**Or Die Beside Him**

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**Or Die Beside Him**

by [I_Gave_You_Fair_Warning](http://archiveofourown.org/users/I_Gave_You_Fair_Warning)

**Summary**

This story picks up in the Kadavo/ Zygerrian/ Slaver arc of the Clone Wars. Obi-Wan's been captured, Rex, Ahsoka, and Anakin's cover is still in place. Rex as a citizen, Ahsoka as a slave, and Anakin as the Zygerrian Queen's new favorite. IF it turns out he's not in cahoots
with the Jedi they just caught snooping around. And beat severely. And who wouldn't give
them any information, despite the torture.

- Inspired by Forgiveness (doesn't come easy) by StoryFabricator
- Inspired by Forgiveness by Naughty Padawan (ThreeBea)
- Inspired by The Stars are on Fire by cheesepotations
**Chapter 1**

“Prove to me you are a slaver.”

Anakin accepted the whip from the Queen and headed down to the arena, ready to bust them out. Trying to figure out a plan...

First, he had to get to Obi-Wan and get rid of the shackles he wore. His Master looked to be in pretty bad shape— he’d barely managed to walk when the guards prodded him.

Anakin might have to help him run.

R2 was up in the balcony, with lightsabers, waiting for a signal.

A warning came through, strong and clear across Anakin’s bond with Obi-Wan.

“Make it real, Anakin.”

Seriously? Obi-Wan thought Anakin would flog him? “I can't beat you, Master.”

“Yes, you can. Remember how angry you were with me when I lied about my death?”

“Master —” Anakin tried to warn him.

“Remember how I used to irritate you as a Padawan? How you resented me? How you wished Qui-Gon had lived instead of me? How you just knew I'd failed him in that last battle?”

“You knew about that?” Anakin demanded, mortified as his feet hit the first hint of sand at the base of the wall.

“Think of all the times I didn't act on your suggestions, when I chose my own ideas instead. I lied to you. I suppressed you. I held you back. I was jealous of you. I failed Qui-Gon. I should have been the one who died. I don't understand you. I called you dangerous.”

Anakin's hand was beginning to tremor. “Stop it. Stop. You're — ”

“Making you angry. Yes.”

“You've always told me to control it —”

“There's fifty thousand people who need you to make a very convincing case that you don't. Either you suddenly discover acting skills you've never possessed, or you need to remember what it feels like to be angry, and aim it at me. Whether you're angry with me now or not, you need to remember how it did feel, and use that. Convince them, Anakin. Now pay attention. I would have left you there. As Watto's possession.”

The frustration that had swirled in Anakin’s soul vanished.

His dear, ridiculous Master. *I will never hurt you. The Zygerrians can just go to the nine Corellian hells.*

There was a hesitation... and then Obi-Wan's shields tightened, locking Anakin outside. Preventing him from seeing what his friend's emotional status was.

“What are you doing?” Anakin didn't like where this might be going.
“I slept with Padmé.”

Anakin’s blood ran cold and he almost stopped dead in his tracks.

But his feet keep moving.

“You’re just saying that to make me angry.”

His Master didn’t respond.

“You are, aren’t you?” Anakin demanded, his pulse quickening. “Tell me the truth, Obi-Wan!”

“The truth? The truth is I fripped her, Anakin. She wanted something more experienced. A bit less naive. Someone who knew how to please her in ways she was accustomed to. The way she deserves.”

Anakin couldn’t believe the calloused tone of Obi-Wan's thoughts. “You're lying!” Panic clawed at his throat.

“Anakin, it's almost adorable, how confident you are. How you think you're impressive in bed. You're a child. She wanted a man. Oh, she loves you. She felt so guilty about betraying you. But she let me do it again. And again. And again. I give her something you never could. Something she needs. Every second she's a moaning, wet mess in my arms she's comparing you to me.”

“Stop. Stop.” Anakin's mind begged. The dragon that lived in the furnace of his soul was waking up. It couldn't take much—

“And you are always lacking.”

Fury flooded Anakin's eyes, and his grip adjusted against the whip.

“Swing that whip, or die beside him!” Queen Miraj demanded.

Anakin didn't hear her.

All he could hear was the roaring in his ears of the thing that slept in his soul and was asleep no longer.

He reached the top of the stage with a graceful bound and activated the cruel length of tearing, burning cord.

The monster was loose.

* * *

Obi-Wan built his shields ever tighter, ever closer.

The instant Anakin figured out he'd been manipulated, their cover would be lost.

The Zygerrians had overpowered Obi-Wan.

It might take them longer with Anakin, but they would succeed.
And then where would the fifty thousand Togruta be?

They couldn't defend themselves. They were as lamblike as a people could get.

They had to be rescued before they were split up and disappeared amongst individual buyers, out of reach of saving.

They didn't have time.

It killed him to wound Anakin this way. To shred the boy's self-esteem.

But he was incapable of acting. Obi-Wan could sense the Queen's suspicion.

It would take an act of unspeakable savagery to ease her doubts.

An act Anakin was fully capable of.

But would never have allowed himself to commit—

As long as he had control over himself.

The fact remained, Obi-Wan had seen the look in Anakin's eyes. Not recently, but plenty in his Padawanship. The desire to harm Obi-Wan in a vicious, searing way.

All of the pieces were there. The capacity. The old desire.

All Obi-Wan had needed to do was push the right domino.

Obi-Wan could sense Ahsoka's horror. She couldn't hear their words, but she sensed the sudden blackness of Anakin's heart. Obi-Wan could feel her frantic tugs at Anakin's Force signature, begging him to hear her—

He was too far gone.

Far too gone.

The first blow knocked Obi-Wan from kneeling upright to his weight resting heavily on his bound hands.

The second tore through the last shreds of his tunic, revealing his criss-crossed wounds from the earlier beatings to the spectators.

They cheered in approval.

Blow after blow after blow after blow—

The full strength of his Padawan's arm, his knowledge of whips, of how to destroy put to use...

Obi-Wan's blood spilled, his ribs and spine glinted white in the cruel sunlight. He collapsed against the stage and the delight of the crowds pulsed deafening in his ears. Ahsoka's horrified begging in the Force almost drowned out by their bloodlust.

Obi-Wan screamed in pain and writhed against the harsh stone, tightening his shields, ever tightening his shields.

Anakin couldn't know. Couldn't know.
He had to finish this out. If he found out now, he would come to himself. Feel the blood that was sprayed across his face, drenching his hands. Realize what he'd done.

There would be no hiding that from the Queen, or anyone else in this Force-accursed place.

No. He could only find out later.

 Darkness closed in around Obi-Wan, beckoning, promising release.

Before he accepted its sweet invitation, he sent a pulse of knowledge to Ahsoka.

“It was all a lie. Fifty thousand people, Ahsoka. Your people, Ahsoka. Keep Anakin on course. Keep him on course. Everything I told him was a lie.”

And with a gurgle, Obi-Wan succumbed to his wounds.

* * *

“Hey. Hey. Didn't you hear her Majesty? That's enough. If you keep it up, we won't get to play with him any more.”

Anakin shoved the grasping hands aside, his rage a thing too alive, too strong to be reined in all at once.

He blinked, realized his face was wet.

He reached up with a sleeve to wipe away the sweat, only to discover his sleeve was splattered with red.

He tasted the liquid near his mouth. 

Not sweat.

Blood. 

The betrayer lay at his feet, unconscious.

*See how Padmé likes you now.*

The figure kept shifting. Obi-Wan to Rush Clovis to whatever that kid Paulo might have looked like. With his dark, curly hair and dreamy eyes.

He found himself being led away.

*The mission.*

*The mission.*

He'd allowed himself to become distracted.

Obi-Wan would have to be punished later. He couldn't deal with that right now. He had to save Ahsoka’s people.
Ahsoka. Who'd watched him flog his Master, and railed at him for doing so.

*She doesn't understand. She can't.*

She wasn't in love.

Obi-Wan had a hell of a lot more coming to him, and he deserved every ounce of it.

The image was burned into his brain. Obi-Wan, thrust deeply inside Padmé, driving her to orgasm, a smug, self-satisfied look on his face.

*I trusted you, and you betrayed me.*

He didn't find himself blaming Padmé.

He'd been afraid, so often, that he wasn't experienced enough for her. That the age gap was detrimental to her happiness.

No. It wasn't her fault.

It was *Obi-Wan's*. And *Clovis's*. And that kid *Paulo's* and any and *every* being's fault who had *ever* laid eyes on his wife.

And especially *Obi-Wan's*.

His anger was still awake when he discovered he'd been led to the Queen's bedchamber.

Ahsoka was nowhere in sight, he and the Queen were alone, and as she licked Obi-Wan's blood from his fevered cheek, it turned him on. A fierce rush of heat deep in his belly.

*Padmé hadn't been faithful to him.*

*Why should he not run this mission the full length?*

So he seized Miraj's hip and dragged her against him. She moaned in pleasure and continued sucking Obi-Wan's blood from his skin, savoring the taste. “You made that Jedi scream,” she purred. “Maybe he'll die.”

A shiver ran down his spine.

Oh... that would feel *good*. The betrayer, dying alone in some wretched cell.

Never able to touch his Padmé again.

He couldn't steal Padmé from Anakin if he was dead. Couldn't poison her against her husband.

Anakin crushed his mouth against Miraj's, claiming Obi-Wan's blood from her lips and tongue.

That belonged to *him*. It was owed him.

It tasted good.

***
Ahsoka kept pounding on her Master's mental shields until the strangest sensation leaked through.

And then she pulled back into her own mind and slammed her own shields up in horror.

He was fripping the Queen of the slavers.

And enjoying it. Fiercely.

The thought of her Master having sex was just plain awful. Who the hell wanted to think about their parent doing that?

And...

How could he? He'd nearly killed Obi-Wan. Ahsoka had been trying to monitor her grand-Master's Force signature, and he seemed to be hovering between life and death.

Leaning towards death.

They needed to get out of here, and rescue him and Anakin was fripping the Queen of Zygerria.

Ahsoka had tried to free herself, multiple times, to no avail.

So now she sat in her suspended cage and glared out into the night.

“Don't you dare die,” she sent fiercely to Obi-Wan.

“And you should be ashamed of herself,” she mentally screamed at Anakin.

And he really. Just didn't. Give.

A.

Kark.

* * *

Obi-Wan awoke to agony.

And someone—

Oh, no. Please no.

Fear and revulsion flooded his system, made him kick at the man pulling down his leggings.

Punishing electricity arced through his body, and by the time he could put two thoughts together again, both leggings and smallclothes were at his ankles, effectively locking his feet together.

He frantically fought, searched the Force for Anakin, for Ahsoka—

Ahsoka couldn't help. But now, sensing his desperation, she was flailing against her own captivity.

And being beaten into submission.
As for Anakin?

The Chosen One dropped his shields and dimly Obi-Wan felt Ahsoka recoil in horror.

Anakin wouldn't be helping him.

Obi-Wan struggled to replace his shields, but it was too late. Anakin held them underfoot.

His best friend had for many years now been the physically stronger of the two.

And for even more years... actually... ever since he was nine years old...

Anakin had possessed a vast strength in the Force that dwarfed Obi-Wan's.

Obi-Wan had voluntarily lowered his shields to him.

And Anakin held him underwater.

“What's so wonderful about your body, Master?” came the taunting words, delivered straight into the depths of Obi-Wan's soul.

Obi-Wan, weakened, so weakened and every few moments assailed by electricity to negate any attempts to use the Force to defend himself, was gang-raped.

Anakin, fripping the Queen of Zygerria for all she was worth, fed off Obi-Wan's agony and humiliation, placed it over the Queen. Painted Obi-Wan's body over her own, taking the sensations he felt through their bond and rutting into them, overwhelmed with vicious pleasure.

The Zygerrians raped Obi-Wan's body.

Anakin raped his mind.

Somewhere, Ahsoka sat curled in on herself, shuddering, trying desperately to block the Force storm out. Trying to hide herself from Anakin's cruel, shameless broadcasting, and Obi-Wan's broken soul, being forced into view by the man he loved most in the universe.

Every Force-sensitive in the system had to have the images raging through their minds.

Obi-Wan felt shivers of recognition from the far reaches of the Force, and the last living part of his soul died.

It wasn't just this system.

It was everywhere.

His friends... his family... were witnessing this.

No.

Feeling it.

As though they were the ones pounding mercilessly into him.

Anakin fed intense pleasure straight into their bodies and minds, connected to images of Obi-Wan's abuse.

Obi-Wan had fought for life up until that moment.
Now he just prayed for merciful darkness.
He didn't really care if it was unconsciousness or death.

* * *

Yes.
Yes.
Yes.
The betrayer, broken beneath him, his spirit reeling with the sheer scale of the humiliation.

Who's laughing now?

Oh, Force, he's so tight, so fripping tight, filled with blood and come—

Anakin heard the Queen's moan, mingling with Obi-Wan's ragged cries.

Yes. Take it, Master.

Take more. Take it all.

And like it.

Anakin sent his own pleasure straight into Obi-Wan's unprotected mind. Watched in amusement as Obi-Wan's body responded, unbearably aroused. Laughed as the Zygerrians noticed and took their cruelties to the next level.

Sneered at Obi-Wan's mortification.

As Obi-Wan's soul struggled, the efforts ever more feeble, against his shattering grip.

Yes. You're enjoying this.

Anakin cried out in pleasure, felt the cry echoed by Obi-Wan.

Felt the Zygerrians' mockery. Heard it— “You want this, Jedi. Take it. Take it.”

Obi-Wan, passed off from one to the next without a break, without mercy—

Anakin fell beside the Queen, exhausted to the bone.

Obi-Wan sensed an end to Anakin's violence, the shards of his spirit trying to pull back.

With a callous hand, Anakin refused to let them go.

Miraj almost more unconscious than asleep beside him, Anakin lay still and watched his Master's suffering, shivering in pleasure, spent though he might be.

He watched through the night, refusing to allow Obi-Wan to hide in his own mind. Denying him even that fortress.

And casually ripping his soul to shreds.
He had time to think now. To calculate.

“Is this how you served Qui-Gon?” Anakin asked, his words flung to the Force and loud, so loud.

He felt Obi-Wan's horror and revulsion.

Anakin dug through Obi-Wan's memories as his former friend struggled to hide them. Struggled to protect them.

Anakin flung him aside. Bruised his mind. Made his soul bleed. Anakin tore through the memories, dragging whatever caught his fancy to the surface to show the universe.

Obi-Wan was being raped with many eyes watching.

It was only right to violate his mind in the same way.

He found a broken little boy who had followed Qui-Gon Jinn to the ends of the universe and back... but their love, intense though it may have been, hadn't been a physical or romantic one. It had been that of a father and son.

Annoyed, Anakin dragged Obi-Wan through the memories of Qui-Gon's death, again and again and again and again, refusing to let Obi-Wan leave, refusing to let him retreat.

Obi-Wan forgot the audience. His distress, physical and mental, was far too great.

“Anakin, stop. Please stop. Please—！”

Yes.

The universe heard him begging.

Anakin let him go, savoring Obi-Wan's instinctive relief, and then started in on the memories of Satine, tarnishing them all with a callous hand.

Obi-Wan's panic was obvious.

Anakin assumed that meant there was something particularly vile hidden in there somewhere, something that would mortify the goody-goody Jedi in a way nothing else could.

But...

It...

Didn't...

Exist.

What the hell?

Obi-Wan had never touched Satine? Not even a chaste kiss?

His most sacred and most visited memories were of... talking? Sitting together in silence? Him sleeping like a child while she kept watch over him?

Seriously?

These were worthless.
Anakin scattered the memories in disarray, leaving them empty and open and jumbled. And with his fingerprints all over them, his scent permeating them.

This was becoming boring. Obi-Wan wasn't fighting him over it anymore, just looking on in dull anguish.

He could keep digging until he found Obi-Wan's sexlife, but he didn't want to go anywhere near memories of Padmé. He avoided any hint of her like the plague.

Something more interesting, then.

Ah.

How about that trip to the Sith planet Obi-Wan had refused to discuss in any detail? What was it called?

Zigoola...

Again the fear. “Anakin, please—”

“‘Anakin, please,’” his former apprentice mocked back.

He dug into Zigoola. Obi-Wan's unending nightmare of torture, Die Jedi die. The dark side crawling through his blood, shredding his sanity—

Obi-Wan started fighting again.

“Die, Jedi, die,” Anakin whispered in Obi-Wan's soul, holding him down. Forcing him to see. Forcing him to feel. To go back there.

Obi-Wan's mind thrashed feebly against Anakin's brutal strength as his best friend forced him to relive disaster after disaster. Loss after loss. Humiliation upon humiliation.

Obi-Wan had nothing but one single option.

Current horror, or past horror.

All of it on a pedestal before every Force-sensitive being alive, Jedi or civilian. Friend and enemy and stranger.

His mind, so prepared, so trained, so ready to be a haven against the torture he occasionally encountered, was now a place almost worse than staying in the present, in the now with his abusers.

The Force wept.
Sidious canceled his last meeting for the evening, locked the door, leaned back in his chair and let his eyes fall shut. A smile curved his lips as he savored the show his future apprentice had prepared for him.

For the universe.

This would break the bond between Anakin and Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan.

The only thing keeping Anakin from the darkness within.

Yes.

After this, Obi-Wan would want to have nothing to do with Anakin Skywalker.

The anchor, the conscience would be gone.

And the Jedi would look at their Chosen One with horror.

Anakin would be all his.

Sooner than expected.

Sidious gloried in the magnificence of it all.

Anakin's unchecked cruelty. Spontaneous, genuine, poisonous.

*What shall I call you, my Apprentice? Something to commemorate this night, I think. Rape, violate, betray; all are such... over-exuberant words. In time you will find your rage aimed a bit more efficiently. Subtly.*

*You will destroy minds, yes... but with less personal involvement. A more callous touch. Just as devastating, but while cloaking yourself in mystery. An invasion.*

*Invade. Yes...*

*Lord Vader.*

* * *

Dooku sat up in bed, startled by the Force's turbulence, and a bit stunned by the images rushing through his brain. He put as many of his shields up as he could, but he couldn't completely block the Chosen One's storm.

Dooku had always thought Anakin didn't have what it took to be a Sith. He was too needy. Too
emotional. Too fickle. Too married to life's pleasures—

Dooku winced, feeling his own hard erection. Very unthoughtful of young Skywalker.

Lord Tyranus had always thought Obi-Wan would be a better choice. Anakin would go dark, certainly. It was inevitable. But he wasn't self-disciplined enough to last long. He'd make a mistake, and his reign would be over in the blink of an eye.

Obi-Wan was the more calculating of the two. If ever pressure could be put to him to turn him, he would make a far better Sith than Anakin could ever hope to be. He had the patience. He had the control. He had deception in a way Anakin could only drool over.

If anything could drive Obi-Wan Kenobi into the comforting arms of the dark side, this should do it.

He had nowhere to turn, and life was going to be stripped from him centimeter by agonizing centimeter if he didn't resort to drastic measures.

Without anger, without fury, without the promise of retribution, how could he survive?

And yet Dooku couldn't find hate. Obi-Wan didn't hate Anakin. He didn't hate his abusers.

Cornered, beaten, made the plaything of a million beings, Obi-Wan was refusing to let go of his light.

Everything was being taken from him.

All refuge. His body. His dignity. His friendships. His mind. His anonymity. His memories. His “son.” His sanity would go soon. Life would follow.

He contested every centimeter. It was painful to watch, simply because it was so futile. Each was torn from his bloodied fingers.

But when it came to his light?

When the Zygerrians and Anakin reached for that, Obi-Wan abandoned all other fronts of battle. He let them take all the ground they could manage, and wrapped himself around his light and would not let go.

No matter how much they battered him.

It wasn't a battle. He didn't fight back.

He simply hunched against the assault and took it, holding on with everything he was worth. They tried to tear him from it, tear it from him—

But this was where Obi-Wan Kenobi made his final stand.

He would not let go of that light, he would not hate, he would not take refuge in anger, he would not, not.

Not.

The glint in his eye said he would die first.

And he probably would.
The torture intensified, came from every angle imaginable.

Obi-Wan's stubborn tenacity held on.

Refusing, refusing—

His voice couldn't be heard over the sounds of his violation—

But he—

Would—

*Not* —

Let—

Them—

Win —

With a growl, Dooku fell back against his bed.

Maybe his Master was right.

He grimaced.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was a lost cause.

He'd probably be dead by morning anyhow.

Apparently they were stuck with Anakin.

Feeling his hard erection against his night pants, Dooku scowled.

Why couldn't he have sent the images *without* the sensations as well?

Just another reason to hate Skywalker.

* * *

The Temple jolted, every Jedi at home snapping to alert at once.

And then the adults and older Padawans rushed to form a protective barrier between the little ones and the Chosen One.

Damage had already been done by the time silence cushioned them in a bubble, keeping them from the vile onslaught.

Fortunately, for the littlest ones, they had no idea how to interpret the images, sounds, words, and sensations tearing through the Force. They just knew Obi-Wan was sad and in pain. And Anakin was angry.

The older ones weren't quite so lucky.
Row after row of Jedi built shields in the Force, physically placing themselves between the children and Skywalker. It took every ounce of concentration, and it didn't keep themselves from seeing what was taking place. Thankfully, from a more detached place, giving them a bit of a cushion against the sensations, but still...

They saw and heard it all.

Needless to say, Mace Windu was furious.

Yoda, grieved to the core.

Everyone else, varying levels of stunned and outraged.

While most of the Jedi were struggling to protect the younger generations, Mace hadn't been putting effort into blocking anything. Instead, he and several other Masters honed in on the signal, trying to pinpoint just where this was taking place.

* * *

Mother Talzin, deep in an incantation, wavered. Nightsisters all around shivered and moaned, eyes glinting with pleasure.

Well.

This was an interesting gift from the Universe.

Unexpected, certainly.

But there was a certain sense of poetic justice to watching her clan find release in experiencing Obi-Wan Kenobi's brutalization and Anakin Skywalker's own ecstasy.

Obi-Wan had cut her son in half. Deprived him of his future, his confidence, and so many years of his life.

Yes.

A very pleasant gift from the Universe.

The sisters were certainly using it to the fullest extent.

They would have to continue the ceremony later. This was too good to not enjoy it while it lasted.

And in memory, for a good many years afterwards.

Given their particular skill set with magicks...

It might not have to just be a memory, either.

Mother Talzin smiled.

The Universe was a wondrous thing.
“Brother—”

“Yes, I sense it, Savage.”

Understatement of the century.

Maul was crabby. Very crabby.

Anakin Skywalker, in his first attempt at revenge against Obi-Wan Kenobi, had already surpassed everything Maul had ever done to him. If Kenobi had the choice between them, he’d be running for Maul without reservation.

That was not acceptable.

That pathetic whelp of a Skywalker didn't have the right to cast Maul's depredations on Obi-Wan's life into shadow. No fragging right.

Especially not in the first attempt.

Maul sat and stewed.

* * *

Far away in a cantina, Ventress sucked in a breath in astonishment.

Sweet dark side.

What the hell?

She dropped credits on the table and bolted for the safety of her ship, thankful Latts Razzi had already left and couldn't pester her with questions.

For the love of frip!

She hid herself away in her ship, locking the hatch and ending up in her bunk.

The sensations roiling through her body were so intense —

They also made only some sense given her own biological structure, but—

A whole bunch of men were having sex with Obi-Wan. And so was Anakin. Only not. Only he was having sex with a woman? Since when had Obi-Wan been covered in fur? No, that was the woman?

Ventress tried to make sense of it, but gave up.

Anakin wanted to destroy his other half. That much was clear, but ka-ark, did it have to feel this good?

Ventress bit her lip.
Obi-Wan had been kind to her. Had extended trust when she'd given him every reason to not. She'd invested effort and risk in saving him from Maul awhile back and she knew if she ever needed help... bizarre as it seemed...

He'd be one she could ask.

He would have been the one to ask even before she'd saved his skin.

He would help.

And she could trust him to not take advantage of her.

She shivered, pressing deep against the mattress, trying to ignore the raging hunger between her legs.

She was a bounty hunter now.

She had a code.

She wasn't sure how her new-found ethics might apply to this situation, but—

She grit her teeth and moaned.

*I'm not going to take advantage of him. If the situations were reversed, he wouldn't take advantage of me.*

That thought sat her up. He'd be trying to rescue her. Despite all the horrible things she'd ever done to him, he'd be trying to save her. Would throw himself in harm's way to do so.

*Kark, Kenobi.*

Damned Jedi.

She stretched out to the Force again, but she couldn't locate him.

She couldn't rescue him even if she wanted to.

She couldn't tell if she was relieved or disappointed.

*

Qui-Gon Jinn had tried urging Anakin. He'd tried twisting the Force all around him.

The Chosen One hadn't listened.

Qui-Gon was screaming at him now, but Anakin couldn't hear. *Wouldn't.*

So Qui-Gon gave up, and instead went to his Padawan.

Obi-Wan would *always* be his Padawan.

He tried to reach Obi-Wan's mind, tried to touch his soul, bring comfort—

But Anakin's strength kept him away. He couldn't force his way past.
Obi-Wan's pleading with Anakin wasn't just in his mind. It was *aloud*. His abusers didn't know what to think of it, so they mocked and laughed. It burned Qui-Gon's soul. He was the reason these two had been together. Obi-Wan had refused to hold on to a child he didn't want. He knew how devastating that could be to the child. He also refused to break his promise to Qui-Gon, so opened his heart to accept Anakin into it. Had chosen to learn to love him. Even though he'd heard warning whispers from the Force, had felt danger and disaster ahead... He'd opened himself up, made himself vulnerable. He'd sacrificed so much of himself for the boy. And this was how he was repaid. The thing of it was... Anakin would never have succeeded with his current atrocity if Obi-Wan didn't love him so much. If Obi-Wan hadn't formed that bond of intense care. If Obi-Wan had rejected him despite Qui-Gon's request, or had blocked him out of his heart and trained him a cold, distant manner, he would have been protected from Anakin's mind. Between Qui-Gon's hopes and Obi-Wan's conscience and compassion for a lost, grieving child, this had been made possible. Qui-Gon watched. And his soul screamed.

* * *

Padmé had retired early, worn out from negotiations that had started in the wee hours of the morning. Terrible images floated through her dreams, a nightmare like she'd never experienced before. She awoke in horror, not just because of the sheer evil of what her love was doing to his former Master, but because of the pleasure she felt whispering through her. What kind of perversion was that? She tried drinking a ferocious cup of caf and settled in to study a new Senate bill—Whispers of images. New images. New words.
This wasn't a dream.

She rushed to the Temple, demanding admittance, demanding answers.

At first no one paid much attention. They were too focused on something else, too drawn and gaunt —

And then she yelled she was having visions. Or something.

And that caught everybody's attention.

It had taken three minutes for one of the Jedi to sense she had life growing inside her.


The child... no... children were receiving these images and channeling them to her.

Padmé was torn between confused disbelief— she couldn't be pregnant, she'd been careful — and horror.

If they were receiving these images, they were being sent from somewhere, and they couldn't be real, they couldn't — Anakin would never do something like—

The Jedi weren't paying much attention to her protests. They herded her into the protective circle that had settled in to hold against the siege, and instantly the vague pictures in her mind vanished.

She tried to find solace in plying Yoda with demands and questions, but all he gave her were quiet assurances that a strong force of Jedi were setting out to find answers and bring help.

* * *

The sun kissed Ahsoka's cage.

Morning at last.

Flying reptiles perched above her, trying to reach inside to tear her flesh.

The space between the bars was just a little too small. If she stayed exactly in the center and didn't move a centimeter in any direction.

That was probably an intentional design feature.

It would have denied her sleep had she dared let go of herself that far.

She hadn't.

Not for a single moment through the long night.

She'd been unable to keep her Master from running Obi-Wan's nightmare through her mind, but she'd been able to mute it somewhat with her shields.

If she'd fallen asleep...
She wouldn't have been able to keep up her shields.

So she sat, shivering in the cold of the early morning.

Her master slept.

Thank the Force.

He slept like a contented baby.

And she hated him for it.

*Hated* him.

Yesterday, even after he'd flogged Obi-Wan, she would have said it would be impossible for her to hate Anakin Skywalker.

She did now.

Just as she knew Obi-Wan didn't.

Force and hell.

Every Force-sensitive from here to Tatooine knew Obi-Wan didn't.

Ahsoka could barely sense the older Jedi now.

He'd been left on the floor of his cell. Naked. Broken.

The door had been left open, and no guards stood there.

But he wouldn't be leaving.

And Ahsoka was unable to go to him.

And Anakin, who retained autonomy...

She felt grateful that Rex, Force-deaf as a post, had been unable to see Anakin like that.

It meant he might still be able to respect his General when they got back to the war effort.

Ahsoka?

She would never respect Anakin Skywalker ever again.

She was also no longer his Padawan.

*That* she promised herself.

She had no doubt Yoda had been witness to last night's horror.

She would have no argument from *him*.

She didn't know what would be done about her former Master.

She didn't know what would be done *for* Obi-Wan.
If he lived.

She almost hoped he didn't.

How could one recover from so sound a betrayal?

*I won't be, and it wasn't aimed for me.*

She feared that if he lived, the rest of Obi-Wan's life was going to be hell.

She wasn't surprised when she felt a familiar presence in the Force and looked up to find Plo Koon.

* * *

When Yoda had told Mace to *go*, he'd *gone*.

With a *lot* of backup.

Adi Gallia, Eeth Koth, Luminara Unduli, Kit Fisto, Shaak Ti, Agen Kolar, Saesee Tiin, Stass Allie just to name a few.

And most brought their ships and clone forces with them. They weren't going to repeat the mistake of Geonosis.

The Zygerrian empire was back, according to the images they'd been forced to witness, Anakin Skywalker seemed to have gone mad, and Obi-Wan was being systematically destroyed.

Mace had even grabbed the 212th, telling them Obi-Wan was in trouble.

Cody and his men were the first out the gate.

Windu had *not* brought the 501st.

He wasn't entirely sure where their loyalty would fall if it came to a struggle to bring Skywalker in.

Plo Koon was able to lead a division to find Ahsoka, following the bond they shared.

She in turn took them to the arena and into the warren of chambers beneath the viewing stands in search of Obi-Wan.

Mace took others and went for Skywalker.

The rest set about utterly *destroying* the reborn Zygerrian Slave Empire.

Battle raged in the skies, in orbit, and all over the capital city, like some horrifying apocalypse. Fires raged. People died. Screams filled the air.

The Jedi hadn't taken such aggressive and decisive action in millenia.

The Zygerrian Empire was *not* going to rise again.

They sanitized it to its foundation, just to be sure.
The Zygerrians weren’t expecting the assault...

And the forces brought to bear against them were just too much.

If only the Separatist war was as simple as this side-track.

* * *

Ahsoka recognized the partially-open cell door. No guards stood watch.

So that hadn’t been a hallucination on Obi-Wan’s part.

They really had been that smug and confident he was going nowhere.

“He’s here!” Ahsoka called, frantically keying the door the rest of the way into the wall.

Cody, almost stepping on her heels, swore as the door revealed his General.

Naked. Lying on his stomach.

Dried blood everywhere.

The stench of come permeating the air. Dried lines of it across Obi-Wan's face, through his hair, through the wounds of his back, staining the bones of his ribs and spine.

And those weren’t the most the obvious signs of Obi-Wan's taking.

Obi-Wan's eyes, aimed for the door, were half-open, but he didn't seem to see his rescuers. Ahsoka felt his silent suffering, his soul quivering in the shattered remains of his mind, afraid to move, afraid to flinch a finger, lest it remind Anakin he still existed.

That the job wasn't finished.

The 212th's medic and Jedi healers filled the cell, and Ahsoka and Cody stepped back into the hall to give them working room.

“Who did this to him?” Cody asked, his voice a low menace.

Ahsoka tried to find an answer for that. Obi-Wan's broken spirit no Zygerrian could ever have achieved. Not through slavery, not through torture, not through rape. He had a resilience that astounded the strongest of the Jedi Masters, and as long as his mind was his own, he could retreat to it. Withstand the worst storms.

He'd even overcome attempts enemies had made to destroy his mind. Again and again.

Only a loved one could succeed where his greatest enemies had failed.

Cody roughly grabbed her shoulder and spun her around. Shocked, Ahsoka stared up into his face. “Who did this to him?”

“General Skywalker.”

Ahsoka's head snapped around and found Rex, dressed in his Zygerrian disguise, helmet off, face

He just looked at her.

Ahsoka found herself unable to protest.

Rex was right. It didn't matter...

Because she couldn't deny the accusation.

Cody's fingers in her shoulder were digging deeper, deeper, deeper —

She twisted out of his reach, and he didn't even seem to notice. He stared at his brother, his face an unreadable mask.

“What did you say?” Cody finally asked.

A scream tore from the other room as the healers moved Obi-Wan onto a stretcher.

Rex's face twisted as he looked at Ahsoka. “I kept waiting for General Skywalker's signal. He told me to wait. He gave me orders. I followed them.”

Ahsoka could read his anguish. He'd been patient. He'd trusted in his General.

“I should have been looking for General Kenobi. I should have found him sooner. I should have known something was wrong— instead I was locating the Kiros people, and this happened—”

“Did you find them?” Ahsoka interrupted.

Rex gave a reluctant nod. “They're in the Kadavo system in giant slave-conditioning facilities.”

Ahsoka turned to Adi Gallia, who stood guard near. “Did you hear that?”

Adi gave her a nod and sprang away, barking orders into her comm.

“We found the missing colonists,” Ahsoka sent to Obi-Wan, hoping he would hear her. “We're going to get them out. The fifty thousand people you wanted to save — we're saving them. Right now, Master. We're saving them right now.”

He didn't respond.

In the Force, he still felt like a cold emptiness.

Cody was still struggling with Rex's earlier words. “Are you sure it was General Skywalker—”

Rex's reply was a simple, steady gaze, shot through with a horrified sickness that just about gutted Ahsoka.

And then the crowd attending Obi-Wan came sweeping out between Cody and Rex, surrounding a stretcher.

Cody's gaze dropped to his General's face, taking in the panic in the glassy, fixed eyes, the agony, the humiliation —

He scrubbed a hand down his face. “Rex, I swear—”

But Rex only shook his head, turned, and followed the medics.
“I'm sorry, kid,” he said grimly as Ahsoka forced her feet to move. “I don't see how you planned to keep this quiet after what happened last night.”

Ahsoka didn't either.

She wasn't even sure she should.

She didn't know how Rex had found out.

But at this moment she was far more worried about Obi-Wan than Rex's intelligence sources.

“How could Skywalker?” Cody asked, voice numb. “They're brothers.”

“I missed it,” Rex returned, voice just as dull. “After Krell, I swore I'd never again let my men be sacrificed like that for a Jedi gone bad. Somehow I missed it, and General Kenobi paid the price.”

Cody gripped his shoulder tightly. “It's not your fault.”

“We're supposed to protect them, Cody. He was under my watch.”

Ahsoka's miserable attention was yanked away from the grieving clones by a tumult in the Force that sent fear through her soul.

She followed it to its source, splitting away from Cody and Rex, who were too focused on Obi-Wan to notice her leaving.

She found Anakin alone, cornered by Fisto, Windu, Koth, and Tiin. He had his lightsaber out, a snarl on his face.

“What are you doing?” Ahsoka screamed at him. “Obi-Wan was lying!”

“Now isn't a good time, Ahsoka,” he growled.

“What Obi-Wan said to you in the arena. He lied. So you would carry out the mission! I was trying to tell you all night, but you weren't listening to me, and I'm not strong enough to trample your shields!”

It took a moment.

And then Anakin's eyes widened. His face went slack, his lightsaber dropped from nerveless fingers. His gaze found Ahsoka's, a terrible doubt in his eyes.

Hints of blood still spotted his face and neck.

Obi-Wan's blood. Dried black.

Tears blinded Ahsoka for a moment. “How could you do that to him?” she choked. “He—loved you—”

The last hint of defiance melted away from Anakin.

He sank to his knees, raised his hands. Made no move to resist as shock-binders were secured to his wrists.

His gaze searched his Padawan's face; desperate, almost panicked. “Ahsoka?” His voice sounded so young. So vulnerable. “What have I done?”
The Jedi led him out of the room. He craned his neck to look back at her. “Ahsoka? Ahsoka!”
She bit her lip and followed, tears slipping down her face.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you bright eyes noticed that in this story Ventress is a bounty hunter and the Nightsister clan is still alive.
Or are they?
Chapter 3

They split the Team up for transport.

And when Ahsoka had to choose which to follow, she went with Obi-Wan.

Eeth Koth took charge of the ship, the 212th ran it, and the healers transferred Obi-Wan to its medical facilities.

Ahsoka didn't know who had Anakin.

Probably Mace and his men.

Ahsoka paced in the waiting area.

Fisto, Plo, Rex, and Cody stood with her, none of them particularly interested in sitting.

212th clones ducked their heads in the door, a silent fury in their Force signatures and a fearful eagerness on their faces, desperate for good news.

They all walked away disappointed.

From the turbulence in the ship and the sheer rage, Ahsoka could tell they knew.

They knew their General hadn't just been tortured again.

That was normal. It angered them, but it couldn't provoke this.

And the wary glances that were thrown Rex's way proved they knew who was responsible.

Of course, all ten thousand Jedi knew it, and every other Force-sensitive being in the galaxy. There were thousands more who didn't belong to the Order. Reporters. Gamblers. Pilots. Politicians. So what was one battalion more, in perspective?

Discussion of what had happened last night, if it wasn't already everywhere, would be soon. In-depth discussions. With information coming straight from people who had experienced it as though they were the ones fripping Obi-Wan Kenobi.

This wasn't something Obi-Wan would ever be able to escape.

Ever.

Ahsoka's steps quickened.


She could feel pulses of pain coming from her grand-Master. It was the only thing interrupting the emptiness.

Obi-Wan hadn't been able to hide in his mind.
So he hadn't.
He'd shut down.
Waited for it to all be over.
And in that turned-off, disconnected and blank state...
He didn't know he was free yet.

*He doesn't even know he's safe.*

That was it. She headed for the door, only to be warned away by Luminara as soon as she caught sight of Ahsoka.

They were working.

Obi-Wan wasn't ready for visitors yet. The fewer the crowds around him until he was stabilized, the better.

Ahsoka retreated, and felt her soul die just a little bit more.

* * *

The Temple opened to receive its wounded son home. Sisters and brothers of all ages waited for his return, trying to come up with ways to make it less difficult for him.

He was unaware of them all, their thoughtfulness unseen.

Bant was there, beside him, tending his wounds and refusing to leave his side for longer than a few hours at a time for sleep.

It had been centuries since an atrocity like this had been received. And never, in all the history of the Order, had something this terrible been so vast. Something so widely known. Yes. There were Jedi who had been betrayed and abused.

No.

The whole galaxy had not been involved.

Somehow... somehow a holo had been found.

A clip of part of Obi-Wan's abusing.

His voice could be heard clearly, begging Anakin for mercy. To stop. The broken look in his eyes, the loud pleasure of the men who fripped him...

Padmé, Bail, and Palpatine had done their best to hunt down where it had come from, and to deny every copy from the holonet.

But that was impossible.

It had gone viral and underground.
It was everywhere.

Everyone had seen it.

The only people who hadn't were those who respected Obi-Wan and were unwilling to do something so unkind to him...

And his brothers and sisters.

Who'd already seen it all in their minds.

Bail had pestered the healers every few hours until they promised to let him know as soon as there were any changes. Padmé had insisted on carrying on her work. She'd been driven by the need to confront Anakin, all up until the point when they'd arrived.

Obi-Wan's broken body on the stretcher. Covered with a thin blanket for modesty's sake.

But nothing could hide the destruction that had been wrought on him.

And his eyes....

And then had come Ahsoka. A teenager turned into an adult overnight. There was an anger, a betrayal in her face...

The other Jedi, their postures protective and wary. Cody, accompanying his General in, looking haggard and almost frantic with worry.

And then had come the bound prisoner.

There was something in Anakin's eyes that terrified her.

Sensing her presence, he'd looked up at her.

Eyes hollow.

They seemed to be portals, allowing one to see into the darkness of his soul.

Padmé had left the Temple within minutes, and hadn't been back since.

There was no way she was going to talk to her husband.

Not any time soon.

She threw herself into work, because it was the only way she could keep herself from curling up in a ball and giving up.

What had her husband become, and when had it happened?

What was she supposed to do about the twin lives she carried? Whose father was a...

Was a...

Padmé buried herself deeper in work.
Ahsoka sat in a chair at the entry to the Halls of Healing.

It was difficult.

This wasn't the first time she'd sat here, waiting for a report on Obi-Wan's condition.

That time, he'd been in a massive wreck caused by a terrorist's bomb.

And also, that time, Anakin had been sitting in the chair beside her.

She'd been so young back then. So in awe of her Master.

So confident he could never do anything wrong. And even if he did, it wouldn't be very wrong, and would definitely have been an accident.

She'd also had every faith in Anakin's love for Obi-Wan.

With the weight of all that had come before, and all that was now and might be ahead, Ahsoka was convinced she would not be sleeping, no matter how exhausted her body might be.

She was wrong.

For the second time, she fell asleep in that chair.

But this time, she didn't have her Master's shoulder to lean against.

And when she was awakened by footsteps...

She was the one the healer was moving towards.

“Padawan Tano.”

“How is he?” she asked, standing. She couldn't bear to be in contact with that chair anymore.

“Very close to death. His injuries were life-threatening before —”

“I know,” Ahsoka interrupted, not wanting to hear the words aloud. “Is he going to make it?”

The healer sighed. “He's not trying to.”

Ahsoka winced. “He wants to die.”

She was surprised when the chocolate-skinned zabrak shook his head. “No. I'm a Mind Healer, Padawan Tano, and I've never seen a mind this... fragile. Most people, when they are in a catatonic state and staring blankly at a wall, have hidden themselves away in a non-physical place in their mind. Oftentimes a place they feel is safe. A childhood memory. A favorite vacation spot. Sometimes it's more nightmarish. Either way, the mind is active, it just isn't interacting with the outside world.

“Master Kenobi hasn't gone someplace else. He's not thinking. At all. He's cut off all input coming in from outside his mind and from inside his mind.”

“Is that possible?” Ahsoka asked, trying to comprehend what he was saying.

“In order to survive, he has frozen himself in time and disconnected from everything, even his own thoughts. He has no idea time has passed. He doesn't know he's safe and among friends. He's still
locked in that place of nothingness. He's not wishing death, because he's not wishing anything. He's simply existing."

“How do we reach him? We have to wake him up, or he's not going to make it,” Ahsoka pointed out, fear chilling her to the bone marrow. “His body needs him to be actively interested in healing!”

The Mind Healer gave her a grim nod. “We’ve tried various things, but nothing is reaching him. Perhaps someone close to him could help. We’ll try with you first, but I’d like a list of his friends. We can’t afford to assume anything. It’s all-new territory, here.”

Ahsoka nodded. That was only reasonable. “Senator Organa. Senator Amidala. Me. An—” She bit her tongue so hard she tasted blood.

The Mind Healer winced a little too.

*That's right. He doesn't just know. He felt that betrayal like it was his own.*

Everyone was suffering.

A memory. Mandalore. The way the Duchess had taken such an interest in Anakin and Ahsoka... because they were connected to Obi-Wan.

And beyond that...

The memories Anakin had taken and flung across the stars. Because of those, Ahsoka knew just how intensely Obi-Wan loved Satine Kryze.

“The Duchess of Mandalore.” Ahsoka could see, in the Healer's eyes, that he'd already included her on his chart.

After all, he'd seen the memories too.

The list was small. How could a man so sweet-natured have so few friends?
And then she thought about the mourning the Temple had fallen into, and realized he had ten thousand of them.

*We're family. It's different.*

Maybe.

Maybe not.

An agitated Force-signature, and then a flurry of black dreadlocks, black leather, and ferocious dark eyes presented itself.

“Where is he?” Quinlan Vos demanded.

The Mind Healer held up his hands in a soothing manner.

“Don't you dare keep me away. I got here as soon as I could. Qui-Gon Jinn was kind to me. He helped me when no one else could. I swore I would always protect Obi-Wan, it was all I could do to repay my debt after Qui-Gon died—”

Ahsoka stared at him in astonishment. Was *that* why Quinlan always kept showing up, even though he and Obi-Wan couldn't stand each other's company?
“I should have been there. If I'd been there—”

“He's in a very dangerous place right now,” the Healer interrupted. “If you want to try to reach him, you are very welcome, but only if you are calm. If he senses turbulence and grief and anger, he's going to hide deeper inside himself. If that happens, we lose him. Do you understand?”

Quinlan wilted. Scrubbed a hand over his face. “I can't— I can't do that just yet. The calm thing.”

“You're welcome to wait here until you're safe to be with him. Then you can visit and see if you can draw him back to the surface.”

Vos gave him a harsh nod, turned, and dropped himself into one of the chairs on the opposite side of the waiting area, lowering his head into his hands. Thick dreads fell in front of his face, concealing it.

But nothing could hide the pain, the fury, the guilt he felt.

Ahsoka felt a kinship with him that she'd never experienced before.

Those three emotions were mirrored in her own soul.

If I'd only been there.

She kept finding herself saying those words over and over as well, even though she'd been in the same city.

I was helpless to help him.

It was a terrible feeling.

“I will contact the Senators and Duchess.” The Healer hesitated, glanced at Vos, then lowered his voice. “Is it... possible... that Obi-Wan is the father of Senator Amidala's twins?”

Ahsoka stared up at him in shock. “What twins ?”

“She came to the Temple while... it was happening. She was seeing glimpses of it. We realized she was pregnant, and the babies were sending her the images and... sensations.”

Oh, hell.

They were powerful, if they were doing that.

It made the likelihood of them being Rush Clovis' kids rather slim.

Kark, Anakin.

What was Padmé going to do? Her children had been fathered by a... Monster. You can say it, Ahsoka. You don't have to feel guilty about it. You didn't make him one. He made himself one.

“No. I happen to know that Obi-Wan and Senator Amidala do not have that kind of friendship.”

The Healer nodded. “I don't know if that means she's more likely or less likely to be able to reach him. We'll try anyway.”

Ahsoka was surprised by the hint of glumness she heard in his voice.

He was hoping we could find someone with a very strong connection to him.
They were ignoring the bantha in the room.

The *Team*.

Skywalker and Kenobi.

Halves of a whole.

If anyone could save the other from something like this...

It was their other half.

“If we tried to use Anakin?” Ahsoka whispered.

The Healer flinched. “Obi-Wan is a breath away from death. If Skywalker succeeded in breaching this final defense...”

Ahsoka could see it in the Healer's eyes. He thought Obi-Wan would find his next retreat in death. “Could he do that?” she worried. “Could he decide where he is isn't safe enough, and just... take one step back? *Die*, with just the desire?”

“I hadn't thought what he's already accomplished was possible. I have no doubt he could run for death if he felt it was his only other place to hide.”

Ahsoka felt her shoulders and lekku drooping.

“I don't know of anyone who has a stronger connection to Obi-Wan. *I* certainly don't.”

“Who knows? Maybe he *will* hear you,” the Healer offered, trying to sound optimistic and failing.

“Ahsoka.”

She turned, saw Kit Fisto in the doorway.

“Anakin is asking for you.”

A glare spread across her face, hardened her eyes. If she opened her mouth to speak, something vicious was going to come out. So she kept her teeth tightly clamped shut.

“He's sounding pretty pitiful,” Fisto added. There was no sarcasm in his voice.

Ahsoka had enough for both of them. “Pitiful, is he? Yes. I should *absolutely* have pity for him because he is the victim here. He's always the victim. He's never responsible for *anything*. It's always someone else's fault. I'm sure this is *Obi-Wan's* fault and Anakin was misused. Definitely. We just need to let him talk enough, and the truth will come to light. We'll realize it's all Obi-Wan's fault. It always has been, always will be. Obi-Wan wasn't enough. Obi-Wan didn't train him right. Obi-Wan didn't love him enough. Obi-Wan wasn't good enough. Obi-Wan didn't communicate well enough. Obi-Wan—”

“Ahsoka.” Master Fisto sounded grieved, his eyes sorrowful.

“Well?” she demanded, raising her voice. “Isn't that what we've all heard? If not from Anakin, from others who disapprove of my Master and his?”

Quinlan raised his head, and Ahsoka could see it in his eyes. He knew what she was talking about. “She's right,” he offered. “No-one can agree on just *what* it is that Kenobi lacks, but they *all* agree it's *his* fault. Too strict, not strict enough. Too loving, not loving enough. Should have been more of
a father, less of a brother. Skywalker didn't need a father, but a friend and brother. Kenobi didn't see the warning signs, or was overly critical and hounding Skywalker for everything. Should have been more like Qui-Gon. Shouldn't have tried to be like Qui-Gon, because that's where he failed; he should have been himself. Or the worst one of all: It should have been Qui-Gon who raised Anakin. Obi-Wan is at fault because he's alive. It's sick.”

“It's also not how we see either of them,” Fisto said quietly. “There's a small handful of people who speak out like you just said. They're very loud and repetitive. But there's about twenty of them, and that's it, in the entire Order. We're not out here taking him apart while he's lying at death's door, and criticizing them behind their backs for their unfair words isn't going to help Obi-Wan.”

“Neither is going to talk to the chief of them. Why should I waste my time talking to him when I could be trying to save Obi-Wan's life?” Ahsoka challenged.

For a long moment Fisto didn't say anything. When he spoke, the words were slow and thoughtful. “I cannot tell you what you should do with his request, Ahsoka. I can only imagine what it would have been like if it was my Master, instead of yours. All I can offer you is that hate is what got us here, and hate will not bring healing.”

*I don't want Anakin to heal.*

“Maybe Skywalker deserves to suffer,” Vos muttered. “He's treated Kenobi like kark for years, and Obi-Wan's accepted it because he's his own greatest critic. He doesn't think he's worthy of anything better. Why do you think he dislikes me so much? I keep telling him to stand up for himself. To believe in himself.” Vos huffed out a sigh. “Maybe a bit too aggressively. But Skywalker has handicapped him all these years. Held him back from realizing his own worth and potential. Bet you when he wakes up, he's going to say the reason Anakin's gone the way he has is because of Obi-Wan's own arrogance in thinking he could teach him. In thinking he had the right to. Because no-one shy of Yoda should have had that privilege.”

The Healer sighed. “Yoda was never an option. Anyone who is old enough to remember that time knows that.”

Fisto was ignoring them, and still watching Ahsoka.

She felt rudderless. The man she'd trusted with everything had turned out to be a monster. How could Anakin be so vile?

*Master Plo would want me to go.*

So she gave Fisto a small nod and followed him from the Halls.

She could sense his gentle approval, see the pride in his eyes.

And...

He left her alone at the hall leading to Anakin's cell.

Temple Guards stood watch, faces unreadable through beautiful masks.

She took a long moment to try to steady her nerves, then walked past them to the door.

It opened to her touch.

She stepped in, and the door slid shut behind her.
Only then did she find the courage to look up.

Anakin sat on the bunk, head in his hands, still dressed in his Zygerrian disguise.

Or was it a disguise?

_In the Force, you looked like one of them._

The slaver scum he'd so vehemently despised.

How could Anakin have always been one step away from becoming what he hated most?

And...

Was that one reason _for_ that hatred?

Because somewhere, deep down...

He'd known he could easily get there himself?

He looked up, and Ahsoka was stunned by how haggard he looked. Gaunt.

“How is he?” he asked, tears slurring his voice.

Ahsoka stared at him for a long moment, trying to come up with an answer to that. “You should know better than anyone.”

Somehow, the dead eyes looking up at her died just a little more.

“He's... alive... I can sense him—”

“You leave him _alone, _” Ahsoka snarled, an unintentional response, but unavoidable. Her breathing thickened as she resisted the urge to _fight_.

“He feels distant. Missing, somehow. He doesn't know I'm here.” Anakin's voice was full of miserable confusion.

Ahsoka took what was supposed to be a calming breath. It _may_ have had the opposite effect. “He's hiding from you, and if we can't convince him to come back, he's going to die.”

Anakin's face crumpled and his shoulders hunched forward. He stared at his hands in horror.

“You're... you're sure he lied?”

Ahsoka pointed an accusing finger at him. “I don't know _what_ he said to you, but what he told me, _right_ before he passed out from the _flogging_ you inflicted on him, was that the mission came first. You had to prove your loyalty to the Queen, he'd given you permission and goaded you so you could manage to _act_. 'Fifty thousand people. Your people, Ahsoka,' is what he told me. He told me _twice_ that whatever it was he'd told you, he'd _lied_. He told me to keep you _focused_ on the mission because all those people might go through what _he_ was going to go through if we didn't. It was _reckless_, but it was _selfless_. Like everything else he does.”

“Did— did they get rescued?”

“Yes. No _thanks to you_! And can I just say it? We lost a lot of _good clones_ out there because you couldn't stay focused!”

Anakin blanched. “Five-oh-first?”
“So, what? It's okay for men to die as long as they're not important to you?”

“That's not what —”

“Really, Anakin? Because the instant Obi-Wan was no longer important to you, you— you—” Tears flooded her eyes.

No. She was not going to let them fall.

She wanted him to look away so she could regain her composure without him witnessing how difficult it was going to be. He just kept staring up at her.

“Can you think of any friends who might be able to pull him back to the surface?” Ahsoka finally mumbled.

“Dex?”

I didn't think of Dex. “How long has he known Obi-Wan?”

“Since Obi-Wan was a teenager, I think.”

Ahsoka doubted that was strong enough.

“Jar Jar?”

Ahsoka blinked in surprise. That... might work. After all, Jar Jar was inextricably tied to Obi-Wan's memories of Qui-Gon. And while both Rex and Anakin at times struggled with being kind to the Gungan, Obi-Wan had a soft spot for him that just could not be shaken.

Besides.

How much more non-threatening could you get?

“Bant.” Anakin's eyes darkened. “I know she helped him get through a lot of bad things in the past.”

Ahsoka stiffened. “Yeah. We all do, now.”

And finally his gaze dropped to stare at the floor. “Senator Organa and the Duchess—”

“Yeah, I already got those two.”

Anakin hesitated for a long moment, and then offered, “Senator Ami—”

“Oh, you mean the woman you impregnated.”

Anakin's head snapped up, his eyes wide. “What?”

“You didn't know? Huh. With all that raw power forcing its way into all corners of the galaxy you didn't notice? I guess you were pretty preoccupied. Yeah. She came to the Temple, seeing visions.”

Anakin's already-pale face lost all hint of color. Terror flooded his eyes.

“Yeah. She saw what you did, Anakin. Saw it, heard it, felt it. Turns out, your kids were getting an earful from Daddy, and thought Mommy needed to know.”

“Who knows?” he whispered.

Ahsoka stared at him in horror. “I just told you that you inflicted that on your children and you want
to know if you're in trouble?"

“I—”

“No. Don't bother.” Ahsoka turned on her heel and stalked to the door. “You know, I always thought you were the farthest thing from an actor. You couldn't manage a covert operation to save your life. I was wrong. All these years you've been masquerading as a decent human being.”

“Ahsoka,” he sounded anguished.

She ignored his plea, left him, and didn't look back.

* * *

Masquerading as a decent human being.

Screams of Sand children in his ears. Baby wails.

The wounded, the sick, the defenseless, those who had nothing at all to do with what had happened to his Mother—

Anakin struck his head with his metal hand, desperate to drown out the screams.

Ahsoka was right. She had every right to hate him. Despise him.

Look at what he'd done to Obi-Wan.

He lied.

And now he might die.

And I'm a father.

And did she use a plural? Twins?

And Padmé knew. Knew what he'd done.

He fell back onto the bunk and wished for a universe in which none of this had happened. But memory was too strong. It wouldn't leave him alone.

It wasn't just the Tusken.

Rush Clovis.


“I'm so sorry, Padmé. I don't know what came over me.”

“You could have killed him, Anakin.”
“I know I went too far. It's just—it's just something inside me snapped.”

“I don't know who's in there sometimes. I just know that I'm not happy anymore. I don't feel safe.”

“Padmé—”

“I think it's best if we don't see each other anymore.”

He shivered at the memory.

In spite of her resolve, she'd taken him back. She'd been in shock and grief, dealing with guilt over the fact Dooku had used her finger to pull a trigger and murder a defenseless man, and horrified that Clovis had thrown his life away to save hers.

Anakin had been there to comfort her, and she'd accepted.

And continued to accept after the shock had worn off.

She'd taken him back and pretended he hadn't almost killed Rush in her home with his bare fists.

Just like she pretended he hadn't massacred an entire village of innocents in order to punish the few guilty.

A more recent memory.

The look on her face as he'd been led to his cell...

*She won't be able to pretend anymore.*

He was going to lose her. Not to death, not to another lover...

But because of who he was.

He'd driven her away.

He'd *had* her, and he'd driven her away.

Obi-Wan's scream echoed through his mind. His desperate efforts to escape. “Please, Anakin, no—please stop!”

Anakin grit his teeth.

If only he could forget ...

*No. I don't deserve to forget. I should have to remember. I should have to—*

Obi-Wan, returning to his tormentors because the reality of what they were doing to him was more tolerable than what his own Padawan was doing to his mind.

*I'm a monster.*

Obi-Wan's agony, his horror replayed for Anakin, this time without the skewed lens of his fury.

Eyelids squeezed as tightly shut as possible, Anakin Skywalker's body shook with sobs as tears took charge.

He didn't think he could take the anguish and guilt.
He forced himself to.

To *look*. To *see* what he'd done to Padmé. To Ahsoka.

To Obi-Wan.

The people he loved most in the universe.

Anakin Skywalker wept.

---

I pushed the final Rush Clovis arc from Clone Wars season 6 back in time. I can't remember where I heard it, but I'm pretty sure I heard that at one point, those episodes had been meant to fall earlier in the Clone Wars timeline... and then production had been pushed back for a few reasons. So technically, they could be out of in-universe order, like Clone Wars movie/Cat and Mouse. And Rookies/Clone Cadets. And Ambush/Supply Lines. After all, Obi-Wan seems to refer to Satine in the present tense. “You've met Satine.” So it's possible those scripts were supposed to hit before Season 5... and there we go, close enough for me to fudge it.

Adi, who’d been friends with Qui-Gon.

Bail hadn’t realized just how loved Obi-Wan was. It was so easy to get caught up in the fact that Jedi were less exuberant with their words and gestures than the rest of the galaxy.

He had to keep in mind that because of it, each gesture had to convey more. One had to be paying attention. You couldn’t just drift through a conversation. A quiet word of encouragement often carried more heart behind it than the exuberant embraces of a non-Jedi.

Blink-and-you-miss-it moments of pure emotion.

Captain Rex had stayed with Obi-Wan for several minutes, then left looking shaken. Bail couldn’t imagine how he must feel. To have an authority figure so completely lose the heroic mask it had been wearing to unleash such betrayal

Instead of joining the other clones in the waiting area, Rex had fled at a brisk, businesslike walk.

Jar Jar had tried his best, and seeing his crestfallen despair had been difficult. Many people couldn’t see past his mental handicapability and to his heart. They were so busy being irritated by and mocking him because his brain didn’t work quite as fast as theirs that they missed just how generous and kind the Gungan was.

He loved. And somehow, he managed to not become bitter despite other people's cruel and unevolved taunts.

Every once in a while Bail thought maybe the galaxy had grown up enough to move past people hating other people for disabilities, but every time he turned around someone was suggesting that Jar Jar would be better out of sight, where everyone could forget about him and his “stupidity” and his “clumsiness.”

It never ceased to amaze Bail how Jar Jar forgave the cruelty. How free his heart was. How kind he was to those who misused him. How willing to befriend them, even though they thought his friendship worthless.

He's a better being than the vast majority who can walk gracefully and calculate higher math in their heads.

Obi-Wan had been one of the few to see him for who he was inside.

Jar Jar loved him fiercely in return.

And there was nothing the Gungan could do for his friend.

As Dex lumbered out of the waiting area for his attempt at rescuing Obi-Wan, Bail made his way
over to where Jar Jar drooped.

“I'm sure he'd be grateful you tried,” Bail assured him.

“Hesa made sure I'd be gettin' shooting training, after de accidente with Padmé,” Jar Jar mourned. “Nobody was a-wantin' to be trainin' mesa, but he mada sure. Mesa noah been a hurtin anybeing with a blaster since. Theysa wantin' to be keepin' mesa away from blasters. Hesa helpin' my be safe.”

Bail gave him an understanding nod.

“And people been a-watchin' dat awful holo. A lot. Mesa been sayin' theysa shouldn't. Dat Obi wouldn't do it to themsa. And because mesa stupid, theysa don't listen.”

“You're not stupid,” Bail objected. “And they should have listened to you because you're right. You're absolutely right.”

“Is hesa gonna die?” Jar Jar searched Bail's eyes, needing the truth.

Bail gave him a sad smile. “I hope he won't.”

“Hesa been through bad things before, and been okeyday. But dissin worse dan all of it before, isn't it.”

And people called him slow.

Bail sighed. “Yes. A lot worse.”

“Mesa gonna contact my friend, Queenie Julia. Askin' her to meditate with hersa people, for Obi to get better.”

“I'm sure he'd appreciate that very much.” Bail had no idea who the Gungan was talking about, but whoever it might be, the effort certainly couldn't hurt.

Jar Jar bobbed his head and hurried out the door, nearly tripping over his own feet in the process. He recovered, only to crash into Padmé as she entered. “Sorry! Mesa sorry! Mesa on a mission to save Obi!”

Padmé recovered, watched him go, and then glanced around the waiting area uncertainly.

Cody was up and out of his seat in an instant, offering it to the civvie, but she waved him back into it and came to stand with Bail.

“Anything yet?” she asked, looking jumpy.

Bail wondered if it had anything to do with being in the same building as the arrested Anakin Skywalker.

Why couldn't she have fallen in love with a different Jedi? Why did she have to go and pick that one? It had been endless fear and heartache for her.

“Not yet.”

Dex came back down the hall, shoulders hunched and tears in his eyes. The massive Besalisk paused in the middle of the room, coughed, and choked, “Somebody get that boy back up on his feet. Please.”
And then he stomped out.

Bail felt his throat close.

“Is it okay if I cut in line—?” Padmé moved towards the entrance.

Bail nodded.

She needed to get out of here as soon as possible. It was written all over her.

She didn't stay long.

Moments later she was rushing out, without a glance at any of them, tears streaming down her face.

Bail turned to the small group of clones, the only beings left except for himself.

He found several pairs of bright eyes looking back at him.

“You can go, Senator. We're going to stay with him until they kick us out.”

A small smile tugged at Bail's lips.

How he wished he could convince the Senate to see these men as the individuals they were.

But that might be even more difficult than convincing the general population to respect Jar Jar for what he could do, instead of despising him for what he couldn't.

Slavery and discrimination.

For the love of the Force, why hadn't the Republic moved past those by now? How many years was it going to take?

Bail walked down the pale green hallway, the soft carpet underfoot silencing his steps. The lighting was gentle, here, and the walls painted with vague floral patterns in soft colors that complemented instead of contrasting with one another.

The door to Obi-Wan's room stood open.

Bail had already heard the basics, back at the beginning of his wait to see the injured Jedi.

No loud noises. No sudden moves. No angry or turbulent emotions, try to keep as calm and soothing and safe as possible.

The healers hadn't dared to put their patient in a bacta tank, given how dimly his life's flame flickered.

A system of braces and slings held him somewhat upright and on his stomach, leaving his back without pressure against it.

When Bail first reached the door, his heart jumped into his throat. Obi-Wan was awake. He was looking Bail in the eye—

No, he realized as he stepped into the room. Obi-Wan was staring blankly in the general direction of the door.

“Hey,” Bail offered, feeling lame and grateful no one else was present. “Now would be a good time
to wake up. I could go back out there, feel very proud I was able to reach you when the others couldn't." He searched for *any* hint of humor in that still face.

Nothing.

Even on Zigoola, Obi-Wan had managed pain-fueled smirks.

This was worse than Zigoola.

For a long time Bail had assumed that trumping Zigoola would be impossible. And then news about *this* had come in.

He knew better now.

“So... you have everybody worried. Even Breha. She keeps calling, asking for updates.”

Still nothing.

“I know you despise politicians, but apparently they take a shine to you. Padmé. The Duchess. Me. Breha.”

No indication of being heard.

“You know... last time you couldn't focus, you had me stab a lightsaber through your leg. I'm kind of glad you aren't telling me to try *that* again.”

The silence only hung heavier.

Bail blinked against stinging eyes. No wonder Padmé had fled.

This was terrible.

Obi-Wan had survived *so much* horror in his life. It had started in his childhood, and carried on up to this present day. Each nightmare he went through he came out of with three things. A memory, a difficulty that for the rest of his life he'd have to compensate for, and a better understanding of *just how much* his mind and body could take.

After Zigoola and Lanteeb, Bail had begun to wonder if there was *anything* that could destroy this Jedi's resilience.

Apparently Skywalker had wondered the same thing.

Anakin.

He'd heard *so much* about the boy in those long, terrible days on Zigoola. Much had been Obi-Wan's fevered murmurs when trapped in visions.

*Just how much* that boy meant to him. *Just how willing* Obi-Wan was to suffer and die for him.

Bail couldn't breathe.

He had to get out of here.

*Voice, touch, the Force.*

That's what the Healers had suggested.
He'd tried his voice, he couldn't manipulate the Force, so he had only one option left.

He gently patted the bloodless hand.

“Come back,” he whispered. “Please.”

And then he was out the door.

* * *

Yoda had contacted Satine before the Mind Healer in charge of watching over Obi-Wan. She'd been on a ship and en route for Coruscant when the zebrek informed her of his condition.

Yoda had always been so considerate.

Satine sought out and watched the recording.

According to what Yoda had told her, every Force sensitive in the galaxy had seen what had happened to Obi-Wan. The enemies who'd abused him had lived it.

The only thing Obi-Wan had lacked in that room of horror had been a friend.

So she forced herself to see it. To let herself hurt, to let her heart bleed.

To know.

She refused to let the recording have power over her. She would not allow it to become a leverage point.

If Obi-Wan woke up... no... when Obi-Wan woke up, she needed to know that no lowlife could try to pressure him into anything by threatening to show the Duchess of Mandalore the recording if he didn't comply.

It was one of the very few things she could do to protect him in this situation.

Oh, Obi...

Ships could move only so fast through hyperspace.

By the time she reached the Halls of Healing's waiting area, it was empty.

This wasn't the first time she'd come here to check in on a dangerously wounded Obi-Wan.

But it had never been this bad.

Down the hall she could hear strong voices, clone voices, singing Vode An.

“Go on in,” one of the Healers encouraged her. “The clones are pretty much camped out here. Waiting for them to leave isn't going to get you anywhere.”

Satine gave him a nod and worked her way down the hall.

She found five 212thers around the edges of Obi-Wan's room.
They came to attention and fell silent as she stepped in the door.

“Ma'am,” Cody greeted her.

“You were singing for him?” she asked, studying their faces.

“That's right. The General likes it when the boys sing Vode An,” Cody explained. “Gets a faraway look in his eyes like he's remembering something. Something good. We thought maybe if he could remember whatever that really good thing is, maybe he could find his way back out.”

Tears flooded Satine's eyes and her breathing hitched.

“It's me,” she choked.

Five sets of eyes looked back at her, blank.

“I sang that to him, long, long ago.” She blinked the tears away from her eyes so she could see. “You don't look surprised.”

Five sets of eyes shifted, looking at one another.

“We... it made sense, Ma'am,” one of them spoke up. “The song is Mando'a. You're Mandalorian, and the General's in love with you. Didn't seem hard to put the pieces together.”

Satine arched an eyebrow. “And this is common knowledge in the army?”

Again the uncomfortable shifting.

“In the two-twelfth and five-oh-first... the other battalions don't know. We don't talk about our Generals outside the immediate family.”

Immediate family.

Two entire battalions of men knew about Obi-Wan's love for her.

*I'm sure he's very pleased with that.* The thought was amusing. Obi-Wan had mentioned to her that “unfortunate words” had been said in the hearing of a few clones, but that he hoped they hadn't noticed and he was *sure* they wouldn't repeat it.

So much for *that*.

The fact they *knew* made their initial salute as she entered the room make sense and gain significance.

They were recognizing her importance to their General.

“Do you want us to leave?” Cody asked.

Did she?

These boys had been denied childhood, denied parents, denied choice, denied just about everything except for violence, death, and their Jedi.

Jedi weren't just commanding officers to them.

They were *everything.*
She could see the love and fear in their eyes.

*He's their buir.*

And there was a warmth towards her she hadn't expected from them.

It made total sense in retrospect.

If they saw him as their father, it put her in the position of mother.

If she was worthy of it. If she accepted them. If she, as a civvie and a non-clone, didn't wig out at the unconventional way they saw the world.

Thing of it was, she was Mandalorian. Even in her chosen pacifism, she had never let go of one of the fundamental tenants of Mando culture.

Family was what you made it.

The clones' worldview made *complete* sense to her.

It felt more normal than the rest of non-Mandalorian humanity she'd run across in the galaxy.

For years, she'd accepted Obi-Wan's family as hers. The Jedi. More especially Anakin and Ahsoka.

It didn't take much to expand her heart to include his men too.

Another Mando trait. Clans could be vast. A Mandalorian heart didn't *run out of room.* It didn't have a limited number of places, needing to purge the old out in order to make room for the new. She could take a battalion of clones into her heart without any of the others in her sphere of care suffering for it.

Who did these men have, outside of one another and Obi-Wan?

“*You may stay.*”

She could practically taste their relief. They settled against the walls, careful to make themselves as unobtrusive as possible.

Satine stepped up to the slings and stared into the empty eyes of the jetii she loved.

So beautiful.

So broken.

She pressed her fingers to his face, hoping the familiar gesture could echo through the abandoned mind to find the hiding child inside.

“I know you're in there,” she murmured. “You are not the first to lock yourself away.”

Granted, no one was able to find an instance where someone had done it so *thoroughly*, but that was her Obi-Wan.

If he did something, he did it the whole way.

“You think you're safe in there, darling. But now it's safe out *here.* Come back to me. Udesi. Just gently take a step towards my voice. Udesi, dear jetii. I'm here. I'm right here.”
Did depths of the eyes look a little desperate?


She didn't look away from the glassy eyes as she spoke to the clones. “Sing again.”

Five strong, beautiful voices rose in the anthem of the Grand Army of the Republic.

Satine joined in.

But she didn't use the modified lyrics that had been given to the Kaminoans.

She used the *originals*. The fierce declarations of loyalty to Mandalore, to its ideals, its people, its blood.

She hadn't sung it in years. It had a vicious bloodthirst that sickened her now...

But Obi-Wan remembered *these* words.

And his ad'ike were right.

A memory so cherished, so comforting, so familiar...

“Bal kote, darasuum kote, jorso'ran kando a tome, sa kyr'am nau tracyn kad, vode an.”

In Basic it would have said: And glory, eternal glory, we shall bear its weight *together*. Not alone. A blade forged in the fires of death, brothers all.

The word for *glory* was the word for *strength* made plural. *Kot to kote*.

Strength, eternal strength, its weight was *always* to be born as a unit.


The clones' voices fell silent, and Satine simply said, “Again.”

They obeyed.

Satine sang, she murmured words of encouragement. She sang. She spoke. She sang.

After four rounds she allowed the clones to rest, and continued on alone, singing other songs of her people that the clones *didn't* know. Some in Mando'a, some in Basic. All of them familiar to Obi-Wan.

She'd sung them over him as he struggled to heal from horrific wounds that year he and Qui-Gon had care of her.

He'd been in so much pain. The path had been so rough.

“We made it through that, Ob'ika. *Tome*. Always together.”
One of the clones gasped. “Did you see that?”

“His fingers twitched!”

Satine didn't glance away from those empty eyes.

Yes.

There was just a hint of fire somewhere deep within that hadn't been there before.

“That's it,” she encouraged, breaking into a feral smile. “That's my atin jetii. Stubborn as they come. You would have made a magnificent Mandalorian. You're almost there. Just a few steps more. Keep following my voice.”

She sang.

The clones cheered as fingers twitched again, then made a fist.

Chapter End Notes

Mando'a Guide:
[Soothing Vocabulary 101]

Buir (Pronounced /boo-ear/) = Parent

Jetii (Pronounced /JAY-tee/) = Jedi

Udesi (Pronounced /oo-DAY-see/) = Easy/Take it easy


K’uur (Pronounced /koor/) = Hush/shhh

Ad’ike (Pronounced /ah-DEE-kay/) = Little one/son/daughter/guys [when used informally on adults]

Tome (Pronounced /TOH-may/) = Together

Ob’ika (Pronounced /ohb-EE-kah/) = Obi-Wan's name, turned into an endearment by using the prefix 'ika. Literally: “Little Obi-Wan.” For your name, take a syllable of it and add 'ika.

Atin (Pronounced /ah-TEEN/) = Stubborn, tenacious, capable of endurance
Obi-Wan didn't dare move. Didn't dare breathe. Didn't dare think.
He held perfectly still, curled in a ball.
The horrible inside had left him for now. Gone away.
It could always come back, if the heavy hand, resting on Obi-Wan's mind, felt even the hint of a twitch.
The horrible outside wasn't gone.
There was nowhere to go.
He would just have to outlast them.
Garen had once joked that was his superpower.
He'd escaped a forced mind-wipe as a child by outlasting the men trying to inflict it on him. Holding on until they went away.
He'd managed to outlast his exile in Agricorps.
The firebeetles that had torn the flesh from his bones, he'd outlasted them too.
The anguish of trying to survive Qui-Gon's death. The various wounds he'd received over the years. Crashes, battles, assassination attempts.
Zigoola, Lanteeb, weeks being tortured by Ventress.
Being tortured by Maul.
Being tortured by Dooku.
By Hondo.
He hunkered down and held on the longest. The enemies grew bored, ended up distracted, or just plain no longer had the means to hold him.
But as long as he was the one still breathing, he won.
Outlast.
He'd always hidden in his mind. Except for Zigoola and the mind-wipe. Those times he'd hidden in his physical body.
This time...
He couldn't hide in either.
So he stood very, very still.
Light wrapped around his fingers, gripped tight in his fists. Holding on to it so tight it hurt.

It's all he had left.

Whispers and shadows slunk near him, tempting him to think. To consider what or who they might be.

No.

No thinking.

He focused on absolutely nothing.

It was an abyss he could easily fall into.

And then in an instant he felt...

Different.

He couldn't think about it, couldn't wonder why or what had changed.

But a bond that had formed very long ago was pulsing with warmth and reassurance.

The whispers changed.

They weren't Basic.

They had a lilting flavor that tasted of a burning sun, fierce stars and campfire-cooked venison.

Bitter cold, horrifying pain, and a being so beautiful, so strong, so determined ...

None of these things could he think.

He couldn't put words to them. Wasn't sure where they belonged, or even who they belonged to. Himself, or someone else's mind.

But there was something his body and mind recognized, even in their turned-off mode.

Something so much a part of him that it didn't require thought to recognize it.

His mind was relaxing.

Not safe. It wasn't safe. Had to outlast, had to hold still —

Whispers of skirts, so much blue... a knife with a hilt of bone...

Bone from a beloved strill who had died long ago...

Whispers of revulsion, whispers of trying to accept a culture radically different from his own...

Whispers of golden hair and blue eyes that could snap with fury one instant and compassion the next. Laughter as sweet as songbirds and harsh as carrion fowl, depending on her mood.

Pain, pain , fear and failure, and pain and his mind so, so torn—

He remembered.
That terrible wounding he'd received. It was then. She stroked his forehead, sang to him through the shudders, through the moans.

Whispered Mando'a in his ears.

Safety in the pain. A place of safety.

She would never push him farther than his conscience drew the line. She would never demand he sell his soul for her. Someone who held him when he was most vulnerable, and who shielded him from every harm. Someone who knew him better than he knew himself. Someone who had loved Qui-Gon too. Someone who remembered him, someone who understood the struggle between warrior and peacemaker. A woman whose heart burned like a dying star but had learned to control her fury.

Safe.

Safe.

Safe.

He couldn't think, but he recognized the scent of her clothes. Her hair. He recognized, a thousand kilometers away, her fingers, tracing a familiar pattern. He recognized the whispers.

She was here.

And she wanted him to move.

No.

No.

It wasn't safe, it wasn't right, it was a trap —

But it couldn't be.

Because this woman prized honesty more than she prized him. She valued what was right more than she valued him.

Her conscience was even stronger than his.

She would never lead him astray. Not in the tiniest of ways.

If she beckoned for him to move away, to start thinking again—

It was because it she felt it was the right thing to do.

Dread flooded him.

What would he find?

But her soothing warmth surrounded his soul.

“Safe, Mando'ad.”

No one would call him a child of Mandalore but her. It was a ridiculous description. Almost as ridiculous as warrior-heart. But she called him that too. Even though he wasn't a warrior.
They were words tied to her heart. Instinctive terms of love and acceptance. They expressed something in her heart that no other words could touch. When she used them on him, they drew his soul close to hers.

It was worth overlooking the inaccuracy.

He took a hesitant step into his mind, expecting the horrible inside to strike him.

Panic seized Obi-Wan's throat.

He couldn't take any more, he couldn't—

He turned to hunker down in his chosen spot again. Not now. He should give it more time.

Just in case.

It wasn't worth the risk.

“Jetii...”

The horrible outside had called him Jedi, the word dripped in blood and filth.

But she wasn't using that word.

“Jetii.”

Only good things belonged to that word. Sunsets that stole your breath. Venommites. Scars and hardship and giddy laughter because after all of that they'd survived.

It belonged to a nation that had been redesigned, a plant that had been reclaimed. Against all odds, a planet of violence had a capital city made of glass. Of art. Of beauty.

Obi-Wan took another step.

Sheer force of will.

Not his, but hers.

He knew what her will could accomplish.

It had drawn him back from death more than once.

“Follow me.”

Where? Are you taking me back there? I can't go back there, you don't know how terrible —

The panic was throttling him again.

“Udesi,” her voice soothed. “Easy, warrior-heart.”

No. No. He couldn't allow himself to give in. The horrible inside was just waiting for him to move. It wanted to lull him into thinking mercy had arrived, only to run him down again. Continuous despair was difficult. The horrible inside knew that despair, then hope, then renewed despair was even worse.

No. He wouldn't let it happen. He couldn't survive that. Not again.
I'm not a warrior. I'm a peacekeeper.

And you are not a warrior. You are a peacemaker.

His resistance seemed to make no impression on the voice.

“Tome, dear jetii. Together, always together.”

That was true. No matter where he went in this galaxy, he could feel her pride. Could feel her love. Could feel her companionship.

She was there with him.

Always together.

He couldn't find her fingers. They should brushing across his forehead or pressed against his cheek. He wanted to find them. Follow her voice and find them—

He took a tiny step.

No. No.

No.

There was something horrible out there. And something horrible in here. If he moved too much, it was going to awaken and find him.

He should just freeze and curl up again. Not head back to where he'd been, and certainly not follow the loved voice.

No. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

“Trust me, warrior-heart.”

I can't face it. Something... something horrible ... inside... outside...

“You're almost there. Take one more step. One more step for me.”

No.

Not even for her.

He would die for her. He would suffer untold torture for her, for her people—

A step towards the horribles. Could he take a step towards the horribles for her?

He couldn't breathe. Couldn't see. Couldn't sense anything.

The horrible inside could be right behind him, ready to pounce; he'd never know it—

He spun around, then again, then again. There was nothing to hide against.
The horrible thing in here... it had Ana— it had a face.

Could it have stolen her voice? It used to have... his voice. Could it have changed? A new cruelty? Trick him into trust, only to shatter him again?

He folded in on himself, quivering in terror.

*No more. No more,* he pleaded to the nothingness. *Please. Qui-Gon. Take me to where you are. Out of reach of this.*

*Please, Qui-Gon...*

*Mercy.*

He'd never begged for mercy in his life.

Of anyone or anything.

Ever.

But he'd begged Ana— the horrible inside. He'd begged *it.*

It laughed at him. It hurt him more.

Obi-Wan Kenobi *didn't beg.*

But he *had.*

It... broke him, knowing that. *Feeling* it.

He'd given in. He'd begged for mercy. Said the word *please.*

He'd....

No dignity left.

The tiny hint of respect he'd felt for himself was dead.

So much dead—

Everywhere he looked, it was familiar but dead. His mind was a crumbling mansion, the lights flickering or out, and haunted by the horrible.

It lurked somewhere.

Playing with him.

Enjoying his dread.

*No, no, no —*

*“Obi'ka.”*

Little Obi-Wan.

He wanted to be little again. To be a child, wrapped safe in a Finder's arms. Guarded from every harm.
“You know this is my territory, my love. You’re not the first mind who’s locked itself away. And you’re not the first I’ve coaxed out.”

His fear deepened.

She was going to win.

Sweet Force, she was going to win. He could hear it in her voice. She was going to drag him into the attention of the horrible inside, and the horrible outside would catch him—

“There. We bear it tome, jetii.”

If she could have saved him, wouldn’t she have already? The horrible inside and the horrible outside would never have found him to begin with.

But she was so confident —

Maybe she could help—

You’re succumbing.

You’re thinking again.

Shut down now before it returns.

He saw a vague swish of dark brown robes down a hallway.

Yes.

It was here.

It was here to complete what it had started.

There was only one thing left it hadn’t taken yet. Hadn’t defiled and torn away from him.

His light.

Taking his life would be a mercy, so he would be forced to keep that.

No.

The horrible inside was after his light.

He caught a glimpse of it.

Curly, light brown hair.

A scar over the eye.

Eyes of burning, molten gold that should have been blue—

Obi-Wan thrashed away, cowering, trying to protect himself, trying to hide his light, trying to—

A precipice.

It hadn’t been there before.
Qui-Gon's through there.

He knew it to his core.

He couldn't see the horrible inside anymore. The memory had flitted away, down the corridors.

It was behind him.

It was always behind you.

He'd lived through enough horror holos to know that.

Only they hadn't been holos.

They'd been unscripted.

And the blood shed hadn't been fake.

Safety lay somewhere in those dark, comforting depths. He stared into it. A single step, and he could leave this place of horror.

He could be free.

He was so tired, so tired of the fear and the pain and the humiliation— he'd begged. He'd... he'd wept... as he begged...

Mind and body had been taken by storm.

Maybe it was time to abandon ship.

What sense did it make to go down with it in flames? To feel it breaking apart, the last seams giving way, a game to see which destroyed you first— the vacuum of space with one seam too many exploding open or the fire that rages through the areas that still retain oxygen.

The horrible outside or the horrible inside.

Escape.

He would have to leave his light behind.

If he kept it, the shadows wouldn't envelop him. They wouldn't hide him. The chasm wouldn't take him to Qui-Gon.

He considered.

The horrible inside would take the light away from him. It would pounce, hold him down, rip his fingers away from it one at a time, breaking them as it went. At least if he let go of it now it would be his own idea.

The laughter. Ana— the horrible inside's cruel laughter, slinking all around him.

He loosened his grip on his light.

It looked battered anyway. Like it might be dying.

Music.
A beautiful, fierce melody sung with a gentle voice like a lullaby.

It was a lullaby.

All about slaughtering nightmares. All about viciously tearing them to pieces and feeding their entrails to your pet strill.

Mandalorian children being told just what to do with their fears. A soothing, calming song.

Her voice.

This song.

He knew this song.

It had soothed him through hours of waking nightmares.

What had they done with the nightmare? Was it one of the two horribles?

No... no... that was a horrible of the past.

If it was past and wasn't here now, it meant they must have killed it.

Fed it to her strill.

But her strill was dead. She had one of its bones as the handle of her knife.

Ghastly tradition, saving a body part of a loved one. As uncivilized as it got. Quite revolting.

Gentle laughter.

“Follow my voice, Mando’ad. This is my territory.”

Horror and hell and revenge and bloodshed and torture?

Yes, actually.

Those were her stomping grounds.

She knows her way around.

When he looked back, the precipice was missing.

Where had she put it? He needed it back—

He took a couple of steps, and she hummed in pleasure. “That’s it.”

Where did you put it? The path to Qui-Gon? The escape route?

“This way. Follow my voice.”

For several moments he did, his fingers tightening around his light again. It might be sick. It might be dying. It might be bruised and beaten but it was his, and it was the only thing that was his as he walked through the halls of his own mind and knew they didn’t belong to him anymore. Covered in filth, the walls leaning crazily, floorboards creaking and groaning beneath the weight of his passage.

Once beautiful sculptures lay in ruins, the shards cutting his feet.
This place... this place was terrible.

He'd always taken care of his mind. Tended it with as much care and effort as he used with his body. He could barely recognize this place. How could it be so ruined and fragile at the same time?

The rooms were all confused. This wasn't the way he'd built it. The horrible inside hadn't just destroyed the furnishings, it had... moved... things Obi-Wan hadn't thought could move.

He... wasn't entirely sure of the way out.

And he suspected not all of the movement was over.

That room for example.

He'd walked by it twice already, but not the rooms surrounding it. Those were different each time.

Was he walking in circles, and only that one room remained steady, or was he traveling great distances, and the room... following him?

Fear again. Ghosting shadows across his light. He held the glowing strands even closer as he tried to follow the voice.

Her voice.

The voice that knew these sorts of cruel mazes. Knew what to do.

The farther he walked, the more parts of his mind activated, every lamp that switched on revealing just how deep the wreckage reached.

Began defining what he'd been hiding from. Giving shape to the footprints of both horribles.

Revealed places he'd prized... that now lay shattered and defiled.

Grief stole over him, making it hard to move.

He could see places where things were missing, but he didn't know what.

Memories lay about, filth contaminating them, scrambled and buried.

Could he retrieve them all? Could he salvage them? Could he ever visit them... without seeing the fingerprints of the horrible inside blocking out her face, or the horrible inside's voice drowning out Qui-Gon's?

“Is this how you served him?”

Obi-Wan turned away, shaking, needing to escape that voice—

A crack in the floor. Emptiness beneath. He sensed that some of his beautiful, precious memories had slipped away through it.

Had been lost to him forever.

He didn't know which.

The knowledge filled him with panic and anguish.

He would never know which.
How many? Wasn't it bad enough the horrible inside had left his memories dripping with its stench? That they were forever twisted and scarred?

Why had it needed to lose some too?

He trembled. He clutched his light and trembled.

He'd moved around in here too much. His mind, coming out of its frozen state, wasn't something he could control. It turned on him.

It wasn't the mind he'd known. It wasn't his refuge. It was something else.

It was hunting him.

The more his mind awakened, the more clearly he thought —

Zygerrians.

The horrible outside. Zygerrian slavers —

Again the panic, again he couldn't breathe —

“Come back to me.”

He shook.

No. No he couldn't.

I'm sorry. I never wanted to leave you like this. I thought you'd be with me to the end.

“They are gone. The horrible outside is gone.”

Maybe so, but he couldn't risk it.

Who drove it away?

“Your family.”

I don't have a family.

“Semantics,” she laughed.

She'd always said that. She'd said they had a granddaughter. She'd been so proud of how their granddaughter had saved her, had uncovered Almec as a traitor —

Obi-Wan took a few more steps.

Then a few more.

The horrible inside hadn't gotten him yet.

And she said the horrible outside was gone.

If he made a break for it, maybe he could hide from the horrible inside... outside. He'd done it before.

He didn't have his riverstone anymore. He'd given it to the horrible inside.
But pain. He'd used pain on Zigoola. That had kept him from slipping back inside his mind. Kept him from thinking.

*Is there pain out there?*

“*Plenty, my darling.*”

*Enough to work?*

“*Yes.*”

*And... you? Are you there?*

“I am always here."

*I mean... when I come out there, will you be there?*

“*Yes.*”

*Get ready. I'm going to make a run for it.*

He tried. He lunged for his body.

He fell short.

He still had mind to recover. To turn on. The lights were all out—

Memories flashed by, unspeakable, bringing the horrible inside into clear horrifying focus—

Bleeding, dying, he stumbled for the outside. *Satine!*

“*Obi-Wan,*” a familiar voice chided. A voice that made him want to vomit from sheer terror and pain.

No. No. The horrible inside couldn't take him. Couldn't take him. No more.

*Her* voice, “*My atin jetii.*”

Stubborn Jedi.

Stubborn.

He was backed against a wall, staring at the horrible inside.


Kill the nightmare.

No. He couldn't kill this nightmare.

This nightmare... he loved.

But he could run.

And he did.

“That's it. Almost there. A few steps more.”
It reached out to grab him. It caught him by the neck. It was going to drag him through memories, force him to —

Kill the nightmare.

And something else he'd learned from Satine.

If you needed to hurt something...

Try the eyes.

He lashed out, slashing his fingers deep into the eyes of the horrible, and he kicked away from it, reaching for the surface. *Satine —!*  
He could see her eyes. He could *see* them.

He couldn't move.

He couldn't —

"*Udesi, Mando'ad.*"

How could he be easy when *it* was hunting him, was right behind —

He gasped for air, and found himself bound.

Panic again. Pure and complete. He reached into the Force to rip himself free —

“*K‘uur, k‘uur, my jetii. Be still, warrior-heart. Udesi, Ob‘ika.*”

She was *here*. She was *here*.

He was *outside*.

He focused on her eyes. Only her eyes.

He could *not* be dragged back inside. Could *not* —

“Don't let me go back in there,” he gasped.

Her fingers against his face. Sweet Force, the warmth of those fingers, covered in callouses —

“Of course,” she whispered back, tone fierce, eyes commanding. “You may *not* go back. I will not allow it.”

She was stronger than he was.

Always had been.

He surrendered to it, to *her* —

And that's when he felt the fire in his back.

She'd promised there would be pain.

All memories of both horribles vanished in the excruciating burn of it.
Thank the Force.

Chapter End Notes

Mando'a Guide:
[Soothing Vocabulary 101]

Jetii (Pronounced /JAY-tee/) = Jedi

Udesi (Pronounced /oo-DAY-see/) = Easy/Take it easy


K'uur (Pronounced /koor/) = Hush/shhh

Tome (Pronounced /TOH-may/) = Together

Ob'ika (Pronounced /ohb-EE-kah/) = Obi-Wan's name, turned into an endearment by using the prefix 'ika. Literally: “Little Obi-Wan.”

Atin (Pronounced /ah-TEEN/) = Stubborn, tenacious, capable of endurance
Anakin bolted upright, quivering as he stood staring at the door.

Obi-Wan was awake.

And in... excruciating pain.

Anakin retracted his probing, remembering Ahsoka's statements.

Obi-Wan had been hiding from him.

Have to stay away, have to stay out of sight.

It would be difficult. He was used to casually invading his Master's space in the Force.

But if it kept him from retreating again, it had to be done.

Thank goodness the pain had kept Obi-Wan from noticing Anakin's automatic contact.

I guess I'll finally be learning that control everyone says I need.

* * *

Satine heard the relieved murmurs of the clones behind her turn to horrified yelps as Obi-Wan's face contorted and his body arched in pain. He groaned, eyes rolling shut.

The healers were back, shoving clones out the door, and came for Satine too.

She held up her hand. “You want me here.”

They glanced at her uncertainly, but didn't try to force her to leave.

* * *

Ahsoka ran for the Halls of Healing, heart nearly exploding.

He was alive.

She tapped her comm as she ran. “Padmé, he's awake.” Without waiting for an answer she tapped it again. “Senator Organa, he's back.” Again. “Representative Binks? He's awake.” Even as she tapped it she heard a victorious ululating. A pure beam of selfless glory in the Force.

“Rex. He's awake.”
She was about to comm Cody when she nearly collided with him and four other clones. They were beaming, but horror flickered in their eyes too. “How is he?” she demanded. “In pain,” was the grim response. A hoarse cry tore down the hall. The clones winced. Ahsoka, feeling it in the Force, grit her teeth. “Who woke him up?” she asked. “The Duchess of Mandalore. It makes sense, with them being in love and all,” Cody explained. “You should have heard her. He’s laying there, no sign of life, but she seemed to know just what to do and say. And when he moved his fingers, she didn’t seem surprised at all. She knew he was coming back to her. She gave her orders, and he followed. We just had to find his commanding officer.” Ahsoka stared at him. “How did you know that?” Five clone faces lost all hint of glee and went very still. “Sir?” Cody asked, suddenly the reserved soldier she thought she’d known. “Apologies, Commander. General Skywalker said some things on a mission. Sir.” “Who does know?” she managed to ask. “The men of the two-twelfth and five-oh-first. Other than us, only those the Generals have chosen to confide in. Sir.” Well, that was... wow. And every Force-sensitive in the galaxy knew now. The memories Anakin had so carelessly tossed about revealed that in stunning color. A vibrant, intense, non-sexual romance. Obi-Wan's abuse was all over the holonet. Soon they were going to focus on his lovelife instead. Everyone and their brother would be discussing Obi-Wan's relationship with Satine. Criticizing. Speculating. Leering. Ahsoka cringed. Obi-Wan was such a private man. So different from Anakin. If he hadn’t been afraid of getting into trouble, he would have been gleeful to shout his love for Padmé from the skyscrapers. Obi-Wan was a different individual. “Are we in trouble, Sir?” Ahsoka blinked back to the present. “No. At ease, troopers. It’s fine.” She left the 212thers behind, and hurried to the room. “No,” she heard Obi-Wan protesting. “You will not put me under—” “But you’re strong enough for the bacta tank now. Sleep for a few hours with a light healing trance,
and those wounds will heal so much quicker and you won't have to feel the pain of it in the meantime. Win-win.”

“No.” There was a frayed desperation in his tone. “I will not go back in there—”

“But you're refusing to take the pain medication.” Oh. The healers were upset.

“I won't be able to keep from slipping back into my mind if you drug me!”

They weren't the only ones upset.

A familiar voice, gentle and soothing, broke in. “It's your decision, Master Kenobi. No one will force you into something else.”

The Duchess of Mandalore.

_You'd really better tell her before someone else does. That thousands of beings in the galaxy saw your most precious moments together. That they're likely to be twisted, filled with details that never happened because the truth isn't steamy enough, and then spread through every planet in the Republic._

Yeah. She really should mention that before the Duchess found out some other way.

Ahsoka turned into the room.

Obi-Wan, cheeks flushed in desperate alarm, looked over and saw her.

All color fled from his skin, leaving him looking dead. His breathing harshened, his forehead wrinkled, eyebrows drawing together in distress.

_He knows I saw it all._

She sent him as much of a smile as she could muster up.

Satine turned to the healers. “Could you give us a moment?” she asked quietly.

The other Jedi filed out of the room, and Obi-Wan sent the Duchess a look of panic.

“Easy,” she murmured. “Easy. Ahsoka is not her father any more than I am mine, or Anakin is you.”

Every muscle in Obi-Wan's body tensed at the mention of his Padawan's name.

“It's not that —” he tried to steady his breathing but it didn't work— “I put her under his authority. He wouldn't have taken a Padawan if I hadn't—” He ran out of words, his eyes begging for the thought to be understood anyway.

Satine turned keen blue eyes to Ahsoka. “Well?” she prompted.

Ahsoka wasn't sure what the Duchess wanted from her.

“Has there been good?” Satine asked, her tone gentle.

“All of it. Until yesterday,” Ahsoka whispered.

“There. See?” Satine turned back to Obi-Wan. “My father was a monster, but I loved him, and he loved me. He gave me things I still use to this day. Darling. Don't push Ahsoka away. Please don’t.
She is hurting too. And no. That is not your fault.”
“What am I supposed to do now?” Obi-Wan asked, his voice tiny. So pitiful. “Everyone looks at me,
and they— they remember how it felt— they look at me with pity or disgust but I just want it to go
away. I don't want their pity. I want them to forget.”

Satine took his face in her hand. “I know,” she murmured. “I know, warrior-heart.”

Ahsoka slunk for the door.

“No.” Satine wasn't looking at her, but had somehow heard her silent footfalls. “Don't leave yet.”

Ahsoka froze. She wasn't at all sure it was a good idea to stay, but somehow Satine's voice had her
feet frozen in place. Now the clones' interpretation made sense.

This woman certainly was the ranking officer in the room, and her orders were to be obeyed.

“Obi, Every one of your friends and the people who care about you know. Period. Most of them felt
it. If you try to avoid people who know, you will be left with no one standing beside you. You will
be alone. What you need is not secrecy. Anonymity is not possible given the circumstances. What
you need is your vode. Your family. The people who will stand beside you no matter what. And if
you need them to wipe the pity off their faces, you're going to need to tell them.”

“Satine —”

He sounded so broken that Ahsoka was inwardly begging the Duchess to stop too.

“I know you, Ob'ika,” she said quietly, refusing to let him look away from her eyes. “I know how
you run.”

His defiance melted.

“If you don't want to get stuck inside again, you are going to have to let your vode help. Those are
your two options, Ob'ika. You can run, be alone, but eventually you will find yourself facing a blank
wall and you will not be able to keep yourself from being sucked back in. And there will be no one
knowing they need to pull you out.”

He was shaking in terror.


“Satine, it's terrible,” he pleaded.

“Is inside better?”

The look in his eyes clearly said that was not the case.

His mind was the most horrifying location in existence.

“What do you need from Ahsoka right now?” Satine coached.

“Can— can she look at you while we talk?” he asked, hesitantly.

“Yes. If that's what you need right now, she can look at you while she talks to you.” Satine circled
her fingers in the air, effectively snagging Ahsoka's gaze, and drawing her fingers to her face.
Ahsoka's eyes instinctively tracked the motion.
Where in blazes had she learned that trick?

Maybe it was an old Mando thing. Ahsoka could only imagine that the original set had been as cozy with PTSD and various mental conditions resulting from trauma as it was possible for a culture to get.

And... that they probably handled those in ways psychologists would have aneurysms over. The mind healers might throw Satine out.

But Obi-Wan was breathing steadily now, and in the Force Ahsoka could sense his panic bleeding away.

And even a spark of determination. To move. That certainly had not been there before.

Satine was motivating him towards life.

Maybe the mind healers shouldn't kick her out.

“What is it you need from her?” Satine asked again.


Ahsoka's gaze reflexively tried to seek him out—Satine's fingers redirected it back to her face. Right.

“We found them. They're back home and safe, with a light cruiser left in orbit. No troops are stationed on Kiros' surface, so they will not have to feel an occupation. Senator Organa was able to secure some counselors and therapists to spend a few months out there, teaching Kiros' own mind-caretakers how to help their people in the wake of this.”

Something sparked deep inside Obi-Wan. Ahsoka felt the warmth of its tiny glow. “They're safe?” “They're safe. The few who had wounds are being taken care of.” In the Force, she sensed the tears as they slipped silently down Obi-Wan's face. She heard a sniff. Felt his shame when he realized she did.

Apparently Satine could see it.

“Udesi, Mando'ad,” she soothed. “Tears are the soul's blood. We are not ashamed of blood from a wound. It washes the dirt and infectants away from the injury. Your mind has been wounded. When it is jostled, it will bleed. Only individuals who are not warriors would consider tears to be degrading or demeaning, because they do not know. You have no need to fight the tears, and you have no need to be ashamed of them.”

“Soul's blood? My mind is bleeding? Where do you come up with this stuff?” Obi-Wan tried to chuckle. It half-way worked.

“Do I need to tell you in Mando'a? Will that make it clearer?”
“I— I need something else. Before she leaves.”
“Yes?” Satine asked.

“The... empire.” He couldn't seem to get anything more out, but Ahsoka didn't really think he needed to. This time, she managed to keep looking at Satine without needing redirection.

“It has been dismantled with extreme prejudice. Its leaders are apprehended and awaiting trial, and the slave holding and reconditioning facilities have been destroyed. Both arena and catacombs are completely unusable. Actually, the clones kind of went bonkers. Those places don't exist anymore. There's nothing but a massive crater.”

More tears.

But this time, a tentative reach towards dignity.

Ahsoka saw the approving smile Satine sent him.

The Padawan marveled at the strange glinting the Duchess possessed in the Force. She'd never noticed it before. As Satine guided Obi-Wan through the hell of life, helping him the way she would have if he'd been a Mandalorian, her Force signature twisted and pulsed with a mesmerizing metallic sheen. Like... liquid durasteel. No. Soft durasteel? Hard and vicious... and compassionate and nurturing? Warrior and pacifist? How could she be so full of so many contradictions and yet feel so balanced —

“Watch it,” Obi-Wan growled.

Ahsoka jumped.

Satine tsked. “Obi, this only works if it doesn't become possession.”

“I'm in pain. I haven't had control over anything in what feels like years. Everything has been taken from me. I'm not very tolerant of other people feeling up your Force signature right now. She can find her own politician.”

Ahsoka blushed and tried not to think about that crush she'd had on Lux Bonterri and how ridiculous she may have appeared while in the throes of it. She was over it now.

She was pretty sure.

But the subject was still a bit sore.

Especially on the dignity point.

“Never fear, Master Kenobi. I would never dream of poaching.” Ahsoka was careful to not try to figure out the confusing Force-signature. Apparently that was Obi-Wan's privilege alone. Understandable. If she had someone with one like that, she'd probably be a bit edgy about it too. Force knew she'd had difficulties with Lux and Steela kissing. And minds were far more intimate.

Satine laughed. “Alright. If you'll let the clones know I'm going to be setting up a watch system through the night on your way out, that would be helpful.”

“I don't need to be babysat,” Obi-Wan grumbled.

“As of now, they, and a certain Jedi Master report to me.”

Ahsoka arched an eyeridge.
How were the clones going to view that? Taking orders from a civvie... and not just a civvie... a pacifist civvie?

“I'll do that,” she offered, slipping out of the room. “See you later, Master Kenobi.”
She heard a murmured response of some sort, but didn't go back to ask for him to repeat it. Instead, she discovered the clones were still hovering in the waiting room, trying to look inconspicuous.

And failing completely, of course.

“The Duchess wants you to report to her. She's going to set up watches through the night.”

Ahsoka was surprised by the happy gleams that sparkled into the clones' eyes.

“Doesn't it bother you?” she asked, baffled. “She's... a civilian. A politician.”

“She's no civvie,” one chuckled. “I'd trust her with my back any day.”

“You do realize she's a pacifist,” Ahsoka choked. “She'd never guard your back.”

The clones exchanged secretive glances.

“It's a good front. I don't know why she does it. But she is a warrior. And she was fighting in there. You should have seen her.”

They seemed quite taken with the Duchess. Ahsoka couldn't help but wonder if they might bring down upon themselves the wrath of a jealous Obi-Wan if they weren't careful.

Obi-Wan had never been possessive. About anything.

Ahsoka had sensed Satine's surprise, which meant it hadn't existed towards her either.

But everything was taken away from him. By his best friend. In the most horrible way possible. Even his memories aren't his anymore. Not his mind, not his body, not his past. Anakin even stole his present, when Obi-Wan was forced to suspend all interaction.

No wonder he had lashed out at Ahsoka when her behavior had simulated the possibility of taking something else.

The question was, would he be able to recover enough to the point where he could hold with the easy and open hand he used to...

Or had that been stolen from him?

The thought hurt. Terribly.

It had been one of the most beautiful things about Master Kenobi. That quiet comfort with living in the now, knowing anything could leave the next moment, and instead of resenting the future loss, reveling in the present presence. It was something Anakin had never had.

She wasn't even sure he'd ever wanted it.

And look where your closefisted greed got you.

* * *
“Satine, I can't sleep. If I sleep—”
“Warrior-heart, if you wait to sleep until you can't hold your eyes open anymore, you will go deeper inside for longer.”

The fear in his eyes was difficult, so difficult to see. I know, I know, love.

“You don't know what it's like in there.”
Satine smoothed the hair back from his forehead. “You're right. I've never been inside your head.”

“Then why would you—”

“Because I'm a strategist, Ob'ika,” she murmured. “You don't let the enemy manipulate the future through the present. We act in the now to take the initiative, so that instead of reacting, we are acting. We do not let them regain that initiative. You will have to risk returning to your mind for sleep at some point. That being the case, we're going to manipulate the odds so they work for us.”

“You want to run towards the cannon's mouth instead of waiting to be cornered,” he sighed.

She smiled. “I always have. But we're not just going to take matters into our own hands, we're also going to make this run towards the cannon's mouth as useful as possible. We'll have them put you in a healing trance and in the bacta tank.”

His eyes darkened, the panic threatening. “I won't be able to wake up— it'll take too long for you to get to me—”

“Ob'ika. You have an option. You can sleep with no trance, no bacta. You are likely to wake multiple times in the night, only to have to go back in again. Wouldn't you rather those gates close on you once, with the knowledge that when they open, you will not have to go back in again?”

Obi-Wan's voice dropped to an almost-mute whisper. “I would rather run until I couldn't anymore, and still crawl away before I go back inside my mind.”

“I know, I know,” Satine murmured. “But running from nightmares only gives them more power.”
“’I can't kill this one, Satine.” He watched her with mournful eyes. “It's him.”

She didn't give him this one. He was going to have to face this, either now, when she could help him, or in his mind tonight, when no-one could. “Who?”

Again, the panicky look in his eyes.

“Him,” he pleaded.

“Who?”

“A—” He shuddered.

“Breathe,” Satine soothed. “Take your time.”

“Our son,” he finally whispered.

He couldn't say his name. Couldn't say the sacred word Padawan.

He had been able to manage using her word. One unfamiliar to his lips.

She combed his hair with her fingers, giving him another quiet smile. “Do you trust me?”
“Always.”

Satine gave him a gentle nod. “And did I help you find your way out of your mind?”

“You didn't help. You did it.”

“Do you trust my skills in battle and in strategy?”

“Yes.”

“Do you believe this is my element?”

“PTSD? Your people practically invented it.”

The smile was less sad now, and more amused. “Do you believe I will take care of you?”

His eyes answered that one. He didn't need to use words.

“Then let me run this campaign for now,” she whispered. “Let me lead this one.”

“Alright.” A thought crossed his mind. Satine watched it flare to life in his eyes. He began to tremble again. “Everyone—the whole galaxy—saw us. They know.” Tears filled his eyes. “I tried to protect our memories, I tried to hide them, but he—took them, Satine, he—shredded them—”

Tears of her own stung Satine's eyes. “I know, Mando'ad,” she somehow managed around the rock in her throat.

Obi-Wan treasured moments. Where another being might collect physical items, Obi-Wan collected memories. He kept them in perfect condition, sparkling, ready to be tasted when he needed their comforting touch.

They were his. He was a Jedi. He owned the clothes on his back, a lightsaber and his mind. However he wanted to furnish it. Some Jedi clothed theirs with knowledge, or experiences.

He went for moments.

He'd admitted to her that memories of her were among his most prized moments.

They'd helped him survive countless disasters.

They were his alone, something he shared with her and no-one else.

Set apart. Unspeakably priceless.

Effervescent in the light that reigned supreme in his soul.

And now they weren't his anymore. They were public domain. Everyone had them. And they had Anakin's bloody handprints and mockery all over them.

If it had been Satine alone who was affected by the desecration, she wouldn't have cared very much. She and Obi-Wan had done nothing wrong, hadn't broken his code or her own in spite of both codes being very different, and they were both better individuals because of the other. Stronger. More true to self.

No.

Let them know. Let them say what they would. Let them mock, let them misunderstand, let them
criticize.

It's not like it would be the first time any of those things happened.

She was a pacifist Mandalorian, for Force's sake.

If she couldn't live her life under a microscope of vicious disapproval, she'd have given up two decades ago.

But it wasn't just Satine who was affected.

And Obi-Wan saw the world very differently when it came to moments.

The desecration gutted him to the quick.

So she mourned with him. Silently, knowing her Force-signature gave him all the words he needed.

I hear you, Obi-Wan. I know.

Satine felt the quiet step behind her through the carpet. “You may enter,” she called softly.

Five clones spilled into the room.

“How'd she do that?” one demanded in a whisper. “We weren't visible, and we didn't make a sound.”

Obi-Wan managed a rueful smile. “She's Mandalorian. Most of the time she pretends not to notice things.”

Satine turned to her new soldiers. “I have assignments for you. General Kenobi is not going to be left alone a single moment through the night. There will always be someone awake, watching over him.”

They were only too eager to hear her plan and demonstrate themselves to be the best soldiers to ever draw breath.

Satine knew good soldiering.

Her people had perfected it to a fine art.

These were warriors of a beautiful caliber.

She chose not to tell them at that time, but she made careful note to do so in the future.

Yes.

These men would certainly hold their own against her kinsmen.

And they loved their General with a fierce loyalty.

And there were plenty of them.

These five would be here tonight.

But for every succeeding night? There would be a wealth of volunteers. Satine would have subjects as long as she wanted them and as long as Obi-Wan would submit to her rule.
Chapter End Notes

Mando'a Guide:

Udesi (Pronounced /oo-DAY-see/) = Easy/Take it easy


Tome (Pronounced /TOH-may/) = Together

Ob'ika (Pronounced /ohb-EE-kah/) = Obi-Wan's name, turned into an endearment by using the prefix 'ika. Literally: “Little Obi-Wan.”
Chapter 7

Obi-Wan's gaze clung to Satine's as he didn't fight the hypo that would lessen the chances of his dreaming. He was still watching her as the healers gently lowered him into a healing trance.

His eyes obscured, and then the lids fell closed and his head sagged forward.

Surrender. To her will, to her protection.

_Sleep well, love._

The healers removed the bandages from his back and transferred him to a new harness. Within minutes, he was lowered into the bacta tank, the healing liquid closing over his head, his breath frosting the mask that fed him oxygen.

Satine circled the tank, watching for any sign of trouble.

Nothing fit the bill.

A little of the worry easing, she scanned his body while still circling.

She'd been told this behavior pattern was unsettling, reminding people of Karkarodons readying to dive in and shred their prey into fishbait.

Or maybe a pack of anoobas, ready to do something similar but on land instead of underwater.

Satine didn't think the clones would mind, and the healers were filing out of the room.

The wounded Jedi certainly wasn't going to mind.

He never felt safer than under her scrutiny.

A smile pulled at her lip.

Stupid, stupid Jetii.

_If I paid even the slightest attention to my clan and ancestors, I would have slaughtered you by now. You've given me so many, many opportunities._

_In fact... if I woke you up and killed you now, with you seeing the betrayal in my eyes, I would be taken back. My years of wandering would be forgiven, I'd be returned to the fold, my family would love me again. My people would adore me. Celebrate me. Follow me to victory and glory. We would take the universe by storm; and once again Mandalore could be the feared mercenary people we once were._

_That we always have been._

The smile on her face was cold. She felt the ice in her eyes.

Because as beautiful as that mental picture might look, as much as she craved her lost clan and felt the freezing burn of their rejection every second of every day....
The picture also looked ugly.

She'd turned her back on the life of a predator, and managed to convince the majority of her people to do the same.

She was never going back.

And only half of her wanted to.

The half she kept diligently, carefully, absolutely in check.

But that half was why she had to hold to her pacifism. She couldn't just encourage moderation with her people. The taste of blood inflamed them like a drug. Throw a little in the water, and a frenzy took over.

Moderate Mandalorians weren't possible. Not this generation.

Now Korkie and Sabine... maybe Satine's nephew and niece could take up arms without losing themselves. They had been born under her reign of possibilities.

Maybe Sabine would find balance, in spite of her mother's hatred.

How Satine wished she and Bo could find reconciliation.

She missed her sister.

Satine stepped back from her pacing.

The clones stood out of her way, silent and watching.

Satine sighed.

Obi-Wan's body looked gaunt.

And that wasn't just from what had happened on Zygerria.

“He's been overworking himself,” she spoke up without looking at the clones. “He hasn't fully recovered from the injuries he keeps receiving, but he's been concealing his condition.”

Oversimplification.

He hadn't recovered from Geonosis, Jabiim, Florrum, the speeder crash, Zigoola, the exploding window incident on Bothawui, Lanteeb, his torture by Maul and Savage—

That was just the beginning of the list.

Each blow that had been dealt was followed by another. Then another. And another.

Satine kept track of each one.

Someone had to.

She watched his ribs dig into his skin every time he drew in a breath.

“We didn't realize it was this bad,” Cody murmured. “He usually insists on tending to his own wounds. He rarely lets us get close enough to know how he's coping.”
“Anakin should have known. If he was paying attention.” Satine shook her head. “But since he's said nothing to you, he must have been distracted. Focusing on other things than Obi-Wan's health.”

“Two days ago I would have taken offense,” Cody admitted, sounding lost. “He just about panics when General Kenobi is wounded.”

The silence hung heavy, full of implications.

The foremost of which was Skywalker's love.

Apparently not as unconditional as it might have appeared. Instead, it had been ready to strike at the first sign of what it considered to be betrayal.

Very Mandalorian of him.

Her people didn't believe in forgiveness. They also didn't believe in unconditional love.

They were extremely behavior-oriented.

Anakin demanded very specific behaviors from people he claimed to love... or he started viewing them as enemies.

Obi-Wan had been the opposite.

Even after everything Ventress had done to him, he stood as her friend. Obi-Wan had been the one to call off the manhunt that had been pursuing her. Had taken a risk, had given his word that she was no longer a threat. Insisted her career as a bounty hunter should be respected and left alone. He'd stood alone against the current in order to win her a second chance, and put his reputation on the line to do so.

She hadn't asked him to. She probably didn't even know. It's simply who he was.

Anakin was poised to view once friends as enemies.

Obi-Wan was poised to accept his cruelest enemies as friends.

Anakin was ready to resent, hold grudges, seek revenge.

Obi-Wan ready to forgive.

He'd gone to Dathomir. Seen a glimpse into his greatest enemy's past.

It had been difficult for Satine to hear him talk about it. To hear the compassion, the grief in his voice for what had been done to Maul as a child.

She wasn't ready to forgive the monster who had killed Qui-Gon and kept doing his best to harm Obi-Wan ever since.

But Obi-Wan wanted to find reconciliation, even as he understood it might not be possible. That he might have to take him down in order to protect the innocent.

That was who Obi-Wan was.

His reality had been more complicated than Anakin's absolute friend-or-foe.

He'd been able to recognize the difference between a person and what a person did. Loving
someone... yet taking a stand against what they had chosen to do.

Would he be able to do that still?

None of the betrayals he'd faced had ever come close to this one.

Cody took first watch.

Clones stretched out on the floor, falling asleep almost as soon as they shut their eyes and willed it.

As Satine followed suit, she couldn't help her fond smile.

Yes.

These were excellent soldiers.

The carpet was soft. A luxury compared to many of the surfaces Satine had slept on in her younger years.

She lay curled around the base of the bacta tank. It was an instinctive position, putting her body between the one she protected and potential danger.

She closed her eyes.

Regulating her breathing, consciously relaxing her muscles, setting her mind into the gentle stillness needed for physical shut-down...

Within moments she was gone.

* * *

Cody paced.

He knew his footsteps weren't going to disturb his brothers, and Obi-Wan's commanding officer seemed to be of similar caliber.

Strange.

That was not how she'd appeared when they'd escorted her to Coruscant some time back. All fancy dresses and shoes and crowns...

He had heard rumors that when she and Obi-Wan fought back-to-back against the miniature assassin droids, not a single one of her shots missed.

And that each bolt took out several droids at once.

Also, that she had fit well with Obi-Wan's fighting style. She knew how to keep his back covered, knew how to ensure he was always covering her own.

That she'd had a cold confidence in her eyes that had shocked those who'd seen it.

A switch had flipped.
One moment she'd seemed startled and trying to escape the droids, the next, she'd become the aggressor.

Cody had assumed the rumors were all out of proportion. Efforts of his brothers to try to respect the woman who held their General's heart.

Now he knew his brothers hadn't been imagining things.

This woman was a maze of contradictions.

Something very, very dangerous wrapped in the guise of helpless royalty.

She had so many of the gestures correct. Recoiling in fear from a threat. Perfect manners. The ability to dress-down an opponent with scathing words instead of physical blows. She moved like a duchess. She spoke like a duchess. When the occasion prompted, she projected horror or distress that fitted a duchess.

And... there was something wrong in her eyes half the time.

Everything else was perfect. Down to the painted fingernails, occasional cry of disgust, the hauteur.

Cody hadn't given it a moment's doubt.

Until he'd seen the other side of her.

No...

The inside.

She lay on the hard floor, sleeping just as soundly, just as ready to jolt to alert-mode as his brothers. As she'd given them orders—orders, not suggestions, mind you—there'd been a familiar set to her shoulders.

She didn't need a weapon.

Her body was a weapon. And as she spoke to them, warrior to warriors, preparing the defense of a wounded one of their own, she'd lost track of the person she put on each morning before she faced the universe.

It confused him, a little.

Why would Obi-Wan trust a deceiver? He clearly knew both Satines. The one disapproved of him for following his conscience, and the other was a cold-blooded predator.

Someone Obi-Wan would disapprove of.

Somehow, the two combined had proved to be an attractant to his General.

Of course, maybe it wasn't strange. All Cody knew of love was what he'd witnessed.

A grand total of Generals Kenobi and Skywalker.

And he'd had suspicions that Skywalker's relationship with the Senator of Naboo wasn't necessarily healthy for either of their minds.

Cody watched his General's breathing. The overworked body.
He doesn't take care of himself.
And he hated letting anyone else do it for him.

That's going to change. We're not letting him get away with this any longer.

* * *

The Healers had chosen their poisons well. Obi-Wan didn't realize he'd been asleep until he opened his eyes to find Satine staring into them.

Not a bad way to wake up.

Not bad at all.

He tested his surroundings, discovered the healers must have already left. So had the clones.

And thank the Force they hadn't woken him up before releasing him from the tank. He was back in his sling, new dressings on his back...

And from what he could sense in the Force...

It was much better than the prior evening. Wounds taking massive steps towards healing.

And here he was, alone with the love of his life.

He hadn't been forced to spend a single moment inside, and he was wide awake. Free for another day.

He felt... a bit giddy over it.

Giddy in a Kenobi sort of way. It meant an abundance of no-teeth smiles and a lightness in his soul.

Which the horrible inside had always insisted wasn't giddy at all, and was certainly undeserving of the term.

No. He wasn't going to think about him. He didn't exist here, in this place.

“Good morning,” Satine murmured.

He smiled at her. “You're still here.”

“Of course I am.”

“I'm fine.”

Her expression didn't change. She simply watched his gaze.

A crack formed in the positivity.

No. Yesterday had been horrible. He didn't want to live there again, he wouldn't survive if they dragged him back. He needed to move on. Look forward. Refuse to look behind, definitely, definitely act like nothing was amiss.
Leave it in the past. He'd survived Qui-Gon's death that way. Jabiim, Zigoola, Lanteeb, all the other terrible times.

Just keep moving.

“Breakfast or more nutrient hypos?” Satine asked.

Relief. She was going to go along with this. She wasn't going to knock over his pretty little castle of lies.

He was injured, he was recovering, he was going to have breakfast with the woman he loved. Let amusement and mirth ensue. “Real food.”

“What interests you?”

He pretended to care, to think, and then gave her his decision. When she asked if he preferred she call for someone else to get it so she wouldn't leave him alone, he gave her a confident smile and assured her he was doing so much better. If she wanted to take a break to stretch her legs and escape the confines of the healing room, he'd be just fine until she got back.

It was true for about seventy seconds.

And then the silence turned cruel.

Deafening, in its quiet.

The slings weren't designed to restrain him. To keep him vulnerable. They were here to help him—

But he wasn't free. He was trapped by them.

And it was quiet. Too quiet.

He could hear himself think.

No. No. Focus. Satine is here. Make the most of it. It's so rare to be able to spend time with her on the same planet. Don't miss out on it because of not paying attention. New moments. Restart your collection. New ones, ones the horrible inside has never seen, never will see —

Oh, that had been a mistake.

Obi-Wan grit his teeth and trembled.

He shouldn't have thought of the horrible inside. Not even in a pep talk.

He couldn't move.

* * *

Satine watched from the security feed a room over.

Obi-Wan struggled to hold himself together.

Was failing.
Her heart ached for him.

A different set of clones stood around her, anxious and silent. Waiting for orders.

She hadn't been fooled by Obi-Wan's protestations, and hadn't wanted to move too far away while still giving him the space he wanted to attempt. One of the clones was on the breakfast run.

Satine considered. She could return immediately, admit she hadn't believed he was as on top of things as he had claimed, cut short his suffering...

Or she could wait until Boil returned with food.

She felt the clones' gazes on her as she weighed the options.

Ahsoka poked her head in the door. “What's happening?”

Ah. Excellent.

“You tell me,” Satine directed.

Ahsoka's forehead wrinkled. “Shivers are running through the Force. It's... excruciating. His shields aren't— his shields are really broken. He's scared, he's in pain, he knows we can feel it and he's feeling humiliated, but the tighter he draws the shields, the more... pathetic...”

“Tattered shreds,” Satine murmured. “A shadow of what they once were.”

A shadow of what he once was.

“What should I do?” Ahsoka asked.

“Go to him.”

Ahsoka looked a bit panicked. “What do I say?”

“You need to find out what he needs in this moment. Take heart. You are better equipped to discover that than I am.”

Ahsoka clearly disbelieved that, but she went to him.

* * *

Ahsoka met Obi-Wan's shivering gaze, then glanced away.

Force, what was she doing here?

“Hi,” she whispered.

Great. Just great.

*Let's make this worse, Ahsoka,* she chided herself.

“I can't shield,” he whispered back, agony in his voice. “I can't—”

Satine had directed her to find out what he needed.
He needs shields.

She doubted his mind was strong enough to start rebuilding them. That would take time. A lot of it... a lot of effort... and a lot of pain.

He needed shields now.

Ahsoka considered the bond that ran between them.

It was closer to a Master-Padawan link than not. She'd even overheard Obi-Wan use the term “our Padawan” to Anakin once or twice.

That sort of bond allowed a Master to protect an Apprentice.

Could it go the other way?

“Would you let me use my shields?” Ahsoka asked.

In the Force, a single cry of helplessness pierced her soul and then died. Obi-Wan's horror at his inability to fend for himself after a lifetime of independence, followed by defeat. A listless surrender...

Since he couldn't win, why keep struggling?

Ahsoka recognized it. Saw again in her mind Obi-Wan watching as Anakin robbed him of his moments, tainting them, breaking them.

Ahsoka closed her eyes against acidic tears.

“You may.”

Ahsoka hardly recognized Obi-Wan's voice. It was so numb. So lost.

So childlike.

And then he froze, his eyes widening in horror.

The shriek in the Force nearly brought Ahsoka to her knees.

* * *

Anakin, Force signature curled in around himself to try to keep it from attracting Obi-Wan's attention, shivered.

Obi-Wan had no control over his own presence.

Wounded, writhing.

Unprotected.

Visible to everyone.

The whole Temple felt his attempts to keep his emotions and pain to himself.

Anakin cringed at how futile they were.
Obi-Wan trying to cover himself with rags that fell apart in his hands.

Anakin tried to block it out. Tightened his own shields, drew farther inward.

Obi-Wan wouldn't want him seeing this, so Anakin tried to not see.

Blood seeped through, pooling around Anakin's feet, staining his hands.

Their link was too close. Too strong.

Anakin tried to make himself as small and nonthreatening as possible but it wasn't enough. Obi-Wan couldn't shield himself, had no control, so it was only a matter of time before—

Obi-Wan, ready to surrender to Ahsoka, stumbled against him.

The Force keened with the reaction.

The fear, the horror, the pain—

Obi-Wan, struggling to pull away, to escape, begging Anakin to forget— to let him survive— to have mercy, just this time, he promised he wouldn't disturb him again— sorry, so sorry—

Trying to hide behind shields Anakin had destroyed, trying to arrange them so the ragged edges could overlap to provide as much cover as possible—

Which was none.

Cowering—

Throat bared in submission. To prove he was no threat to the Chosen One, wasn't challenging him, challenging him was the farthest thing from his intention—

To broken, far too broken, to give more than a bleak tremor of self-loathing to the knowledge his brothers and sisters heard and saw it all.

Anakin couldn't breathe. No. No, Obi-Wan, please—

But the sound of his voice shattered the last of his Master's composure.

Anakin watched in horror as Obi-Wan imploded.

Shields blew out, fear and dread turned to terror—a beacon of agony through the gentle stillness of the Temple.

Anakin's throat hurt. Felt like he'd been screaming for hours, only to swallow a live coal and have it get stuck on the way down.

His eyes stung, but he had no more tears to soothe the dry burn.

He lay on his back and stared at the ceiling, barely able to breathe. Obi-Wan's panic clawed at his soul like bloody fingers. Mangled fingers. Glistening, broken bones and lost fingernails.

Anakin shuddered, trying to drive the image away, afraid Obi-Wan would see what his imagination had conjured—

Oh, he saw it.
Anakin cried out in anguish at the way Obi-Wan's heart stuttered as he looked at his hands, didn't see that kind of damage, and assumed it was what Anakin planned next for him.

His whimper of despair shattered Anakin's soul.

A strong, young presence stepped between them. White flares in the Force sheltered Obi-Wan like a bird's wings.

Like fire.

Not the same sort that burned in Anakin's core, a dark threat and the color of innocent blood, but a white flame. One that didn't harm, but protected. Something clean. It sang of truth. Hope. Loyalty.

His Padawan.

His Padawan no longer.

She'd turned her back on him, physically and in the Force. He'd tried to be respectful of it, hadn't forced his presence on her.

But he couldn't look away from her now.

Obi-Wan was forever in his soul. Almost as necessary there as his own spirit.

She'd placed herself between them.

That meant she would feel his observation, even though he was trying to stay away. She would feel what Obi-Wan would have felt before the protecting presence had intervened.

Anakin felt the shudders through the Temple subsiding, the wails of terrified children, the soothing murmurs of their caretakers.

The worry, the grief—

The rejection of Anakin Skywalker.

Complete, total.

They didn't hate him. They wouldn't hate him.

But they pulled away, left him alone in a bubble of emptiness, left his grief untouched, but worse—

Unbelieved.

They thought he was lying to them.

Again.

He had always rejected them, had always refused to see them as family. He'd looked down on their relationships, scorned the way they communicated love.

Considered their culture worthless.

Maybe the Council wasn't the villain, all those years ago. The question whispered through Anakin's tortured mind and refused to leave. You assumed they were wrong about you. That the danger, the possible disaster they said surrounded you was something their own prejudices made up. That they
had a personal vendetta against you. That they lived to humiliate you and see you fail.

Maybe...

That hadn't been the case.

Yoda sensed pain in the future, if I was trained.

He was right.

It was only Mace who'd managed to look askance at him all these years. The rest of the Council, once the decision had been made to allow him into the family, had accepted him. Yoda had watched over him with the same care and thoughtfulness that he showed to other children.

Yaddle had died for Anakin.

But they hadn't given him an easier standard to live up to. They'd treated him like they treated every other young Jedi.

Although Obi-Wan had tried to tell him that, Anakin had refused to see it. Felt they singled him out for disapproval.

Eventually Obi-Wan had given up trying to show him that was the highest form of acceptance. Anakin said he didn't want them treating him differently.

They weren't.

In return, he hated them.

And now, after everything he'd done to Obi-Wan?

Many of the Jedi on the Council had watched Obi-Wan grow up. They remembered the child he'd been.

So many of them had a soft spot for him.

Anakin had proved their initial hesitance so, so wise.

And Obi-Wan, who had taken a chance, who had risked everything—

Lost it all.

They had chosen to risk accepting Anakin, and it was Obi-Wan who paid the price.

How could the other Jedi not hate him?

It didn't make sense to Anakin. They should be crying out for his blood, they should be—

His body shook as he made the connection.

It was because they were Jedi.

He'd been so busy calling them hypocrites...

It never occurred to him that they might say what they said because that's how they actually saw the universe.
They weren't spouting meaningless platitudes. It's how they felt.

They weren't lying.

They were sharing their souls.

There was something fundamentally different between himself and the rest of them.

It lit up the Force like a warning sign.

The Council had seen hints of it long ago.

They'd chosen compassion. They'd chosen to give him a chance. They'd chosen vulnerability in order to not harm the little life who requested sanctuary.

Now, there was no doubt to be found. The camouflage was gone.

Even though he currently meant them no harm, the Force twisted around him in a blood red glow.

It wasn't light.

It wasn't beautiful.

It reeked of death and cruelty.

It made his presence in the Temple seem a blemish.

A rotting wound.

Anakin thanked the Force Padmé couldn't see it.

And then loathed himself all the more that he could think of himself, in such a moment.
Obi-Wan considered the shields Ahsoka had placed around his mind.

*Her* shields.

So different in texture and tone to his own.

It shut out the clamor from the outside, and shut in his horrifying, humiliating wasteland.

No one could see it now, except for himself and—

His heart crumpled just a little bit more. A

Ahsoka.

Ahsoka saw it all. It was inside her shields.

Why couldn't death just take him?

*“No, Master,”* Ahsoka murmured.

She was a *child*. She—

*“Am I really?”*

Obi-Wan looked to the shields guarding him. The strength of those wings.

From here, her Force signature was very easy to inspect.

*“Forget you know who I am, forget my age, and just look.”*

He obeyed.

He found a person who *knew* who she was. One who had weathered storms, and who knew she was going to weather this one. Wisdom and grace, compassion and ferocity.

This was no youngling.

It was hard to even say she was a Padawan.

*She's close, very close to knighthood.*
Obi-Wan had been almost a decade older than her before he’d been ready to step out on his own.

Ahsoka could easily reach knighthood by seventeen.

*How did that happen?*

*When* had it happened?

“Stop trying to shelter me. Stop hating yourself for not being able to shelter me. It's my turn. You watched over me in the past. Let me watch over you.”

Adulthood had very little to do with years lived.

It had everything to do with the person *within.*

So Obi-Wan surrendered to her. He let go of his quivering, rotting shields and let them lie around his feet. Let Ahsoka take the weight of protecting him.

Let her take the weight of protecting *herself* from what was left of and in his mind.

He sensed her shiver as the last of the obscuring haze cleared away and left his soul completely visible.

Her pity.

He *hated* it. He *hated* —

His light. His *light.* Where had it gone? He pulled into his mind in a panic, searching, searching —

*He* had taken it. No. *No*, he couldn't lose that *too* —

“Take a breath, Master. It will come back if you hold still and breathe. Calm. Remember what you taught me.”

*It’s* gone. *He* stole it —

“No one can take it away from you. Calm, Master. It will find you.”

Obi-Wan shivered in pain, in fear.

Felt a hand on his shoulder.

Pulled out of his mind enough to see Ahsoka's steady eyes. “In... out. Breathe. In... out...”

Obi-Wan did his best, around the fist that was crushing his heart.

“Relax. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

As stillness returned and fear drained away, one slow drop at a time, he felt it.

His light.

He latched on to it, burning relief searing his lungs.

Thank the *Force.*

And someone else.
“Thank you,” he whispered.

She gave him a nod. “You don't have to be alone in this. We're here for you. We're here with you.”

“Tome.

“What?”

He felt himself blush. Considered just how misplaced that embarrassment was, considering all that had happened.

Admitting he knew Satine's language was nothing compared to what Ahsoka had already seen.

“It means together, in Mando'a. It's a plural. Often suggests more than two.”

* * *

In the observation room, Satine smiled.

Boil stuck his head around the door. “What happened?”

“How do you know something happened?” one of his brothers demanded.

“You're messing with me, right?” Boil handed the tray to Satine. “We're in a miniature city populated by Jedi. When you're walking down the street and suddenly everyone around you cringes like they've been stabbed and tears start falling, but they keep on with their tasks and try to act like nothing's wrong, it means there's nothing they can do to fix whatever's wrong. And come on, it's Jedi we're talking about. They can fix almost anything. So it had to be the General.” What had started out as fiery belligerence turned mournful at the end.

As Satine passed him on her way out, she gripped his shoulder. “Well observed, soldier. He'll need that kind of observation in the days to come. Interpreting tiny tells others might miss.”

He gave her a bleak smile. “He doesn't let us help him much.”

“We'll have to see what can be done about that.”

* * *

“She's good,” Wooley murmured as soon as the Duchess was out of earshot.

“We'd better hope she's better than good.” Boil moved closer so he could watch the livefeed from the sickroom. “Good would get him to live and occasionally leave this building without a panic attack incapacitating him. Good doesn't bring him back to us.”

“He wouldn't leave us,” Wooley protested.

Boil scowled at him. “He would if he felt he wasn't fit enough for combat. If he thought that we'd be put in danger because we'd be overextended by protecting him instead of protecting ourselves. If he thought his brain wasn't working well enough to pit it against the Seppies', and so lose battles and
more of us. You know he'd put us first, and stay the hell away and never come back.”

Wooley's face had gone rigid, and his gaze snapped back to his General.

Cold settled over all five.

“We can't let that happen,” Wooley muttered. “He has to come back.”

Boil shrugged, a gesture of helplessness and hopelessness. “We weren't there when he needed us. And if the Jedi can't fix what's wrong, how could we?”

“We're important to him,” Wooley protested.

Boil couldn't meet his worried gaze. “Skywalker was important to him too.”

* * *

“Good morning Ahsoka,” Satine greeted with a smile. “We were just about to have breakfast. Care to join us?”

Ahsoka glanced to Obi-Wan, felt the threads of his fear at the thought of losing her shields.

“I think I will. Will you take the chair, Duchess?”

“No. It's been a long time since I've had the opportunity to feed Obi-Wan; I'm going to stand.”

Obi-Wan scowled. “I can do it myself—”

“Did I say anything about your ability or lack thereof? This is about me, darling.”

Ahsoka could feel his knowledge that it was a lie.

Could also feel his fierce independence soothed by Satine's words and manner.

Satine handed a plate of food to Ahsoka, then balanced the other on her left hand.

“Tell us about the two-twelfth,” Satine prompted Ahsoka, waving a fork of food below Obi-Wan's nose, and inserting it into his mouth when he opened it, ignoring a reproachful glare from her love that could probably soften durasteel.

The next forkful went in her own mouth.

* * *

Five clones watched, spellbound.

Watching Satine feed Obi-Wan and herself at the same time had to be the most romantic thing they'd ever seen.

Ever.
Though certain brothers were going to argue for the singing from yesterday, or the sleeping curled up at the base of his bacta tank.

Or ordering his men around in order to make sure he was protected.

But these brothers hadn't been there for that.

“It's like it came out of a holodrama,” Wooley breathed. And then he chuckled. “Look at Commander Tano! Looks like she's gonna slip a gasket.”

* * *

Ahsoka blinked, trying not to stare and having a difficult time with how... open... Satine was being with her affection for Obi-Wan.

“Is the two-twelfth on furlough?” Satine asked, as though she hadn't noticed Ahsoka's difficulty in making sense of all of this.

Given the internal grumbles and almost-smirks from Obi-Wan's mind, Ahsoka didn't think that likely.

She forced herself to pay attention more to what Satine was saying than her comfortable feeding of both Obi-Wan and herself, like this was nothing new—

Red spilled over Obi-Wan's face and he grimaced.

Sorry, Ahsoka apologized.

If she was going to have this much access to his soul, she needed to tame her natural curiosity.

Immediately.

“The two-twelfth.” Ahsoka focused on her own plate as though eating might be the most important duty she had ever performed. “They are on temporary leave, and making the most of it.”

Satine gave her a nod. “And the five-oh-first?”

Obi-Wan froze, his teeth clenching.

Satine took note of the ignored mouthful she was offering, and simply kept her hand there, waiting.

“Same,” Ahsoka somehow managed to murmur, around the rattling of Obi-Wan's mind. “Rex wants to come see Obi-Wan, but I think he's afraid to.”

The quivering mind stilled in confusion, but its owner still didn't take the bite Satine held out.

“Why?” Satine asked, tone gentle.

Ahsoka was already regretting those last words. They hadn't been well-thought-out. At all. “Because of... who he is.”

There. That was vague enough, right? “And?” Satine prompted.
Kark. “Who he's... connected to.”

Obi-Wan didn't move. Didn't speak. His mind had gone very, very still.

Ahsoka would have no idea what was going on in there if she didn't dig a little.

And there was no way she was doing that to him.

But her Captain was suffering, and wasn't listening to anything she had to say.

Maybe the Charmer of Clones could get through to him. Satine had certainly swept the 212th off its feet.

“He thinks it's his fault,” she spoke up, hoping Rex wouldn't kill her later. “That he shouldn't have waited for the signal, should have known something had gone wrong, should have been searching for Obi-Wan instead of the people of Kiros.”

Ahsoka tried to steady her aching heart. “Should have realized his General had gone... bad.”

She felt a hint of life from Obi-Wan.

That was worth pursuing. “You know how he felt after Krell. He's feeling like he let you down.”

Obi-Wan's frozen face softened into a frown. “Of anyone involved, he's the least responsible.”

“He doesn't believe that, and it's why he's staying away,” Ahsoka explained. “He tried waking you up, but that's been it. The two-twelfth is fighting over who gets to come stay near you, and who has to remain behind. Rex just watches. And hurts.”

“Hmm.” Satine waved the fork again, and Obi-Wan accepted it this time. “I think we need to see the Captain. Make sure he understands we think he's being unreasonable. What do you think, love?”

Ahsoka felt a little spark of hope to notice that Obi-Wan refused to talk with his mouth full. Apparently he cared enough about life to hold to standards of politeness.

When it was empty again, he sighed. “Will he come at a request, or do we need to make it an order?”

“I guess we'll find out.” Ahsoka poked at her food for a moment longer, then couldn't keep silent. “Duchess, I need to speak to you. It's great what you're doing for Obi-Wan, but people are going to notice—”

Satine sent her a smile. “Anyone who doesn't know about us is cut off from the Force and living under a rock. It's sweet of you to be concerned, but there is no point in hiding.”

“What about the Council?” Ahsoka asked, a bit shocked.

Obi-Wan squirmed in discomfort, but Satine simply set the fork down on the plate so she could comb his hair back off his forehead. “Master Yoda has known since the beginning,” she said calmly.

“Who do you think invited me to his funeral during that deep-cover op?” Satine shrugged. “Master Yoda. The Council.”
Yoda also contacted me first over this. He explained what I needed to know, and asked I come as soon as possible.”
“I don’t believe it,” Ahsoka breathed.

“We have nothing to be ashamed of.” How could Satine seem so comfortable? “We haven't broken his code, or mine. Our love has never been one of attachment. As long as he refuses to do what is harmful to others in order to spare himself the pain of losing me, the Council has no reason to find fault. It's selfish love they take their stand against. They encourage selfless love every day, Ahsoka. Think about it. Selflessness. Placing others' needs before your own, no matter how you feel about it. Compassion. Gentleness. Honesty. Forgiveness. They do not use the word 'love' because most people can't tell the difference between the selfless and selfish varieties. Instead, they expect you to recognize it by its shape, its texture, its smell. A Jogan blossom by any other name.”

“I— but— I don’t understand.”

“Right now, our love strengthens Obi-Wan as a Jedi instead of weakening him. The day he wavers between doing what is right and saving my life? That is the day it becomes something less than selfless. That is the day it harms us both, and the people around us.”

“But Anakin—”

Satine's expression saddened. “Anakin's love is selfish, Ahsoka. It is intense, it is beautiful, it is self-centered.”
“But he's kind,” Ahsoka snapped. “And he puts his life on the line—” She shut up as she remembered what he'd done. Who it was she was defending.

It was so confusing. How could he have been so... wonderful one moment and so vicious the next?

Obi-Wan was very still again.

“Ahsoka, even if what Obi-Wan had said to Anakin in that arena was true, would Padmé have wanted Anakin to do what he did?”

Ahsoka’s eyes nearly fell out of her head. “You know about Padmé?”

“Padmé and I are confidants, Ahsoka. And anyone with enough pieces to the puzzle now know too.”

The only thing that could have made that weirder is if Lux had made it a three-person let’s talk-about-our-Jedi fest.

Not a pleasant mental image.

“Is this what Padmé would have wanted?” Satine asked again.

Ahsoka shook her head. “Of course not.”

“So when Anakin took his revenge, who was it for? Padmé, or himself?”

Ahsoka’s blood ran cold. “I know he loves her.”

“Yes. He does. He loves the way she makes him feel when he knows she loves him. He loves the way she looks at him. He would do anything to keep from losing that... even if it harmed her. Even if it was something horrible, something that sacrificed other people, something she didn't want. So yes, Ahsoka. He loves her. But tell me who he loves more.”
Ahsoka stared at her in horror.

“He loves Obi-Wan too,” Satine murmured. “But when he thought two people he loves might be finding happiness without him, jeopardizing his own... he lost sight of everything but himself.”

Obi-Wan’s breathing strangled.

The panic was back.

Worse than ever.

“Satine, I can't— I can't do this— everyone keeps saying his name— I can't—”

Ahsoka found herself taking the second plate that was thrust her way, and watched with both her eyes and the Force as Satine soothed the broken Jedi. Walked him back from the terror, the grief, the agony of betrayal.

Ahsoka did her best to still her own mind, to give him something to reach for. To hold on to.

It wasn't easy.

But it will be harder for him, so much harder if he has to combat both his own weight and block out mine.

It's why Anakin had never been very successful in comforting Obi-Wan. His own anger and grief had taken a massive amount of effort to cancel out, leaving Obi-Wan with fewer reserves to deal with his own grief.

Ahsoka drew in a deep breath, closed her eyes, and found her calm center.

She had no idea what in hell she was going to do, but she was here. At home. Surrounded by her fellow Jedi who wanted desperately to heal Obi-Wan and everyone close to him.

And in an even smaller circle, she was here. In the same room as her grand-master. Not long ago she'd been denied access to his sickbed because it would endanger his life further. She was here, protecting his mind when he couldn't do so himself, and he was allowing her to, in spite of what she might see, and how terrifying that was for a man so private in nature.

She was here.

Watching the love of his life care for him with the wisdom of her ancestors.

Ahsoka had never witnessed open love before. Not when a Jedi was involved.

Certainly not with Yoda's passive approval.

Privileges. All of them.

Beautiful.

Satine and Obi-Wan together were beautiful.

Ahsoka allowed her eyes to open again.

Felt her soul thrill as she felt Obi-Wan's desperate presence in the Force seize her own, now calm, one. Watched in awe as he counted her heartbeat, matched his breathing to hers, drew threads of her
stability to still the terror, the desperate need to bolt and never stop running. Felt Satine's pride for her.

*She's proud of me?*

How strange was that?

Just exactly *what* stake did the Duchess of Mandalore *have* in Ahsoka?

*“Grandaughter.”*

Ahsoka's eyes widened. *That's how she sees me?*

*“Yes.”*

Did that mean Anakin was—

Obi-Wan's heart twisted.

*“Son.”*

Oh, Force.

That explained Satine's tone as she spoke of Anakin and his... cruelty.

Sorrowful. Gentle.

Anything but accusatory.

There'd been no venom, no hate, no resentment.

Just a sad relaying of facts as Satine saw them.

A sudden, horrifying thought struck her. Her gaze snapped to Satine's face. “The clones. You didn't know the clones are still here, watching—”

Satine only smiled, pressing a kiss to Obi-Wan's bandaged hand. “I knew,” she murmured.

Obi-Wan groaned. “Satine—”

It was a tone that sounded familiar.

Like perhaps he'd used the lament often.

*“Who are they to learn about love from, if not from us, Ob’ika?”* she asked. “The Kaminoans? They have no parents, Obi. They only have you.”

*“You've adopted them all, haven't you.”* Obi-Wan raised clear gray eyes to her face.

Her Force signature sparkled in return. “Am I Mandalorian?”

*“Of course you did.”* Obi-Wan let his eyelids fall shut over weary eyes.

The silence stretched for a long moment.

*“What now, Satine? It's morning, but I wish it was night. I don't—”* He let out a shuddering sigh.

*“You don't want to live through the day,”* Satine murmured.
“No. I don't.”

Ahsoka could feel it. The weariness shot through his bones.

The hopelessness.

“No. I don't.”

Satine said without changing the tone or volume of her voice.

Obi-Wan muffled a groan again. “You have no shame. No sense of privacy whatsoever.”

“You've known that for eighteen years, dear jetii.”

“You could at least pretend.”

“Amongst family? Why?”

* * *

Boil was almost relieved to leave his brothers behind to go seek out healers for the information his General's commanding officer needed.

They were talking.

A lot.

Love, the General, the Duchess, the other General, Commander Tano—

Adoption.

A mother.

The fact the Duchess thought they should be able to expect to learn about love from their General.

They'd always thought that, of course. The fact his commanding officer agreed, well, that was news. Big news.

Boil dreaded returning to the cruiser, knowing that soon the entire two-twelfth would be buzzing with it.

Waxer would have appreciated it.

And Waxer would have known better than to shove it down Boil's throat.

And hells and kark he missed Waxer.

His eyes burned and his throat closed.

Krell.

Krell had been focused on himself, had murdered so many brothers over that campaign, but worst of all was that night when he'd sent brothers to kill brothers.
And thought it amusing.

Somewhere in this Temple was another Jedi who had lost sight of everything but himself... and done something terrible, thinking it amusing.

This time, not to Boil's brothers, but to his General.

The man he'd been made for. The man who saw him, valued him as a person instead of a possession, when he had every right to consider him expendable.

And, yeah. According to his General's commanding officer...

His father.

The crimes against this man had been committed by his General's best friend. His brother.

It wasn't something he was going to forgive. Not soon.

Probably never.

The two-twelfth could talk about love, and orders, and healing, and adoption.

Boil only had room in his heart for hate.

If Skywalker was sentenced to death— and he should be, Boil was convinced—

I want to be on the firing squad.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ahsoka headed for the Resolute once Obi-Wan had been surrendered to sleep for the night.

He wouldn't notice the lack of shields, and she had a mission.

Satine had requested only four 212thers, so if the fifth brother of the 212th was not to be disappointed in vain, Ahsoka needed to bring back Rex.

“Commander.” Jesse was the first to meet her.

Ahsoka couldn't manage to scrounge up a smile.

“Why weren't we allowed to help rescue General Kenobi and avenge him on those Zygerrian dogs?” Ahsoka just looked at him, not sure how to respond.

“If it went the other way, would they have trusted Cody?” Fives spoke up. “That's the real question.” Ahsoka shook her head. “Neither of those are the question. It was a battle that was better for you to sit out, given the fights ahead.”

“With all due respect, Commander, that's banthakark and you know it.” Jesse scowled. “It's General Kenobi we're talking about.”

“It's General Skywalker we're talking about,” Ahsoka corrected.

Heavy silence fell over the men.

“Tactically, it made more sense to wait to bring you in until we knew what was going on.”

“Wasn't much question of that,” Fives muttered. “Whole freaking universe knew exactly what was going on.”

Ahsoka could sense his bitterness... and confusion.

And betrayal.

“How is morale?” she asked, voice soft.


“Same here.” Ahsoka sighed. “I've got to find Rex. Do any of you know where he is?”

Heads shook.

“Master Kenobi wants him.”

Expressions changed.

“Does that mean we get to volunteer like the two-twelfth?” Jesse pursued. “We'd been staying back because technically he belongs to them more.”
Ahsoka shook her head. “If you want to help, by all means, help. The Duchess is putting to work whoever she can get.”

“She's by his side?” Jesse asked. “Always?”

“So far. But Jesse... don't expect him to talk to you much.”

The clone looked pensive. “I'm not even sure I'm going to try. We're... we're too tied to General Skywalker. I can't imagine he'd be glad to see us.”
Ahsoka gripped his shoulder in silent sympathy as she passed to try to go find Rex.

Jesse's doubt was one shared by every friend and family member Obi-Wan Kenobi had.

It was even shared by Obi-Wan himself.

Ahsoka wasn't sure how they were supposed to navigate this bleak, uncharted territory, but she believed Satine when she said it was better to do it as a group than as many lost individuals, attempting it on their own.

Everywhere she turned, clones approached her, varying levels of worry and anger swirling around them in the Force. Desperate for news... for reassurance...

“If General Skywalker doesn't come back, are we going to be split up and sent to different battalions?” one asked, voicing the fear so many of them were unable to speak.

“No. I promise.” Ahsoka had no idea how she was going to be able to keep that promise... but...

“And what about the two-twelfth?”

“I...”

She shouldn't be lying to these men. They deserved better.

If both Skywalker and Kenobi never returned to the war effort, the battalions would have to be split up. There weren't any Jedi to take over.

And while her gut urged her to combine the two and take command herself, she knew in her heart of hearts she wasn't ready for her trials. She might be close, but she wasn't ready.

She still needed a Master.

Combining three battalions...

That wouldn't be fair to the men.

After over an hour of searching, she finally located her Captain.

She could sense his grim agitation behind the closed doors of a storage room.

She opened the door, allowing light to spill in.

A figure sat in the corner, mostly concealed by the shadows the hallway's light couldn't dispel.

“Rex?” she asked, approaching cautiously.

She received no response.
Stepping around racks of weapons, her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Scrubbing... Scrubbing... Scrubbing...

Rex didn't pause to look up at her.

His armor had to be clean by now, it looked like he'd been at it for quite some time, but he just kept one.

She could sense it, in the Force. His desperate need to rid it of the filth —

She crouched down beside him, reaching out a cautious hand, not entirely sure he knew it was her.

“Rex?”

“Good soldiers follow orders,” he muttered. “Good soldiers protect their Jedi. I followed orders. I didn't protect my Jedi.” He scrubbed harder.

Ahsoka scanned his signature in the Force, realized he was running on severe sleep deprivation. Very severe.

“I trusted him with everything — my life — my brother's lives — and he — I don't know who — I missed it. I missed it. I didn't see —”

“Rex? I missed it too.”

The scrubbing stilled. Rex peered up at her.

Ahsoka was shocked by how haggard he looked.

“And he hurt you.”

Ahsoka felt tears threatening to fall and fought them. “That was — a side effect.”

“My brothers trusted me to look after our three Jedi. They sent me alone with them. And I failed.”

“Did I fail?” she whispered.

Dark eyes snapped to fury. “No.”

“Then you didn't either.”

Rex seemed to melt in upon himself, looking so small. “We exist to shield Jedi,” he whispered. “The only reason we're alive is to make sure bad things happen to us instead of our Jedi. It's why we're made. It should have been me in that room, but I failed. And my Jedi suffered for it.”

Ahsoka felt like she'd been thrown out an airlock, the wind sucked from her lungs by sheer vacuum. It took a moment before she had enough air to speak with. “No, Rex. No. Master Kenobi wouldn't want you to feel like that. He—”

“He doesn't understand. Jedi don't understand. Jedi are too focused on trying to give us real lives. Trying to have us not be dependent on them. Jedi are all there is. Everything. We only pretend that's not the case because you seem to want it.”

“What? No, Rex, this war is going to end and after that all of you boys are going to have a chance at whatever life you choose for yourselves—"
“Do you really think, if given the choice, any of us would leave our Jedi? You talk about the end of the war like it’s a good thing, but we’re going to be cast out on our own. Our Jedi will go back to working in pairs or alone. If the war ended, we would want to still serve our Jedi. Fight Jedi missions instead of battles. You’re going to send us away.”
“What’s been done to you isn’t right,” Ahsoka blurted. “You’re practically slaves. It’s wrong, Rex! We want your freedom!”

The Captain looked so lost, so young. Ahsoka had never seen him like this.

When he looked his age.

Four years younger than herself.

“We don’t want freedom,” Rex whispered. “We want our Jedi.”

Ahsoka thought of the anxiety, the turbulence pouring through the 212th and 501st. Of the undercurrent of agony. Fury. Fear.

They feared for their Generals. Yes.

But they also feared they would be separated from them.

We're the closest thing they have to family.

Satine had said as much.

Now Ahsoka knew it to be true.

Satine was right.

About... a lot of things, Ahsoka was finding. She wasn't sure about some, but others were becoming clear as a summer day on Naboo.

“Listen. Master Obi-Wan's commanding officer wants you to report in for duty.”

His forehead wrinkled in confusion and concern. “Who? General Yoda?”
“What? No. Duchess Satine. You've— not been spending any time with your brothers, have you.”
“No.”

“That's what they're calling her. She woke Master Kenobi up, and she's been in charge since.”

He looked mournful. “Is she going to take him away from us?”
“I don't think so. She told me to have you report in to Master Kenobi's sickroom.”
He collected his pile of armor plates and started cinching them to his body. Gathering his helmet under his arm, he gave Ahsoka a nod. “I'm ready.”

“Good man.” Ahsoka led him out of the storeroom and down the hall.

As light fell across him, she had to fight the urge to stare.

On much of his armor, only faint streaks of blue remained.

The rest had been scrubbed down to a scored white.

* * *
Rex knew Obi-Wan was in love with the Duchess of Mandalore, of course.

That memorable flight to Couruscant had made that clear.

It scared him.

Skywalker would never be allowed near the troops again. He would be court-martialed... probably executed...

At least, if he was a clone, that would be a reasonable outcome...

General Kenobi was the 501st's only hope of staying together.

If he would take over Ahsoka's training... combine 501st and 212th just long enough for Ahsoka to be knighted and become a general in her own right, who could then take charge of the 501st...

But General Kenobi's love was here.

And apparently she was his commanding officer. His brothers would know it when they saw it.

He'd been entrusted with General Kenobi's life and well-being.

After what had happened...

How could the Duchess possibly consider letting the clones have care of him again?

She'd probably insist he never return to the military. Maybe even insist he return to Mandalore with her.

Rex tried to hide his despair as he walked through the halls of the Jedi Temple.

But he knew the Jedi around him could sense it.

Ahsoka left him at the halls of healing, needing to go find rest herself. She looked about ready to fall asleep standing up.

A head leaned out of General Kenobi's room, saw Rex standing uncertainly in the waiting area. It disappeared again, and a moment later she came out.

He almost didn't recognize her.

She wasn't walking the same.

Instead of the mincing sweep he remembered, with the slight sway to the hips that specified she was, without doubt, a woman—

Her gait was that of a soldier. If she'd been clothed in clone armor and helmet, it would have been difficult to tell her apart from his brothers. Her shoulders had a familiar angle and her head a familiar set.

Instinctively, he came to attention.

There was also something more here.
She wasn’t just a *soldier*.

She was elite.

And not just elite...

But a huntress.

He could see it in her eyes, in her step, and yes, in her clothing. A loose tunic and pants that would allow her freedom of motion as she destroyed.

He wasn't used to warriors like this cloaking themselves in harmlessness.

Only predators did that.

Not only was she a warrior, *and* General Kenobi’s commanding officer...

She was a deceiver. A very, *very* good one.

She scared him.

Who *was* this person?

She’d been hiding as a civvie, and he’d bought it.

Now the warrior was loose. Coming for *him*.

And he’d failed to protect the man she loved.

He stood his ground, trying to hide the fear from his eyes.

“Captain,” she said, her voice quiet, and still with the Mandalorian accent that reminded him so much of General Kenobi’s. “General Kenobi is asleep, and I have a system of watches set up through the night. You will take first watch.”

“Sir. Yes, sir.”

She didn’t fit into the GAR hierarchy.

She was separate.

Somehow had authority over General Kenobi anyway.

That was scary in and of itself. The reg manuals hadn’t explained this.

A Mandalorian.

No.

A *Mando*, with authority over a Jedi.

His General was a monster, his commander barely more than a little kid, his other General broken, and the individual who stepped forward to take charge wasn’t a Jedi at *all*, but the Jedi’s worst enemy. One who’d seemed harmless, but whose true colors were bleeding through.

Rex almost wondered if he should sound the alarm.
There was a sleeper agent in the heart of the Jedi Temple...

With direct access to its most vulnerable son.

He was asleep. Helpless.

And those keen, calculating eyes watched him.

Instead, Rex followed her back to the room.

He received nods of recognition and reluctant acceptance from the four 212thers present, who proceeded to curl up on the floor and fall asleep. Apparently, the 212th was thawing a little bit towards the 501st.

There, in the bacta tank, hung General Kenobi.

Rex forgot about the raptor sitting in the center of the songbirds' nest.

Jedi were powerful.

General Kenobi looked anything but.

Silent movement had him shying away from the Mando.

She ignored his distrust and approached the tank. For a long moment she looked up into the pale face, and then she curled up at the base of the tank and fell asleep.

He recognized the posture and everything it signified.

If anyone came to hurt the General...

Rex didn't think they'd be walking away.

It didn't matter that she seemed to be unarmed or deeply asleep.

Neither of those things mattered at all.

He retreated to the doorway.

There was a chair, and he had no doubt he would be allowed to sit in it.

But he wasn't here to be comfortable.

This was his vigil.

He'd failed to protect this man once.

He was not going to make that mistake again.

Before seeing Satine, he'd assumed this to be safe, friendly territory.

But the Jedi had allowed her to walk in.

Clearly the Temple wasn't as secure as he'd thought.

Given the signals she'd been giving off, he didn't think she'd hurt his General.
But if an enemy like this had simply walked in, and someone like Skywalker—

Yes.

Skywalker was somewhere in this Temple too.

Rex stood by the door and watched, every sense extended to its fullest.

A whisper of sound, a shadow—

Rex stepped into the hall, ready to fight, ready to—

And found a grim-looking General Vos.

Rex relaxed. “He's asleep at the moment.”

“Yeah. I can see that. Duchess is still here too.”

But... the Jedi didn't move.

“Do you want me to comm you when he wakes up?” Rex asked, not sure what he was supposed to do, but there was a helpless pain in Vos' eyes that he recognized all too well from himself and his brothers.

“No... no, he wouldn't want to see me.” Vos huffed out a quiet laugh. “And I'd just end up saying something stupid. Make everything worse.”

Rex could understand that fear.

“Do you mind if I hang around? Keep an eye on everything? I hate being useless.”

“Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” Vos slipped back into the shadows to prowl the hallway.

Rex stepped back into the room to find one of Satine's eyes open.

It unnerved him, but he sent her an assuring nod.

All clear.

The lid closed over the watchful blue once more.

Ho-ly kark.

When his brothers had speculated about Obi-Wan's relationship with the Duchess, they'd never guessed any of this.

It made him wonder if they were losing their edge.

***

Anakin lay curled up on the hard sleeping shelf that stuck out from the wall of his cell.
The moment Ahsoka had extricated herself from between the Team, Anakin had recognized Obi-Wan's practically-unconscious Force-signature. Deep in a healing trance. And drugs.

Probably bacta too.

This deep under, he wouldn't be in danger of being aware of Anakin's presence, or remembering it when he was awakened later.

And no. He wouldn't be waking up on his own.

For the first moment since that horrible misunderstanding earlier, Anakin drew in a deep breath.

He couldn't hurt Obi-Wan right now.

His Master was safe.

And Ahsoka was safe too, the distance she wanted between Anakin and herself back in place.

He'd been able to sense how traumatic it was for her to sense him so close while she shielded Obi-Wan.

For the night...

All was still.

Heavy shadows lay across the room, and the Temple guards at the end of the hall were the closest living beings to him.

Thick, sound-proof walls and door separated him from them.

It was strange to be alone. It didn't happen often.

As a child, his mother had always been present. Then, as Obi-Wan's apprentice...

Obi-Wan had always been close by.

Then the war had come, and a Padawan of his own—

There were always clones and Ahsoka, or Padmé.

This feeling of solitude was foreign.

And very... very...

He shivered.


No-one seemed to notice.

He studied it mournfully, seeing the jagged edges his rage had left behind. He trailed his fingers across them, wishing he knew how to put the pieces back together.

His Master had been so beautiful, so powerful, so self-controlled and kind. So forgiving. So wise.

And for so many years I refused to see it.
The wreckage was recognizable, but just barely.

Anakin muffled a sob.

He loathed himself. Hated the way his own signature whispered crimson and death.

Even in the destruction and loss, Obi-Wan's signature pulsed with a quiet, enduring light. It was warm against the cold emptiness of Anakin's heart.

Anakin sifted through the shields that lay in broken disarray.

He'd wrecked them.

He knew what they used to look like. How they used to sweep around Obi-Wan, keeping his thoughts his own.

It had frustrated Anakin at times, to not know what his Master thought. To be unable to read it from his face, since Obi-Wan had such fine control over his expressions.

Now he just wanted Obi-Wan to have that back.

Yes. Maybe Obi-Wan being a mystery had ruffled Anakin's feathers.

But he wasn't that way to annoy his Padawan. It's just who he was. Part of what made him Obi-Wan.

Anakin caressed one of the broken plates, tried to see where the piece that had been punched through it may have fallen.

He found something that looked similar in tone and shape.

The two fit together, but fell apart the moment he let go.

Lifeless.

*I'm good at fixing things. I just have to look at it differently.*

But he was afraid.

He was good at fixing things that weren't alive. He found kinship with dead metals, lifeless machinery. That he understood. That he could salvage. Could make better by trying.

He'd never been good with living things, whether they be animals...

Or people.

*I always break people.*

For two hours he struggled to find a way to restore Obi-Wan's defenses. He lost track of the time as he gave everything he had to the attempt.

But when he stepped back...

The precariously-balanced house of cards he'd built looked like a skeleton, made from the bones of mismatched creatures.

Grief stole over him.
I can't fix it.

And he couldn't even apologize, since it hurt Obi-Wan too much to hear him.

He gazed down at the heart that had protected him for so many years.

He needed Obi-Wan. The thought of life continuing on without him, and estranged from Padmé was a future he wasn't sure he could face.

There were many people Anakin could live without.

The entire galaxy could go, as long as he had Padmé and Obi-Wan.

He stopped trying to help.

And instead...

He curled up against Obi-Wan's sleeping mind. Pressing himself up against the raw edge where shields should have formed a comforting wall.

Simply listened to the rhythms that were his Master.

He became a little child again, sleeping against his father's chest.

He adored this man.

*I lost track of that somehow. How did I lose track of it?*

Half his soul would die should Obi-Wan ever fall in battle.

He snuggled there, pretending Obi-Wan held him in return, like he used to, when Anakin was a scared, lonely kid.

*Sorry...*

*I'm so sorry.*

He let his soul rest, and pretended Obi-Wan had forgiven him.

* * *

Rex was exhausted when his watch was up and the 212ther took his place.

He lay on the floor and tried to relax.

Found to his shock that it was possible.

Actively taking a step towards helping Obi-Wan, even if it was a tiny, mostly meaningless step, eased a little of the tightness in his heart and the throbbing in the back of his brain.

* * *
Satine smiled to herself as Rex's breathing deepened and the muscles of his face relaxed.

When he'd arrived a few hours earlier, he'd been wound so tight that if something snapped it was going to punch a hole through the wall.

She considered what tomorrow would bring.

Obi-Wan would put his foot down and insist on being freed from this room. He would walk out of here—

She was fairly certain he hadn't thought it through to the point of figuring out where he was going to go, but his aversion to hospitals could only be soothed for so long.

That meant she needed to figure out where to take him.

And who she wanted to come along.

Also?

It was time for him to start working on rebuilding his shields.

*After Zigoola he found solace in the Room of a Thousand Fountains.*

It wasn't too long a walk from the halls of healing, and the bubble of life and renewal the plants provided should act as a cushion of calm as Obi-Wan tried to mend his defenses.

She made a note to comm Yoda before Obi-Wan awoke to ask him to warn Jedi away from the room. She doubted her charge was ready to have anyone other than Ahsoka nearby as he worked on something so delicate...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to wolfishpennings for the awesome idea of Rex scrubbing his armor to paintlessness!

Also: I know, I know. In canon, Rex would never behave like this, let alone talk like this. He’s too tough, too much of a soldier. However, what’s the point of having a fanfic with clones if we don’t get to make them just a little bit more vulnerable? They’re twelve years old, after all, with no family and the Kaminoans really screwed with their brains and that’s BEFORE you count the chips. So I’m going to have my needy, orphan child clones. End of story.
Chapter 10

“Asked to see me you did, Duchess?”

“Yes, Master Yoda. It's been a week. What is to be done with Master Skywalker?”

Yoda heaved a sigh, bone-deep sorrow looking up at Satine through ancient eyes. “Decided, that has not been. Demanding we hand him over, some in the Senate are.”

“It's none of their business.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

“Do they even comprehend what transpired?”

“No.”

Satine considered the problem. “If any Republic citizens or clones had been injured, they would have every right to intervene, and the injured party would deserve it as well. But because this was a Jedi committing a crime against another Jedi, you can hold your ground for Order determination in this matter.”

“Very perceptive you are, Duchess. See, I do, how tamed Mandalore you have.”

Now it was Satine's eyes that shadowed. “Not tamed enough.” She could feel Yoda's studying gaze, not just see it.

“Infuriated, your people are, by what has been brought to light.”

“Yes, Master. It was one thing for them to listen to me when they perceived me to be Mandalorian to the core and dedicated to Mandalore. To them. Their faith in me is shaken.”

“Speak optimistically to me, you need not.”

Satine sank to the round cushion-like chair opposite Yoda, crossing her legs and resting her hands on her knees.

Just another of her tiny gestures to respect Jedi culture as a legitimate way of life. Yoda appreciated them, more than she knew.

She lowered her mask of calm confidence, allowing him to see the dread within.

“If it had been anyone else. The member of a clan who'd long been considered an enemy. Any nationality spanning the Republic, CIS, or wild space... if he'd even been Sith, my people would have let it pass.”

Satine drew in an unsteady breath. “But he's a Jedi. And that is enough to wake the slumbering hatred. I managed to keep the Clone War distant enough its drums didn't stir their blood. It was theory. Words. I was so careful to ensure they felt they had no stake in it. They'd come to ignore the Jedi. To forget the old hatred. I brought Ahsoka into the schools, and there were no riots. But this—this they cannot let pass. An affront. A betrayal. A humiliation. I love a Jedi. I may as well have spit in their eyes and called them hutunila.”

She didn't have to explain to Yoda the significance.
He knew the word coward was the greatest insult one could offer a Mandalorian.

Nothing came even remotely close.

“Heard, you have, from members of your government?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “My sister is calling for my blood, and the common folk are responding. You
know my people. You've known them for centuries. Their pride.”

“Believe in your dream, they did not.” Yoda’s ears drooped. “Bend the knee to you, they did. Not to
your ideals.”

Tears blurred her eyes. “I hoped that with time and gentle reason they would come to see. But things
are deteriorating so fast. Bo is telling them that this has all been a plot to keep them enslaved to the
Jedi. To de-fang them. That the galaxy laughs at them. No longer fears them. She's been doing that
for years. The problem is their own hearts now tell them the same things.”

“Grieved, Obi-Wan would be, if your world collapsed once more.”

“He has bled and suffered and sacrificed for them,” Satine whispered. “And he supported the
sacrifices I made towards the same end. It's always been balanced on the edge of a knife. But to see it
teerter—”

“Your voice, enough to hold them, no longer is.”

Satine swallowed hard. “It's only a matter of time.”

The thought clenched around her heart like a Sith’s merciless grip. She bowed her head, and silent
tears slipped down her nose.

Beautiful, beautiful Mandalore.

About to plunge headlong into the brutality and hatred of the past. The blood. The suffering. The
screams of the innocent.

Five-year-olds, taught by their parents how to kill.

Eight-year-olds, hardened killers.


Laughing at the screams as they burned their enemies alive.

Family slaughtering family, simply because once, thousands of years ago, a member of the one clan
wronged the other.

Endless cycles of aggression and revenge, then revenge and aggression—

Death, death, death.

“I thought we could change,” she whispered.

“Long ago, words of wisdom Qui-Gon gave you.”

“You can't save people who don't want to be saved.”

It's why she'd convinced them. She'd taken them by storm, by force of personality, by authority,
she'd appealed to their love of their children, their passion for family.

She'd taken the foundations of Mando philosophy and turned them, agonizing over them until she could make a case that backed her up.

She'd used their very momentum to divert them into a new path.

She'd spoken to them in Mando'a—

And led them to peace.

They'd been mesmerized.

She'd soothed their fury, calmed their pride.

Whispered visions of a glorious future, where Mandalorians led in *everything*. Not just in the caliber of their warriors.

And, almost through the sheer force of her belief that they *could*, they'd followed her.

They'd allowed her to draw them towards something better.

There hadn't been a moment's rest ever since.

Qui-Gon had been so instrumental in that year of struggle, when she was trying to find hope. Trying to discover if a brighter future was even *possible*.

He'd given her the courage to stand for something better.

To believe her people could become the best they could be.

And somehow that belief had spilled through her words and challenged her people.

And Mandalorians could never turn down a challenge.

They also had very... very short attention spans.

She'd held them for *eighteen years*.

*And* she'd managed to hold off a salivating Republic. Force, had the Chancellor wanted to get his hands on the warriors that slumbered in the hearts of every citizen who walked the streets of Sundari. Unarmed. War the farthest thing from their minds.

She'd held her ground and *kept him out*; kept the bubble secure—

But Anakin had attacked from a front she couldn't defend against.

Agony pounded through her heart.

The tears burned deeper.

A gentle thud announced Yoda had left his seat, and a moment later a warm hand pressed against her knee. “Failed them, you have not. Given them every chance, you have. Their choice, it has always been. Their choice it still is. Same as Obi-Wan—failed Skywalker, he did *not*.”

“I should have tried to educate them *faster*.” Satine shivered. “I should have—”
“No!” The three fingers squeezed tighter. “Perfect, no-one is. Give their best, all anyone can do. Control others, we cannot. Control themselves, they do. To help, we strive. To accept or deny our help, their choice is. Theirs alone.”

Satine raised her eyes to meet his. “Is there hope, Master? Can I save my people, or is it too late?”

“Theyir choice that will be,” he said gravely. “As it was eighteen years ago.”

“The ministers in my government are begging me to return.” Satine searched his eyes. “But I cannot leave Obi-Wan.”

Yoda tilted his head to the side.

“You think I should ask him.” Satine sighed. “You're right, of course. He deserves to know the stakes. But I'm afraid he will tell me to leave, when he isn't ready for me to go.”

“Alone, is he?”

Satine considered.

She could practically feel the love Obi-Wan's fellow Jedi had for him. Walking through these halls, seeing the welcoming, hopeful glances thrown her way, hearing the heartache in their voices as they asked after him—

As long as the Order remained, Obi-Wan would never truly be alone.

The wizened sage standing beside her now.

He'd watched over Obi-Wan's cradle. Had been there as Obi-Wan took his first steps.

Had whispered of the Force to a wide-eyed baby.

Had introduced him to lightsaber wielding.

Had nudged Qui-Gon Jinn into accepting Obi-Wan as his apprentice.

Had welcomed him back after Obi-Wan's trial on Melida/Daan.

Had been there for him, beside him, every step of the way.

Had warned, warned so closely against the agony Anakin would one day inflict on Obi-Wan.

Had known, had fought, had struggled to protect Obi-Wan from it—

But as he told her now.

Choices were made.

All you could do was give your best.

Even if, against all probability, the Order turned its back on Obi-Wan, Yoda would watch over him.

The Jedi. Yoda.

And it's not just all of them.

There was Ahsoka. Devoted. Compassionate.
Who for the last several days had been helping Obi-Wan rebuild the shattered remains of his shields into something strong once again. Who had displayed infinite patience as his fingers fumbled, as it all came crashing down and they had to start anew.

Her patience had paid off.

He was shielding himself once more.

It had brought a spark of dignity back to his eyes.

He still couldn't look anyone in the eye, but he didn't quiver with humiliation every time a Jedi stepped into the room anymore.

And it wasn't just the Force sensitives who loved him.

There were two battalions of clones who felt it to be the highest privilege to be allowed to care for him.

Dex sent Obi-Wan's favorite dishes up to the Temple, unasked, simply because he cared. Jar Jar had sent flowers.

Bail had a fervent need to protect him in a way that made Satine rest just a bit easier simply knowing he lived on Coruscant and wouldn't take Obi-Wan's bantha-kark answers for granted.

The Senator was just as stubborn as the Jedi.

And one of the few people who could badger him into a medcenter.

Obi-Wan was thousands of people away from being alone.

Do I trust them to take care of him, or do I believe I am the only one who can?

And wasn't that the weakness she winced over every time she saw it surface in their son?

He refused to trust the people he loved.

Only he could do the job right. Only he could keep them safe.

They didn't know what was best for them. They couldn't be trusted to make their own decisions.

“Thank you, Master,” she murmured, patting the wrinkled hand. “There are moments when I long for Master Jinn's advice.”

“Feel the same, we all do.” Yoda stepped out of her way as she stood up.

Satine straightened her clothes and drew in a deep breath.

This was going to be difficult.

A hell of a lot scarier than charging alone into a room full of hostile clansmen.

If Obi-Wan told her he could handle her absence...

It was going to be gut-wrenchingly hard to leave.

At the door she paused, looked back at Yoda. “I would very much like to be present for Anakin's trial.”
Yoda considered for a long moment.

“Open to outsiders, such a proceeding usually is not."

“Am I an outsider?”

“Alert you, I will, when know the time we do. Welcome in the Temple you will be. Beyond that, promise I cannot. Wait outside the judgment hall, you might be forced to.”

She gave him a low bow. “I recognize the courtesies you extend to me that you are not required to, Master. Thank you. May the Force be with you.”

* * *

And as Yoda watched her leave, step firm, shoulders braced, ready to do that which she desired least, he whispered, “And with you, may the Force be, child of peace and war.”

He'd lived a long, long time.

Trust between Jedi and Mandalorian was something unspeakably precious.

And even more rare.

He'd never been able to trust a Mandalorian before Satine had appealed to him for help, eighteen years ago. Asking for a teacher. Wanting someone whose main focus was peace to help her discover how to bring it to her people.

Qui-Gon Jinn had been the perfect fit.

Yoda's willingness to give Satine a chance all those years ago had only proven wise again and again.

He would trust her with the lives of the Jedi he safeguarded.

He certainly trusted her with Obi-Wan's soul.

He sighed.

He had allowed himself to entertain hopes that one day her people would make her dream their own.

That Jedi and Mandalorian could find rest. Trust.

Friendship.

It hurt, to see it so close to unraveling.

It hurt worse to see Satine's belief in the possibility of that dream wavering.

Believe, Mando'ad, he thought. Fight always.

Worth fighting for, it is.
“It's... a test. The present is difficult, but we can still find our way.”

Obi-Wan's gaze didn't ease.

Satine had been seeing through him the last few days.

Now it was his turn.

“There is heaviness around your heart.” His gaze unfocused. “Despair.”

“Obi—”

“You must go back to them. They need you.” He searched her eyes. “You know they won't listen to you if you are at a distance from them. They need you present, attention fully focused on them. They need to hear your voice, see your face.”

He was right.

“You need me too,” she murmured.

He shook his head. “I am not alone. You've seen to that. I will miss you, of course. I always miss you. But your people only have you.”

It was true.

So many members of her government had proved corrupt at best, working for Death Watch or the Sith at worst.

She wasn't sure who she could trust.

Many people could point to family.

But it was Satine's own family who were leading the charge to kill her.

And Korkie...

Korkie was on-planet, with no friendly family members nearby.

*I'm all he has.*

She needed to return.

But it broke her heart to leave.

“You know that undercurrent of remorse you speak of?” she whispered. “I'm feeling it right now.”

Dimly, Satine was aware of the fact that the Room of a Thousand Fountains was deserted. Ahsoka and the clones had slipped away.

That had probably been Ahsoka's idea.

“And if you stayed, you would still have an undercurrent of remorse—that you weren't there for your people when they needed you. Only then you would also feel guilt, would you not? It's not a question of which path will leave you without remorse. It rarely is, for us.”

“When did you become so wise?” Satine took his hand and pressed a fervent kiss to the back of it.
“Will you be alright?”

He quirked an eyebrow at her, an expression so familiar and so missed. “I doubt I would be allowed to be anything else, given the number and identity of my prison wardens.”

Satine sent him an arch frown. “Wardens. Must you always consider healing to be incarceration?”

“Always.”

She allowed her fingers to curve against his cheek. His eyelids fell shut and he leaned into the caress.

“The Force will be with us both,” she whispered. “I will return when I can.”

* * *

Obi-Wan remained in the garden when she left.

It had been impossible to feel safe anywhere post Zygerria.

But for Obi-Wan, this room was less terrible than other places. It had been steeped in safety. It whispered through the leaves in the trees, murmured in the waterfalls.

Every disaster he had ever faced in his life he'd recovered from, and a large part of the healing process had always taken place here.

This room practically represented his ability to survive.

To find peace.

To re-find happiness.

It's why he'd spent countless hours here with Ahsoka once he'd been freed from the sling. They'd rebuilt his shields.

And now, when alone, he didn't have to sense Anakin.

Oh, he knew he was there.

But the presence was muted. Distant.

Locked out.

The shields were good for something else.

They kept Obi-Wan locked in.

Ahsoka couldn't just glance his way to discover his inner state anymore.

She had to accept his words. His facial expressions. Whatever he chose to allow her to see in the Force.

It gave him a measure of control over what happened to him, a thing he'd desperately craved.
And...

To be perfectly honest...

With Satine gone, he could gain even more control over his immediate destiny.

She knew all his tricks. She knew how to read him.

And she was able to out-maneuver him.

As far as the rest of the Jedi and the clones?

They would have no idea what hit them.

And Yoda, the only one who might be able to rival Satine in that capacity, was torn in too many directions. He had too many disasters to attend to.

So while his attention would be focused completely on Obi-Wan when turned in that direction, it would only rest there every once in a while.

Plenty of time.

First things first.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was not going back to the Halls of Healing. He could stand, he could walk.

That meant he would not live there a moment more.

He knew that in order to keep from drawing too much scrutiny he would have to submit to some sort of medical assistance, at least in name, so he allowed the clone medics to take over.

But only at scheduled hours. And he wasn't always in attendance at those hours.

It wasn't easy to face the walls of his room, but at least it was his. And Anakin's was two halls and a turbolift away, so he didn't have to walk past or see it.

He avoided it like the plague.

Second order of business?

Lose the pills.

He hated them. They made his connection to the Force fuzzy. And while that connection was a source of severe pain and disgust, Obi-Wan hated even more the feeling of helplessness that the fuzziness caused.

And even worse was how deeply he slept when he took the medication that kept him from dreaming.

That was too close to unconsciousness.

Anyone could do anything...

And he wouldn't know. Wouldn't be able to defend himself.

Unacceptable.

With shields, he could now go about fighting it all.
He ditched the pain meds. The sleep meds.

The anxiety meds.

The jittery pain that resulted was difficult to take, but was better, so much better than the numbness. He'd always hated numbness. Always —

With his shields in place, he could keep his fellow Jedi from figuring out that the plants and sewage-recycling systems were probably sleeping the best they ever had, felt no hint of worry, and no sign of pain.

Too many eyes were focused on him. He hated the scrutiny.

He wanted it gone.

WANTED TO BE HIMSELF AGAIN.

He started ducking away from his babysitters. Hiding. Lurking.

It was a miserable way to live, but it was so much better to being a vegetable.

To be held to account for his every waking moment, to have someone nearby at all times, to be told he needed to take his medication and submit to the medics and now they wanted to send him to a Mind-Healer for counseling—

It felt like slavery.

Others, demanding his cooperation.

He'd had Quite. Enough. Of. That.

On Zygerria.

He hadn't been this recalcitrant since before his Padawanship to Qui-Gon Jinn.

* * *

Ahsoka was at her wits' end.

Obi-Wan seemed to be doing well. Very well. But his resistance towards medical help was becoming a bit frustrating.

Before Zygerria, he'd had an almost religious aversion for it, and now ?

He disappeared when the clone medics arrived.

It could take hours to find him and drag him out of hiding, and he'd grumble the whole way back. When they found him. Sometimes they didn't.

She knew the trauma he'd suffered would have to express itself. But she dreaded the first-scheduled Mind-Healer appointment.

And every succeeding one.
Not for the first time, Ahsoka wished for Anakin.

He’d been able to corral Obi-Wan back when no-one else could.

Ahsoka felt out of her depth.

_Completely._

* * *

The nightmares were horrible.

But with his shields so impenetrable, no-one knew.

Every evening he thought nights were the hardest.

Until he woke up in the morning and realized he had to face another day.

Then he knew days were definitely the worst.

Each day it became a bit more difficult to keep the eagle eyes watching him believing he _wasn’t_ feeling the heart-stopping fear and guilt— _yes, guilt_—

But he was Obi-Wan Kenobi.

He’d lived with horror all his life, and learned how to hide it.

But at the same time... as the days progressed... he became more accustomed to the deception. Understanding just a bit better which buttons to push with which watchers.

If he pretended all was well, they would immediately suspect him.

So he allowed himself to appear vulnerable. Struggling.

But he lessened that a little every day. Not much, but a little.

Enough to look like he was firmly on the path they all wanted him to tread.

They suffered with his recalcitrance and didn't call Satine, because, after all, _he was_ getting better. They _could_ see it. _Feel_ it.

He assured Ahsoka he was working on clearing out the wreckage in his mind. He even spent hours in meditation, making sure she could catch him doing so.

But he didn't try to find healing. Instead, he created a brand-new room, and sealed off the rest of the house. Left it to rot, to fester, to fall _off_, do whatever the _hell_ it wanted, because he would _not_ step foot in there except when he was absolutely forced to in his dreams.

He worried about the Mind-Healer, though.

They were trained to see past the carefully-spun webs.

His might be _better_ than most webs, but he was afraid it wouldn't hold against the invasive prying
that would take place.

At that point...

The cage was going to tighten. The walls would close in around him, and he would be trapped. Forced to re-enter the drug-duced fog that fripped with his emotions, making him feel calm when he wasn't calm, the emptiness that made him utterly vulnerable every night, and the pain meds that made keeping his shields strong enough to keep up the facade difficult.

Could he manage, with the Mind-Healer?

Not appear *too* healed...

But hide the brokenness a little more each day?

* * *

Rex had been concerned that watching over the General wouldn't demand all his skills and attention. He'd been really, really mistaken.

Half the time, the 212th and 501st had *no idea* where the General might be. And the Jedi didn't either.

It frazzled nerves, drove them to perfect their spycraft, and to wonder if there was something more they should be doing for him.

Almost all of them were convinced they needed to kidnap him and head back out to the battlefront where he could take out this nervous energy on the enemy. Make *them* try to keep track of him. Force knows the war would probably end fairly quickly at that rate. The Separatists would quit just to get away from him.

The Mind-Healers, both Jedi *and* clone disagreed.

He wasn't ready to be thrown into that kind of disaster this soon.

They insisted it would only help him to retreat farther away from people.

Rex hoped that the counseling would help.

He and his brothers had a grim determination to make sure Obi-Wan did *not* duck *those* appointments.

* * *

And Qui-Gon, watching from the Force, wished for the first time since death that he was alive.

No-one else saw what his Padawan was doing to himself.
And no-one but Satine could cut through the fog of misdirection he had wrapped around himself and coax him out of it.

No-one except Qui-Gon.

From the outside, everyone perceived Obi-Wan Kenobi as an obedient, submissive Jedi.

Qui-Gon knew from experience that was not the case.

He submitted when he chose to.

And the only people he had ever done anything else with were Yoda, Qui-Gon, and Satine.

Yoda was too distracted.

Satine was elsewhere.

And Qui-Gon Jinn was dead.
“Is Master Windu back yet?” Jocasta Nu asked.

Kit Fisto shook his head, his lekku swaying. “No. He reported in two hours ago to say it might take longer than expected.”

Jocasta gave him a weary nod of understanding.

“You should sit down,” Kit encouraged, drawing out a chair for her. “You look exhausted.”

“Don't deflect like that,” Jocasta chided. “I know you feel the lack of sleep just as much as the rest of us.”

He sat across from her.

She was right.

He glanced around at the archives, taking note of just how unusual everything looked.

Data cubes, holocrons, data crystals, datapads, even ancient scrolls and tomes that had pages that had to be turned by hand lay everywhere. Many of the shelves looked bare. The long work tables with computer terminals were just as covered as the floors.

Masters, knights, Padawans—

The search for knowledge had hijacked everyone.

Jocasta had started the investigation even before the Force-storm Skywalker had inflicted on Kenobi had been brought to an end. Tears streaming down her face, she’d sought out text after report after letter.

Once the rest of the Temple had been able to breathe, the stream of volunteers to assist became massive.

They had to find something to explain what ailed Skywalker...

And how to fix it.

And...

If they couldn't find a way to heal him...

Some way to defend against any further attacks.

The Council had dug into areas the rest of the volunteers couldn't go, but the manuscripts were vague at best.

Kit was aware that Skywalker raged in his cell that he was being unfairly held, but they were so far from an answer at this point.
Mace had taken off to Tython to follow a lead. Other members of the Council had headed other places.

Yoda even sought out what the ancient writings had called Korriban, a planet the modern galaxy knew as Moriband.

The birth-place of the Sith.

The Mind-Healers were collaborating together and reaching out to colleagues outside the Jedi Order, trying to determine how they should work with Skywalker on a purely mental path while their brothers and sisters tried to find out how to help his twisted Force.

Dooku, knowing they were distracted, pushed harder on many of the war fronts.

The Jedi still on the battlefields had to struggle so much harder to achieve even a fraction of what they'd accomplished before.

Kit rubbed at his aching forehead.

A hologram of clues they'd collected hung in the center of the library, and as a Padawan here or a Knight there found something knew, they sent it to join the picture gradually taking shape.

It wasn't a pretty picture.

So many records had been destroyed when the Sith and Mandalorians came through millenia earlier.

And it didn't all look coincidental.

Kit had the feeling that when the Sith took the Temple, someone may have intentionally tried to deprive the Order of all knowledge about whatever it was that now afflicted Skywalker.

And the leads were currently thousands of years dead.

“If anyone can find something, it will be Mace,” Jocasta soothed, patting Kit's hand. “You remember what he was like as a youngling.”

Kit had to smile at that.

Most people didn't bother to get to know the man well enough to see past the apparently-grumpy exterior.

But Kit had.

Windu might be frustrated and feel helpless and responsible for the disaster that had struck, but he would do his damnedest to find a cure for Skywalker. He didn't like the young knight.

But Skywalker was a Jedi.

And Mace was sworn to guard all of his brothers and sisters, whether he liked them or not.

And, really, Kit's friend had done a remarkable job of not saying, “I told you so” every five minutes. Which he could have done. And been completely justified in doing.

Windu had always been intense. Far more so than his fellow younglings.

And as determined as Skywalker.
Certainly less fickle. Skywalker could love one day, hate the next, then love the following—

Mace had a steadiness that would chip a mountain away one painful punch at a time if that's what it took to achieve a goal. He would not be swayed, distracted, or stopped.

And now that intensity was aimed at redeeming Skywalker.

“I fear our window of opportunity is closing.” Kit heaved a sigh. “I hate to ask any of the people here to work any harder—”

Jocasta gave him an understanding nod. “They're not sleeping enough. Many aren't eating enough. They're too focused. Too desperate to find something.”

Kit rose.

He couldn't talk about it any longer.

He needed to search, before he was called away to help Tiplee and Tipler, who were close to the breaking point.

It was hard to even think of leaving to help with the war when the battle against time here was so heavy.

* * *

“Force curse it, Obi-Wan!” Quinlan growled. “You've got to go.”

Obi-Wan scowled back, unintimidated by Quinlan's height. “That's rich, coming from you. It's no secret that you wouldn't if it was your turn.”

“Don't you dare give me that! I swore to Qui-Gon I'd look after you!”

Obi-Wan stared up at him in disbelief. “You what?”

“You heard me,” he snarled. He'd never planned on admitting that to the infuriating little Jedi before him, but there it was. “Your Mind-Healer appointment is today, and you are going.”

Obi-Wan's face took on the stubborn look Quinlan knew so well.

*Force, how can he be more infuriating than I am?*

“I don't want you to look after me. And you'd feel it an insult if anyone told you they'd promised to look after you; and you'd definitely refuse to visit a Mind-Healer.”

Quinlan's anger was almost something living. Obi-Wan was being intentionally dense. He had to be. He was smarter than this.

“Fine, maybe I wouldn't go to a Mind-Healer for any old thing. But this isn't any old thing. You've been raped for Force's sake—”

Mistake.

Quinlan found himself completely locked out of the conversation.
Obi-Wan's expression changed from annoyed and insulted to clear. Calm.

He took a step closer, and it was all Quinlan could do to not back away.

“Don't you ever throw that in my face,” Obi-Wan murmured in his ear, freezing Vos' blood with the sheer venom that lurked beneath the surface, and then brushed past him and walked away without a backwards glance.

Quinlan stared after him in shock.

What the hell had that been?
*He's not alright. He's very far away from alright.*

He wasn't taking care of his mind. He was toying with it.

It was going to come back to bite them all.

Quinlan might not be a model for dealing with stuffed issues, but even he could see this was going to be bad.

But if Obi-Wan would *not* be budged—

Then he would *not*. Be. Budged.

It's the only reason he'd survived what had been done to him.

Quinlan was just afraid that the thing Obi-Wan was holding on to *now* wasn't his light.

And while Quinlan was all kinds of careless with his own light, the thought of Obi-Wan throwing his own, beautiful light away... after resisting every effort to steal it from him...

It hurt Quinlan.

Made him sick.

But just as no-one could convince him to let go of it...

No-one would be able to convince him to protect it.

*We're in trouble. We're in big, big trouble.*

He went straight for Master Yoda.

If they waited to intervene until this blew up...

Quinlan wasn't sure that they'd be able to put the pieces back together.

Obi-Wan might be lost.

Not to death...

But to apathy. He might pull away from his friends, turn on them, and walk off into the night without a moral compass and with a massive chip on his shoulder.

Even if he didn't fall into darkness...

He'd be likely to live the rest of his life hounded by bitterness.
The quiet, resilient joy that resurfaced through the oceans of sorrow he endured might finally die.

Quinlan didn't possess such a priceless gift.

Perhaps that made him all the more eager to protect it in someone else.

* * *

Obi-Wan retreated to a secluded nook of the Room of a Thousand Fountains.

Ahsoka caught sight of him and trotted after.

He groaned inside, but figured if he could just make it to the special spot, he could figure out a way to convince her to reschedule the appointment.

But as he turned the corner, he found himself face-to-face with a small band of clones, who'd already been searching for him.

In his spot.

He grit his teeth, spun around, and found Ahsoka.

“Master, please,” Ahsoka pleaded. “What's the worst that could happen?”

“I have no interest in sitting on a couch and talking about my feelings. No-one has asked me whether this is something I think I need.”

“Just give it ten minutes, Master. You can always leave if you don't like it—”

“Do you think it would be my first time with a Mind-Healer, Padawan?” he growled, still unable to look at her.

“Have you ever been to this one?”

“That's irrelevant.”

“Maybe she's different from the others—”

“There is no such thing.”

“With all due respect, General,” Rex spoke up, “you could probably convince a lot of us to harass you less if you would meet with her regularly. We wouldn't feel the need to pester you about your meds that way. Going would be a good way to get us off your back.”

Obi-Wan groaned. “Must it be one or the other? Why can't you all trust me to take care of myself?”

“Maybe because Satine didn't?” Ahsoka offered.

“Satine. Always meddling—” his holodisc chimed. A familiar pattern to him.

Very familiar.

“Speak of the Sith,” he muttered, but answered it anyway.
There was a promise to keep.

If at all possible, each was supposed to answer the other, because this frequency was only used if they needed to speak to one another.

Little blue figures sprang to life above his palm.

Figures?

It took a moment for Obi-Wan's brain to recognize who the others were.

* * *

Anakin watched Obi-Wan's tightly-built shields in sorrow.

They never relaxed, now.

Not even in sleep.

Layered so thick it was impossible to guess what was passing beyond them.

He edged up closer to inspect their surface, the—

Agony split through the shields, striking Anakin right between the eyes.

The force of it sent him reeling backwards.

He hastily threw up his own shields, trying to block out the horrifying grief as a cry of anguish escaped Anakin's lips —

What the hell had happened?

He found himself kneeling beside his sleep-shelf, clutching it as he sobbed.

* * *

Yoda felt the thunderclap in the Force.

It came from Obi-Wan.

For a long moment the old one couldn't breathe, Obi-Wan's pain seizing him with its excruciating grasp—

And then all was silent as Obi-Wan's shields recovered from the overload and closed over the wound.

All still.
Except for the Temple reeling from the blow.

* * *

The volunteers in the archives froze, looking to one another in desperation.

But what else could they do, besides fight as hard as they could to find or invent a solution?

* * *

Cody watched Obi-Wan drop the holodisc to the grass and walk away.

He seemed decades older. His footsteps uncertain. Shoulders stooped.

With a whimper, Ahsoka darted after him.

Cody couldn't move.

Wooley dropped beside the fallen disc, and tapped at it.

The message, coming in live, had been automatically recorded.

And in a moment, Wooley had it playing again.

Why?

Cody found his gaze drawn down to it, even though he didn't want to see it again.

“It has to be a trick,” Wooley mumbled desperately, searching the holo for signs of fabrication. “It's not real.”

Boil's face was blank, but there was a fury in his eyes so deep, so dark Cody half-expected it to burst into a black hole and suck the trees out of the room and into an abyss of frigid nothingness.

A harsh crack had Cody spinning around to see Fives beating his armored fist against the trunk of the closest tree, yelling in rage, cursing at the top of his lungs.

Rex tried to quiet him with terrified glances Obi-Wan's direction.

But the General didn't seem to care.

And the damn holo started its third time through.

Wooley whimpered.

Boil seethed.

Fives beat an innocent tree.
Rex pleaded with Fives.

Obi-Wan sank to his knees, staring at nothing.

Ahsoka knelt beside him, holding his hand, leaning against his shoulder, crying.

And Cody...

Cody wasn't sure what he was doing.

* * *

"Senator Organa?"

"What can I do for you, Padawan Tano?" Bail took a closer look at the blood-shot eyes. "What's wrong?"

"It's Obi-Wan. He— he can't be in the Temple right now. There's too many memories— and— can he stay with you? Just for a little while?"

Bail's eyes widened. "Certainly. Has he suddenly gotten worse? I thought he was doing well—"

Ahsoka sniffed, blinking hard.

"It's fine, Padawan. You don't have to tell me," Bail assured her, though he desperately needed to know. Something had obviously happened.

"There's a holo that explains everything," she whispered. "But I'm not sure— I think— it may be better if you haven't seen it when he shows up. I'll bring it with me. Can— Padmé—"

"I'll have her meet us there."

"Thank you."

The hologram of the Padawan disappeared.

Bail collected the few documents that he could not leave until tomorrow, and rushed home.

It didn't take long to set up the guest room. On a hunch, he prepared the second one as well, just in case.

Both couches could easily be slept on if need be.

You're overreacting, he told himself.

Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as his gut said it was.

But he didn't believe that for a minute.

Padmé arrived first, all worry and confusion, clearly sleep-deprived. Her eyes looked almost as red as the Padawan's had been.

"I don't know what's wrong. I just know Ahsoka asked us to be here."

"Is it Anakin? It's got to be Anakin." Padmé sank to the couch, all color drained from her face.
“We don’t know that,” Bail soothed.

She raised grief-struck eyes to his. “How can I face him?”

“Obi-Wan?”

“After everything that's happened—”

Bail didn’t have time to give her more than a sympathetic grimace before he was called back by the doorchime.

The door opened to reveal Obi-Wan and Ahsoka.

Obi-Wan didn't make eye-contact. He just stared straight ahead, a numb look on his face, wrapped closely in a cloak with the hood drawn up.

The lines around his eyes were tight, and there was a furrow in his brow that Bail knew well. Pain. Deep and insistent.

“Come on in.”

Obi-Wan obeyed, walking in the door and then pausing.

Ahsoka gently gripped his arm and steered him towards a couch. A light touch prompted him to sit.

Bail watched from the doorway in stunned silence.

Ahsoka threw an expectant glance at Padmé and then rushed back, dragging Bail into the hallway and shutting the door.

She drew a holodisc from her belt and clicked it to play.

* * *

It took several moments before Padmé managed to gather the strength to look over at Obi-Wan.

And then she couldn't look away.

He stared off into the distance, apparently unaware of her presence, or possibly simply uncaring.

His eyes looked dead.

And suddenly Padmé forgot all about herself and moved to sit beside him. “Obi-Wan?” He didn't look at her.

She reached out a hand but hesitated. It could be dangerous to life and limb to startle a Jedi, but he looked to be in so much pain —

She lightly touched the back of his hand.

His breathing hitched, his eyes widened in horror, and his head turned, those broken eyes meeting hers.
And then he was sobbing. A silent, shattered wail. Curling in on himself, he rocked in agony.

Horrified, Padmé gathered him to her, resting his head against her shoulder and holding him tight. Tears of her own soaked his hair.

Two broken people.

Crying in the dark.

* * *

Ahsoka tried to shut out the sights and sounds as she held the holodisc, but it was futile.

“Master Kenobi. So glad you decided to answer. Would have been a shame to have to show you this after it happened.”

Obi-Wan's quiet, “What do you want?”

There was just the slightest hint of a quiver in his voice. That was all that betrayed his agony of fear.

It still stunned Ahsoka. The control it had required when Satine knelt there, battered and bruised, bound, clothes torn, surrounded by old-style Mandos. Not Death Watch.

The old armor.

Armor that had been gathering dust in the backs of closets for eighteen years.

These were citizens who'd seemed normal in that time.

The once-slumbering dragon slept no longer.

“We want to make it clear that this aruetii no longer speaks for Mandalore. Mandalore remembers. Mandalore lives. Mandalore has turned her over to face punishment for her betrayal, and we're standing here to tell you, and the rest of your Order, that we will not be made a laughingstock any longer. This is a statement to the galaxy that we're done rolling over and playing servant to the Jetiiise. Mandalore is back.”

“I can see that,” Obi-Wan said quietly. “Your point is made.”

“We're done having you and this Jedi lover laughing at us.”

“Does it look like I'm laughing?”

“Consider this the last warning we're going to give you, Jedi. You've shabar us long enough. Don't shabrudur us again. Fear us. We're back in the business of hunting Jedi, and doing anything we damn well please.”

“I remember,” Obi-Wan assured them. “I also remember Mandalore's reputation when it comes to monetary savvy. An enemy is worth more to you alive than dead. Your weapons are outdated. What better way to fund Mandalore's return to glory than the sale of the one who betrayed you? You have us where you want us. Is it time for us to bleed credits?”

Ahsoka had been able to sense Obi-Wan's grim knowledge at the time. She hadn't understood it then.
Now she did.

He'd known his words, phrased though they were to encourage the Mando psyche to listen, would fall on deaf ears.

But Ahsoka and the clones had waited with bated breath.

Satine had watched her love, a calm knowledge in her eyes as well.

She also knew how this was going to turn out.

And she was willing her Jetii strength.

“You and that zabrak Sith both seem to think credits would be enough for this one, and he would pay more. He seems to want to have something to hold over you. We're letting him think we'll go for it. It will be amusing to see his face when he realizes what's happened. You're both crazy if you think we'd give up our chance at revenge for coin.”

Ahsoka heard her own voice pitch in.

Thought she sounded naive and young.

The words hadn't felt that way at the time. “You would make yourselves the number-one enemy of the Jedi Order, you would draw down upon yourselves the full—”

She could see it, the momentary disbelief in their faces, swift followed by interrupting her. “Have you been listening to anything we just said? That's the point. We're declaring war against your Order by killing your ally and this Jedi's lover.”

Ahsoka felt again the helpless fury that had suffused her.

Heard again Satine's quiet, controlled voice.

“It's alright, Obi. I'm ready.”

Someone struck her across the mouth. “Ready? Oh, come on. You don't look like much of a duchess now!”

They were wrong.

On her knees, beaten, and facing death, Satine looked more powerful than she ever had. She hadn't winced against the pain of the blow, and the dignity that wrapped around her like a cloak could almost be felt. There was no sign of fear in her face, and in her eyes there was only love and compassion.

She didn't resent death.

But she was sorry it was going to hurt Obi-Wan.

And she wanted him to survive it. She was commanding him to, without using a word.

Her countrymen missed it. “She's scared, Kenobi. Scared and in pain and you're the reason we know about her. You weren't careful enough. You should have hid that knowledge better. Should have protected it instead of handing it over the way you did. You rolled over and submitted, and because of it, we're going to take her away from you. Forever. And Mandalore rises again. You were weak, Jetii, and guess what? We know. It's too late. Chew on that, Jetii who thought he could make
Mandalore his bitch.”

Obi-Wan stood, so very still.

And then a lightsaber hissed to life.

No...

The blade was black. Sucking light, sucking life from the atmosphere around it.

Obi-Wan had known that blade. Every Jedi did.

Many of their kind had been murdered by it.

It had been stolen from the heart of the Temple in the time of the Old Republic when Sith and Mandalorians had broken through, massacring everyone they found inside, down to the tiniest infants.

Mandalorians had been killing Jedi with it ever since.

This time, Ahsoka saw something she hadn't in that first time around.

Satine heard the distinctive whine.

And her face lit up.

Ahsoka's stomach knotted and she wasn't sure she wouldn't throw up on Bail's doorstep.

The hints of warrior that bled through Satine's chosen life sparkled in her face.

She was pleased that the blade that had slaughtered Jedi would take her life.

She felt that to be reasonable.

Honor enough.

Content to let her blood mingle with theirs.

And then the blow struck.

Satine's severed head hit the duracreet with a sick thud.

Beside Ahsoka, Bail cringed and let loose a pained syllable of protest.

“It gets worse,” she whispered.

She could hear the yells of anger that had come from herself and the clones, could hear the curses.

Remembered how Obi-Wan had stood tall. Stared into Satine's eyes up to the last moment.

Hadn't flinched. Hadn't protested.

Hadn't let even his eyes express his devastation.

No.

That shattered through the Force alone, robbing the satisfaction of seeing it from the Mandalorians.
But they were *determined* to rip a reaction from him.

Jeers, spitting on the corpse, stomping on her body, pouring blasterfire into it—

“*Shabla pacifist! Coward, coward! Jedi lover!*”

Bail was shivering beside Ahsoka.

And then the game started.

The ballgame.

Using Satine's head.

Tears streamed down Ahsoka's cheeks as she bit her lip.

*How* had Obi-Wan stood there so still? So outwardly calm?

Mocking laughter filled the air and one of the Mandalorians stepped closer to the holodisc to make sure she could be *heard* over the vocal enjoyment of her fellow Mandos kicking Satine's head across the ground.

“*Kenobi. Tell Skywalker next time you see him that sniffing out traitors is a lucrative business. We have a heavy case of credits with his name on it, any time he wants to send for it. Can't wait to do business with him again.*”

And then the holo ended.

The Mandalorians had cut short the call.

Bail swore. Long. Quietly.

When Ahsoka looked up at him, she saw tears in his eyes.

“The Temple was hard enough when it was just memories of Anakin,” Ahsoka whispered. “*But now, with Satine? He went to see the Mind-Healer. He wouldn't let me convince him otherwise.* And then he just... *sat* there while she tried to get him to talk. She gave up, told me to take him back to his room, but he tried to leave the Temple and point-blank refused to stay. He hasn't said a word. He hasn't cried, he hasn't raged, he hasn't done *anything* other than that single scream in the Force. I'm afraid for him—”

“It's good you came to me.” Bail ran a shaking hand over his mouth and beard. “*Hells. I don't know what to do for him. Satine was the best thing that's ever happened to him.*”

“He might not be the only one who that's true of,” Ahsoka whispered, thinking of the clones. “*She —*”

What could be said?

She was unlike anyone Ahsoka had ever met?

That she'd changed Ahsoka's perspectives in a lot of ways, and challenged her to be the best version of herself possible?

What Ahsoka finally said was, “*Someone has to tell Padmé. They were friends.*”
“I'll do that. I don't think—if Padmé insists on seeing that recording, then fine. But I'm not going to volunteer its existence.”

Ahsoka gave him a nod. “I don't want to leave him, but there's two battalions of clones who—knew she'd adopted them. They saw her as a possible mom. They—”

Bail's eyes filled with compassion. “Go help them, Ahsoka.”

She gave him a grateful nod and raced away.

And somehow, somehow, Bail reentered his apartment.

Chapter End Notes

Mando’a Guide:

Aruetii (Pronounced /ah-roo-AY-tee/) = Traitor

Jetiise (Pronounced /JAY-tee-see/) = Jedi (plural)


Shabrudur (Pronounced /shah-broo-DUUR/) = The most rude variant of “screw with” possible in Mando’a. Only used in the most extreme of circumstances. (They have plenty other rude words for everyday use.) This is a threat of the deepest caliber. A vicious warning. As in “Don’t shabrudur me.”

Jetii (Pronounced /JAY-tee/) = Jedi (singular)

Shabla (Pronounced /Sh-ah-blah/) = F-ing. “la” is practically “ing” in Mando’a, and I'm sure you recognize the root word from the two examples above. Bet you can now determine how you'd say F*** without me telling you. Yep. Just get rid of the “ing.”
“What happened?” Anakin wailed against the door, pounding on it with his metal fist. “You know what he is to me! How can you just stand there and not tell me?”

The cell might be sound-proofed, but he knew the two Temple guards could hear him. He was certainly yelling loud enough to get past the insulation.

And he was hammering at them with the Force as well.

Something was terribly, terribly wrong with Obi-Wan—

He'd been at it for the last hour, demanding answers. Demanding somebody, anybody talk to him—

The Temple guards moved farther up the dead-ended hallway, so they wouldn't have to see Anakin's frantic gestures.

And then they settled in again in silence.

He leaned against the door, panting, furious and heartbroken.

He had pushed the Jedi away... and finally they'd turned away from him.

He wished they would come in here and beat him. Would yell at him. Would mock him. Would do anything other than watch him from a distance in quiet distrust and grief.

He wanted them to go berserk on him.

He desperately needed for the Code to go back to being an impossible to-do checklist instead of the description of a Jedi's relationship with the Force.

He hated the red haze that swirled around him in the Force.

And worse—

He hated the pure light that spilled from theirs.

He hadn't asked to be made this way; he'd tried to be a good Jedi—

It wasn't his fault if he just wasn't cut out to be one —

And Obi-Wan—

Something was horribly wrong—

And they were treating Anakin like he didn't deserve to know what.

And he did. He did deserve it. He deserved an answer—

And then he slid along the door to the floor and stared at his sleep-shelf.

His self-righteous fury drained away from him.
Maybe they aren't trying to punish me. Maybe...

Maybe they are concerned that if I know what it is that's hurt Obi-Wan so badly...

I'll use it against him.

The thought was a kick in the gut.

Maybe they were ignoring him to protect Obi-Wan.

Anakin's eyelids fell shut over burning eyes.

It had been too long.

Every day he waited to be hauled out of his cell, to face some sort of tribunal.

Each night he fell asleep wondering what was taking them so long.

If they waited until Obi-Wan was mentally ready to testify against him...

He could be here months.

The thought sent a shiver of panic through his soul.

Months without seeing the sky. Without flying.

Confined. Caged, like a wild animal that might attack without warning.

He had a wife and children —

Or... he had...

Could Padmé have terminated the pregnancy?

What if she hadn't yet but would?

Could he really blame her?

And yet the thought made him want to claw through the walls with his fingernails and beg her to not.

He wanted—

He wanted—

What does what you want matter now? he snarled to himself. Why should it matter to anyone, and what right do you have to make demands like that?

But he was always making them.

Always... always... always...

He sent a tiny pulse along his bond with Ahsoka.

Not an arrogant demand.

More of a whimpering plea.
He felt her stir against it, but she didn't yield.

And then the screen near the door crackled to life.

Anakin sprang to his feet and hovered over it.

It appeared to be—a conversation—

It was time-stamped earlier today—

He knew that bound woman, though she was hard to recognize without the royal finery—

His heart leaped in his throat as he heard Obi-Wan's voice. Calm. Collected. Controlled.

He sounded like had before Zygerria.

Anakin's heart bounded in hope.

And then he realized what was happening.

He quivered in horror. He screamed. He raged.

The Force exploded outwards from his cell, and had anyone been in any of the cells down his hallway they might have died, their organs exploding from the force of it.

Fortunately, the Temple Guards had moved far enough away.

Anakin clutched at the screen, and as the jab about paying him was made he collapsed to his knees, weeping.

He nearly turned away, as they abused her lifeless body.

But he just knew Obi-Wan hadn't.

So he forced himself to watch.

And then it was over, and the screen shifted, showing Ahsoka's tear-burned face.

“Ahsoka,” Anakin choked. “Let me go to him. Please, please—”

Ahsoka sighed. “She died because of you. You exposed their secret. Do you really think it would help if he had to experience your presence too?”

“But I'm so sorry,” Anakin wept. “I have to know he knows that—I have to know he forgives me—”

“I don't know that he does.” Her voice choked and she fell silent to try to regain control over it.

He stared at her, aghast. “What do you mean? He always forgives me—”

She just stared at him in hopeless amazement. “Do you honestly think that means you're entitled to be forgiven now?”

“No!” How could she continue to misunderstand every single thing he said to her post-Zygerria? “I'm not the self-focused monster you think I am! I mean, I am—but I'm not—”
He swore for quite a little while.

For some reason, Ahsoka didn't just leave him to do it by himself.

He pulled himself together as best he could. “Yes. I'm a self-focused monster. But if you and the Council think that means I don't love Obi-Wan, then you're all crazy.”

“Yes. He deflects the Council's heat away from you and takes your failings onto his shoulders. But just this once you're going to have to deal with the consequences of your choices.”

“Damn it, Ahsoka! I would never hurt him again!”

“Unless it struck your fancy.” She watched him with sad, resigned eyes. “Anakin, your greatest complaint is that nobody trusts you. But have you ever proven yourself trustworthy? And how many times have you proven you're not?”

He thought of Padmé.

Sand People.

Rush Clovis.

Zygerria.

“If you're compiling a list, be sure and add Mortis.” Ahsoka sighed. “The Father removed your memories of that time... but you chose the dark side, Anakin. You betrayed Obi-Wan into the hands of the Son. I have no idea why the Son chose to not kill him, but you left. You left him there.”

Anakin scowled. “I'm not the only one who went bad and tried to kill their Master, Snips.”

And now she was angry.

“You just don't get it, do you!” she yelled. “On the one hand you bow and scrape and assure us you've learned your lesson and you're the worst of offenders, and then you lash out with the exact same pride and self-centeredness that got us into this mess! Why do you think no-one comes to visit you? It's pointless!”

“They can't withold forgiveness forever and leave me begging!” he snarled. “You do that to someone, you humiliate someone like that, you grind them into the dirt like that, you scorn their repentance like that and it will turn ugly! I'm not the exception!”

She stared at him in disbelief. “It's not been forever, it's been less than two weeks! And for the record? Take a sniff in the Force. Nobody is refusing to forgive you, except for the clones, and maybe Master Vos! Everyone else doesn't desire you harm. They certainly don't want revenge or to make you pay.”

“But no-one has said so--”

“If your eyes see something, do you need to read it in braille too?”

“They haven't forgiven me. I'm locked up, kept away from Obi-Wan--”

“Forgetting you doesn't necessarily equal to taking you back, Anakin. And forgiving doesn't necessarily mean letting you escape the consequences of your actions.”

“Then forgiveness is meaningless,” he growled.
“Would you let you near Obi-Wan? And if they let you out of this cell, would you not stalk him?”

He opened his mouth to protest—

“Don't think I haven't noticed the way you hover just outside his shields, waiting for one to slip the tiniest inch. You managed to stay away from him in the Force for all of four days. Do you really expect anyone to believe you wouldn't do something similar physically?”

“You misunderstand. He needs me. We're the Team. He needs me to get through this.”

Ahsoka stood taller. “No, actually. He doesn't. What he needs is space, and you're refusing to let him have it. You want to be the hero of this story instead of the villain. You're convinced you can badger him into allowing you to play that part.”

“The Council is toying with me! It's unjust to keep a prisoner waiting indefinitely like this. They must charge me, they can't just keep ignoring me —”

“You want them to rush this? You think they're ignoring you? They're searching history and the Force to try to determine what to do with you. They don't want to just retaliate with a knee-jerk reaction. They want to see if you can be helped —”

“It's Obi-Wan who needs help—”

“Can you look me in the face and tell me you haven't lashed out in vengeance before?”

Anakin went very still.

“I remember when you set out to hunt Rako Hardeen. It didn't seem brand-new then.”

“I didn't know it was Obi-Wan.”

“That's irrelevant. You have hunted and lashed out in hatred before. I can see it in your eyes. Yeah—go ahead. Shore up your shields so I can't see. Fine. It just confirms it. Each time it happened, did you promise it would never happen again, like you've promised this time?”

Yes.

The memories zipped by, condemning him.

“You need help, Anakin.” Ahsoka's voice turned pleading. “And yes. The Council has no idea where to start. We've never seen a blood-red Force-signature before. We've never seen someone so kind lash out so viciously before. Anyone who loves you would insist on you getting help, whether you want it or not. People are getting hurt, Anakin. And that's putting it mildly. ”

How little did she know.

Children die.

That's what happens.

Something else Ahsoka said rankled in his soul.

That bit about anyone who loves him insisting he get help.

You're wrong, Ahsoka. Love would be looking the other way and letting me figure it out on my own.
Holding a weeping Jedi Master in her arms, Padmé was thinking about the same thing.

And coming to a very, very different conclusion.

*I didn't want Anakin to resent me. I didn't want him to lose his love for me, his trust in me. So I didn't go to his authority figures and tell them something was wrong.*

Children had been slaughtered.

And she looked the other way.

She hadn't wanted to lose Anakin’s love. Even then, before she'd decided to allow their marriage to happen.

*I was afraid of causing myself that pain.*

*If they'd stepped in then, could all of this have been averted? Would Obi-Wan have been stripped of everything he's ever held dear? Would Mandalore still be peaceful?*

*Would I not have to be afraid of my own husband?*

True, maybe he wouldn't have been her husband.

But who did she love more? Herself, or Anakin?

Anakin had *needed* his mental health taken care of. He wasn't going to ask for help, and he'd begged her not to ask for it.

*How* had it been loving towards him to agree to let his mind and heart fester?

*By my silence, I failed him... and I failed myself.*

*And I failed our unborn children.*

Obi-Wan was calming. Running out of the energy to flail against the pain any longer, running out of the effort required to care enough to cry.

Returning to a dry, non-stop pain that underscored every moment of every waking day.

She knew, because she lived with it now.

And then he went very still against her shoulder.

At first she thought he was realizing he'd broken his usual personal-space bubble and was now aware enough of himself to be uncomfortable about it.

And then she saw his gaze.

Locked on her stomach.

He reached out hesitantly towards it, then yanked his fingers away before touching her as if they'd
been burned.

He pushed himself back up off the couch at an angle so strange she was almost startled that he landed on his feet.

And then he was headed for the door.

“Obi-Wan, please,” Padmé pleaded. “I'm sorry?”

Bail intercepted his Jedi friend. “What is it?”

“His Force-signature. It’s inside her. It’s— he’s— she’s—”

“Yes. I'm pregnant.” Padmé threw up her hands. “And I'm about as scared and confused and hurting as anybody else.”

“They aren't him, you know,” Bail pointed out softly. “And just because they're his doesn't make Padmé him, either. All three of them are innocent.”

Padmé felt sudden guilt. She wasn't entirely sure she was without blame for Anakin's depredations. She'd seen the warning signs.

She'd done nothing.

“No, Bail. I can't stay here.”

“Is the Temple really going to be better?”

Obi-Wan shuddered. “It's full of memories, yes. Of him— and— and Satine.” His voice caught with a sob. “But it's my own turf. This— this isn't safe. It's not safe. I don't know the exits and—”

“I can show you all the exits—”

Padmé broke in. “I'm going to leave; I won't be coming back until Obi-Wan is comfortable with it. So, there's that.” She moved past them and paused in the doorway. “I'm sorry, Obi-Wan,” she murmured. “I hope— I still see you as a friend. If I can do anything, let me know.”

His gaze skittered away from hers. So unlike the confident, persistent Jedi she'd known. Even different from the quiet, earnest Padawan from even longer ago.

“Did you see it?” he whispered. “Did you see— this — lurking inside him?”

And now he met her gaze.

From the way he fidgeted and the look on his face it made her think it was excruciating for him to do so.

Her own expression betrayed her.

“You saw it.” His voice was so dead. “And you didn't warn me.”

Tears blurred her vision. “Obi-Wan—”

“He hid it from me— I never saw it, Padmé— I— he didn't hide it from you—”

“Please forgive me,” she choked. “I thought I was protecting him.”
Obi-Wan shuddered. When he spoke, his voice was quiet. So quiet. So controlled. “My brother—
my son needed help. A long time ago, evidently, because this doesn't happen overnight. A friend of
mine would have made sure I knew. Made certain I was ensuring he would receive the help he
needed. A friend of his would have done the same.”

Bail reached out a cautioning hand, but Obi-Wan shrugged it aside.

“Do you claim to love him?”

Tears were running down her cheeks. “Yes,” she choked.

“You are well matched.” Obi-Wan turned and walked towards the window.

Padmé longed to rush after him, to convince him she'd only had the best intentions—
But she wasn't entirely sure she believed her intentions had been anything other than self-focused—
So instead she covered her mouth with her hand and turned to go.

Bail reached out and gripped her shoulder. He mouthed the words, “I'm sorry.”

She gave him a broken nod and rushed away.

Maybe he thought Obi-Wan had been unreasonable.

But half of Padmé's pain came from the fact he hadn't raged at her. He'd turned away from her,
retracted his trust...

But he hadn't stayed to beat her over the head for her mistake.

Was it a mistake?

She didn't know.

She reached her apartment and found herself wrapped in Dormé's arms, the handmaiden soothing
her, comforting her—

Assuring her she'd done nothing wrong—

Padmé pulled away from her in disgust.

Padmé had said the same things to Anakin far too many times.

* * *

“I'm going home, Bail.”

The Senator gave a quiet nod. Obi-Wan had been standing at the window for ten standard minutes
without speaking. He clearly had considered the implications. “Alright. I'll drive you.”

“No. I'm walking.”

“People... know your face—”

“Understatement of the century,” Obi-Wan muttered.
Bail could imagine the reception Obi-Wan would find should he be recognized. It made him shiver. He didn't think his friend was ready for that. But Obi-Wan had his stubborn, weary face on. The likelihood of budging him was low.

Persuasion, now... *that* might be different.

So he phrased his words in a deferential cast.

“Do you want to deal with that right now, or go home in peace?”
He could see it in Obi-Wan’s face.

Wasn't going to go for it.

The Jedi headed for the door.

“Bail. I want to go home. I want to walk. And I want to be alone.”

“You could borrow my speeder, I don't have to come,” Bail offered, *knowing* it was hopeless but *having* to try.

Obi-Wan didn't even dignify that with a response.

He showed himself out and closed the door.

Bail immediately commed Ahsoka with Obi-Wan's new plan and watched him from the window for as long as possible.

“Should I shadow him?” he asked the Padawan.

She heaved a sigh, much too old for her years. “No. He'd know, and he'd feel the need to give you the slip. He might not arrive for *hours* if he feels his independence is questioned or threatened. If we're lucky, he'll come straight home.”

“And if not?”

“I... *may* ... have thought of that before I handed him over to you. But it's better if you don't know. He can't lose trust in you if you aren't actually complicit.”

“As long as he's safe.” Bail ran a hand down his face. “The underworld might be under the impression he's... fair game. Worth the effort. Do we know if he can fight or if he'll freeze up?”

“We don't know yet.”

Bail sat heavily on the couch and longed for Breha's comforting presence.

And... he still hadn't managed to tell Padmé about Satine.

He dragged himself to his feet again, and headed for the door.

Better to do that in person, than over holo.

* * *
Ahsoka ended her call and returned her attention to the Mind-Healer.

"While I have not had a chance to speak with Master Kenobi at any length, I have read his previous files and spoken with the Minders that have worked with him in the past."

"What can we do to help him?" Ahsoka urged. "He scared me earlier. He's gone deep inside his mind before — "

"I think he's unlikely to try that approach a second time. He has expressed significant distress to various people over the thought of it, and while earlier today he wasn't communicating, he was responding to outside stimulus, and moving under his own volition. He chose to come to see me, even after fighting against it so hard. I will do my best to start drawing him out with our next session, but in the meantime, I would suggest trying to draw him into something that can take his attention off his own pain and losses."

"Distract him?"

"No. Believe me, he's paying quite a bit of attention to what's happened. It's why he's been struggling against seeing me. He's afraid I will make him face up to how much he hasn't recovered."

"Then why did he come today?"

"I don't know, but I suspect it's because he's almost reached the end of his tether."

"But he won't hide inside his mind?"

"Correct. He needs some outlet for the built-up agitation. Find something familiar he can throw himself into again."

"Won't that encourage him to run?"

"It's better than staring at a wall and stagnating."

Ahsoka gave her a nod. "What would you suggest?"

"I don't want him sent out to the front lines. He's not ready for that. And at this point, sending him to a secluded planet may do more harm than good. He's poised to spiral. We want his focus to not narrow further, but to widen. See if the Council can coax him to return. That would be a good start. He needs to feel needed. He has a very strong sense of responsibility. For him, giving is life. We need to show him that despite all the harm he has suffered, he can still bring help to others. It may return his sense of purpose, and eventually, his sense of peace."

* * *

Obi-Wan trudged along the walkway, feeling unspeakably weary.

It took a lot to keep his shields tight enough to keep Anakin out.

It took even more to keep up the facade of healing.

And he was just so tired.

And Satine was dead, and her dream destroyed because of him.
She would have been glad to die if her world was saved.

_I lost both for her._

“_You weren't careful enough. You should have hid that knowledge better. Should have protected it instead of handing it over the way you did. You rolled over and submitted. You were weak, jetii._”

The Mandos’ cruel words pounded through his head, a mantra that would not shut up.

He'd been _trying_ towards healing for Satine.

She was the only reason he'd walked out of his head.

And she was the only reason he'd _kept_ walking.

He'd been so relieved she'd been at a distance and couldn't insist he _keep_ walking... the facsimile of it was tiring, certainly, but better than _actually_ treading that path —

And now she was dead.

Because he'd failed.

Not only was the point of _healing_ gone...

But the point of pretending had been slaughtered too.

He tried to drag himself out of his thoughts, and became aware of people's notice.

Mothers pulled their children behind them and covered their eyes. Watched him with disgust and loathing, like he might taint their offspring.

When it was older children, they stared after him with wide eyes and whispers.

The teenagers and twenty-somethings hid their curiosity even less well.

“Is that the—?”

“Gods. I think it is.”

“Can't be. He's dead, right? Or he _should_ be, given what happened, right? _Can_ you survive that?”

“One way to find out. Excuse me, Mister Jedi?”

Obi-Wan _tried_ to ignore her, but she tugged at his elbow.

A gesture he'd often used to catch Satine's attention.

His throat tightened—

“Are you Obi-Wan Kenobi? The Jedi from the holo?”

How could she look and sound so... _entitled_ to ask something like that?

He pulled away from her, unable to look _any_ of them in the eye and hurried away.

“_Oh, my Force — that was him!_” someone squealed.

“_So_ turned on right now,” another moaned.
“Holos! Get holos! The girls are never going to believe this!”

Obi-Wan ducked his head and picked up his pace even more.

Adults stared at him with open disgust or pity.

He wasn't sure which burned him worse.

But there were so many young people —

“He's cuter when he doesn't have snot running down his face.”

“I'd do him.”

“Gods. Are all Jedi so hot?”

Elderly people peered down their noses at him, prim and proper.

Those he knew would have asked him for help or directions two weeks ago eyed him with distrust and disdain.

Someone threw a jogan at his head.

Another wolf-whistled.

Still another called out, “Come on, admit it. You liked every second of what those Zygerrians did to you!”

Obi-Wan's spirit burned.

It wasn't a fire of resentment, or anger...

But of death.

His own.

A sharp pain exploded up his shin as a thin wooden cane rapped it sharply. He skittered away, looking back to find a hunched old woman. She glowered up at him. “You should be ashamed of yourself, young man!”

He turned to walk away from her, but the cane landed again, this time against the side of his knee. It hurt.

“Look at me when I'm speaking to you, young man! That vile recording you made of your sick and twisted—sickness—is all the young folk talk about! Think of the example you're setting for them!”

He stared at her in open-mouthed shock. “You think I'm the one who made that recording?”

“It takes two to tango,” she dismissed.

“More like ten.” Fury blossomed in his eyes, a feral thing.

Somehow she was the one looking scandalized. She lashed out at him with her cane again, but this time he was ready and stepped out of range. He spun on his heels and strode away.

“You will never escape the stigma of this!” she called, tone dire. “It will follow you wherever you
go. You can't walk among decent folk and expect us to accept you! We know what you really are!"

He ran.

He actually broke into a run to escape her shrill, condemning voice.
“We could really use your knowledge on this one.”

Mace listened to Kit Fisto and tried to twist his face into a friendly expression. It just wasn't in him. He was good at what he did, but the niceties were difficult to master.

_Really_ difficult.

In fact, he didn't know _why_ he'd been asked to join in.

His personal opinion was that with the three of them standing here, Obi-Wan would feel like they were ganging up on him.

Eeth and Kit were _far_ better equipped to try to encourage the broken Jedi.

Mace was a man of _action._

The talk was difficult.

Especially since he was still angry with himself for not resisting Anakin's induction into the Order more strenuously.

Look where _that_ had gotten Obi-Wan.

It was Mace's job to _protect_ the Jedi who were too kind, too compassionate to defend themselves against threats. He was the hard-assed voice of reason so that Yoda and the others could be the gentle angels of mercy.

The members of the Council with the only exception of Mundi preferred gentleness to harsh words. They would rather nurture than suspect.

It didn't help that neither Tython nor Korriban had yielded results, and the various Council members who'd set out for answers had returned home empty-handed.

Obi-Wan wouldn't look any of the three who'd come to speak with him in the eye.

“You know the Sijarrans better than anyone else in the Order, _and_ you're the only one who speaks their language. If you would attend the debrief it would be a personal favor to me,” Eeth urged.

“I'm sorry.”

It _hurt_ Mace to see Obi-Wan's fingers fidgeting. To see the slight rocking in his shoulders. The closed, emotionless expression.

Just because he didn't know how to talk without a snarl didn't mean he didn't _care._

And this Jedi in particular...

This one he cared about a _lot._

“You need to find someone to take my seat on the Council.”
Stunned silence fell across the three.

Mace had figured there was a fifty-fifty chance he'd agree to come back or say he needed more time off.

He hadn't seen this coming.

I should have.

“We don't want you gone from the Council, Obi-Wan,” he said. “We chose you to join us because we value your insight and skill set. Neither of those things has changed. We want you. It's unanimous.” The words felt strange to his tongue, but true.

Had Yoda seen this coming? Was that why he'd insisted Mace tag along?

Obi-Wan wavered for just a moment, and then his expression dulled. “I won't be coming back, and you need a full Council. You can't afford to not have one right now. The Force will guide your choice.”

He turned away from them.

“Obi-Wan,” Kit spoke up, “is this decision about you, or are you worried for us? Our reputation? The Order's?"

“It's not like the Jedi can afford any more criticism than we face already.”

Mace frowned. “We don't care about that.”

“Allow me to use the excuse to shelter my own failings.”

Obi-Wan's listless words were a kick in the gut for Mace.

In the end, they walked away...

And Obi-Wan stood still.

Force, Mace hated Skywalker—

No.

No.

It took some time to reach a place of inner calm.

It had always been more difficult for him than for many others.

And under this testing...

He was the protector of the Jedi Order. He watched for threats others couldn't see.

He saw shatterpoints.

Scoring through the Force that when struck would rain down destruction and suffering.

Anakin Skywalker, so long ago, had been a thermal detonator, wanting to nestle against the most sharply-defined shatterpoints of all.
And through the years, the scoring had spread and deepened, twining around Obi-Wan's heart and sanity, reaching into the core of the Jedi Order itself—

And every year, Mace felt wound a little tighter as the explosion didn't rip his family apart, but the damage it would cause when it finally blew expanded ever greater.

His brothers and sisters, so trusting, so *selfless*, had opened their home and hearts to Anakin Skywalker.

And now the dominoes were falling. Tap, tap, tap, tap—

Obi-Wan had been the first to go. His mind twisted and crippled the way a body might be in a cruel speeder accident.

Every instinct Mace possessed screamed at him to go down to Anakin's cell and *finish* him. To try to burn a swath in the path of the raging fire so that hopefully the spread would be halted.

To maybe save what was left of his family before it was too late.

Instead, he breathed.

And somehow, even though it took every ounce of strength he possessed, he let go of his anger towards Skywalker.

It would come back. Probably multiple times through the day.

And each time he would let it go again.

Anakin had groused about how hard it was to be a Jedi.

The kid had no idea.

The kid also had no idea what it felt like to work hard for something, to sweat and bleed and weep for something—

And finally reach the prize.

Being a Jedi was worth the struggle.

And the kid had no idea.

* * *

Obi-Wan rebuffed all attempts to draw him out of himself and into helping others.

And he insisted on taking long walks in the evenings.

Ahsoka *tried* to give him space and still look after him, but she ached for Satine's advice.

She had no doubt the Mind-Healer knew her business, but—

Obi-Wan wasn't *listening* to the Minder.
He didn't seem to be capable.

He sat with her. Answered some of the questions she put to him.

And stared off at nothing for the rest of them.

And then the Council brought Ahsoka in to discuss her situation.

Three weeks masterless.

There were two elite battalions of clones without Generals and they needed her to complete her training.

If for nothing else, to take charge of the 501st.

It was with a heavy heart that she sought out Obi-Wan once again.

* * *

“Master Plo has offered to take me as his Padawan.”

Obi-Wan somehow managed a nod. He tried to find the right response, the expected response, but couldn't come up with anything.

“I would prefer you.” She was watching his face. He could feel it.

It made him feel cornered. He tried very hard not to show it.

But he could feel himself starting to rock. It wasn't something he could stop.

The more days passed, the more pronounced the behavior grew.

He wasn't sure where it had come from.

He wasn't sure it would ever leave.

“I can't even look you in the eye,” he pointed out. “How could I help you find your confidence?”

Ahsoka didn't respond.

And she didn't retract her statement.

The trembling had started. He could feel it in his hand. *Hold it together.* “Every time you went out in public with me, there would be—you don't deserve to face that ridicule. If you were with me, there would never be a moment's peace again. If you're with Plo, you'll be able to have as close to normal a padawanship as possible. Be able to enter a cantina and *not* be the center of that level of mockery.”

“What if I don't want a normal padawanship? What if I want you?”

“You deserve better,” he whispered. “You have a strong bond with Plo. One that predates ours.”

“Yes... but we had Anakin.”
Couldn't breathe.

Hot and cold.

The walls closing in.

Cruel laughter, *Die, Jedi, die* —

“Obi-Wan? Breathe.” A gentle hand on his shoulder.

Obi-Wan nearly jumped out of his skin jerking away from her. “I'm sorry; I'm sorry—”

Ahsoka sat very still. He could sense just how guilty she felt.

“You need to be able to talk about— him — with your Master. Work through things. You need a Master who won't have a panic attack every time you say his name.”

He could sense her desperation. Her hesitation... then the decision to use the final weapon in her arsenal.

“Wouldn't... wouldn't Satine have wanted us to stay together?” she asked.

The fear drained away from Obi-Wan, leaving an empty gulf inside his heart. “I have no doubt she would.”

The spark of hope Ahsoka felt at his words died as she continued to study him. “Why are you— that means— doesn't it? The family stays together?”

The quaver in her voice gutted him.

Yes. *Hell*, yes, the 501st, 212th, Ahsoka, and Obi-Wan belonged together.

And no.

Obi-Wan couldn't do it.

He just—

*Couldn't.*

He tried to watch her walk away, but couldn't manage it.

He felt her grief and fear as she struggled to hide them.

The guilt he felt incapacitated him.

He was failing her. Failing the clones.

Failing Satine, who believed he could heal.

Failing his fellow Council members, who had looked sucker-punched when he turned away from them.

He had to get out of here.

He couldn't stay in the Temple.

He didn't want to see Bail. Or Dex.
Or anyone he knew.

He had to be alone.

There was a park with grass and trees and paths within sight of the Temple.

He wrapped his cloak around himself and made a beeline for it.

Thankfully no-one tried to stop him on his way out of the Temple.

And once outside... for the first three minutes of the walk, no-one recognized him.

And then a smattering of derision hurled his way.

Fortunately, many people were simply too busy to take a second look at the cloak-wrapped Jedi to discover his identity.

He wasn't sure how many of the jabs he could take this evening.

He found a deserted bench, lowered himself onto it, and wasn't at all surprised he didn't feel better. At all.

The compelling urge to get away from people didn't lead him to relief.

It just made the quiet louder.

Allowing his thoughts just that much more dominion.

And—

Memories.

Memories of what Anakin had done to him.

Memories of Satine's efforts on his behalf... their farewell... and her death.

Memories of Ahsoka's drooping shoulders and hopeless sense as she walked away from his rejection of her and her clone brothers.

Memories of the mocking that had been thrown his way by the gleeful public.

What was the point?

He could sit here and suffer, or sit in his room in the Temple and suffer.

So why stay here?

He dragged himself to his feet and began the trek back.

“Master Jedi? We need help, please?”

Obi-Wan looked up to find a small pack of human teenagers, on the younger side of fifteen.

He was about to ask what assistance they required when one of the boys grabbed his crotch. Jerking hips, mock moans, catcalls and the words Jedi whore—

“How much for an hour?” one of the girls called, dissolving into cruel giggles.
She was young enough to be his grand-padawan.

Obi-Wan's face froze into a mask as he turned to walk away from them.

Just walk away, just walk away—

They tripped him.

Ankles caught, he fell hard, elbow and knees striking the stone of the pathway.

Gasps of delight and fear burst out, and then the pounding of running feet filled his ears as the kids fled, their bravado expended, not entirely sure how far they could push a Jedi before they'd be risking life and limb.

They needn't have worried.

Obi-Wan couldn't seem to find the will to stand up again.

He pushed himself back onto his knees, sitting on his heels.

This area of the park was deserted. Empty.

Like his soul.

The dull ache was so much worse than the sharp pain. That pain of betrayal, of loss, of fear, at least it had told him he was alive.

This?

The knowledge that he could get up to return to the Temple... but that every time he ran into people, there would be a response of some sort.

That he could enter the Temple and feel responses of a much kinder sort... but still existent.

That the walk and the humiliation would just end in him facing the blank wall of his room and going over the same thoughts he would churn through if he just stayed here, on his knees.

On his knees.

Where he belonged.

Who was he fooling? The children who had mocked him had been right.

His time was over.

He'd been used, then cast aside when his Padawan and the Zygerrians grew bored...

He would never be able to preside over a negotiation now.

No-one would take him seriously.

He would be detrimental to any peace-forging process. A distraction. An embarrassment.

And who in their right minds would feel safe with him as a protection detail, when they all knew he hadn't been able to defend himself? How could he protect them?

Young Force-sensitives would remember him as the wounded man who haunted their dreams. Their
parents would see him as half of a corrupting duo they had been unable to exorcise from their children's heads.

The mocking multitudes had a point.

He clearly hadn't fought the Zygerrians hard enough. He was a Jedi. If he'd wanted to, he could have escaped them. Could have saved himself. Could have stopped it. Qui-Gon would be so ashamed, were he still alive.

He would loathe the boy who had only ever been barely good enough.

Obi-Wan could see himself so clearly in this moment.

Filthy... broken... pathetic...

Worthless.

He could keep taking step after step after step.

It didn't matter how many he took.

He would never find a different place than the one he knelt in now, in the growing shadows on the unforgiving stone.

Life.

He unhooked his lightsaber from his belt and studied its familiar shape and weight.

“This weapon is your life.” Familiar words. Words he'd heard. Words he'd spoken.

They'd always been true.

Not anymore.

His life then. Not now.

What he had now wasn't life.

He was a shadow, masquerading as the Jedi knight who used to inhabit this form.

That man had died on Zygerria, at his former Padawan's hand.

And I am left in his place.

He felt numb and heart-sore at the same time. Just so tired of it all.

Tired of dreading the day when he woke up, tired of dreading the night when it fell.

Tired of dreading meeting strangers, tired of dreading facing his family.

Tired of dreading being alone.

He'd taken agony, of mind or body, and endured it.

It always ended. Gave way to something else.

But this endless sea of gray...
Unchanging waves to the horizon and beyond...

The cold of his soul...

How was it possible to feel *nothing* and feel pain at the same time?

He nuzzled the emitter of the lightsaber against his chest, over his heart.

A spark of interest. Just a slight quickening in his blood...

But not of fear.

Life.

Fascinating.

After a moment he realized that it would be faster, more efficient, less likely to fail, *better* if he sent the blade through his brain instead. If he went this way.

Hearts, if tended fast enough, could be mended, after all.

The cold metal brushed the underside of his chin.

If he ignited the blade...

Would he see the blue light, since it would shine *behind* his eyes?

What a curious question.

* * *

Anakin, in the Temple, felt Obi-Wan's ever deepening gloom.

Felt his lack of interest in maintaining his shields.

No-one else would be liable to notice, but Anakin had been pushing at them ceaselessly, and he felt them give.

Felt Obi-Wan's emotions seeping through.

He endured it in silence until he felt the shiver as Obi-Wan placed the saber to his heart. The shiver of possible surrender.

Escape just a step away.

Anakin went berserk.

“*Guards!*” he screamed, but the sound-proof cell threw his voice back at him.

He lashed out at them in the Force, demanding attention, and they ignored him.

He had no bond with them.
He couldn't send words.

And as for urgency? They'd felt it from him before. Not that long ago.

It was expected.

He was the emotionally unstable prisoner.

He was probably trying to enact some trick for escaping purposes.

That or he was just throwing another of his fits.

"Don't you dare!" he cried out to Obi-Wan.

He could feel the cold against his chin. No. Obi-Wan's chin.

Knew what it meant.

"A few weeks ago you would have been pleased," his Master's thoughts came listlessly back. "Isn't it exhausting to be so fickle? I'm just completing what you started. It's been my job ever since you came into my life to clean up the messes you leave behind. Is it ironic, or simply amusing that I'm the final mess to clear away?"

Horror and terror warred for Anakin's soul.

The worst thing about Obi-Wan's words? The total lack of accusation or passive aggression. There was no resentment whatsoever.

No regret.

His Master didn't have the strength to care enough for any of those things anymore.

Anakin flung himself against the door—

Still the guards ignored him.

_Stop, Obi-Wan! Stop! Please, no—_

His Master wasn't listening.

He had only one option left. He reached out for Ahsoka. Screamed at her. He'd respected her severance of their bond, but—

*Obi-Wan— suicide— now!* he warned.

Her own horror and terror struck at Anakin along the suddenly re-opened channel.

Along with her rush to attempt to locate Obi-Wan, to reach him—

She was doing her best, but no, no, no.

It was too late.

It—

Obi-Wan wasn't paying any attention to his shields. He simply didn't care.
And he was going to press that button.

Anakin acted almost before he'd made his decision. He pushed his way through Obi-Wan's shields, a feat made easy since he knew every step of the way, and reached out for his Master's mind.

Apathy combusted.

Obi-Wan screamed and his mind went mad with fear.

It burned Anakin's eyes, his nostrils, his throat. He couldn't breathe —

“Master! I don't want to hurt you,” he sobbed, lowering his own shields as far down as he was holding Obi-Wan's, trying to reveal his intentions. He wanted to save him—

But Obi-Wan was not going to let himself be trampled again. He couldn't, he wouldn't —

I can't let you die. Please, Obi-Wan, think about this.

Obi-Wan's loose interest in death turned into a hard-edged desire.

No! Desperate, Anakin tried the only thing left to him.

He tried to force the issue. To take control of Obi-Wan's body enough to—

Obi-Wan fought like a tooka being held underwater. He struggled, knowing he was no match for Anakin. So he didn't try to win the war.

He went after one very small thing, and he went for it fast, before Anakin could react.

He clenched his fingers.

Anakin screamed and slammed his fist against the wall in agony as he felt the ignition button depress.

Roaring pain seared through Anakin's brain— blue and blood—

And then Anakin, mind so deeply entwined with Obi-Wan's, was dragged into darkness after him.
Chapter 14

Anakin slowly drifted towards consciousness.

Throughout the long years of fear of losing Obi-Wan, he'd been afraid of all the wrong things. It was never someone else who was going to take Obi-Wan away.

He'd killed himself to escape Anakin.

Anakin's first in-drawn breath as he awoke was a sob. He reached out to the Force, but Obi-Wan was gone. The familiar presence that had always been there, like a hand on his shoulder, was missing. A hole torn in the tapestry of the Force.

He screamed, beating his hand against the floor, then letting his head fall against the wall.

Why hadn't he seen it coming sooner? Why hadn't he called Ahsoka sooner?

Force, Force —

Obi-Wan had been devastated by Qui-Gon's death.

How would he have felt if Qui-Gon had committed suicide to get away from Obi-Wan?

“No! Anakin!”

Ahsoka.

He didn't look up. “You didn't find him,” he choked. “He— turned it on —”

“No! Anakin, he's alive. He's injured, unconscious, but alive.”

Anakin's head snapped up. “No. Not possible. I can't feel him—”

“She sensed your connection to him, recognized it from last time, and was afraid it would take him out even if she took the lightsaber away. So she used her Force-concealment talisman to cut the mind-invasion you had going. She knocked Obi-Wan's aim off, and while he has a nasty burn to the side of his head that nearly took his ear off, he's alive. He's alive, Anakin.”

Now he was weeping with relief, his entire body shuddering with the force of the anguish.

It took several moments before he could pull himself together enough to speak again.

* * *

Ahsoka watched from the doorway, amazed at the level of anguish Anakin was carrying.

And for the first time since Zygerria...
She almost...
Felt compassion.
And then she remembered what he'd done.
“You have to let me go to him,” he urged.
Ahsoka scowled at him. “You forfeited your right to stand beside him.”
“But I can't just stay here while he suffers — he nearly died because you've kept us apart!”
Ahsoka's eyes widened. “Seriously?”

* * *

Obi-Wan's first conscious thought would have been frustration if he hadn't been so numb at heart.
And... although he could feel the bandages, knew he must have been burned...
He didn't feel pain.
They'd dosed him.
And... he felt very unmotivated. Certainly not interested enough in expending the effort it would take to try to kill himself again.
So they must have dosed him that way too.
And...
The Force felt distant and awkward to manipulate. Things were harder to sense. A bit confusing.
Force, he hated meds.
In a dull, anguished, non-violent way.
All he could feel was the subtle pulse of emptiness that their drugs couldn't take away. Grief at too low a level to consider painful ...
Yet behaving as though he'd had a low-level headache for a week straight.
Ready to drive him mad, if he only had the strength to go berserk.
It was really, really too bad he couldn't die just by lying here.
“You're lucky Ventress was in the area.”
Obi-Wan squinted up at a Healer hovering over him. “What?”
“Ventress. Saved your life and hauled you back here while you were unconscious.”
That couldn't be right.
This had to be a hallucination or dream of some kind.

If so, it was doing a kriff-poor job of it, since he felt basically the same as he had when awake. The sensations should at least be different, if you were going to go through something so pointless...

“Where she now?” Obi-Wan asked, half-expecting to be told she’d turned into a Blurrg and shrunk to the size of a comlink.

“Locked up.”

Wait.

This was actually happening?

Obi-Wan sat up, ignoring the throbbing in his head. “What? You locked her up?”

“Mmm-hmm.” The Healer murmured distractedly as she checked various readouts. “It's not like we could have her running around Coruscant hurting people. So when we came to pick you up, Drallig escorted her to a cell.”

“On whose orders?”

“She's a former Sith acolyte. Were any orders needed? The Council's busy with something else at the moment—”

“She saved my life, brought me home, and you punished her for it. For the love of frip.”

The Healer raised her eyebrows, clearly surprised at Obi-Wan's language.

He didn't really care.

Yes. His curse usage had turned a bit harder since Zygerria.

Not like my mouth could end up any more defiled than it already has been.

“Heart acceptable,” he growled at the Healer and stalked from the room.

He didn't see the woman's tiny smile, or hear her tap a comlink. “Master Yoda? I think it's working.”

* * *

“Last I checked, they haven't appointed a new Council member yet. Until then, I represent the Council. Leave. She saved my life, and this is how you repay her?”

Ventress sat on her sleep-shelf and felt amused.

Obi-Wan sent the Temple Guards packing, sounding very close to his old self. Perhaps a bit crankier, but definitely alive.

She could sense his cold indignation in the Force, and when he arrived at her door, she could see the durasteel in his eyes.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside. Profuse apologies, a readiness to lead her out of the
“Good to see you looking grumpy.”

Obi-Wan frowned at her. “Why aren't you?”

“You spent a couple months as a prisoner in my castle, figured I should take a peek at the accommodations of yours to make sure you weren't one-upping me by any chance. I needn't have worried. My castle's torture chambers are better.” She shrugged.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Why are you so calm?”

“Why aren't you, Mister perfect Jedi?” And that was a question she genuinely wanted answered.

He stared at her in blatant disbelief. “You just stopped me from killing myself. Perfect Jedi my ass.”

“Maybe I carried you home.” That had certainly shocked herself, and every Jedi who'd seen it happen. “Maybe some of your fellow Jedi are worried about you. Maybe Yoda thought that if you had a cause to take up, an injustice only you could right, maybe you'd remember who the frip you are. Maybe I'm weirded out by your trespassing into my morally twisted territory, and want you the hell out of it and back on your side of the border. Maybe I thought Yoda's plan had merit. Maybe I walked into this cell of my own free will, forcing you to come rescue me.”

He narrowed his eyes and skepticism laced his voice. “You're trying to help me.”

“I just saved your life. Force, what does it take with you, Kenobi?”

His stare didn't ease. “You tell me. Why did you stop me?”

“I already said. You losing your uptight Jedi-ness throws the universe upside-down and messes with the natural order of things. I needed to put you back in your place.”

Oh, he definitely looked suspicious now.

It angered her. Did he think this wasn't humiliating for her? To come here and save him? For the Jedi to know she'd gone out of her way to try to help him reclaim his old self?

“So it's not because Anakin's show was so enjoyable that you'd hate to prevent the possibility of a repeat?” he growled.

“Fripping Sith hells, Kenobi! I didn't get off on that. Don't you get it? I saved you because it's what you would have done for me.”

There. She'd said it. And sounded like a fragging Jedi.

His eyes misted.

Kark. Kark.

If he started crying —

“If it was compassion you wanted to taste once, just to see how it felt, you should have let me go through with it.”

And then she couldn't meet his gaze anymore, and her own darted away.

Force.

The weight of agony that hung around him like a tattered cloak...
Sith hells, had Skywalker done a number on him.

And of course, then that Mandalorian Duchess had been done in too. The underworld was buzzing with that.

At this point, Kenobi had lost about as many people as she had herself.

And... he'd been betrayed just as cruelly.

Been made to feel worthless.

He was well on his way to becoming her, and for some reason, that... made her angry.

He didn't deserve that.

He might be maddeningly pure and light and selfless —

But those were annoyances.

Not crimes.

And though she'd kill you if you told anyone she thought so...

The universe had enough Ventress-like people.

It didn't have enough souls like his.

Obi-Wan waited, then turned to leave.

“Seriously? That's it?” she demanded, angry again.

He paused. “What do you want from me?”

“There's people out there who need you, idiot. And it's not like there's an overabundance of Jedi these days, so you can't just check out.”

“Is that right?”

Her words hadn't reached him at all. No spark of defiance, no annoyance, nothing.

Well, she'd just have to try harder.

She'd never made him angry yet.

That always went the other way, Ventress burning with rage and Obi-Wan laughing at her lack of control.

Maybe today was the day.

She drew a deep breath and calmed herself.

Obi-Wan turned to stare at her. Oh, he'd sensed it.

Yeah. Watch this, Kenobi.

“When it was all happening, I went looking for you. I was going to try to save your ass. I didn't care how many might stand in my way, I was going to come and rescue you. And I came out here to
Coruscant simply to see how you were doing. And what do I find? I find you trying to punch your brains out. I was gonna put aside my personal code in order to save some self-righteous Jedi. You have no right to trample on that.”

His stare hardened, a flicker of something in his eyes that she couldn't quite read. “You think I give a kark what you have to say about it?”

“I think you got knocked down. Beat. Trampled on. It happens to a lot of people. This galaxy is big, Kenobi, and it happens.”

His jaw was tensing.

She took that as a good sign.

“You know, Ky Narec spoke highly of Qui-Gon. Thought he was strong. I thought he passed that trait on to you.”

“Yes? Well, now he's dead.”

“So's my Mother. And my clan. Yeah. That happened recently. Do you have to pry a lightsaber out of my head?”

“Ventress —”

“Don't even think to start with that. My Mother was dead, and she looked at me, and the last thing she told me was to go out and live. To go out and fripping live. I failed at being a Sith, at being a Witch, and now I'm a bounty hunter, but I'm living, Kenobi. You haven't even failed at being one thing and yet you're quitting!”

“Don't you dare say that to me,” he snarled back. “I failed at being a Master. Clearly. And the fact I tried to take my own life shows I failed at being a Jedi.”

“Again: I don't give a kark. I swear, Kenobi, if you go and die on me I'm going to torment your ghost ass!”

He arched an eyebrow at her. “I was under the impression haunting went the other direction.”

“You wouldn't be able to haunt anybody with your head so far up your ass. Force damn it, Kenobi, why aren't you out there bringing food to refugees? Why aren't you pulling kids out of burning buildings? That's where you belong.”

“Do you have any idea what happens when I step outside?”

“Maybe you could consider full armor and face-mask of some sort.”

“I—”

Ventress took several steps forward into his personal space, making him tense and his eyes go vicious with threat. “Why are you up here growling at me? You should be down wherever Skywalker is, giving him the riot act on why you aren't going to let him limit your life. That he's a pathetic, sniveling child and you're done having him rule your existence and he will not wreck your life!”

“I love him!” Obi-Wan thundered back.

“That's a lie. If you loved him you'd be trying to heal instead of—”
“And what would a Sith know about either of those subjects—”

“You're a fripping coward, Kenobi—”

“Finally someone's paying attention—”

She punched him.

Right in the nose.

He reeled, hand flying to catch the blood—

And froze as he saw it on his fingers. When he looked back up at her, all Ventress could see was terror.

In an instant, her lightsaber was out and crashing for his head.

Blue met yellow.

“See?” Ventress hissed, pushing against his guard, leaning her weight into it. “You don't want to die. You're just afraid of living.”

“What's the difference?”

“The difference is dying when you don't want to and have a choice is stupid.”

Force. She could see the depths of the agony in his eyes.

She pulled back, keying the yellow blade back into the hilt. “Don't you get it, Kenobi?” she asked more quietly. “If you make it through this, in the public eye as you are, then every rape victim and mind-broken person is going to see you and think there's hope for them. You healing, you beating this, who the frip cares on your behalf? But you care about random, meaningless people. Well, guess what? Before Zygerria, you were some unattainable, ridiculous ideal. Who was going to take your example seriously? You were probably born perfect. But now? You're more like them. And there's a lot of hopeless people looking at you right now, expecting you to crash and burn like they expect themselves to crash and burn. If you keep your Force-awful light, and you keep doing what you do, no matter what the rest of the universe has to say about it— if you go out there and refuse to be ashamed, refuse to let them beat you— you could give hope to those people who don't have it.”

Ventress clamped her mouth shut.

Aw, hell.

Please tell me I did not just give Kenobi an inspirational speech.

I really have reached rock bottom. He better keep his mouth shut, or my rep is going to completely die.

Obi-Wan was staring at the wall, a lost expression on his face.

And then he walked away without a word.

“Kenobi?”

Ventress followed him out and realized he was not leading her to the exit. He was heading off on his own.

“I'll just show myself out, then?”
He didn't seem to hear her.

Ventress shook her head. Force above.

As she made her way back to the outside, she kept expecting someone to tackle her, demand to know why she was unescorted, maybe throw her back in the cell.

No-one did.

Jedi were fragging weird. There's no way she'd allow a former Jedi inside her house like this.

Way too willing to forgive.

Way too.

But had it really been a mass decision she was harmless? It's not like the Council had grilled her to make sure of it.

The realization slapped her in the face.

They afforded her this courtesy because they'd been given someone's word she wouldn't harm them. Someone's word they trusted implicitly. Someone who's reputation deserved that kind of trust.

*Kark, Kenobi.*

That explained why they didn't meet her with lightsabers lit when she carried his broken body up the Temple steps. She'd wondered why they didn't assume she'd done something to him.

They seemed to automatically know she'd rescued him.

*Damn you. Arrogant... Jedi.*

There really wasn't a better descriptive.

*Jedi.*

Well, either he'd gone to try offing himself again—

Or maybe to consider pulling out of his funk.

*Or maybe I just screwed his brain up worse.*

Wouldn't be the first time she'd had a decent intention result in putrid decay.

But that did not make her and Skywalker similar.

No.

Not at all.

She'd wipe that smirk off your face with her saber, motherfripper—

* * *
Obi-Wan stared at the reflection of himself.

He'd avoided mirrors since Zygerria.

Now he faced one down.

He looked cadaverous. And his head was bandaged.

*I look like someone who's given up.*

Was Ventress right? *Could* he still save people?

Was the old, old dream still possible?

All he'd ever wanted to do was become a Knight and help as many people as he could.

*Is it true I can reach some now that I wouldn't have been able to rescue before?*

Could he save people... simply by *living*?

Could that really give *them* the courage to try just one more day?

And then another... and another?

And could maybe some of those people find healing?

*Maybe I never will. Maybe I'll live with this forever.*

But wasn't the suffering worth it if even *one person* could dare to truly *live* again?

He clutched at the sink basin.

*Satine. I miss you so much, I'm so, so sorry.*

Tears slipped silently down his hollow cheeks.

*Sorry for everything.*
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Council was present and about to wrap up the day’s review when the doors slid open and Obi-Wan strode in.

For a moment they all stared at him in shock.

There was a firmness in his step, his chin was up, and there was a confidence to his stride they’d all missed.

“Masters.” He bowed, then stood tall before them, meeting gazes.

Yoda could sense how excruciating it was. How terrifying.

But something was apparently worth the anguish.

“I have a request. A series of earthquakes on Pantora has left several thousand people homeless and heading into Pantoran winter. I would like to take the two-twelfth and five-oh-first to bring the Pantorans supplies Senators Organa and Amidala will provide from the Refugee Aid committee. I would like to stay for a full six rotations to set up emergency shelters and organize the refugee camp into something that can sustain itself without turning into a slum.”

Yoda’s ears lifted in pleasure.

He missed the days when this was what Jedi specialized in.

He could sense Obi-Wan longed for that time as well.

“That sounds fine,” Mace spoke up, glancing at his fellow Council members.

They nodded, afraid to speak and perhaps break the spell that had come over their wounded brother.

“However, I have one stipulation. You need to take Padawan Tano and the Mind-Healer with you, and the latter gets full access to your cooperation whenever she deems it necessary, whether you agree or not, and no matter how inconvenient the timing might be.”

Obi-Wan bowed. “It shall be done.”

Yoda sensed that Mace wanted to point out Ahsoka hadn’t been locked into another Master commitment yet, and that there was still a Council seat with Obi-Wan’s name on it—

Yoda sent him an intense shushing in the Force.

Mace’s eyes glowered from his checked headlong rush.

So often people standing before the Council interpreted such an expression as disapproval with them, when it was Mace responding to silent directions from Yoda.

Mace had the self-control to not look over at the elder Jedi...
But not the control to keep it entirely from his face or eyes.

Skywalker had been the recipient of many glares that came from Yoda trying to keep Mace's quick tongue in check.

The boy had never responded well to correction, and if Mace had gone on his usual path with him the way he did with everyone else, Yoda had feared an explosion would take place.

So he'd restrained Mace.

And Skywalker had never known.

Had thought they hated him, inflicted more criticism on him than anyone else.

Skywalker's violent emotions often interfered with his brain.

Yoda's ears sank again at the thought.

He watched as Obi-Wan left the Council chamber, not a falter to be seen in his step.

No sooner had the doors shut behind him, than conversation started up.

Saesee's smile could light up a room. Depa beamed. Shaak had the subtle smile that was so quiet physically, and so loud in the Force. Mace, massiff-faced though he might be, looked inordinately pleased.

Ki-Adi, Eeth, Plo, and Adi Gallia murmured encouraged words to one another, and Fisto sat there grinning, teeth glowing white in the beautiful Coruscanti sunset.

Yoda sat back in his chair and let his eyes close, feeling the warmth of the Council.

He reached out farther. Found Obi-Wan.

His shields were still firm, but they didn't have the fanatical edge anymore.

He was struggling.

But he wasn't lying about it.

There were moments when it was hard to breathe, when his step glitched, when he turned and avoided his target doorway only to have to come back and try again in order to find the courage to face the person or people within.

There was pain. Grief. A mind-ache that saddened Yoda to the bone, but he recognized the dogged determination that had been Obi-Wan's from small childhood.

He suffered.

But he wasn't focusing on himself anymore.

He was focusing on others.

And as long as he did that...

Obi-Wan Kenobi could take anything.
“Ahsoka, I have a mission for us.”

Familiar voice. Familiar strength.

Familiar presence in the Force.

Ahsoka spun around, eyes widening, begging the universe for this to not be a dream.

“Master?” she whispered.

Obi-Wan’s gaze faltered just the slightest under her own, but he didn’t turn his eyes away. He stood there.

“We have to take the Mind-Healer with us, but—”

“Master.” Ahsoka lunged for him, flinging her arms around him and holding tight. She needed to feel he was alive. Needed to not see the bandages on his face.

Obi-Wan jolted, but refrained from running.

“Don’t ever do that to me again. Please, ” she sobbed. “Master Yoda had some plan, and the Mind-Healers told me to stay away—I almost didn’t listen, but you’d—and I was so scared—clearly I’d messed up in how I was trying to help you—”


Ahsoka’s arms squeezed tighter, driving the air from his lungs.

He patted a cold hand awkwardly against her back. Hugs just really... weren’t... his thing—

Ahsoka smiled a little through the tears as she pulled back. “Can’t hide your aversion for hugs, though.”

He gave her a weak almost-smile.

“How am I to know you’re not lying again?” Ahsoka asked, tone utterly serious, staring up at him. Demanding an answer.

“The Mind-Healer practically owns me now.” Obi-Wan sighed. “I’m supposed to be on...on... watch. To make sure I don’t try—”

He looked at her helplessly, apparently unable to say the word suicide.

“You can see why that’s reasonable, right?” Ahsoka worried, also a bit frustrated. “We thought you were fine and then the next minute Ventress is saving you?”

Obi-Wan gave her a painful nod. “I’ll submit.”

“That’s what you said last time.”

“They figured out I wasn’t taking the pills.”

“Yeah. It became a little obvious.” Ahsoka sighed. “Why, Master? Why is it so difficult to let us help
She watched as he struggled to find words. Saw the point where he would normally have given up.

Saw him duck his head and push past that point.

Saw him raise his eyes to meet hers, even if the color had drained from his face.

“Because for that night, I was property. The Zygerrians’, and—” Ahsoka saw his pulse fluttering in his throat. Saw him force his breathing to remain steady—“and Anakin’s.”

_He said his name_, Ahsoka realized.

“And when the Healers, the Medics, the Mind-Healers demand— _audiences_ or _cooperation_ —”

He wanted to run.

He wanted to turn, leave her here, and escape. Curl up and quit again.

But for some reason he just... would... _not_. give in—

Yoda and the Mind-Healers had been right, Ahsoka realized.

Obi-Wan had needed to interact with Ventress _first_. Before the people who loved him.

He needed what she had to give.

Given the way his face looked, Ahsoka thought the former Sith probably hadn't been too gentle.

“—It makes me feel trapped, Ahsoka. It makes me feel helpless again. It makes me feel like I never left Zygerria.”

He looked so vulnerable. Ahsoka desperately wanted to reach out and hug him again.

Knew it _wouldn't_ help _him_.

Remembered Satine.

She'd found ways to reach him.

_I just have to find my way._

She moved to stand beside him, so she wasn't looking at him, and he didn't have to look at her. It was a place of solidarity. She wasn't demanding an accounting from him now.

She was _with_ him.

She allowed that conviction to wreathe itself around her in the Force, and she reached out slowly to take his hand in hers. He didn't need that, but _she_ did.

She thought of Satine. “When you... _chose_ to submit to Satine... that didn't make you feel like property, right?”

“No.”

“If you _choose_ to not lie to me, if you _choose_ to let me and the Mind-Healer and the clones help you... then we aren't the ones in control, ultimately. _You_ are. You've proven you can make your own
decisions, you've proven you don't have to listen to us. Maybe I was wrong. I think I was, when I demanded you listen. So instead... I'm going to ask. Master, please, never lie to me about your mental state again. Please don't shut me out. Please let me help you heal. Please let me fill the role Satine wanted me to play.”

Obi-Wan's fingers tightened against her hand.

It hurt.

Ahsoka could take it.

“It's your choice, Master,” she whispered.

For a long moment he held still.

And then the extra shields he'd raised pulled back, leaving only normal shielding.

And then he lowered his head.

Ahsoka sensed the barrage of warnings that wailed through his mind, though she couldn't hear the specifics. She sensed the feelings of panic, of pain—

Fingers around his throat—

He sank to his knees, hand pulling away from her as he tried to breathe.


A sob ripped through his body.

And then he leaned into her.

The action was so sudden Ahsoka nearly fell over. She braced herself and held him as he cried into her lekku. She felt his surrender to her. Recognized it from when he'd done something similar with Satine.

Only with the Duchess, it had been a relief for him to do so.

This was difficult for him.

Terrifying.

Ahsoka soothed him, finding herself murmuring words in Mando'a. “Udesi.” She knew better than to use the endearments that Satine had used. Those were sacred to them alone. But other words... “K'uur. K'uur.”

Those were fair game.

Together.

Easy.

Hush... shhh...

They reached a part of Obi-Wan that nothing else could.

When he could speak again, he looked over at Ahsoka, tears still slipping from his eyes. “I want to know what is being learned about Anakin. I need to know all of it.”
Ahsoka nodded. “It's being compiled in the library.”

“And after that... there's something I'm going to have to do before we leave.”

* * *

Obi-Wan stepped into the library.

For a moment a hush stilled across the murmured conversations.

And then they continued again.

Obi-Wan appreciated the effort, even if it eased the feeling of being watched only a little.

They wanted to make it easier for him.

They were trying.

He made a beeline for the holo in the center of the room. The friends he had in law enforcement probably would have called the thing a murder board. A very, very massive one.

He could feel attention was still aimed his way.

It wasn't easy... but he tuned it out.

What mattered here wasn't that they knew what had happened.

What mattered was Anakin.

He carefully said the name to himself many, many times.

He imagined the face. Remembered the voice. Breathed.

Kept at it until his throat didn't close and his heart didn't stop from the fear.

And then he focused on the compiled facts hovering in the air before him.

Something was terribly wrong.

Obi-Wan needed to know what.

And whether...

His other half could be rescued.

* * *

Anakin paced.
He supposed he should be spending his time by examining his Force-signature and trying to learn as much about it as he could, but he just couldn't keep his mind still enough to get anywhere.

Obi-Wan...

There'd been some anger earlier. And then the shields were back.

And then he'd felt a sparkle of hope from Ahsoka...

And then the seal that ensured nothing could be sensed from Obi-Wan lifted.

Pain, fear—

A bit of surrender.

To Ahsoka.

Anakin could sense his former Padawan responding. Soothing.

Obi-Wan felt a bit saner, to Anakin's point of view.

And then a sharp concentration had surrounded Obi-Wan's Force-signature.

It made Anakin's heart ache. It was so familiar.

Obi-Wan examining pieces, running through options, hunting something to its source.

But when, three hours later, he looked up to find Obi-Wan standing at his door, he froze in speechless disbelief.

“I'm shipping out.”

Anakin could hardly stand hearing the beloved voice. He'd longed for it, but now he was terrified—

“Ahsoka and I are going to run a mercy mission. Leave the war alone for a bit.”

Anakin watched him. He's not looking at me. He can't look me in the eye.

He was supposed to say something, right? How could he have a multitude of words for Ahsoka, for anyone who would listen, and have nothing, nothing now?

“The Mind-Healer almost didn't let me come see you. But I— She's down at the end of the hall, just to make sure.”

Make sure I don't hurt you, or you don't hurt you? Anakin searched for words, searched to breathe. The clamp around his chest was... far too tight.

Obi-Wan stood in the open doorway, but he made no move to step into Anakin's cell. “I was concerned that maybe you believed you'd been left to rot.”

Anakin's gut reaction was haven't I been?

He squelched it.

He'd fought with Ahsoka a lot of late. He didn't dare risk that with Obi-Wan.

He couldn't quite believe his Master was here. That it wasn't a dream.
That Obi-Wan had chosen to not leave the safety of the door between them.

“Everyone is trying—very hard—to decide—to find out—”

“How to punish me?” Anakin whispered.

Obi-Wan’s head came up, gray eyes meeting Anakin’s desperate blue.

Anakin’s knees felt weak.

“No. They're trying to find out what your Force-signature means. It's happened before, we've learned that much, but all information was stolen from us long ago. We don’t know if the... redness... is... bad or not... and the Council doesn't want to rush to judge you for something that may not be a crime.”

“But I hurt you.”

Obi-Wan shivered. “Yes.”

Anakin waited for him to say something else. Anything else—

“To punish you for something before we know... why... you did what you did would be wrong.”

“It's because I was selfish. Because I—”

“We've had other selfish Jedi before. This is different, and you know it.”

Anakin shut up.

“The Council doesn't want to wrong you. But until we know whether it's harmful to those around you or not—or contagious—we don't have anywhere else to put you.” Obi-Wan's shoulders sank. “But they're trying. Very hard. Searching.”

“I want out of here, Obi-Wan. It's—I have a hard time believing they're really—I don't trust them, Obi-Wan.”

His Master winced. “I know.”

How could Anakin navigate this? He didn't feel it was going too well. “Master, I'm—”

Obi-Wan watched him warily.

“I'm sorry.”

He saw Obi-Wan waiting for the but. Waiting for the excuse, the justification—

Anakin's apologies were always followed with detailed explanations of why it wasn't his fault.

Tears filled Anakin's eyes, spilled silently down his face. “Obi-Wan? I swear. This time... this time it's just I'm sorry. No excuses.”

“I don't know if I'm—can you promise it would never happen again?” Obi-Wan whispered.

“Yes. Yes, I—”

“Even if you thought you would lose Padmé if you didn't?”

Anakin fell silent.
Obi-Wan, who had looked cautiously hopeful, deflated.

“I'm sorry, Anakin. I can't—” his voice broke. “I can't live like that. Not knowing— I can't. ” He sank to the floor, sitting on the steps leading into the cell and lowering his head into his arms. “I thought maybe— we're running a mission that should have no violence, no aggression— and Ahsoka and I can't exactly be exposed to something we haven't already been steeped in...”

Anakin's heart exploded in shock.

Obi-Wan had come down here to ask him to go with them.

“Oh-Oh-Oh...”

“But I can't live like that, Anakin.” Obi-Wan shuddered. “I can't. Perhaps that makes me a terrible Jedi. Perhaps that makes me weak.”

No. No.

He couldn't leave Anakin here. If they were together, away from the rest of the Order, surely they could manage to fix this. Anakin was sure of it. He just had to convince Obi-Wan.

He approached. Cautiously, to make sure to not scare the wounded man. It was hard not to stare at the bandage that concealed the burn that so easily could have stolen his life. “Master— you are not weak, or a terrible Jedi. You're the best Jedi I've ever met. But you are safe with me. I swear it. Only Padmé could make me snap like that. You understand that. If... someone had tried to cut in on you and Satine—”

Obi-Wan's shoulders stilled.

“It would have made you angry. I know you loved her. Please don't hold my love for Padmé against me. I love you too. I know you would never hurt me, but if the stakes had been Satine's love—”

Obi-Wan's head came up. He stared at Anakin in incomprehension.

Nervously, Anakin paused. “I— if I had betrayed you in the worst way you can imagine, wouldn't you have wanted to— hurt me— too?” His words faltered as he realized his mistake.

“Do you think I care for you so little?” Obi-Wan's expression was one of horrified disbelief. “Do you think that you betraying me would make any difference— you do. You honestly think that.”

Anakin felt gutted by the expression of brokenness that crossed Obi-Wan's face.

“No, Anakin. Satine had many suitors over the years. I tried to hurt or intimidate none of them. If she had chosen any of them over me, I would have stood back so she could find happiness. I encouraged her to do so. It would have hurt, it might have killed me, but—”

“What if it was me ?” Anakin begged. “What if I stole her from you and she was happy with me? You would have been angry—”

That grieved look—

It was destroying Anakin—

“You don't know me at all, do you.”

“Master —”

“I might not have had the strength to be near you. I might have needed to stay away—”
“So you wouldn't *hurt* us—”

“So I wouldn't *wreck* both of your happiness because I couldn’t *smile* for you!” Obi-Wan struggled to his feet.

“It's one thing to *say* that, Obi-Wan,” Anakin pleaded. “It's something *completely different* to—”

“If you doubt my heart so much, why are you trying to convince me to take you?”

He... understood?

Oh, thank the *Force*.

“Because we *belong* together. And I hurt you, and I should be the one to stand by you while you heal. Because I should be out there protecting you. Because every second I sit in here is a chance for you to end up *more* hurt.”

The glance of sorrow Obi-Wan sent him gave Anakin a sickening realization.

*In just the few minutes he's been here with me...*

*I have hurt him more.*

How *did* that happen?

“Please don't leave,” Anakin whispered.

Obi-Wan's gaze fell away from his. “I'm— weak, Anakin. I— I'm not ready to risk it. It— *hurt*— too much, and—” his voice broke. “If I— can't trust the person at my back to not hurt me—”

“I *promise*, Obi-Wan!”

“As long as Padmé isn't at stake.”

“We'll just make sure that she never *is*—”

“That's not the way the universe *works*, Anakin!” Obi-Wan snapped. “And if you want to talk about losing someone, how about we just *face* that bantha in the room? Satine is *dead*. Because of you. With all this hypothetical nonsense, you perhaps should have picked a different analogy, because you *did* take her from me. Only she isn't happy. She's *dead*.”

“And you're angry,” Anakin urged, feeling hope.

Obi-Wan shook his head. “No. I'm not angry about that. I'm angry because I came in here to *apologize* and *ask you back*, and yet here you stand justifying yourself. *Always justifying*. You said this time it would *just* be sorry. And then you proceeded to try to excuse what you did because *certainly* you couldn't be expected to do anything *else* given the circumstances. So convinced everyone else is *just like you*.”

“*You* were going to apologize to *me*?” Anakin choked out. “*What? Why?*”

“Because I should have seen the *redness* sooner. I should have asked more questions about certain missions you took. I should have *been here* for you a *long* time ago—”

“What are you *talking* about? You have only ever *been here* for me! You can't take this on you!”

“I cannot and will not absolve you.”
Anakin wavered. “I— maybe—”

He thought of Padmé.

He hadn't... gotten *better* under her way of handling his violence.

She'd tried that path.

It hadn't worked.

Why expect Obi-Wan to make the same mistake?

“If you weren't going to... *absolve*... me, how could you justify taking me with you on your mission?”

He hadn't thought Obi-Wan could droop any farther.

He'd been wrong.

“I thought that maybe you'd realized that loving Padmé should make you a *better* person. Not the other way around.”

“I *am* a better person—”

“And if she was in danger, how many innocent lives would you sacrifice to save hers?” Obi-Wan demanded. “How many husbands would have to lose *their* wives so *you* didn't have to lose the woman *you* love? How many sons would have to lose their fathers? How many lives would be *devastated as meaningless* just so *you* don't have to endure that same devastation? Why are *they* less important than *you*? Why is *their* love less valuable than *yours*? Because *you* don't know them? That makes their pain acceptable?”

Anakin trembled. “Is that how you see me?”

“Should I be seeing something different?” Obi-Wan tore his hand down his face. “Either you were *really* good at deceiving me, or I was *really* naive, or I only chose to see the good in you. Because I never, *ever* thought you capable of something like this. Have you killed in revenge before, Anakin? No. No. I know the answer to that. This question instead: have you ever intentionally killed an innocent?”

“In battle, things can become so confused, so—”

“You know what I mean.” There was a weariness in his tone.

Something that suggested he might just leave if Anakin tried to banthakark him.

“Obi-Wan, *please* don't ask me that.”

“Were you still my Padawan at the time?”

“ *Obi-Wan*, please, just leave the past in the—”

“You were.” Fresh tears traced the tracks down Obi-Wan's face. “Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you *trust* me?”

“I was afraid you'd *hate* me!” Anakin cried, feeling everything being stripped away from him. “I was afraid you wouldn't *trust* me—”
“Look how trusting you turned out!”

“Love can make you do terrible things—”

“No,” Obi-Wan whispered. “Self-love does that. Forget what you did to me. You are willing, in this moment, to murder innocents if Padmé's life was on the line. If you loved Padmé to the point where whatever happened to you meant nothing, you would do everything in your power to make the good woman that she is proud of you. You would never make her be the reason you trample on principles she holds dearer than life itself. You would never even consider harming people she would be willing to die to protect. And you would never make someone else bear the pain that you are too afraid to shoulder yourself, forcing them to take it because you're stronger than they are and they can't stop you. And if you don't love her that way, how can I possibly think you could love me?”

Obi-Wan turned to leave.

“Show me!” Anakin threw himself across the cell, landing on his knees. “Please, Obi-Wan. I've never understood that kind of love. I don't— my Mother used to talk about it— but I— I just assumed everyone loved the way I did— I see now. I realize. Please give me another chance. Try to show me. Please.”

Obi-Wan looked back at him. “You never wanted to listen. You called me cold. Heartless. You laughed at me. You told me I just hadn't— met the right person yet.”

Anakin shivered as he sensed a tenth of the heartbreak Obi-Wan endured over the loss of Satine. “I was wrong. Please. Forgive me.”

“I already forgave you, Anakin.” Obi-Wan twisted his fingers together. “I never held— what you did— against you. I never wanted payback. I only wanted escape. But forgiveness doesn't make the pain any less, or the... Anakin, you broke my heart. In so many different ways, and I just— I don't think I can take any more. Not after Satine. If you decide to attack again—”

“I won't. I swear, Obi-Wan. Please believe me. Look at me in the Force, see if I'm lying—” Anakin laid waste to his shields, stripping himself of all defenses.

Maybe Obi-Wan would find terrible things, things he didn't know about yet—

But Anakin was desperate.

He was going to lose Obi-Wan if he didn't so something.

His knees ached against the cold floor. His neck hurt from looking up the stairs at Obi-Wan.

His soul hurt.

Every second dragged by like an eternity. Obi-Wan studied him. Scanned deep.

Reached into Anakin's soul.

Anakin shivered under the weight of it.

He'd never let Obi-Wan in. It had been too dangerous.

A whimper burst from Obi-Wan's lips. A sound that left Anakin shattered.

Obi-Wan was no more convinced of his own safety than he'd been a minute ago.
Worse—

The fear of a possibility now solidified into dread.

But what he said was, “Come with me to Pantora.”

Anakin would show him. He would prove he had nothing to fear.

Anakin could protect Padmé, and his Master, and all those “innocents” Padmé and Obi-Wan went on and on about.

And Sand-people babies really shouldn't count in that designation anyway. So what if they'd never done anything wrong? They would have, if allowed to fester. Because he’d taken them out, there were that many fewer Raiders in the years ahead to maul farmers.

And thank the Force Obi-Wan was out of his head enough by now he didn't catch even a hint of that.

*I can't think like that. I have to try to think like Padmé.*

* * *

The Mind-Healer had a fit.

She did not think it wise to bring Skywalker. Not onto a shipful of two battalions of clones who each had different but very deep issues with him.

She also didn't think Skywalker was ready to face the ridicule that Obi-Wan endured in public now, and was even less sure he could control himself if some of that shame was thrown his way.

Last thing they needed was for Skywalker to kill some harmless though cruel hecklers.

Then he'd be out of their hands entirely.

Anakin swore his way up, down, and sideways, trying to prove himself to her.

Hardest for him to endure was when she took Obi-Wan aside and asked quietly, “Do you feel safe?”

And Obi-Wan responded with a quiet, “No.”

“Then why do you want him to come along?”

“Because I— perhaps I could rebuild my life without him. A large part of me wants to. But if I leave him, who does he have? Who is going to let him come close?”

“I understand. But that person doesn't necessarily need to be you. Or this soon. I think some distance might be wise until we can work out a healthy sharing of power and safety. Right now he has all the power, and you have none of the feeling of safety.”

Obi-Wan shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “But—”

“I don't think it's wise for you, emotionally.”
“But if I focus on helping him, doesn't that help me want to live?”

“Yesterday you were completely nonfunctional. It's important to take things slowly. Better to find it's too easy and add on more, than take too much at once and have to give back. The one is going to feel a lot better than the other.”

“Listen.” Anakin spoke up. “I—I want him to be ready.”

He found it was true. He desperately wanted to move back into his normal place at Obi-Wan's side immediately.

But he hated the pained look in his Master's eyes. Hated the gut-rumbling dread his Master felt when he looked at a future with Anakin in it.

“I will go back to my cell, and I will wait there until Obi-Wan is ready for that to change.” It was a tremendous one. It nearly killed him to make it.

He missed the sky, missed flying, missed freedom, missed it all—

But he had to prove to Obi-Wan that he would respect his Master's self-determination. Had to prove that Obi-Wan's safety and comfort were at the top of his priority list.

“You resent the Jedi,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “You don't believe they're trying their best. If you stay here, you'll forget you made this choice for me. All you'll remember is how much you distrust us.”

“I—” He paused.

He had a sneaking suspicion Obi-Wan was right.

But if he knew ahead of time to watch out for it...

“What if I prove my adulthood? I can be reasonable.” He turned to the Mind-Healer. “If I want him to trust me, I've got to trust him, right? He tells me they—you—are trying to help me. If I trust his judgment on the matter, does that count for something?”

The Mind-Healer considered and gave him a nod. “It counts for something, definitely. How much, only Obi-Wan can decide.”

Anakin sent him an appealing glance. “Don't leave me to rot forever?”

“I'm not going to run from this, or from you, any more.” Obi-Wan spoke with a quiet, trembling intensity. “I have to face it. If Master Elvett believes I should take more time—”

“I do.”

“—Her word is law.”

Anakin nodded. “I will go back to the cell. I swear I won't hold it against the Jedi. I'll wait for you, Master. However long you need.”

The look of weariness on Obi-Wan's face suggested he doubted Anakin's avowal, but he gave his former Padawan a nod and left.

Before Elvett followed, she looked back at Anakin. “I saw you wince at the thought of accepting what you termed as 'help.' I'd just like to say that no-one is here to fix you. My colleagues are very skilled, and their goal is to give you the tools you need to find a place of healthy happiness. We don't want to reshape you. We want you to uncover the best in yourself.”
He watched her warily. “If you say so.”

She gave a laugh, musical and without a hint of malice. “My. You distrust mind doctors as much as your Master distrusts medical ones.”

Anakin felt he had a pretty good excuse.

There was murder in his past he'd been trying to cover up.

Chapter End Notes

Mando'a Guide:

Tome (Pronounced /TOH-may/) = Together

Udesi (Pronounced /oo-DAY-see/) = Easy/Take it easy

Kuur (Pronounced /koor/) = Hush/shhh
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Obi-Wan stretched out on his bunk, feeling closer to normal than he had in a long time.

It had been a week full of hard physical work, plenty of mental effort, and an unbelievable amount of verbal negotiating.

The Pantorans he'd come to help had lost everything, and a lot of them weren't very graceful about it. He could relate.

He'd had a few run-ins with people who wanted to torment him, but he'd refused to let it incapacitate him. He was going to live life on his terms.

In the Force, Ahsoka felt just a little less tightly-wound.

Mid-week Yoda had commed, telling Obi-Wan he'd been spending quite a bit of time with Anakin, meditating with him, trying to help him find his calm center.

Trying to help him sort through the various pieces of his past.

Trying to help him find a way to accept himself.

Obi-Wan reached out to the Force, breathing in the life of the planet down below. He could sense the clones.

Most of them were struggling with Satine's death. Obi-Wan hadn't realized quite how big an impact on them she'd had.

Most of them hadn't even met her, but given the way the brothers shared everything, that hadn't been much of an impediment.

When Obi-Wan's Mind-Healer wasn't focused on him, she made herself accessible to the clones who didn't want to share with a Minder who was one of their brothers.

For Obi-Wan...

The thought of Satine stung.

He reached deeper into the Force, knowing she was there somewhere. Her essence had been drawn into the cosmic Force.

Made part of the wind and the sky and the stars.

Every once in a while, if he stilled his heart to a quiet enough place...

He could sense her there.

Children, playing games in the dirt with sticks and stones, finding joy in spite of the severity of their poverty. He could hear Satine's laughter echoing in their giggles.
The wind carried the scent of her hair to him as he used his hands to build homes to shelter these precious people from the future winter.

It felt good to work hard in the service of life.

The war had taken more out of him than he'd realized.

We have to escape it somehow.

Lying here on his bunk, he could almost hear Satine murmuring words of pride and love. Encouragement and peace.

And strength.

A tear slipped from the corner of his eye even as his face relaxed in a smile.

Aayhan.

The bittersweet moment of grief and joy.

I understand the word so much better now.

A familiar chime.

The joy vanished.

Cold fingers seized his heart.

He bolted upright and stared at the holodisc on its stand.

No.

That tone— that frequency—

He answered it. Maybe he shouldn't have, but his fingers moved almost of their own accord.

A woman, dressed in beskar'gam. Fiery hair that swept just above her shoulders. Piercing eyes. A sense of hatred that swirled around her so thickly it nearly choked Obi-Wan.

He knew her.

His stance widened a little. He folded his arms and felt the mask of professional distance cross his face.

Knew his eyes hardened.

And he didn't say a word. Force her to explain herself.

He could outlast her.

And there was no way in hell he was going to ask her what she wanted.

“Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan held his silence.

Bo-Katan heaved a sigh. “Look. I'm calling to ask for help.”
Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow, forehead furrowing in merciless skepticism.

But he didn’t give her any relief. Not a question to make this easier.

Nothing.

“It’s Korkie. My nephew. Satine’s nephew.”

Still Obi-Wan waited.

“The government is switching over. It’s not a good time to be a pacifist right now.”

Obi-Wan took what little comfort he could in the knowledge that she was floundering. She’d looked defiant and demanding, and now she looked flustered.

That left him in control here.

“He’s a good kid. But Satine raised him, and he’s loyal to that, and he won’t listen to me— and he’s Mando enough that he refuses to blend in.”

Obi-Wan felt his gut clench, but refused to let it show.

He was not going to ask.

“One of his friends is already dead. She refused to accept the new order of things. The other two have joined us. He’s alone and angry and helplessly naive. He needs help getting out and he has nowhere to go.”

“That might have something to do with the fact that you killed your sister,” Obi-Wan said dryly. Relief lit her eyes, brought by the fact he’d finally spoken. “Yes. But Korkie... Korkie wasn’t raised right, so it’s only partially his fault. And I don’t want him dying here, Kenobi. He's family. I can't help it my brother decided to leave him with her instead of me. He was delirious near the end. I would have raised Korkie as my own if I'd had the chance. I can't help him. So get him out, Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan didn't soften his steely expression. If anything, he intensified it. “This has trap written all over it. You and your insurgents are why Korkie's caregiver is dead. And now that your chief enemy is out of the way, I'm next on the list. Don't think I don't know you'd like to capture me.”

“Listen,” she snapped. “Satine had it coming to her. Just look at it like this: I know the Jedi are trying to figure out what's wrong with Skywalker and how to fix it. Let's just say that any records the Jedi might have access to are going to be useless.”

Cold leeched through his bones. “Oh? Do tell.”

“Yeah. But it's possible to have stories told by people who watched from the outside. It's not just Jedi who have access to Jedi history, after all.”

“Just spit it out.”

“I'm a Vizsla by marriage. Trust me. Vizslas were there at the sack of your Temple. We left our mark all over it and stole the darksaber.”

“I'm aware.” Obi-Wan reached out his hand, with a show of intention to cut the call.

“So we're aware of the Sith selectively destroying pieces of your database. Being curious, of course we had to find out why and what.”
“This we already know. You have nothing.”

She scowled at him. “I was also... a Kryze... before that name became synonymous with treachery. And Kryzes... were somewhere else. Does your Padawan's Force-signature look bloody?”

Obi-Wan went very still.

“You should listen to me, Kenobi. This is the only time I'm going to ever try to help you. Understand? We are not friends. You were one of the reasons my sister never saw the error of her ways, never came home.”

“Then why are you helping?” Obi-Wan pressed. “Why aren't you just trying to reprogram Korkie into a mini-you?”

For a long moment she watched him in silence.

When she spoke again, her voice had lost the arrogant aggression, and there was a quiet honesty that Obi-Wan could practically taste. “Because I had a baby recently. A daughter. And if I died, I'd want to know someone who respected my worldview was looking out for her.”

It might look real, it might sound real, but Obi-Wan had to be sure before he risked being taken by Mandos who would think that what the Zygerrians did to him was amateurish.

“Korkie isn't Satine's son.”

“Not by birth, no.” Bo-Katan looked him square in the eye. “But by choice, yes. And for a Mando, that's good enough. And Kenobi, he doesn't have anybody that Satine would have approved of. Nobody but you. And coming to get the kid is important for you, not just sentimentally, but because as a Kryze, he knows the family lore. He's your best chance at saving whatever's left of your Padawan.”

“What would you propose?”

“I'm going to steal the kid a ship, get him on it, and send him to a neutral planet of your choice. You better scoop him up fast and get him back to safe ground because a helpless Kryze is serious bait. He's going to be pursued. I'll see what I can do to keep it quiet, give him as many hours head start as I can.”

* * *

It didn't take much.

The clones were on board from the second they heard the words Satine's adopted son.

It made Korkie some sort of sibling or, if not quite that close, at least a cousin.

And they were hoping to run into some Mandos.

Really hoping.

The Mind-Healer was staying out of it.

Ahsoka, who knew Korkie from her time on Mandalore, had nothing to say against the rescue.
So they may have all taken a detour on the way home from Pantora.

And to the massive disappointment of the clones and equally massive relief of Obi-Wan, they had no tangles with Kryze hunters.

They scooped Korkie up, blew up the ship he’d escaped in, and headed back for Coruscant.

Obi-Wan felt strange flutters in his gut as he went to meet the boy.

He'd never... actually... met Korkie.

He'd heard a lot about him, of course...

As much as Satine had heard about Anakin and Ahsoka...

Bo-Katan's voice rang heavy in his heart.

“You're all this boy has now.”

Was it true?

The door slid aside, and there Korkie stood with Ahsoka.

Dimly, Obi-Wan recognized that the clones had made themselves scarce.

Korkie had classic Mandalorian cheekbones, a nose that would have pegged him as Satine's blood-relative in any galaxy, and eyes the exact same shade of blue as hers.

“This is Master Kenobi,” Ahsoka offered, giving Korkie's arm a little squeeze before she walked away.

“I know.” Korkie looked up into Obi-Wan's face, just a hint of worried defiance in his eyes.

And a mountain of grief.

“You can call me Obi-Wan.”

“Alright.”

Obi-Wan had no idea what to do next. “We should reach Coruscant in a couple of hours.”

Korkie gave a nod.

Still watching his face.

The scrutiny was rapidly becoming very, very difficult to take.

Don’t run. Don’t run, Obi-Wan warned himself.

“Did she suffer?”

Obi-Wan's eyes widened and his breathing hitched. “What?”

“My Aunt. I heard of her death after the fact. And Bo-Katan wouldn't talk about it. At all. Did she suffer?”

“No.”
Korkie gave him a nod, and his shoulders sagged in relief. “I've seen— a lot of really bad things recently—”

Obi-Wan's heart melted.

Yes. Yes, he would have.

All he'd ever known was Satine's beautiful, sane Mandalore.

Obi-Wan could imagine the fires raging, the executions in the streets, the revels, the boastings—

Unlike Korkie, Obi-Wan had walked the streets of the old Mandalore.

He could sense Korkie's bewilderment. The boy couldn't understand how things could go from so good to so bloody this quickly.

“What are you going to do with me?” Korkie asked, tone hushed. “Bo-Katan has washed her hands of me. Completely.”

He sounded lost.

Obi-Wan had been working on the question since that call. “What is it you want to do? What is your dream?”

“I wanted to be a politician. I was going to be someone Aunt Satine could count on. Our government's had problems all along. We needed—” he broke off helplessly. “But it's all kind of pointless now.”

Obi-Wan watched him carefully. “Why?”

“Because Auntie's dream is dead.”

“Is yours?”

“Yes?” Korkie looked confused. “I mean, there is no government anymore. And Aunt—”

The lump that stopped Korkie had a mirror in Obi-Wan's own throat.

“I'll be an adult in a year and nine months, five days standard. I just have to find a way to manage until then. I'll be fine, I swear. I mean... I can find a job as an aide or something.”

“What about completing your studies?”

Korkie shrugged. “It's not like the Academy exists anymore. It was sort of... blown up. Most of Sundari is in ruins.”

Obi-Wan winced.

“It's just time for me to be grown up, I guess. How does the Coruscant system work? Will I be forced into a... foster home... of some sort?” He looked worried. “I'm so close to eighteen...”

“The Republic takes child care very seriously.” Obi-Wan ran a hand through his hair. “And it's your right to complete your classes. If not with your original teachers, then with others.”

* * *
Korkie had gone for far too many hours without sleep, so while the young Mandalorian slept, Obi-Wan paced the bridge.

Gradually he became aware of a group of clones waiting patiently by the door.

“Yes? Fives?”

“Sir. The kid is going to be thrown with some random family, isn't he.”

Obi-Wan leaned heavily against the tactical holo-table. “Most likely.”

“He belongs with us.” Fives' brothers nodded in agreement as he spoke.

Obi-Wan sent him a rueful grimace. “Satine hated violence. Of any sort. Just because she chose to accept us does not mean she would want us turning her nephew into a soldier or warrior of any kind. If he decides to follow that path, that needs to be his decision, for the right reasons. Not because we held the door open and made it the most familiar, comfortable path possible.”

“Family has to count for something, General. We can't just let him be handed over to strangers.”

Obi-Wan looked up. Grim. “No. You're right. We can't.”

* * *

“I am taking Korkie Kryze as my charge.”

Nobody on the Council looked surprised.

“Are you sure that's what's best for him?” Mace pressed. “Do you feel that you can give him what he needs?”

“I do not know. All I can do is find out. What I do feel is that if I steep myself in death, I will not heal, and the same can be said of Anakin. Neither of us should be heading back out into the war. Not at this time, anyway.”

“And what of Ahsoka?” Plo Koon spoke up, concern evident. “I am more than willing to take her on, but she wants you.”

“It may be irresponsible, but—” Obi-Wan rubbed at his beard. “I— would like to claim her as my Padawan.”

“Are you ready to raise two young people at once?” Fisto asked.

Obi-Wan could sense the concern for his friend the Nautolan felt. “I know I haven't been stable. But I have done everything the Mind-Healer has asked, and I will continue to do so.”

“If apart from the war he keeps himself, healthy for him, to focus on new young life it would be.” Yoda pointed his gimmer stick at Mace. “Room, I think, there is if Master Kenobi wishes to work with younglings. Away from the war that would keep him, and close for young Kryze's schooling.”
Obi-Wan sent him a grateful nod. “I would appreciate it, Master, but I do not want to deprive Ahsoka of fieldwork. I would like to work with the younglings, but I also want to take missions.”

“What missions do you have in mind?” Mace asked.

Obi-Wan hesitated. “I know a small fraction of the Order is still assigned to disaster relief and mediation. I do not wish to steal those missions away from them, but—”

Yoda shook his head. “Know them, I do. Willing to take their turn in the war, most of them will be, to allow you the time to heal.”

Obi-Wan bowed his head in acknowledgment, trying to still the guilt that whispered through his blood. It felt like his fellow Jedi thought they needed to walk on tiptoe around him. Give him special treatment because he wasn't strong enough.

“The guilt, unreasonable is,” Yoda murmured. “Begrudge you this, none of us do.”

* * *

Mace seized Yoda's distraction as a chance to speak his mind without interference. “What about the clones, and your Council seat?”

Obi-Wan stood tall, like he was bracing for trouble. “I have meditated on it. I believe that Force is leading me to take the 212\textsuperscript{th} and 501\textsuperscript{st} with me.”

“You do remember they are the best we have,” Ki-Adi pointed out, hesitant. “And you are aware of the inroads Dooku is making? The droids already outnumber us greatly.”

“Yes. But these men are full of anger. If we simply aim them towards the enemy, it will fester. Make their transition into life after the war even more difficult. I want them to reach out to the common citizens, and I want the average person to come to realize these men are individuals.”

“You want to campaign for their rights,” Eeth realized. “And by bringing them on mercy missions, giving them responsibility and time, you think the difference can be made?”

“I think we're going to lose the war. It's become riotously unpopular. Dooku's forces are only growing larger by the day. We can't destroy the droid factories fast enough. We lose men, and they aren't being replaced because it takes ten years for a clone to mature, and yet the Senate just voted to place another order with Kamino. That's encouraging the war to drag on ten more years. It has to end. It's sinking this galaxy into darkness. We only agreed to fight in order to protect the innocents Dooku threatened, and he's sabotaging every effort the Senate and the CIS Parliament make towards peace talks.”

Mace sighed. “There you have it. This war is going to destroy everything, and yet to pull out, leave the clones to fight and die alone, with no-one to represent them? The non-Jedi military officers think of them as organic droids. If you ask the Senate, the clones have absolutely no rights. If we don't stand beside them, who will?”

“We have to mobilize the average person.” Obi-Wan shook his head. “We have to make the demand for peace so strong that even Dooku can't resist it. On both sides of the line.”
“Have a plan, do you?”

“Not yet, Master. But that's what I want to focus on. The violence cannot stop because every time we give ground, Dooku burns a planet. But if the CIS *itself* turns on Dooku... then we can do what we were *meant* to do. Help bring peace back.”

Shaak nodded gravely. “The 212th and 501st will be sorely missed. But we can spare them.”

Nods from the rest of the Council joined hers, Mace's included.

But he still had something he wanted to—

Yoda sent him a jab in the Force—

And Mace grimaced and ignored it. “And the Council seat?”

“Will I have the time to do it justice?” Obi-Wan asked. “Between the peace effort, two battalions of clones, a Padawan, a charge, and Anakin?”

The Council went very quiet.

“You want to take Skywalker with you?” Mace asked, dreading the verbal confirmation of what he already knew.

“If he is willing to come, yes.”

“The best place for him to be, it is,” Yoda spoke up. “Clear to me that has become.”

It bothered Mace, to think of sending Obi-Wan out there with no-one to defend him and Skywalker going along too.

He trusted Yoda's judgment, but sometimes it was very, *very* hard to agree.

“I don't think it's wise,” he said, knowing he sounded stubborn. “What does the Mind-Healer say?”

“She doesn't want me to rush. But at this point, waiting is meaningless to me. I've made up my mind where I want to go. More consideration isn't going to improve it. I would simply be running in place.”

Mace nodded. “Fine. But I think it makes it imperative you keep your Council seat. Maybe you don't have to be involved in every meeting and debrief, but you could definitely use the authority to go with you in your peace effort, and *we* want to make a statement to the Senators who are pressuring us.”

Obi-Wan seemed to brace himself. “About me?”

Kark.

*Maybe I should have listened to Yoda.*

Shaak Ti leaned forward in her chair. “You don't fit in the streamlined, faceless organic-droid image they want us to carry. You are polarizing. The politicians find you embarrassing, but many in the population are identifying with you. Suddenly, the Jedi don't seem to be a species set apart who surely can't understand or sympathize with them. And with Satine...”

“You're becoming something of a folk legend.” Eeth tilted his head to the side. “I... *may* ... have
heard a song while on the streets. It *may* have been about you. A ballad about love and suffering.”

Obi-Wan’s face seemed trapped in a protracted wince.

“And after the... park incident, the Senate is even *more* uncomfortable with you holding your Council seat.” Fisto grinned. “They think it makes *them* look bad.”

“Unfortunately, making them *look good* isn’t high on the Order’s priority list,” Mace snickered. “So, if you are willing, we want you to stay.”

Obi-Wan stared at him, blinked, shook himself and seemed to unfreeze. “Wait. Let me get this straight. The populace has been slowly turning against the Jedi, dehumanizing us— forgive the speciest term— considering our lives and deaths pointless because we live to serve... and you think that I’m somehow changing that?”

“Before, you were a war hero,” Fisto explained. “The same way a blaster-slinger from some age past might be venerated. Unassailable, unrelatable, something distant, vague, and non-threatening. Now you’re in their *faces*. You've challenged everything they *think* they know about Jedi. They know you struggle. They see you respond to the insults, they know about the park incident. And they see Pantora. You’ve set fire to their imaginations. You want to heal the breach between Separatist Alliance and Republic. Maybe you can. You're already healing the breach between the common person and the Jedi, bringing us back to the place where we were meant to be. The trusted guardians.”

Mace could sense the overwhelming emotions that Obi-Wan was having difficulty sorting through. They were certainly all over the place.

“What saying, the Council is, is that our approval of your plan pieces, you have.”

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan murmured.

Shaak Ti moved from her seat to come stand before Obi-Wan. She reached out with a gentle hand, and lightly caressed his cheek with her fingertips. “You thought your ability to help people had been severely crippled. It's not. You've been given wings.”

Tears filled his eyes. He bowed to the Council and beat a hasty retreat.

Mace found a rock in his throat and scowled.

It fragging *hurt*.

* * *

Obi-Wan thought he should probably go speak to Korkie immediately, to ask if he would prefer a strange life with a Jedi over a foster home, but—

That meeting with the Council hadn’t been—

The things they'd *said* —

He found the Temple Guards had been released from watch duty, and Anakin’s cell door was wide open.
And Anakin sat inside.

The place had been turned into a little den. Droid parts lay strewn everywhere, a datapad played music in a low murmur in the background, and Obi-Wan spotted a couple of parenting holobooks lying on the sleep-shelf. He also recognized the holocron of a Jedi Master who'd had a family. The glass cube was several thousand years old, and there was no way Anakin could have gotten it on his own.

A Council member would have had to have retrieved it for him.

And the likelihood was Anakin wouldn't have known of its existence in the first place...

So somebody thought of it for him.

Obi-Wan felt warmth push against the ice in his soul.

Anakin, sitting on the floor, tinkered with a tiny droid, his curls in their usual chaotic mess across his head.

He was too focused on the task at hand to notice Obi-Wan standing in the doorway.

Obi-Wan watched him in silence.

This had always been one of Anakin's great weaknesses. He'd get so caught up in one thing, that everything else could slide right on by.

And he'd never even know they'd passed.

What was the future going to look like? Obi-Wan, Korkie, Ahsoka, Anakin, 212th, 501st...

What are we? What is this?

And could they accomplish anything?

The Council clearly had high hopes.

It scared Obi-Wan. He wasn't at all sure they were reading the situation accurately.

He hadn't seen people responding positively to him.

All he'd found were the insults and stones thrown at his head. And worse...

The reporters ...

A ballad? Someone actually wrote a ballad about me?

It didn't make sense.

He felt so dirty, so broken so much of the time. So... average. It was hard to not feel disgust towards the frame that had been so abused. It was hard to not believe he could have done something more to save himself—

He remembered what the Mind-Healer had said. She'd told him these feelings were normal, given his circumstances. Natural.

And that they weren't indicative of truth.
What was done to me has nothing to do with my worth.

I didn't deserve it. I fought as best I could.

I have nothing to be ashamed of.

Anakin paused, frowning down at a washer in his hand.

And now he realizes someone's standing here.

The golden head came up, blue eyes found his, and an expression both eager and afraid took control of the scarred face. “You're back.”

“I am.”

Anakin cocked his head and his eyes went distant for a moment. “And you didn't bring the Mind-Healer with you.”

Obi-Wan moved to sit on one of the steps. Joints protested. Obi-Wan accepted the pain in silence. His body wasn't as resilient as it used to be.

“You don't seem... scared. Last time you seemed scared.”

Obi-Wan looked him in the eye. “I was.”

“And now?” Anakin whispered.

“And now I'm ready. The Mind-Healer said I needed to wait until I was ready to invite you back into my life. I'm ready.”

Anakin lunged forward, small metal bits flying every which-way, throwing his arms around Obi-Wan in desperate relief.

The feeling of Anakin's arms clamped tight around him wasn't easy to take. It triggered several of the warning alarms that Zygerria had built into his brain and body.

Obi-Wan considered them, accepted them, and decided what he was going to do.

Anakin interpreted physical contact as acceptance, and the refusal of it as rejection.

Obi-Wan could stand a few more seconds of this.

Probably.

Awkwardly, unused to this sort of communication, he hugged Anakin back.


“I don't know what to do. Everything's broken and I don't know how to fix any of it.”

“I understand.” Obi-Wan thought of Korkie. “I understand.”
Mando’a Guide

Beskar’gam (Pronounced /bez-car-GAM/) = Mandalorian armor, forged with your family. Expresses your very self.
Chapter 17

Korkie couldn't quite believe his ears.

He'd been trying to resign himself to being left with strangers, tried to steel himself for whatever that might entail.

Never once had he considered that the Jedi his Aunt had loved so fiercely might take responsibility for him.

How could that Jedi stand there, looking so uncertain, and actually ask if the plan was acceptable to Korkie or if he wanted to head into the foster system or a boarding school?

Korkie stumbled all over himself to make sure Obi-Wan knew just how badly Korkie wanted to stay with him.

And then worried it might have been too much, and frightened the Jedi.

He remembered his Aunt talking about how with Jedi, less was more.

“I promise I'll get out of your hair as soon as I legally can.”

Ooh.

Maybe that wasn't fixing it.

Now, instead of looking overwhelmed, the man looked concerned. “You're not an imposition, Korkie. I don't want you to think that.”

Instead of trying to find words to say, and maybe make things even more complicated, the young Mandalorian wrapped the Jedi in a hug.

Korkie needed a hug.

Satine had always been free with them, and even peaceful Mandalorians had relied on their long history of using touch to communicate.

Obi-Wan's body felt like the Jedi had stepped into a trap and any flicker of movement might result in death.

Instead of letting go, Korkie held on, even though he knew better. “I miss her so much,” he choked.

A shiver ran through the older man, and then arms slowly moved to encircle him, holding him tight.

For the first time since his Aunt's death, Korkie thought that maybe...

It was going to be alright.

He released the Jedi and saw for a moment the depth of Kenobi's heartbreak, screaming through his eyes.

And then his focus was completely on the here and now.
“Did your academy have any sister-schools here on Coruscant?”

“No. In Mandalore’s colonies, sure, though Concord Dawn never allowed it. They weren’t big on cooperation."

A knowing smile sparked in Kenobi’s eye and almost reached his lips.

Clearly he had a story about Concord Dawn.

*I'll ask sometime,* Korkie vowed. “Could I take classes here in the Temple? Ahsoka came and taught at our Academy. Could I just sit in the back of the rooms here? It’s not like I have a long way to go to complete.”

A wry smile—this one including the Jedi’s mouth. “There’s a reason Ahsoka was teaching. Jedi children learn the same things as they would in public schools, but in half the time.”

Korkie’s eyes widened. “They’re that much smarter than the rest of us?”

“What? No. The public school system is half about learning, and half about occupying time. It doubles as a babysitting service from childhood through the teenage years. If they streamlined their curriculum, teaching styles, student-teacher ratio, and study hours, they could do what we’re doing. But then teenagers would be running wild with nothing to occupy their daytime hours. We don’t have that problem, since once our children complete the book-learning they’re taken as Padawans and spend the next ten-plus years in the field with hands-on experiences.”

“So I could sit in on classes... but I’d be surrounded by nine-year-olds?”

“Sorry.”

Korkie considered it. Yeah, maybe that would be difficult to take.

Or maybe not.

He knew that some of his peers had struggled with Ahsoka having authority over them and teaching them, since she was their age.

That hadn’t been a problem for Korkie. Ahsoka had the knowledge and the experience, what was the big deal?

Kenobi had explained that Korkie wasn’t *dumber* than these super-genius kids. It was simply that the two education systems had differing goals. The Jedi wanted to get the book-learning absorbed in as efficient and timely a way as possible. The public schools wanted to keep kids and teens out of trouble.

No wonder young Jedi seemed so... grown up. They knew a heck of a lot more than their non-Jedi peers.

*Yes. Maybe some of my classmates will make life uncomfortable. But... I've never experienced this kind of schooling before.*

*And I bet there's subjects that my Academy didn't have.*

*Granted, I won't be able to actually do any of the things they teach about the Force...*

*But...*
It was an opportunity.

Had a non-Force-sensitive student ever been taught at the Temple?

*Should I throw that away because some nine-year-olds might laugh at me?*

And really...

Would *he* have a problem if the kids didn’t?

*Not likely.*

For some of his friends, it would have been insurmountable.

Korkie's ego didn't work in that direction.

“Would I be allowed to learn at the Temple? I would probably have to live elsewhere, right?”

Obi-Wan considered it for a long moment. “No, I don't think that would be necessary. You're my ward. They'll find a room for you, get you a schedule, and go from there.”

Korkie felt a shiver of excitement.

For the next year and nine months...

He was going to be *living* in the mysterious Jedi Temple.

“But I must warn you: you may not find you feel comfortable at the Temple once you've been brought up to speed on...”

Korkie watched him search for words.

“My... clan, Korkie. It's... dysfunctional.”

The young Mandalorian watched the Jedi, wondering how much he should say. “I am... aware of the circumstances that brought my Aunt to Coruscant. And of the circumstances that brought her back to Mandalore. And why I'm here now. And Bo-Katan said that your former Padawan has a crimson Force-signature.”

Obi-Wan looked about ready to die. “My responsibilities are split at the moment. I have two battalions of clones that need looking after. I've taken Ahsoka on as my Padawan. And I need to help Anakin with his recovery. And I answer to a Mind-Healer at all times now. And I'm going to be running non-war-related missions, because I cannot stand still.”

“I don't think the Mind-Healer is embarrassing. And Padawan Tano is kind of amazing.” *And if I'm your ward and she's your Padawan, does that make us brother and sister?* “I get that the clones are people. My Aunt was very insistent on that. They're just as important as we are, and they're all different.”

Obi-Wan was slowly relaxing. “You may want to avoid being seen with me in public.”

“My Aunt wouldn't have.”

“You have your life ahead of you,” Obi-Wan countered. “She threw in her lot with me years ago. You have no such restrictions. Just know that I will understand if you want to keep out of sight.”

Korkie shook his head. “With all due respect, I think that's *not* the way to bring change. People try to
shame things that make them uncomfortable into the shadows, whether that be perceived physical defects, poverty, mental illness, or a subculture of people who see the universe differently than they do. They feel they have a right to *not* have to see, and that we owe them their fantasy-land of singular normalcy. The only way to *change* that is to refuse to let them have it. We refuse to let them shame us into hiding. The streets don't belong to them. We shouldn't be shoved out of sight... and we won't be.”

* * *

Obi-Wan’s heart ached.

He could hear Satine all through Korkie's impassioned speech.

“You are wise for your years. Your Aunt would be proud.”

“She still is. Now. About these missions. If I can keep up with my studies and not fall behind, would I be allowed to accompany you?”

Obi-Wan gave him a nod. “I'm specifically avoiding anything war-centric. I cannot guarantee that peaceful efforts will not devolve into violence, but I can promise it would only be in self-defense, and that I will do everything in my power to ensure you won't have to raise a weapon yourself.”

“My Aunt would appreciate that.” Korkie shook his head. “But, Master Jedi, I've killed before. I may be new to violence, but that doesn't mean I have my Aunt's aversion. Right after her death... things... well, before that. When people started wearing their armor in the streets, my friends and I started learning how to use blasters. Auntie was on Coruscant, of course, and didn't know. And then she died, and it was kill or be killed— and we didn't all make it—”

Obi-Wan scanned the boy in the Force. He was clearly still reeling after his first kill.

Obi-Wan made note to ensure the boy had access to a Mind-Healer.

“What I'm saying is I'm not a pacifist. My Aunt was, and I respect that. I know you aren't. And I respect that too. I'm not entirely sure where I stand yet, but I know it's not in the same place as Auntie.”

The boy's eyes were screaming *it would mean the world to me if you respect me too.*

Obi-Wan could understand his need to be treated as a rational being. So he bowed his head in acknowledgment. “Understood. Likewise understand that I would have been avoiding the war even if you hadn't come to me. I don't believe I'm ready for it. I want to avoid violence for as long as I can, for myself and for Anakin's sake as well. He's going to be beside me a lot soon.”

*There* it was.

Korkie finally looked uncomfortable. “Master Kenobi—”

“I told you that you can call me Obi-Wan.”

“That would make me very uncomfortable. I'm sorry. But as for the other thing... are you... *sure*?”

Obi-Wan braced himself. “Your objection being?”
“I— it's really not my place.”

“On the contrary,” Obi-Wan said softly, “we're in this together now. If I'm dragging you into this mess, it most certainly is your place.”

Korkie gave him a grim nod. “How often is it that an abused spouse goes back to the abusive partner?”

Obi-Wan stiffened, but held his tongue.

Korkie needed to be allowed to finish.

“I know you and my Aunt were— that Master Skywalker isn't— I know that it's not romantic between you and Master Skywalker. I also understand that you do make a family unit of sorts. And I'm concerned that the family unit remains. If the two of you weren't Jedi, and you were on the outside looking in, would you advise the abused partner to return to the other?”

Obi-Wan did his best not to cringe every time Korkie used the word abuse.

That was fragging hard.

For a long time Obi-Wan stood silent, trying to find both words, and his calm center.

His gut wanted to snap some harsh words at the boy and hope the subject never came up again.

*But I'm the adult who is going to be investing in his training and future now.*

Satine would have smiled and said he was Korkie's buir.

Obi-Wan was not comfortable with the word Father ... but he could understand that the responsibilities were going to be similar.

If he was going to use his own words instead of hers, then Korkie would be his non-Force-sensitive Padawan. Someone to cherish, help grow, turn loose as they came into their own.

That meant facing down the difficult discussions.

And this one had been inevitable.

Might as well get it out of the way first instead of waiting for it to fall.

“Anakin has no intention of hurting me again, and I will be watchful.”

Korkie looked sorrowful. “You know that's what they say, right? For example: an abused wife will assure worried friends or family that her husband has a good heart, he just gets overcome sometimes, and that she's sure he'll never do it again, because he's turning over a new leaf, and either way, she can take care of herself.”

Obi-Wan sat heavily in a chair.

“A childhood friend of mine ended up trapped in a situation like that,” he murmured. “And yes. She stayed with him far longer than I felt she should have. And yes. I eventually convinced her to leave him.”

And...
Obi-Wan had no idea where she or her son were now.

“She deserved so much better than the man she chose.” Obi-Wan sighed and rubbed at his beard.

“Has anyone suggested something similar about you and Master Skywalker?”

For a moment Obi-Wan was certain he was going mad, because he saw several thousand Quinlan Vos's staring at him.

*One is quite enough,* he begged.

Vos had been vocal against the situation even *before* Zygerria. He seemed to think that Obi-Wan didn't allow himself to shine because Anakin was a glory guzzler, and Obi-Wan felt the younger Jedi deserved it.

Vos claimed that if Obi-Wan would step away and take missions on his own more, Obi-Wan would find all sorts of things Obi-Wan didn't know he possessed.

“I raised him since he was a small boy. You have to understand, Korkie, that he was *nine* once. An innocent, scared little boy, whose greatest dream was to become a Jedi and free all slaves.” Obi-Wan wanted to smile at the memory. Found it difficult. “He'd never had a father-figure. Your Aunt used to try to bridge the gap between Jedi and other... household systems by using family terms.”

“Yes. She considered Master Skywalker your son. And hers.”

Obi-Wan's eyebrows flicked in surprise. So she'd been communicative with her adopted child.

*Of course she was, you idiot.*

“I'm going to use her terms for now, for the sake of communication. Your concerns are valid, but although Anakin and I are now equals, that was not always the case. We're not partners who started out as friends. He was, and still is, my son. And you *never* abandon your child, no matter what they've done to you.”

Obi-Wan watched as Korkie considered it.

“My Aunt would have agreed— about never abandoning your child. But her parents didn't. They turned her out and disowned her. Publicly.”

“Why do you think that is?” Obi-Wan encouraged.

“They considered tradition to be more important than their daughter.” Korkie scowled. “And Bo-Katan considered it more important than her sister.”

“And yet she chose to go against it to get you out of there.”

Korkie shook his head. “She seemed to feel guilt. But about Master Skywalker, I suppose... is he cooperating with professionals? He's being watched by therapists and he's cooperating?”

“Yes.”

Korkie squared his shoulders. “Then I will not intentionally cause strife with or over him.”

“I appreciate that.”

“But I'm not likely to respond well if he treats you badly.”

“You and Ahsoka both. And a whole lot of clone troopers.” Korkie's negotiation and affect
reminded him of something. “By the way. Should you decide you still want to pursue politics, I have two friends—” Obi-Wan paused.

*Did* he still consider Padmé a friend?

He didn't trust her. He was afraid of her influence over Anakin, and the fact they loved each other had *nothing* to do with it.

The self-interest involved on both sides was what terrified him.

But just because her relationship with Anakin wasn't healthy didn't mean she was a bad woman. Or that she was untrustworthy in other areas of her life.

She was a good politician. A good person. Kind. Generous. Honest—

*Except for where I'm concerned* —

And reliable.

Again, excepting Obi-Wan.

“The senators of Alderaan and Naboo. Either would be happy to help you pursue such a career. And if you want to head somewhere other than politics, I'm sure we can find individuals in other fields. That's an advantage of you being drawn close to the Order. We meet a lot of people in all kinds of professions. If I don't know somebody I can trust, there's bound to be another Jedi who does.”

* * *

Anakin felt nervous.

Very... *very* nervous.

If all went according to plan, he was going to rejoin the 212th and 501st.

And Korkie Kryze.

And Ahsoka.

And Obi-Wan.

No pressure.

It had been made very clear to him that he would have no authority over the clones whatsoever, and it had been made clear to *them* that they did *not* have to follow any directive he might give.

In fact...

They were told to *not*, at this point.

Anakin knew that the fact they'd been given orders on the subject, not just *you don't have to*, would give them a framework off which to build the following days. It would provide a little comfort, a little normalcy in a sea of troubles the regs and Kaminoans had *not* prepared them for.
Anakin had every intention of doing his *absolute* best to not give any orders. Whatsoever.

It was the least he could do—try to make it a little easier for them.

He also had no authority over Ahsoka, or Korkie.

*Certainly* not Obi-Wan.

He made his way from the officers' hangar to the bridge.

Some of the clones along that path refused to look at him, ignoring his existence. Some watched him with neutral, unreadable expressions.

And some glared after him with a malevolence that rocked Anakin to the core.

Some of these men *hated* him.

He'd never had a clone *hate* him before.

Ever.

He found the secondary bridge door closed, and as he entered the area, the door behind him slid shut.

In the now-cut-off area stood Obi-Wan, Ahsoka, Korkie, Cody and Rex. In the corner, watching, the Mind-Healer sat, unobtrusive.

Anakin's gaze flicked from Obi-Wan and Ahsoka, whose reactions he already had a pretty good handle on, to Cody.

The man looked unhappy, but that could only be found in his eyes. The rest of him was ruled by professionalism, and the Force around him practically sang of it.

Korkie didn't look a heck of a lot different, to Anakin's point of view. He stood near Obi-Wan. Not close enough to seem possessive, and there was nothing about his posture that suggested protectiveness.

He seemed to be a student, ready to learn.

But Anakin could sense more behind those blue eyes so calmly meeting his own.

This kid, who he'd seen *twice* before in his life, for less than five minutes each time, was ready to protect his *Obi-Wan* from him.

*Guess I deserve that,* he mused.

And then he looked to Rex.

And started as he saw the condition of his armor.

There was hardly a scrap of blue left.

Even the jaig eyes were merely vague impressions.

Rex looked sleepless, in pain, and wrecked.

It sobered Anakin.
He hadn't set out to hurt Rex.

Actions had strange cascading effects.

Anakin had never been good at calculating them ahead of time.

* * *

Boil kicked the base of his bunk, leaving a dent in the polished metal.

Skywalker was back.

Why was Skywalker back?

Boil's 501st brothers were strained to the breaking point, and Boil himself didn't dare go anywhere near the bridge.

Skywalker.

Betrayer.

No. More than that.

Traitor.

Something itched at the back of his mind, bringing up vague memories of dreams he never dared speak about.

Dreams he knew his brothers endured as well. He'd heard them talk about it, in hushed, terrified whispers.

Boil was sick of the dreams. Sick of waking up terrified he'd hurt his General, only to realize it was an illusion.

Boil wasn't the one who'd betrayed Obi-Wan Kenobi.

It was Skywalker.

And Skywalker was back.

Boil had tried to find out what punishment had been inflicted, and was horrified to discover the answer was none.

There'd been some enforced alone time to think, actually think, since Skywalker didn't do much of that...

But that was it.

That's practically leave-time, he snarled.

The Duchess was dead.

His General had tried to follow her.
Boil had never been in love, but he knew how terribly empty his heart felt without Waxer. He saw how Fives had gone stern and cold after he lost Echo.

Everything all piled together in one horrifying anchor, dragging him down, farther from oxygen, farther from light, into the murk, into the cold...

Waxer would have urged him to go talk to one of the brothers who specialized in mind care.

And Waxer was dead because of a Jedi who'd gone bad.

The Jedi wouldn't have let Krell go with just a slap on the wrist.

The Jedi had been horrified over what Krell had done to the 501st and 212th.

But when Skywalker harmed one of their own...

That was okay.

_It's because General Kenobi won't stick up for himself._

His General thought he deserved this. Thought he was responsible for Skywalker. Thought he had a duty towards him.

Duty.

Traitors.

Nightmares.

Death.

Boil groaned and dropped onto his bunk.

* * *

Padmé felt nervous as Yoda's small fingers pressed against her stomach.

His hand was warm. Gentle.

The ancient Jedi's eyes were closed, his ears raised as if listening.

“Strong they are,” he murmured. “Powerful, already.”

Padmé shook her head. “They're not far enough along to be—”

“Of _thoughts_ you speak, and of _body_. The Force and the mind, together _can_ work, but the Force, bound by time or _development_ is not.”

“But Master Yoda, their genders aren't even defined yet.”

“Hmm. And yet, individual Force-signatures each have. Pulsing bright, true. Full of light.”

Padmé felt sick. “How can they be light when... their father...”
“Separate from him they are.” Yoda sat back against the couch, looking tiny against its cushions.

Cute.

She would never say that out loud. At least, not to his face.

“The best of you, the best of him, they are. Their faults, their own will be.”

“But isn't it more likely they will... become... monsters... because of who their father is?”


“But you knew, when he was a child, that— I mean, I only saw a sweet kid, but you saw something else. You told everyone to stay away from him, and they didn't listen, and look what happened—”

His eyes saddened. “Pain, I sensed. Terrible pain in Obi-Wan's future. Much fear there was in the child Skywalker. And Master Windu, shatterpoints saw.”

“Is the danger over? The shatterpoints?”

Yoda shivered.

Padmé felt dread steal away her heart.

For a long time the ancient one didn't say a word.

Then he looked up at her, and to Padmé's horror she saw tears slipping from his eyes. “No.”

“Master Yoda—”

“Scored glass, ready to snap apart when struck— what shatterpoints are, this is. Many, inside Obi-Wan, broken have been. Others remain. The points leading to Mandalore, snapped are. Points leading everywhere else, remain still.”

Padmé couldn't quite make sense of what he was saying. “Another planet could be thrown into disaster?”

“Every planet. Every Jedi.”

“Anakin has that kind of power?”

“Yes.” Yoda reached out towards her stomach. “Since no bigger than your own children, he was. Obi-Wan, kingpin of the shatterpoint web is. Once broken, out of the way... all else unprotected lies. But stands, he still does. Holds.”

“How can that be?” Padmé protested. “He isn't a political figure, he's not the best Jedi you have, he's not even the most powerful—”

“A matter of placement, it is. Through Obi-Wan, Mandalore reached was. Work for the Sith, Mandalorians always have. A new army arises now. Dominoes. If holds, the first does, the others poised remain. Wavered, Obi-Wan did. A path, now burning is. If fall completely he does... lost we are.”

“Then why are you allowing Anakin to accompany him? And why did the Council relent and allow him into the Order in the first place? Shouldn't you have kept him as far away from Obi-Wan as
Yoda sighed. Padmé couldn't find a hint of anger, just immeasurable sadness.

"Trained Anakin without our approval, he would have. Said as much to me he did. Prevented this, our refusal would not. A different trigger there would have been. Entwine through the center of the shatterpoint web someone as volatile as Skywalker... a matter of time, it becomes."

*This was inevitable. If Zygerria hadn't happened, something else would have.*

Did Padmé believe it?

“But if Obi-Wan had distanced himself from the Order, wouldn't that have meant that when he came down... the galaxy wouldn't too?”

“A child, Skywalker was.” The look of clear helplessness in Yoda's face gutted Padmé. “*Bound* to fate he was not. Choices he still had. Opportunities. To throw away a child for what they might become, cruel would be. For hope, the Jedi Order stands. For *light*. To encourage people, their *best selves* to be.”

Padmé stood up and paced. “Your words aren't helping me figure out what to do. If I *have* these babies, because they have a *chance* of not being like their father, and they do something *terrible*, how could I ever live with myself?” *And is that what Obi-Wan's feeling right now?*

Yoda simply watched her.

“Why won't you tell me what to *do*?” she wailed, turning on him. “Why are you making me figure this out on my *own*? I'm not one of your Jedi. I'm not here for you to *teach*. I need *wisdom*. Not riddles. *What* can you tell me about the twins' future?”

He looked up at her, sorrowful.

It stung Padmé a little. She'd been short with him, when he hadn't laid a single word or look of blame on her. She'd lied to his face for a long time, and yet unlike Obi-Wan, he hadn't lost faith in her.

Yoda's eyes drifted shut, his mouth pursed, and he seemed to settle into himself. “The future, always in motion is. Many *possible* outcomes there are. Tiny variables, change everything can. Set in stone, is *nothing*."

He breathed in, breathed out...

“Clouded, their fates are. Perhaps because decided, you have not, whether live to see years of life they will.”

That made sense, Padmé supposed. “Fine. What are they like *now*? If their Force-signatures are so obvious, and Anakin's was *always* so dangerous, do you feel something similar with them?”

“The danger, *inherent* in young Skywalker is *not*. Comes, it does, from his unwillingness to listen. To trust. To learn. Focused on self, is he, and lose sight of others he does. Instead of kindness, fear of loss drives him. Willing to harm anyone to protect himself, he is. *Learned*, all such patterns are, *not born*."

*So that's why you take children so young?*

After all, the patterns had been *very* set, carved deep into Anakin's soul by the time he came to them.
“See them, I do. Your children.”
Padmé froze.

Yoda's eyes were still closed, his cheeks still damp, but a radiant smile lit his face, almost dazzling her.

“One, quiet. Thoughtful. At the mysteries of the universe, marvel they would. Seek out its wonders. With love reach out to people others find unlovable. Believe in the broken. See good where others despaired to find it have. Compassion. This one, gentle is. Gentle would be. The opportunity to express these things, the child has not yet, but written through the Force-signature they are. The future I need not see, to know this one's heart.”

Padmé waited in stunned silence for him to continue, unable to say a word.

Yoda's head tilted, and his beam turned into a more of a smirk. “The other. Impetuous. Fiery. Determined. The best of the father, this one has. Eager to communicate. Eager to convince. Surprised, I would not be, if politics this one chose, over any other profession.”

A politician?

“But— it's strong in the Force—”

“Not all Force-sensitives, meant to be Jedi are. This one... I suspect not. Perhaps wrong am I. Not the first time would it be.” Yoda's eyes opened, and back was the weight of old and new griefs. “Loud, this one, where the twin quiet is. As a team, forged, already they are. Communicate even now, they do, and communicate with you, I do not doubt they will as they have before.”

Padmé sat down again, her legs suddenly weak. “Obi-Wan discovered them. He said Anakin's Force-signature was inside me.”

“Mmm.” Yoda nodded. “When looked upon each alone, difficult to see Skywalker there. But when twine their signatures together they do... whispers, it does, of the father. For someone as close to Skywalker as Obi-Wan is, unmistakable it would be.”

“I don't know, Master. I don't think I'm ready for children. But I'm not sure I could give birth to them and hand them over to you.”

Yoda watched her with large, understanding eyes.

Why is he so understanding? Don't Jedi feel possessive about Force-sensitive babies? Like they're theirs by right?

“Bracing for a fight, you are,” Yoda observed. “Why?”

Padmé narrowed her eyes. “If I choose to not terminate the pregnancy, if I choose to give these two a chance, that doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to give them to the Jedi and resign myself to never seeing or hearing about them again.”

Yoda arched an eyeridge. “Is that how see us you do?”

“Isn't that the way it is?” she challenged.

“No.”

“Banthakark.”
Yoda shook his head, giving his ears a gentle sway. “In our culture, focused the formative years are. That where they came from defines them, limits them, many people feel. Believe this we do not. Focus, instead, on discovering who a child is by what's inside them. Not what was around them by birth. To mold them, we seek not, but to discover. Many young ones, never Padawans become, because for them the Jedi path is not. Seek to give them the tools they need for another life, we do. The life they fit. When a young adult knows who they are, and comfortable with it has become, then if seek out their home planet and family they desire, nothing to say against it I have. Some do. Some don't. But in their formative years, all equal they are. Prejudices from home planets, left behind are. Social status, wealth, pedigree—all meaningless as they discover themselves. Many knights and masters we have who dress from their homeworlds. Master Ti. Even Ahsoka, adopted customs from her homeworld has. Master Unduli. Master Secura. But each is what they choose to be, not what home circumstances suggest.”

“If I choose to have children, there's no way I'm going to wait sixteen to twenty years before being involved in their lives.”

“Think the one belongs with the Jedi I do not. Frustration, I believe would result. A cage it would be.”

“And the other?”

“The other, the temperament has. The curiosity. The wonder.”

“So you would take one and leave the other? That sounds... wrong.”

“Said nothing, I did, about taking.”

Padmé shook her head. “Even if you did take that one, how would you keep it away from Anakin? If keeping away from family is so Force-damn important—”

Yoda frowned. “Said anything about that, have I? Put these ideas into your head, who has?”

“Anakin—”

“Ignored, did he, the bond between Master Koon and his niece? Master Diath and his nephew? The twins Tiplee and Tiplar, who separated have never been, from birth to knighthood and beyond? Call one another 'sister' openly, they do. One battalion of clones, they share.”

Padmé blinked. “Wait. You didn't raise them to not know they were sisters?”

Yoda simply looked at her.

Padmé felt sudden guilt. It was so easy to look at the Jedi from outside their culture and make assumptions. So easy to judge. So easy to dismiss and ignore.

There are many different kinds of normal. Their normal is just as legitimate as mine, even if I don't understand it.

Satine had so easily accepted that idea.

Padmé wondered what her friend would have done had she had a Force-sensitive baby...

The loss of Satine ached in her heart.

The Duchess had known what it was like to love a Jedi, and she'd had so many more years of
experience than Padmé possessed. She'd been a good listener, had only given advice when asked...

And was quite dead.

*I'm on my own, here.*

“Pressure a parent to give up their child, we do not,” Yoda said gravely. “Wrong, that would be.”

Padmé shook her head. “I think I may have picked up some stereotypes, Master Yoda. I'm sorry.”

He bowed his head gravely. “Easy to do, that is.”

“It is. And I don't want to keep doing it. I want you to explain to me what the options for the twins are, should I choose to bring them full-term. Motherhood always seemed so far away, I've never given it much thought; and the last few weeks I've spent panicking. I want to focus.”

Yoda's eyes sparkled with fondness, and several decades seemed to lift away. “Different, you are. Try to understand us, you do. Your friends, the Jedi will always be.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

We are swiftly approaching the end; soon I will know the exact amount of chapters left in this story. All of you have been wonderful, so thank you.

“Sure thing, Master Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan heaved a sigh and turned to Korkie. For the billionth time, this again?

He was just going to ask.

“Why is it so difficult for you to call me Obi-Wan?” he asked, patient but tired.

Korkie paused in the doorway. “It's not what I'm used to calling you.”

“What are you used to calling me?”

“Uncle Ben.”

The air fell out of Obi-Wan's lungs, leaving him staring at Korkie in stunned silence.

“It wasn't safe to talk about you, because Death Watch spies might hear. So Auntie designated that as a codename for you. That way, if we were overheard, it wouldn't be...” Korkie's voice faltered.

Wouldn't be what Anakin did.

Neither of them was willing to say it.

Finally, Korkie pulled his shoulders back and raised his head. “There was a backstory to go along with the codename. Uncle Ben was a policeman—”

A bark of laughter in Obi-Wan's mind. Why, that infuriating, smug little Mandalorian woman—

“—on Taris.”

Taris. Also known as “Little Coruscant.”

And a few thousand years ago, it had been home to a Temple outpost. Jedi had once lived there.

Clever Satine. So clever.

But a policeman?

How many ways had Satine found to taunt him when he wasn't around to see it? He had a sneaking suspicion he might find out, with Korkie by his side.

And of course the boy had no idea that calling a Jedi a policeman meant. The belittling it entailed.
He stood there, innocent and unassailable.

Somehow, even after death, Satine had just gotten him back for all the times Obi-Wan had teased her by calling her a Mandie.

_You win._

He realized Korkie was still watching him. He pulled himself together and hoped not too much time had passed.

“Are you refusing to call me Obi-Wan because you can't remember to, or is it because you don't want to?” he asked.

Korkie flushed a little.

Ah-ha. _Thought_ so.

Korkie met his gaze through the embarrassment and held his head high. “I would never have called you by your first name if Auntie were alive, even if it had been safe to do so. I was raised to respect adults, especially if they were... family. If I change that... it feels like I'm forgetting Auntie. It doesn't feel right. I understand I need to keep moving forward, but I would like to respect her memory too.”

The familiar, astounding pain from the hole in his heart...

He still wasn't sure how he was going to be able to _live_ with it, but...

“It's only right. Her memory is worth respecting,” Obi-Wan spoke up, keeping his tone brisk to try to move past the aching that made him want to sit in a corner and weep again.

He'd _done_ that. _Twice._ Once with Padmé, once with Ahsoka. Enough was enough.

“If you want to call me Uncle Ben, I think I can manage that for her.”

Astounded gratitude flooded Korkie’s face. “You— I never— _wow._ Um... _thank you._”

Obi-Wan saw the light rolling of weight towards the foot closest to him, saw the turn of the shoulders —

Oh, _dear._ The boy wanted to _hug_ him.

There’d been so _many_ hugs of late—

He braced himself.

But Korkie kept his feet planted to the floor, and instead closed his eyes, his face furrowing in concentration.

“What are you—” Obi-Wan started, and then was smacked in the face with a wave of gratitude flowing off of Korkie. It drove away the cold that he couldn't seem to banish from his bones, and it eased the sharp agony of loss to a quieter ache.

Korkie opened one eye, peering at the older man. “Did it work?”

“What... were you trying to do?” Obi-Wan asked, bewildered.

“For a lot of people, hugs are a way of communicating. Imparting a warmth inside the soul. My Aunt
told me that Jedi hug... but they hug with their minds. They don't feel the same thing we feel when they are hugged. It's uncomfortable for them. For you. So she told me that if I needed to express that warmth, I had to focus on what it was that I wanted to convey with the hug, and think it really, really loudly until it was the only thing in my mind. With an intensity to where you almost can't breathe. That the Jedi would feel it. Did it work?"

Obi-Wan's throat closed, and he nodded.

“Good.” Korkie smiled and slipped from the room, leaving Obi-Wan standing alone.

Tears blurred his vision.

Korkie... understood him? Korkie had taken the time to reach out to him in a way that could reach him?

Even Anakin hadn't done that.

Anakin had discounted Obi-Wan as cold because Obi-Wan couldn't express love Anakin's way, and had scoffed whenever Obi-Wan tried to explain it. Obi-Wan had tried to meet him half-way, but he wasn't built that way and it would have been so much more likely to succeed if Anakin had been willing to try too...

What had he done to deserve Korkie? The boy was incredible. He deserved a lot more than tagging along behind a Jedi.

*I'll make sure he gets it.*

Whatever Korkie decided to study, he would get there. Obi-Wan would find him the mentors he needed, find him connections.

Had Satine simply been trying to raise Korkie to be multiculturally sensitive? To think outside the box when it came to physical components in relationships?

*Or ...*

Korkie had Satine.

No-one else.

And while the danger hadn't always been visible, it had always been present.

Had Satine been preparing Korkie so that if something happened to her, he would be as compatible with Obi-Wan as possible? Knowing Obi-Wan would look out for him, had she trained Korkie to understand Jedi, to be able communicate with one, so that both of those she left behind would come out of it better off than if they'd been left to their own devices?

*Sly. So sly, you beautiful Mandie.*

Korkie was going to be anything but a burden.

In fact...

Obi-Wan's memory that he'd been willing to turn Korkie over to a boarding school should the boy want it now seemed unfathomable. Korkie apparently had a place in Obi-Wan's heart and life, after just a couple of days that Obi-Wan hadn't realized existed.
The last time he'd taken a young person under his wing, the two had been completely incompatible. Unable to communicate. Unable to reach across the cultural barriers that kept them apart. Obi-Wan couldn't cross it all by himself, he'd needed Anakin to try too.

And...

Heartbreak had ensued.

The realization that Korkie Kryze was reaching out to him brought tears to Obi-Wan's eyes.

Obi-Wan had begun to wonder if Obi-Wan Kenobi was a person worth reaching out to.

To think that maybe there was something wrong with him.

Maybe the relationship between Obi-Wan and his child was a painful labyrinth of danger and confusion...

But it looked like he could have something quiet and strong with Satine's child.

She'd always looked out for Obi-Wan.

She was Mando, as well as pacifist. Of course she'd thought of the possibility of her death. Of course she'd weighed what it might do to Obi-Wan.

Of course she'd faced her options with the tactical brilliance that was her birthright.

He loved her still.

Desperately.

Terribly.

With all of his soul.

He missed her.

He would always miss her.

* * *

Cody realized his General hadn't seen him step through the door, so for a moment he simply watched.

The Jedi stood there, lost in thought, body relaxed in that feline grace all Jedi possessed. His face was calm.

Anyone but a clone might assume he was contemplating what he'd had for lunch.

But Cody knew better than to read his body language or expression.

He went for the eyes.

Cody had countless brothers who looked identical. In the early days of training on Kamino, the
Kaminoans didn't allow them to individualize their hair. Or clothes. Or armor. Or living spaces. And tattoos were definitely out. Most of them hadn't received scars yet.

And before Jedi Master Shaak Ti had come to protect the clones from the Kaminoan scientists...

The tall, compassionless aliens had seen any sign of emotion as a sign of weakness.

Too much weakness...

And you failed.

They didn't keep failures. They killed failures.

It had built into Cody and his brothers the ability read the finest muscle twitches in a face. The smallest shifts in the tone of a voice.

Taught him to not believe serene expressions.

Taught him how to read eyes.

Sometimes, the eyes were the only way to tell brother apart from brother in a sea of thousands.

Often, the eyes were the only way to tell what a brother was thinking and feeling.

Cody had discovered Jedi were the same way.

Their feelings ran deep. Not loud.

They required watching and care to discover. Tenacity.

Cody hated what had been done to his brothers on Kamino, but it had given them the tools to connect with their Jedi. Granted, it wasn't the tools the Kaminoans had thought they were imparting. Jedi across the galaxy had been systematically uprooting those and throwing them out, trying to invest in the clones' personhood and self-worth.

Shaak Ti had arrived after Cody had shipped out, but he had been to Kamino since her takeover.

It was a different place.

And his brothers practically worshiped her.

“Defective” clones didn't die anymore.

The little brothers didn't huddle together, terrified if a squad-mate's eyes were blue. Or his hair blond. Or if he had a lisp.

Shaak Ti would protect him.

With the Jedi, being different wasn't an offense. It was encouraged.

Thinking was encouraged. Questioning. Learning.

So instead of following protocol and drawing attention to himself, Cody watched Obi-Wan's eyes, reading them for long moments. Refusing to rush. Refusing to assume.

And then he knew.
Knew the level of agony Obi-Wan was enduring.

The weight of Obi-Wan's grief nearly buckled Cody's knees.

Great Force, how did he stand it?

Obi-Wan's gaze tracked to his as the General realized he wasn't alone anymore. He gave Cody a quiet smile. "Status?"

His voice sounded so normal.

His eyes said something else entirely.

Cody had no doubt his Force-signature looked calm and collected too.

Did Skywalker ever bother to look beneath the surface, or had he been too impatient, unwilling to invest the time and effort to actually know how Obi-Wan was doing?

To actually know Obi-Wan?

And Cody knew the answer to that, because he'd seen into Skywalker's eyes.

Cody had many brothers.

Obi-Wan had one.

His heart ached for his General, but it wouldn't make Obi-Wan's burden lighter if he brought it up. So, instead, he gave him a formal nod and offered up his report.

Structure. It helped Cody when the world came undone.

He knew it helped his General too.

Jedi and clone?

Perfect match.

Cody didn't know what would happen to them after the war, but he desperately hoped he'd be allowed to stay by Kenobi's side. He completed his General, and Cody would never be complete without him.

His place was guarding Kenobi's back.

Always. No matter what.

Skywalker may have betrayed Kenobi...

But Cody never would.

* * *

Anakin didn't know what he'd been expecting. Ahsoka had mentioned something about people treating Obi-Wan not very well, and the Mind-Healer had encouraged him to simply observe today,
but this was not what he'd envisioned.

“Hey! Jedi bitch!”

Obi-Wan's shoulders set and he didn't look around, but Anakin spun to find the voice, furious disbelief rising in his throat.

He caught the rotten meiloorun with the Force before it could strike Obi-Wan's head. Force it stank.

“Taking your bitch for a walk, General Skywalker?”

Anakin's eyes blazed and he took a menacing step towards the offending—


Anakin stared back at him in disbelief. Obi-Wan met his gaze with a quiet glance.

“He can't talk to you like that.”

“We're not here to pick a fight. We're here to help. And if you try to shut down everyone who says those sorts of things to me, you're not going to have time for anything else.”

“It can't be that bad, can it—”

Obi-Wan was looking over his shoulder. The smaller Jedi's eyes widened, and then he spun around and dragged Anakin after him.

“What? What is it?” Anakin craned his neck to see—

And then the chaos struck.

* * *

Ahsoka, out of hearing but not out of sight, felt a shudder through the Force.

Felt Obi-Wan trying to escape— his soul hunkering down to outlast.

Felt Anakin's growing bewilderment, growing anger—

She dropped the crate she'd been moving and bolted for them. “Fives, grab two squads and follow me! Media drill.”

“Sir, yes Sir!”

* * *

Anakin tried to make sense of the babbling voices, of the flashes of light, of the people in their faces as he tried to push his way through them—
Recording devices of all shapes and sizes—

So many beings—

Obi-Wan looked made of stone as he ducked his head and shoved his way through, apparently not worried about politeness. At all.

“General Skywalker. Would you say General Kenobi is the best you've had, or somewhere lower on the list?”

What the frip? There was a holodisk in his face —

He knocked it from her hand and followed Obi-Wan.

But the mob of reporters was amoebic. They see you headed one direction, those at the back ooze forward so by the time you're through, there's a whole 'nother batch— sometimes ones you've fought past before already once—

“General Kenobi. Are you and General Skywalker a couple now? He seems pretty interested in keeping you away from us and all to himself.”

Anakin leveled the speaker a glare that could freeze Mustafar.

“Perhaps you'd like to comment?” the reporter asked eagerly, turning to Anakin.

Don't you understand what a glare means?

Evidently not.

“Master Kenobi, what answer do you have for Senator Orn Free Taa's public statement that you are a disgrace, and I quote, 'The best thing General Kenobi can do now to serve the Republic is fade out of sight and memory, and hopefully never feel the need to shine the spotlight into whatever corner he crawls into. Maybe then we can return to the important issues at hand’?”

“Jedi Kenobi, would you say you are still suicidal?”

“General Kenobi, are you on suicide watch?”

“General Skywalker, are you aware there's a holonet fanclub entitled General Skyfripper dedicated to your sexual prowess? Members are calling themselves Skybitches and are vying with one another for the honor of being your next exhibitionistic conquest. Their tagline? 'Rough us up.’”

“General Kenobi, as the first ever Skybitch, do you have any words of advice for those who seek to follow in your footsteps?”

“Master Skywalker—”

Anakin froze. He couldn't move and there were just so many, and it was so loud, and he couldn't get out, get away from them, and they were saying such wretched things—

Anakin felt blind panic building, building—

Obi-Wan turned, and for the first time looked up. He moved close, gripping Anakin's forearm, sensing impending disaster. “Steady,” Obi-Wan breathed. “Steady.”

These people were evil, they didn't care, they were taking pictures —

Obi-Wan's fingers squeezed tighter. “Don't hurt them,” his voice came desperately over their bond.
“But they're hurting you—” 

“This isn't new, Anakin. It's just new to you.”

It... this had happened before? Anakin thought he might vomit all over the filthy lifeforms clawing at him. “They've been hounding you like—”

“Just keep walking. We'll go to the ship, lock them out. Come on.”

Anakin's feet wouldn't move.

“Please,” Obi-Wan pleaded.

The undercurrent of dread his Master felt only made things become that much worse. Obi-Wan was afraid he was going to hurt these people.

As though these people somehow had worth or rights.

Anakin couldn't make out their words anymore. Just the noise, the chaos, people jostling him—

And then a hand reached for Obi-Wan's groin —

What the hell?

Anakin's fist shot out, a vicious Force blow that sent the groper and half a dozen intrigue-chasers flying.

Obi-Wan dragged him through the opening created, setting a punishing pace for the ship. “Follow me. Now, Anakin.”

Anakin stumbled after him, ignoring the now even more fervent clamor behind him.

And then familiar white armor surrounded them, providing a buffer. Physically shoving gawkers back and away.

Obi-Wan kept moving, so Anakin followed.

“Commander Tano! There's a rumor that you are now General Kenobi's Padawan. What made you leave General Skywalker?”

“Padawan Tano, has your former Master, General Skywalker, ever molested you?”

“Ahsoka— may I call you Ahsoka?— in the wake of your new Master's suicide attempt, do you think you may have been better off staying with Skywalker?”

“Commander Tano, is it possible that General Kenobi's suicide attempt is connected to your becoming his Padawan, or would you have us believe the two events are unrelated?”

“Padawan Tano, is your former Master interested in women too, or is it men only for the Skyfripper? There is a raging debate on the holonet as to whether female Skybitches have a chance. As apprentice and heir to his legacy, can you give these passionate ladies hope?”

“Listen to my voice,” Obi-Wan commanded over their link. “Only to my voice.”

“But, Master, they're saying such disgusting—”
“I’m the only one who matters right now. Understand? My voice only. Listen to me, Padawan.”

Obi-Wan hadn’t called him that in a long time. It nearly stopped Anakin’s heart.

“But Ahsoka — we can’t leave Ahsoka back there — ”

“You’d be surprised how talented she has become at shutting them down and sending them home.”

“They’ll eat her up — ”

“Anakin. Trust your Padawan, and trust me.”

Inside the ship, with the door locked, the sound was muffled.

Anakin stood in cold shock, and realized he was trembling.

Obi-Wan watched him for a long moment.

Anakin tried to look at him but couldn’t. Couldn’t meet his questioning gaze—

“I’m sorry,” Obi-Wan mourned.

“You’re sorry?”

“I knew what they were like, and I brought you into public with me. I practically painted a target on your back. I’m surprised they have only now caught up to us.”

Anakin shook his head. This was his third day working alongside Obi-Wan, and today they’d diverted from their initial plan because of a report that a housing complex had collapsed a few levels down from Coruscant's glittering surface.

For the last several hours, they’d been using the Force to locate and rescue the trapped and wounded. Because they could lift massive chunks of duracrete away, they were able to reach the injured days before a work crew would have managed it.

The work reminded Anakin of his apprenticeship.

Back in the days when Jedi helped people.

He found missing children and paired them back up with their frantic families. He carried bleeding, terrified people clear of the rubble and handed them over to Kix.

He watched the years and burdens peel off of Obi-Wan as he threw himself, body and soul, into saving people.

The expected death toll estimate made by the Disaster Response team the Jedi had found on-site?

Thirty-three.

The actual count?

One.

And that one had died before the Jedi and clones arrived.

It had felt good, and Anakin hadn’t felt this clean since the Tusken massacre.

Obi-Wan had glowed in the Force, beautiful...
And now...

Anakin felt covered in filth.

“What is wrong with them?” he asked, his voice trembling in outrage. “People just lost their homes, and they trample all over that to come after us—”

“At least we completed our work before they arrived,” Obi-Wan soothed. “They could have found us while we were still trying to pull people from the wreckage. It's difficult to work around them, but the clones have learned how to block them very efficiently.”

Anakin dragged his leather-clothed metal hand down his face. “Force, Obi-Wan—”

He couldn't begin to express the humiliation he felt. Obi-Wan had been exposed to all of this... saw this as the new normal...

“Let's go back to the Resolute.” Obi-Wan headed for the cockpit of the shuttle. “You want to pilot?”

Dimly, Anakin realized Obi-Wan was trying to draw him out. Distract him.

Flying wasn't going to fix this.

* * *

“You didn't come down for dinner, and Jesse said you were still in here—” Obi-Wan froze.

His gaze took in the chaos of the darkened strategy room. Anakin stood rigid, hands planted on the holotable, head bowed.

“What are you doing?” Obi-Wan asked, voice cautious.

Anakin didn't look back at him. It was obvious, so he wasn't entirely sure why Obi-Wan had asked. The evidence was suspended in the air before him, the blue of its glow the only light in the room.

“Looking through the news.” Or... at least... he had been. For the last half-hour he'd been staring at his hands.

Obi-Wan drew in an almost-steady breath. “Why?”

“I had to see if Taa really said what they claimed, and he did, and there's—”

More. A lot more.

He reached out and cleared the holos.

But he couldn't erase the main image from his brain.

Obi-Wan, hand on Anakin's arm, looking concerned up into his scowling face.

He was trying to keep me from hurting them... and they used it against him.

That image was everywhere.
In certain chat rooms, Anakin had even seen people using it as their *avatar*.
The holonet had blown up, and that picture was the cause.
Headlines across all the major news sites accompanied it.
And worse.
The *little* news agencies. The ones who didn't even claim hold to a standard.
Anakin's fingernails clutched at the metal of the table.
He couldn't drive the headlines from his mind.
“Jedi falls prey to the charms of his abuser.”
“Hungry for more: Jedi like it rough!”
“Jedi Courtship Unveiled.”

*That* one cited an anonymous source in the Temple who claimed that vicious public rape was just a Jedi's way of saying they're interested in you.
They *made it up*. The *source*, the *story*, all of it—
And according to the reactions of people who'd bothered to view it...

There were a lot of people who *believed it*.

“You know the news,” Obi-Wan murmured. “They'll find some new scandal and they'll forget all about us. They want shocking headlines that bring in consumers. They'll get bored with us when the public gets sick of hearing our names, and they'll move on to the next thing.”

Anakin had been unable to feel more than gut-punched shock while searching the holonet.

Now?
The anger flared to life.

“It's *wrong*. They don't *own* us, they shouldn't be allowed to *do* this—”
Obi-Wan sighed. “Anakin, reporters... it's what they do. You don't *have* to pay attention to the news. You can ignore it. I haven't been on the holonet in weeks. It's possible, and it's actually pretty peaceful.”

Anakin's fingers clenched tighter, his living bones aching from the strain.

“You've been living with this.”

His Master didn't answer.

“Obi-Wan?”
The agonized question pulled an answer from his friend. A murmured, “You'll get used to it.”

“I don't *want* to get used to it!” Anakin cried, spinning around and taking a step forward. Fury billowed about him like a black cape.
Obi-Wan's body tensed and he took a quick step backwards, eyes wide.

Anakin felt guilty—

But Obi-Wan was forcing his breathing to steady, was relaxing his stance, was reversing the step he'd retreated.

Anakin couldn't sense what he was feeling, though, he was still too angry.

But at least Obi-Wan seemed to not be quite so traumatized by it anymore.

That was good, because Anakin couldn't stop it. “They talk about you like you're a—” he searched for a word vile enough, a word that could express a tenth of the—

“Anakin.” The word was so gentle. It reminded him of Obi-Wan's cool hand bathing his forehead when he'd been so horrifyingly sick as a Padawan. The fever had nearly killed him.

His anger fell away, as if his soul had turned into a sieve.

“I wish I could make them stop,” Anakin whispered.

Obi-Wan took another step in his direction, the concerned, compassionate look on his face killing Anakin. “The best way to do that is to carry on, as if their words are meaningless. Because they are. Meaningless.”

A hand, on his shoulder.

Squeezing.

And then receding footsteps.

Anakin stood frozen, unable to watch him leave, because Anakin hadn't meant it that way.

He wanted to force them to stop. If someone dared speak of Obi-Wan like that, he wanted to choke them, make them stop, scare the others into never treating Obi-Wan that way again, ever — he would protect Obi-Wan—

It was a really, really good thing Obi-Wan couldn't hear any of that.

* * *

Obi-Wan sank into a chair, trembling.

In one way, what had just happened had been very difficult.

The hecklers, and especially the reporters still got to him.

Obi-Wan believed what he'd told Anakin, believed it to his core, but that didn't necessarily make the situation easier. It was an ongoing battle.

So yes. Today's encounter with the press had been excruciating.

In another... it had been infinitely better than before.

Because instead of it being aimed only at himself, it had been thrown at Anakin too.
And Anakin had been panicking. He'd needed Obi-Wan.

And again, in the strategy room.

Obi-Wan had been able to turn himself over to the need to help. To comfort.

He forgot himself in order to take care of someone else. Someone who desperately needed it. And nothing soothed his soul more than that.

But then... right near the end...

It had all broken through and he'd needed to get out. If he didn't feel so pitiful, he would have been impressed that he'd managed to walk and not run from the room.

As it was, he'd ducked into the nearest empty room with chairs, and fallen into one.

And... immediately started to doubt himself.

Should he have left Anakin? Should he have tried a hug? Should he have said more, said less? Should he have pretended he didn't notice what Anakin had been doing? Should he have—

He didn't know the answers to any of those questions, but he was sure he'd messed it up.

Because he always messed it up. That's why Anakin was struggling now, wasn't it? It had to be his fault.

I raised him.

He drew in a deep breath and held it, sinking into a familiar breathing exercise to try to stave off the panic.

* * *

Ahsoka followed the turbulence and found Obi-Wan in a darkened consultation room.

“Master?”

Saying the word, now that Obi-Wan wasn't just a Master but her Master, sent a shiver up her arms. Of gratitude, of grief...

And a promise to be the Padawan he deserved.

Obi-Wan's eyes, focused on the ceiling, dropped to look at her, but he didn't say a word.

Ahsoka approached slowly, to give him plenty of time to move if he needed space.

He held still and watched her, his face twisted in discomfort.

The Padawan knelt on the floor beside him. “It was a rowdy bunch today. How are you feeling?"  
She saw him open his mouth to give her an answer designed to make her leave as soon as possible—  
Saw him remember her request he never lie to her about his mind again—
Remember that choosing to tell her the truth gave him power. Put him back in control, and he needed control. He felt powerless at the moment.

A little of the tension in his shoulders eased. “Not well.”

“What do you need from me right now?” Ahsoka asked, hearing Satine's voice whisper in her mind.

Relief crossed Obi-Wan's face. “I need you to make sure Anakin is safe, since I can't right now. He was going through the news.”

Ahsoka patted his cold hand and stood. “I will go do that immediately. Do you think I should send someone else in?”

Obi-Wan blew out a rough gust of air and grimaced. “Master Elvett.”

Ahsoka let her pride in him sing through the Force as she strode from the room.

Behind her, Obi-Wan leaned back in his chair and wasn't quite sure why Ahsoka felt it...

But it stilled some of the raging self-doubt.
Kenobi was in the way again.

Sidious had entertained hopes that Zygerria might have made him no longer a threat. Somehow, it had made him even more of one.

Sidious needed Skywalker to be a war hero. And if the war hero went peace-preaching, it would really frop with the plan. The script had been so simple. The Team, heroic and beloved, rescue the venerable Chancellor from the evil Dooku. Dooku dies in the process... but not before he kills Kenobi. That would catapult Skywalker from hearthrob darling of the people to anguished savior. And when the protector of the people who has suffered so much loss stands and tells them they should make a Chancellor an Emperor, the people's hearts would cry out to him, and victory be to the Sith.

Anakin, in typical fashion, wasn't doing what he was supposed to do.

Sidious was still revising the plan in the wake of the Skywalker-betrayed-Kenobi problem. Oh, it had been very satisfying, of course. Sidious had long wished somebody would put the scrawny Jedi in his place. Force, unimportant, as far from a child of prophecy as possible, weak, it was astounding Kenobi had been such a thorn in his side for so long.

But now Sidious had a bigger problem than before.

Kenobi was mending his relationship with Skywalker.

That was fine; that could play into the original script again. Sidious might not have to reinvent the whole thing. Which would be nice. He had been perfecting it for the last thirteen years, and it would be a shame to rush a new script.

What wasn't alright was the twist Kenobi had thrown into the mess.

So like him.

So many Jedi were so focused on the Living Force that they completely missed the eddies of darkness that Sidious couldn't quite erase. He was a born chameleon, it's part of the reason Plagueis had chosen him. He was the only individual in the galaxy who could hide right under the noses of the Jedi Council.

But Kenobi lived and breathed the Cosmic Force. Whispers of how the puzzle pieces fit together on the largest of scales danced through that accursed head, and if he'd been allowed to chase after them, thirteen years ago on Naboo, he might have unraveled the secret.

Thank the Force for Qui-Gon Jinn.

Sidious hadn't realized at the time the danger he'd been put in. The Padawan was so quiet and unassuming that his talent hadn't been readily recognizable. Sidious had assumed that someone so bound to the Living Force as Qui-Gon would have an apprentice of the same caliber. It had made
them the perfect pair to investigate the Trade Federation, since Valorum would send Jedi. They'd be caught up in the moment, never realize something larger was happening.

But the apprentice wasn't a mini Qui-Gon Jinn.

And he'd sniffed trap from the beginning.

Fortunately, Qui-Gon had felt the need to stomp on Obi-Wan's gift. Hadn't been willing to acknowledge that the Jedi Order needed both kinds of Jedi.

And even more fortunately, Obi-Wan wasn't Anakin.

Instead of resenting Qui-Gon's direction and going his own path...

He'd listened. Obeyed.

Let it go.

And now here they all were. So close to victory.

So close to power.

Kenobi's link to the Cosmic Force had messed things up on Naboo months ago. Skywalker had been almost ready to turn. He'd seized Dooku's throat, and the rage and hatred in him was ready. Palpatine stood by and waited for the inevitable. The script would alter—Skywalker would turn first, then wait, and rescue Palpatine from Grievous instead of the already-dead Dooku. Kenobi still dying aboard the Invisible Hand.

And if Kenobi had been a Living Force fiend, he would have gone back home to Coruscant after the whole “botched” kidnapping plot.

But he hadn't.

Because he'd sensed there was more. That the kidnapping hadn't been the point. That the kidnapping had been trapings to stretch Skywalker to the breaking point, then isolate him, and present him with Dooku to kill.

He didn't figure out all of that, of course, but he put enough together to come running to his apprentice's aid.

And so the fall of Anakin Skywalker had to be deferred.

Kenobi.

And now, again. Looking at the vast picture instead of the little one. The Jedi fought in the war because more innocents would die if they refrained than if they took charge. They fought in the war because they couldn't leave the clones alone, couldn't watch a slave army die for the Republic without standing side-by-side with those slaves, suffering the same lot as them.

But Kenobi saw the picture. He saw that they couldn't abandon either the contested planets or the clones...

But also...

That Jedi could be in multiple places at once.
And that the war needed to end... but not by *violence*.

That kind of massive, multi-dimensional thinking was a problem.

Not because it could unravel the plan. No. This war had never been about what the *people* wanted. Dooku had everything under control on his side, and Sidious would manipulate the Senate. No. Even if Kenobi had the people clamoring for peace, it wouldn't *accomplish* anything.

But it *could* still wreck things if Kenobi turned *Skywalker* into a *protestor* instead of a *war hero*. The people would forgive him his scandal if he fought for them. As long as he still cut the image of a hero.

Anything else was not acceptable.

Sidious wanted the *hero* to add legitimacy to his takeover and Jedi purge.

So he found himself facing down *another* Jedi tuned into the Cosmic Force.

This one didn't pretend to be polite. This one, like Kenobi, didn't trust Palpatine.

But this one didn't care to *hide* it.

“Master Windu. Have you any idea of the uproar the Senate is in right now?”

The Jedi looked down at him, unsympathetic. “It usually is. They might get bored otherwise.”

“I assure you, it is no laughing matter,” Palpatine said, trying to make his voice sound as grave as possible.

It didn't move the man standing before him.

Mace Windu did to Sidious what Anakin Skywalker did to the Council.

“Why didn't Master Yoda come? I specifically asked for him.” Palpatine stifled his annoyance. “He's currently tied up by other matters.” Mace kept watching him with those infuriatingly indifferent eyes.

“Perhaps reinstating young Skywalker into the war effort would *help*.”

“I though the Senate wanted him locked away,” Mace answered coolly.

“Fortunately I was able to make them see reason. The situation clearly wasn't what it *seemed* to be. Masters Kenobi and Skywalker were on an undercover mission. Deception to its core. And with the Separatist army gaining ever more ground, we need our prize Generals back.”

“I hate to disappoint you, Chancellor, but I don't think the likelihood of convincing them to return is very high.”

He hated it, did he?

What *Sidious* hated was the way Windu patronized. The way he blatantly just *didn't care* to observe the niceties of politics. Yoda, at least, knew how to *pretend* to be polite.

“It would be one thing if they were on furlough to recover, but with General Kenobi traipsing about the galaxy running errands that, forgive me, but *any* Jedi of *far less* caliber could accomplish-- and not just that, but *denouncing* the war—”

“I thought you were opposed to the war as well, Chancellor.”
Oh, the *mockery* in his voice.

If anyone was going to figure Sidious out, it was going to be Mace Windu.

He always thought the worst of people.

“I am, but the depredations of the Separatists must not go unchecked.”

“We are checking them. We're just doing it without Kenobi and Skywalker.”

“I don't see the point, Master Jedi.”

Mace came very close to shrugging. The *insolence* of it!

“Chancellor, the Jedi were never meant to be soldiers. We agreed to lead the clones for multiple very sound reasons. However, that was never meant to be a long-term solution. Obi-Wan is just exploring other options. A little something called *peace.*”

“I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to recall Master Kenobi at once. We simply cannot do without him and Skywalker.”

Windu matched his tone. “I'm afraid Master Kenobi has gone a bit rogue and isn't answering to the Council at the moment.”

Palpatine narrowed his eyes. He was sure the man was lying. Why didn't the Jedi Code forbid lying? It would make things so much more *straightforward* — “I'm sorry, I was under the impression he still held a position on the Council.”

“So you see why we've been trying to keep the situation quiet, then,” Windu offered, a sorrowful expression on his face that Palpatine knew Windu knew wasn't deceiving the leader of the Senate. “The trauma he has suffered *will* have effects on even the healthiest mind. Our hope is that he will come to his senses sooner rather than later and return to us. All we can do is wait for him to snap out of this fog.”

For the love of *hell.*

They were the only two people in Palpatine's office, and it would save a *world* of time if they would just *speak plainly* to one another.

However, *I'm the Sith Lord, I want your Chosen One, and I need Kenobi here so I can destroy him and drive Skywalker into the darkness* would just open up a whole new set of problems, and the timing wasn't right.

He had to *wait.*

He had to *pretend* to care, and in response Windu would *pretend* to trust him and *pretend* to comply with his demands.

Sidious really hoped he'd get to kill Windu personally.

“Sorry as I am to say it,” Palpatine mourned, “we can't afford to give Master Kenobi that kind of leniency. We simply do not have the time and resources.”

Windu spread his hands in a show of helplessness. “It's not about what we will *give* him, it's about what he will *take*. He was the apprentice of Qui-Gon Jinn, after all.”

*And I happen to know for a fact that ninety-eight percent of Jinn's “unsanctioned” activities had*
Yoda's unsaid permission all over them. Rogue Jedi my ass.

But it was a good way to be able to operate without the Senate’s approval.

Yoda had a few of those “uncooperative” Jedi in the Order.

“We can't control them,” had been the usual excuse. The Council washed its hands of whichever rogue was in trouble, the rogue continued their actions, Yoda gloated, and Sidious glowered.

Most people were just too dumb to see through the compliant mask of the Jedi Council.

Jedi were far too tied up in their consciences to bend them at the demand of the Senate. They always found ways around the rules to do “what's right.”

Frightfully inconvenient.

The Zillo Beast incident had been just one example. One very large example.

Of course...

Sidious felt that might still turn out for the best.

“I flatter myself by considering myself to be a friend of Master Kenobi, and I happen to believe he has much more regard for the Council than his former Master did.” Banthakark. Pure banthakark. Just get this over with. “I'm sure that if you applied a little pressure, he would yield to the Council's collective wisdom.”

“We will try, Chancellor, but I cannot promise success,” Windu lied happily. “Master Kenobi can be very unreasonable, as any friend of his knows.”

How much longer would Sidious have to put up with this?

Soon. Soon it will be over, he promised himself.

But he could only keep that promise if he could maneuver Skywalker to where he needed to be. And right now, the boy was out of reach.

As the door slid shut behind Windu, Sidious sat at his desk and stewed.

Kenobi wasn't coming back soon. That much was clear.

*I will just have to shift the time-table closer.*

Young Skywalker would start having nightmares tonight.

It would have been better if it was Padmé trying to field the dreams, rather than Kenobi...

But Skywalker wasn't supposed to know about the pregnancy until later too. His future apprentice had certainly thrown a wrench in the works with the Zygerria stunt. First thing Vader was going to learn? How to follow a plan.

***
“It doesn’t feel right.”

Ahsoka, standing in the corner, leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. This vantage point allowed her to keep watch on all three faces— both her Masters', and Korkie's.

The door was closed, the clones warned not to disturb, and Ahsoka had the Mind-Healer ready to join the party the moment Ahsoka gave a warning signal.

The three at the table didn't know about that.

Ahsoka had her comlink tucked in the palm of her hand, hidden. A simple click of her thumb, and help would be here.

“I don’t get it,” Anakin grumbled. “I’m the one at stake here, and you don't feel comfortable sharing information that might help me?”

Korkie drew in a breath, his shoulders squared, his head came up. There was a glare in his eyes that Ahsoka recognized from her time on Mandalore. It was a gesture of silent fury that his Aunt had used. “My problems with you as a person are not why I'm hesitating.”

From here, Ahsoka could see Obi-Wan's hand move under the table to rest on Anakin's knee. A steadying pressure. The older Jedi didn't look at his former apprentice, didn't seem to notice his glowering.

If you were sitting at the table.

Which was another reason Ahsoka wasn't.

“Why does it feel wrong, Korkie?” Obi-Wan asked, patient.

*Always so patient.*

Ahsoka wondered if she would be that gentle a personality when *she* had a Padawan. *Or will I be short-tempered?*

She had no idea.

“It’s... Kryze business. And I'm sure you all mean well, but— even other Mandalorians aren't allowed to hear these things. It would be one thing for you, because you're practically an honorary Kryze anyway, but the others aren't. I'm sorry, Ahsoka, General Skywalker, but it feels wrong to share Kryze lore with you.”

“I understand, Korkie. There is knowledge that the Jedi are not swift to share with outsiders either.”

“But you still want me to talk.” Korkie grimaced.

Ahsoka could sense Anakin's frustration overheating again. He'd always preferred to menace information out of people instead of coax it. It worked, most of the time, but Ahsoka had seen Obi-Wan end up with far more knowledge by working with the person.

Oftentimes a scared, angry person left things out, whether intentionally or not.

Things that could be useful.

Obi-Wan's fingers tightened again, and Anakin threw himself back in his chair, trying to let out the steam without using words. Or wrecking the room using the Force. Korkie watched him with a wary glower.
And just a hint of his total lack of respect for Anakin Skywalker.

Ahsoka hoped Anakin wouldn't take too much offense over it. Knew that was unlikely.

Wondered if Satine would be pounding her head against the wall over the feud trying to form between her two sons.

“Korkie, did your Aunt care about Anakin?”

Korkie slumped in his seat. “Very much.”

Ahsoka felt Anakin's jolt of shock, even though he tried to hide it from his much younger nemesis.

“Would she have wanted us to know everything we could about his current condition?” Obi-Wan continued, still gentle.

“Probably.”

“Would she have put tradition before Anakin?”

Korkie sighed. “Tradition was still very important to her. She just made new ones instead of old ones.”

Obi-Wan gave him a nod and waited.

“It would be easier if they would leave,” Korkie finally said.

Anakin scoffed. “If Obi-Wan's just going to tell us later, what difference does it make? Just spit it out —”

Obi-Wan's fingers spasmed closed so hard Anakin yelped and shot forward in his seat, no longer lounging. He reached under the table to try to dislodge the appendages causing the severe pain.

Obi-Wan relented.

Korkie eyed them, the spark of amusement that lurked behind the grim stubbornness suggesting he'd guessed what had happened.

“Korkie, you said you feel that I'm almost a Kryze,” Obi-Wan spoke up. “You've told me in the past that Satine shared with you that she felt Anakin was our son and Ahsoka our granddaughter.”

Anakin forgot all about his crushed knee. “What the hell?” skittered across his bond with both Obi-Wan and Ahsoka, an accident.

Obi-Wan ignored it.

Korkie nodded reluctantly.

“I know Satine didn't use Mando'a often at home, but perhaps she used Basic for this. Did she ever use a truism about family and blood?"

“Aliit ori'shya taldiin,” the boy murmured. “She never spoke Mando'a to me, but I've heard it a lot since she died. It's how they justified wanting to kill me, even though I'm Bo-Katan's nephew. I'm just blood, I'm not family.”

Another understanding nod from the Jedi Master. “And what are we?”

“Auntie considered you family. That makes you family to me.”
“All of us?”

Korkie glanced over at Ahsoka, then Anakin.

“Don’t look so antagonizing,” Ahsoka growled to Anakin.

Anakin adjusted his expression to be just a little less vicious. Just enough to have complied... but still manage to be massively passive aggressive.

What was with him?

And then she realized.

Obi-Wan had claimed Korkie.

A boy with a self-control Anakin had never possessed. A boy who appreciated holobooks, knew how to be polite, could speak well, carried himself like a prince minus the arrogance, and who treated Obi-Wan like every word the Jedi said was worth serious consideration.

A boy... from the woman Obi-Wan had loved.

Now Anakin’s aggression made sense.

Anakin thought Korkie was the new him.

A better him.

The thoughts fell together in two-point-three seconds standard. Plenty of time for her to send Anakin a message before Korkie replied to Obi-Wan's question.

“He’s not taking your place with Obi-Wan.”

“He’s not?” came back the caustic reply. “He's Obi-Wan's chance to erase me.”

Ahsoka glared at him.

Korkie's gaze found Obi-Wan's again. “All of you.”

“If everyone in this room is family, does that make us clan?” Obi-Wan asked, ignoring Anakin’s sneers.

Baby steps. Ahsoka couldn't help but admire Obi-Wan's careful steppingstones.

She had no doubt he would draw Korkie to his viewpoint.

He just had to take small enough steps.

“We're clan,” Korkie explored, “but we're not all Kryzes.”

“They all we have left to determine is whether family is more than blood.”

Knowledge flooded Korkie's face, followed swiftly by admiration.

Anakin saw it, and turned even more sour.

Grow up, please grow up, Ahsoka begged, careful to not let him hear her thought. It would only inflame the situation, and she needed to be a mediator. A calming influence. She focused on her
breathing, on relaxing her clenched shoulders, on keeping her expression passive.

Obi-Wan somehow sat there, to all appearances blissfully unaware of Anakin's attitude, in spite of the fact that Ahsoka knew it was paining him. There was a tiny glitch in the Force that was as loud as a scream if you took the time to look for it.

And Korkie was rising to the occasion, meeting the high bar Obi-Wan set.

Which left Anakin being the uncivil one. The... only... uncivil one.

Which made him all the more sullen, because it threw him in all kinds of bad light.

“Alright. What questions do you have?” Korkie asked.

Anakin leaned forward. “Let's start with why the hell Mandalorians would know something about the Jedi that the Jedi don't.” His entire affect suggested this was an interrogation and he was grilling a suspect.

Whom he would find guilty.

“Ease up.” Ahsoka almost smiled when she heard Obi-Wan's mental voice say the words the same time she did, making her voice and his almost blend.

Korkie didn't look at all intimidated. His chin came up just a little more, he looked Anakin in the eye, and he said, “I would prefer it if Uncle Ben asked the questions.”

A flash of panic jolted through Anakin's Force, and his head spun around to see Obi-Wan's face. Not finding shock or rejection, Anakin sat back again, opting to try an I-don't-care facade.

Not that he was fooling anybody.

“Uncle Ben?” Anakin mocked. “You think he's going to let you get away with a nickname so ridiculous?”

Korkie watched him coolly, knowing he had already won this one.

Obi-Wan looked exhausted.

“Obi-Wan. Tell the kid. Tell him he's overstepping and needs to dial it way down.” Anakin threw his former Master an expectant look.

Obi-Wan didn't look at him.

“Obi-Wan?” Anakin's confidence wavered. “Frip, Obi-Wan, he's been here less than two weeks!”

“Anakin, it's what Satine—”

“You've known him for all of two weeks and you're already Uncle. How long is it going to take before he's calling you Father? Huh? Is the time period the same, or is shorter?”

“Anakin—”

Anakin shoved up and away from the table, knocking his chair over.

Ahsoka clicked her comlink and stepped forward.
Korkie held his ground, still sitting.

It didn't help, because he somehow had a regal bearing that said he didn't need to stand in order to hold his own with Anakin Skywalker...

And that only infuriated the Jedi worse, even though Ahsoka was fairly certain Korkie was quite firmly scared.

But his Aunt had raised him.

And she'd done a thorough job of teaching him how to not cower before someone who was more powerful than you.

In this moment, Korkie looked far more in control of the entire situation than Anakin.

And Anakin saw it.

And, being Anakin, somehow didn't see that the only way to regain control would be to control himself. To sit back down, stop yelling, and match Korkie, cool confidence to cool confidence.

But no.

Anakin's bid to regain control was going to be loud.

Ahsoka moved closer.

“Do you have any idea how long I've called you Dad in my head?” Anakin snarled at Obi-Wan. “And am I allowed to use the word? No. This random kid shows up, and suddenly — ”

Obi-Wan seemed to curl in on himself.

Master Elvett slipped into the room and sent Ahsoka a nod. “Korkie? There's a comm for you. School stuff.”

Korkie rose, sent Anakin an arched eyebrow, walked around the table, and paused by Obi-Wan's side. He hesitated, looking back at Anakin.

Ahsoka could see protectiveness written all over the movement.

Korkie didn't want to leave Obi-Wan in the same room as Anakin. An individual he did not trust wouldn't become violent. Because clearly, Master Skywalker had as much control over himself as an incontinent old-timer.

Oh, boy.

The image was so clear.

Ahsoka was moving the same instant as Anakin.

She needn't have bothered.

Obi-Wan was out of his seat and nose-to-nose with his former Padawan.

He didn't say a word.

Ahsoka inwardly begged Korkie to leave.
The young Mandalorian watched the two for half a second, glanced at Ahsoka and the Mind-Healer, seemed to decide that Obi-Wan had backup, and left the room.

The door slid shut behind him.

Ahsoka felt a massive wave of relief.

Still Anakin didn't move. And then his gaze tracked down, and he realized Obi-Wan was trembling.

Anakin took two steps back, out of Obi-Wan's personal space.

Obi-Wan seemed to collapse back into his chair. “Force, Anakin, he was willing to have a truce. Must it be war?”

“He's a random kid who's only important because Satine left him for you — ”

“ You were simply a random kid until Qui-Gon left you. ” Obi-Wan slammed his flattened palm against the top of the table with a resounding crack. “ Why do you hate Korkie so much? You should feel for him!”

Anakin went pale. “You do see us as the same,” he whispered.

“What?” Obi-Wan ran a shaking hand through his hair, clearly bewildered.

Ahsoka looked to the Mind-Healer, but Elvett mouthed the word wait.

“You're throwing me away for little- perfect- boy. I didn't turn out right, so you're starting over with better stock.”

Anger flooded the room, sharp and dark.

It knocked the wind out of Ahsoka, and she saw Anakin sway under the weight of it, absolutely stunned.

“How dare you say that to me,” Obi-Wan murmured, eyes blazing. “I do not only have room in my heart for one son. As for your fears: Korkie will never call me Father. It's not how he sees me. Satine trained him to call me Uncle Ben, and he asked me if I would accept it. You never asked to call me Dad. Don't you dare take your guilt out on him— he's just lost everything. You should have compassion for him. Given you are the one responsible, I think it's only fair you should do what you can to make this easier for him, not as hard as possible. He just decided to put aside years of tradition to try to help you, and you try to scare him as a thank-you. Clearly you feel threatened by him, but I can't for the life of me figure out why since you're here. Because I wanted you here. Because I wanted to give us a second chance. But instead of showing me I made a good decision, you turn into a bully to pick on someone who is smaller and weaker than yourself. How safe is that supposed to make me feel?”

Anakin couldn't look him in the eye.

Horror flooded Obi-Wan's face as he recognized the darkness that swirled around himself. Saw his own fury.

He bolted.

The Mind-Healer jerked her chin and Ahsoka raced after him, while Elvett moved to intercept a now-shuddering Anakin.
Ahsoka followed, as silently as she could, until Obi-Wan stopped running.

Apparently he had realized he couldn't get away from her.

He turned so fast she nearly ran into him.

Words tumbled out of his mouth, anguished and terrified. “I'm turning into him.”

Again the urge to hug.

Ahsoka shoved it mercilessly aside. “Master,” she simply said. No remonstrance, no dissent.

Simply the word, spoken with a quiet calm that he immediately latched hold of.

“Force, Force, I've made it worse again. I yelled at him. I wrecked him, and I can't get it right even now — ”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down,” Ahsoka blurted, losing her plan in her shock. “What do you mean, you wrecked him?”

“I shouldn't have been the one to train him. I was barely a knight — I wouldn't have been a knight but for the fact I defeated Maul. I didn't even kill him. They thought I killed him. My knighthood was a farce. I wasn't ready, and I definitely wasn't ready to train someone as powerful and important as him. I made every mistake in the book. It should have been Yoda. I was arrogant, I thought I could train him, IV”

“Master, you gave it your best. You gave him your best. That's all anyone can do, even Master Yoda — ”

“My best wasn't good enough,” Obi-Wan whispered, eyes wide with pain. “He is what I made him.”

“No. That's not the way it works, Obi-Wan. Children don't end up how the parents wanted or anticipated.”

“You aren't—”

“Listen to me, Obi-Wan. Your training was important, yes. His surroundings impacted him. Of course. But in the end, only Anakin can decide what Anakin does. And who are we kidding? He always has. He only obeyed you when it was his idea anyway. Obi-Wan, if a perfect parent was required for a kid to turn out okay, no-one would ever turn out okay. You give them what you can, and then it's up to them.”

He shook his head. “You don't understand. You've never been one before. Besides. The current situation is my fault. I should never have goaded him. I shouldn't have lied to him. I should have found another way to rescue the Togrutan colonists — ”

“Hey,” Ahsoka soothed. “After every mission we look back and see things with hindsight that we couldn't see in the middle. It's easy to judge ourselves using the clarity we get with distance, but it's wrong.”

“This all happened because I goaded him.”
“No. This happened because Anakin chose to let it happen. You did what you thought you had to do at the time. Whether you would do it again, knowing what you do now, is another question entirely. You are *not* responsible for what happened to you. You did *not* bring it down on your head, you did *not* deserve it, you do not — ”

“But I *knew* how angry he gets. No. I didn't. But I knew *enough*. Yes, he has blame, certainly, but I created the cage and stepped into it.”

“I suppose you think what the Zygerrians did was your fault too.” Ahsoka struggled to keep the scowl from her face. “*Master—*”

“Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon should have trained him.” Obi-Wan turned away from her.

“I'm sure he wouldn't want you to think—”

“You didn't know him. No. He would tell me I have failed. He would have been honest with me, unlike all of you. He would never have tried to tell me *other* than that I was a failure. It should have been me who fell on Naboo, but I failed him *then*, too.”

“You are not *guilty* by right of *survival!* Haven't you been listening to *anything* the Mind-Healer has said?”

He snorted a laugh through his nose. “The Mind-Healer is trying to keep me from attempting suicide again.”

It was the first time he'd said the word aloud. It froze Ahsoka's blood. “You're not seriously thinking—”

“No. Failing once at that was quite enough.”

“*Listen* to me, Master. Your own worst critic is you.”

“Only because Qui-Gon is dead.”

“I don't believe that. I've heard people say he was very *kind*—”

Obi-Wan laughed again. A hollow, empty sound. “Yes. He took in every stray he came across. Except for me. I wasn't worth rescuing. I wonder if he knew, *even then* knew what I'd become. Knew I wasn't worth it.”

“What are you *talking* about? You were his *Padawan*—”

“He rejected me. Again... and again... until I nearly died for him. And then he took me. And when he found Anakin... well, Anakin had more potential. Anakin had power, would gain a strength I could never hope to touch, and Anakin was the Chosen One. So Master Jinn recommended me for the trials. I wasn't ready. I wouldn't have passed. That didn't matter. His eyes were elsewhere. The first I heard of it was before the Council, when the highest praise he could give me was *'he's competent.'*”

Ahsoka winced.

“No. Qui-Gon would never have coddled me the way all of you keep trying to. And Anakin thinks I'm replacing him. How the *frip* can he *think* that?” Obi-Wan's despondency froze to disbelieving anger.

“Listen, he has self-esteem issues that *almost* match yours. Though I'm thinking yours trump just
about any case I've ever seen.”

“Master.”

Ahsoka looked around, found Anakin hurrying towards them, looking penitent.

She wondered what the Mind-Healer had said.

Anakin reached them. “Obi-Wan. I'm sorry. Korkie scares me.”

Ahsoka did her best to hide her shock from the Force and her face. She hadn't expected him to be quite so honest about it. Clearly the Mind-Healer had said *something* impressive.

Obi-Wan's scowl was fading.

“It's just... I look at Korkie, and I look at me... how I was at that age... and how I am now... and I can't imagine how you could want me, when he's here.”

Obi-Wan's shoulders sagged. “Oh, Anakin.”

And then he was suffering through another hug, doing his best to return it with the warmth expected. Ahsoka watched the intense discomfort in his face, and suddenly realized just how much he *hated* hugs.

And how much he *loved* Anakin.

Chapter End Notes

Mando'a Guide:

*Aliit ori'shya tal'din* (Pronounced /ah-LEET or-EESH-yeah tal-DEEN/) = Family is more important than blood
“Ahsoka? Ahsoka! What's wrong?”

Somehow the Padawan looked up at her former Master.

Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew she should ask how the second attempt with Korkie had gone, since she'd been called away for a comm from the Temple at the beginning and missed the discussion.

But she couldn't bring herself to care.

Not right now.

“Barriss is dead.”


“The war. Too many droids. Got trapped, reinforcements couldn't get there in time.” Ahsoka suspected she might not be very coherent, and wasn't sure it mattered. So many Jedi had fallen in the last two and a half years... but none quite this close to her.

Ahsoka felt the moment when her new Master caught hint of her grief in the Force.

It didn't take long before he reached her.

Anakin engulfed her in a hug, and Obi-Wan cradled her mind, grieving for her and with her.

Two very different sensations...

But with both combined, Ahsoka thought she might make it through this.

She needed both.

She'd tried pushing Anakin away, had taken on the role of Obi-Wan's protector and advocate...

But she needed Anakin Skywalker in her life.

So she let him hold her as she cried, and clung to Obi-Wan's quiet, loving signature in the Force.

The three of them, a unit against the storm.

* * *

“What were you thinking?”

“This has as much to do with us as it does with him.” Fives had that stubborn look on his face that his brothers knew so well.
“I think he's right,” Jesse chimed in. “It's not eavesdropping when it's something you need to hear.” Tup frowned. “I'm not sure that's how it works—”

“It's spying. On our commanding officers,” Rex protested again, feeling like the only voice of reason in this room. Even Cody was just standing over there, pretending to not hear what was going on instead of stopping it.

What had discipline come to these days?

“The kid called it a Crimson Force-signature. Basically, a long time ago— a really long time ago—” Tup shook his head. “What? You mean like thirty years?”

Wooley's eyes widened. That was over twice how long any of them had been alive.

“I'm talking longer,” Fives said, his voice dropping to give emphasis. “Hundreds— thousands of years longer.”

“Thousands.” Wooley sat back, trying to comprehend it. “Was General Yoda around?”

“Nah. Before even him. Anyway. There were Jedi in love, and some of them were like General Kenobi and some were like General Skywalker. The Duchess called it selfless and selfish.”

Rex winced again. Satine. His brothers talked about her as much—or more—now that she was dead than before. The Mother who died.

Some of his brothers even believed she was watching over them from whatever afterlife there might be.

Rex didn't believe a word of it. He didn't believe in much these days. There was duty. There were orders.

His men were losing discipline. So were Cody's. But Cody wasn't trying to rein it in... and Rex didn't seem able to. He wondered when he'd lost his authority. When his brothers had stopped listening to him.

He wondered if alcohol helped like civvies claimed. He might have to look into that. The thought had never attracted him before.

“So apparently General Kenobi and Commander Tano and just about every Jedi in the galaxy has a signature that's sort of like looking into the heart of a star. It's selflessness that makes it that way. And self-ish ness makes it the other way. And apparently his wasn't always that color, because nobody's born like that. And it can go away, if he makes decisions that help others instead of himself. Though it's only likely to go away completely if something big happens and he responds like a Jedi instead of looking out for himself first.”

“What happened that long time ago?” Tup asked.

“Apparently, something really, really bad. For a really long time— over two hundred years. That's why Jedi don't throw the word love around much, because it's one word that gets used for both kinds. They ended up really burned and a bit gun-shy over the word. So they called the selfish stuff attachment, and they tried to describe the selfless thing using any word but love. So all that talk about the value of life, compassion, putting others' needs first, forgiveness, nurturing, loyalty, willing to take a blaster bolt for someone— that's what they were talking about.”
“There were a lot of Jedi who looked like General Skywalker back in the day? In the Force?”

“Yes. A lot. And it was too easy to assume someone meant the selfless stuff when they really meant the other thing, when the word love is used. They decided that instead of being told it, they wanted to be shown it.”

“I could get that,” Boil grumbled. “Words are cheap.”

Rex squinted at him. Hell. Boil looked almost as bad as he did.

Cody had been badgering Rex to go see the mind-caretakers. Or, if he couldn't stand to let a brother help, then the Jedi Mind-Healer.

Rex just couldn't find enough effort to care to go.

Cody told him he was behaving like General Kenobi.

Maybe he would listen to Cody. He'd probably try the Jedi, not a brother.

No. No, definitely not. Not the Jedi. He'd go for the clone equivalent. Maybe a brother could make sense of the nightmares he'd been having.

“What's so bad about selfish love? Attachment, they call it?” Jesse asked. “I mean, isn't that what most people have? From the Duchess' descriptions, I'd say that most people love that way.”

Fives shrugged. “If it's not hurting anybody, the Jedi don't care. As long as it's not a person who's got other people's lives and happiness on the line. So if General Skywalker wants to keep the selfishness part of it, then he's welcome to, as long as he's no longer representing the Republic. If he gives up that authority.”

“Would he have to stop using the Force?” Kix wondered.

Fives shook his head. “No. But he'd have to give up the lightsaber, because lightsabers are a symbol of authority. It's like a badge. He can't be the automatic commanding officer when he walks in a room. He's got to be a volunteer. Same as the rest of the people in the galaxy. General Kenobi said something about how Jedi only allow selflessness in their ranks so that the rest of the universe is free to love selfishly. That they can do so in safety. Somebody has to look out for them.”

Now Cody angled himself towards the conversation. Rex saw the movement out of the corner of his eye.

“So what's he going to do? Is he going to try to think about others more than himself, or is he going to leave?” the 212th's Commander asked.

And now Fives looked sober. “He didn't say.”

* * *

Korkie studied the massive holomap, just a little envious of the kids around him.

It was hard to resent them, though, when they treated him with so much respect.

He was twice their age and couldn't tap into something they all had been able to manipulate from babyhood. He'd been sure there would have to be some kind of effort towards bullying at some
point. It would have been inevitable at the Academy back on Mandalore.

Korkie was astounded by the kindness that surrounded him. Apparently, the Jedi took full advantage of the younger years, and by this age, those principles were fairly well settled.

He was accepted, and when he asked for help in catching up, they assisted with no sign of arrogance or condescension.

He'd heard of one bully. One.

But that kid wasn't in any of the same classes as Korkie.

He had no doubt that the one would seek him out eventually, but he felt rather optimistic about the whole thing.

Life wasn't bad here by any stretch of the imagination. The gardens were gorgeous, the library massive, the teachers, some of the best in the galaxy and among the most patient, and the food was amazing.

The only thing that would have made it better would be if Lagos was still alive and here.

Or if Amis and Soniee hadn't defected to the resurrected Mandalore.

* * *

Anakin, just out of the holo pickup's range, almost didn't breathe as he listened to the beloved voice.

“How long are you going to be back for?”

“I don't know.” Obi-Wan shook his head. “We're running supplies out to the slums on Coruscant's moons. It could take a few days, longer if we find something that needs fixing.”

Anakin felt the rumble of the engines as the Blockade Runner came to rest on solid ground. Silently, he urged the clone pilots to stay back, to give Padmé time...

“I just... I don't know, Obi-Wan. To be honest, I don't understand how you could take him back so easily.”

Obi-Wan nearly choked, but he didn't say anything.

Anakin cowered back a little further. Easy has nothing to do with it, he knew.

“Nobody's expecting you to take him back at this point. All he's asking is to be allowed to see you. For just a little while, on your terms.”

Padmé hesitated.

She was so beautiful. Anakin could barely stand it. And she looked so grim...

“I don't know, Obi-Wan.”

“What about by holo? That way you aren't in the same room?”
Anakin's heart skipped a beat. What was Obi-Wan doing? Could he be angling towards Anakin speaking to Padmé now? Panic seized his throat. If that happened, what was he going to say to her? What could he say to her—

“No. I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. I want to watch from a distance awhile longer first. I'm just not ready.” Nervous dread crossed her face. “He's... not going to lose patience with me and show up in my apartment one of these nights, is he?”

Even through the comm, Anakin could sense her jumpiness and fear.

Fear of walking around her own home.

He bit the inside of his lip.

Tasted blood.

“I promise he will respect your boundaries,” Obi-Wan said. So quiet. So earnest.

He believes that. He believes in me. How can he? Force, he loved Obi-Wan.

I'm really unreasonable a lot of the time, probably.

He would have to make it up to him.

He was still standing there musing when the call ended and a knock at the outside hatch announced a visitor. Obi-Wan crossed the room and answered the door.

“Can I help—” Obi-Wan's voice stuttered, failed—

And then the hatch was slammed closed, and Obi-Wan was on the far side of the room, moving with the speed of a scared tooka.

“Force, Obi-Wan?” Anakin yelped, springing to his side.

His Master looked up at him, eyes wide, body trembling.

Terrified.

And frozen.

Anakin lunged for the door, lightsaber out, and threw the hatch open. He hadn't sensed danger. Why hadn't he sensed danger?

The man standing there stumbled back with a curse, and now terror was bleeding off of him in waves.

Anakin searched for a weapon, for a—

And then paused.

A middle-aged colonist.

Hands roughened through years of working the soil. The strong but unimaginative clothes of a farmer. Lines of care worn in the forehead and around the eyes. A gentleness in those eyes that had Anakin returning the blue plasma to the hilt.
It would be hard to find someone more harmless than this. This was one of the people they'd come to help.

Anakin looked back at Obi-Wan, curled in the corner, arms around his head, trying to breathe.

“Uhhh—” he threw the bewildered farmer an apologetic glance. “Hang on a minute. Somebody will be out in a minute to help.”

“What did I do?” the man asked.

Anakin shook his head. “Nothing. You did nothing.”

He shut the door and walked over to his former Master. “Obi-Wan?”

The older Jedi was murmuring incoherently to himself.

“Master?” Anakin crouched down beside him. “Can you hear me?”

The Force shuddered with the weight of Obi-Wan's torment.

No. Obi-Wan was not hearing him.

Anakin reached out, placed his hand on his friend's shoulder. “Hey. Come back. It's me. You're safe, I promise.”

Obi-Wan flinched at the touch.

“You're not there anymore,” Anakin promised. “It's okay, Obi-Wan.”

Slowly, Obi-Wan pulled out of his flashback, the panic attack slowly easing, pulling its claws loose from his guts.

Tears slipped down Obi-Wan's cheeks as he realized what had happened.

“Hey.” Anakin pulled him into his arms and patted his shoulder awkwardly. “Remember what the Mind-Healer said. It's normal. We'll get past this. I promise.”

“He didn't do anything wrong,” Obi-Wan sobbed. “He's one of the people we're supposed to help —”

“You didn't do anything wrong. And you recovered really fast, Obi-Wan. That's a good thing—”

“I just fell apart like a— terrified youngling —”

Anakin felt waves of relief as he saw movement from the other parts of the ship. “Listen, Obi-Wan, you don't have to deal with him. Okay? The clones and I can handle it. He'll get the help he needs. But you don't have to be part of that.”

And outside, the Zygerrian who lived his life independent of and mostly ignoring galactic events, wondered what it was about himself that could have possibly sent a Jedi fleeing in revulsion and fear.

* * *

News of the exploits of Kenobi filtered through the haze of war talk.
His efforts frustrated the Senate to no end, and the politicians turned on the Order to try to change the situation.

But this is where the structure of the Jedi Order kicked ass.

If the Senate wanted to communicate with the Jedi, they had to go through the Council.

Because the Council comprised many individuals, they could take turns bearing the ire of the Senators, switching one another out to diffuse the pressure.

It made stalling beautifully easy.

They mournfully disavowed knowledge of Kenobi's plans. Assured anyone who asked that it could all be attributed to post traumatic stress.

He'll come back when he's ready, we just need to be patient with him. Can you imagine how horrible what he went through was? Certainly you want him to recover. What if he froze up on a battlefield, and lost... say... lost control of one of the hyperlanes leading to Coruscant? No, you want him ready when he comes back.

He's not answering his comm. We can't spare the bodies to send someone to track him down.

Would you like to see the latest report on the Outer Rim sieges?

* * *

Obi-Wan took advantage of every hour the Council managed to buy him.

Anakin followed after him, helping as best as he could.

The younger Jedi didn't think the people really wanted peace... but...

He wasn't going to pop Obi-Wan's bubble.

Somehow, in spite of his focus, Obi-Wan had noticed the growing circles underneath Anakin's eyes.

It hadn't been easy to confide...

But...

Yes. He was having nightmares again.

Yes. Similar, very similar in tone to those he'd had about his Mother just before her death.

Obi-Wan had gently drawn the answers from him, one after another.

These were about Padmé.

Dying in childbirth. In pain. In blood. In tears—

“But that's months from now,” Anakin pleaded. “We have time to figure it out, right?”

“Of course. We'll figure it out.”
Anakin gave him a nod. “We always figure it out.”

But Obi-Wan refused to lie to him.

So Anakin's words hung in the air, a desperate bravado that had no foundation in truth...

And they both knew it.

But he could also sense Obi-Wan's grim determination to find a way to save the Senator who held Anakin's heart.

Anakin's gut told him to resent Obi-Wan for his unwillingness to ply his friend with sweet lies...

But his soul recognized the fact that Obi-Wan would fight for them.

And that was worth more than all the empty words the universe could offer.

* * *

Dooku sat meditating, searching the dark for answers.

Something was wrong.

He didn't know what.

And if Sidious figured it out first...

It would be bad.

Something was threatening...

He needed to go, or he would be late to the gathering of the Confederacy's Parliament. An amusing farce, comprised of people who thought the war was about ideology. Avoiding corruption. Completely ignoring the founders of the war.

The Trade Federation. The Banking Clan. The Commerce Guilds.

None of them had been fighting for an ideal.

They all fought for money.

But, sure. Let the CIS think it was fighting corruption.

It kept the average Separatist quiet, compliant, and useful.

Their only purpose to exist was to kill off Jedi, and keep those surviving too distracted, too surrounded by death to be able to stave off his Master's takeover.

It would all be over soon.

He presided over the gathering, listening with half an ear to the boring details of stupid people who thought they had worth.
And then his head came up in disbelief.

They were not saying what he thought —

They couldn't be serious —

They were. They were accusing him and Grievous of war crimes.

They were evicting him. Disowning him. Taking the army away from him, and all political authority he possessed.

Who did they think they were, and where in blazes had this come from?

“Who is it that brings such terrible accusations against me?” he demanded. “As your founder, I have the right to meet my accusers face-to-face.”

It turned out they didn't have a person accusing him, but instead, visual footage. A lot of it.

Some of it from security cameras...

Most of it from droids' points of view.

His battle droids.

Someone had stripped the images from their electronic brains.

“Where did you come by this supposed evidence?” he finally interrupted the damning flood.

“Is that relevant? It's been tested by our best slicers. It's legit, Dooku. We're supposed to be better than they are. But it looks like in our fight against corruption, we overlooked a major source. Right here.”

It ended in a discussion.

Dooku drew aside the leaders, and explained to them that they weren't going to throw him—or Grievous—out. They certainly were not going to put them on trial, and they certainly were going to let this go.

These minds were too determined to be forced without breaking. He had no use for vegetables.

But threats of death and destruction could be just as effective, and the the people he faced might be fools, but they weren't suicidal fools.

Nope. That was just Kenobi.

And Dooku had a sneaking, horrible suspicion that it was Kenobi who had supplied the Separatist Parliament with the evidence.

And that was enough to make even a dignified Count swear.

* * *

“They're not going to do it.” Anakin scowled. “You don't understand them, Obi-Wan. They're evil.
They don't care about *justice* and *lives* —"

“Give them a *chance*, Anakin.”

The younger Jedi ran a rough hand through his hair. “You're setting yourself up for *major* disappointment. Do you really think the Separatists *don't* know what Dooku and Grievous are like? How *stupid* would they have to be?”

“No stupid; deceived. It's not like they have living individuals on the front lines who *aren't* loyal to Dooku. And communication between Republic and CIS is nonexistent. Anything they hear, they would assume to be propaganda, and since when does the Parliament investigate any of the worlds Dooku takes over?”

“They're never going to turn on him. You believe too much. With some people, there just *isn't* good in them.”

Obi-Wan sent him a neutral glance. “And how does one identify such people?”

“By what they *do*, of course, and what they *don't do*. They stand by and let people suffer when they could *stop* it—”

What was that? What was that wondering spark in his Master's eyes?

*What did I say?*

And then it clicked, and his face flushed crimson.

*I'm gonna shut up now.*

Obi-Wan watched his discomfort with kind eyes. “Anakin, things are rarely as black and white as we would like. I know you want to define things by *loyal to you* or *enemy*, but there is more in this universe than that. Ventress, for example. Hondo, for another. I do *not* believe the Separatist Parliament to be entirely corrupt.”

“But the Confederacy was founded by—”

“Massive corporations, yes. But then the idealists jumped on the wagon, and *they* are the ones in the Parliament. The corporations still manipulate behind the scenes, but don't underestimate the idealists. They resent corruption? Let *them* take on Dooku. Not us.”

Anakin shook his head. “You're so deviant, you know that? Convincing them to turn on one another?”

“It's not deviant if I'm helping them achieve their goals.”

Anakin arched an eyebrow. “Uh... *no*. It's *more* so. Do you ever maneuver me like that?”

“Only occasionally.”

Anakin snorted a laugh, saw the quiet smile on Obi-Wan's face.

Felt his spirit soar.


And suddenly, Obi-Wan's naivete when it came to believing people could be something better than they seemed wasn't annoying him anymore.

*It's the only reason I'm still here.*
And somehow, he wasn't surprised when they were smuggled, in the dead of night, into a neutral location, to discover the Separatist leadership, some physically present, and others by holo.

He hadn't believed in them.

But he believed the hell out of Obi-Wan.

And if anybody could call the good in somebody to light...

It would be him.

* * *

It was cruel, to realize that they were in more trouble now than they’d been before ceding from the Republic.

They'd fallen back into line, because they were dead if they didn't.

But they weren't going to give it up. They couldn't. Not after all the lives that had been lost to get this far.

There was one insurmountable problem.

Who could overthrow a Sith?

There was only one option.

But to ask the Jedi Order, the Generals on the opposite side of the conflict for help...

Impossible.

But there was one who had pulled away. One who denounced the violence. One who was calling for respect and co-existence. One who called the fighting pointless. One who'd made it clear he wasn't part of the war anymore. One who reached out to help their citizens as well as the Republic's. One... who just happened to be very skilled.

They could turn to him.

* * *

Anakin watched in awe as Obi-Wan's skills blazed bright.

His Master was good with a lightsaber. Very good.

But he was even better with words.

For the first time, Anakin allowed himself to actually pay attention to what was being said, and how.

And how Obi-Wan knew just what to say, and when.
Allowed himself to know, to his core, that had he been expected to run this discussion...

Everything would be in shambles already.

Hell. They wouldn't even be here. He'd be out slaughtering droids.

Anakin tried to be suspicious. Would the Separatists really betray Dooku and Grievous into their hands? Everything he'd told himself over the last two and a half years said it was ridiculous.

But he could sense these beings' desperation.

Obi-Wan, of course, drew them out.

Yes.

The Team would go after Grievous and Dooku.

If...

The CIS agreed to enter into peace talks with the Republic Senate to find a nonviolent solution to the conflict the moment the two war criminals were apprehended.

If the CIS agreed to cease all hostilities for the duration of said negotiations.

If the contested planetary systems were allowed to decide their allegiance by local vote instead of proximity.

Anakin didn't believe they'd go for that last one.

But Obi-Wan acted as though he believed it reasonable, and after a moment's consultation, what came back wasn't a refusal, but a request for clarification.

Which Obi-Wan was happy to give.

“We will assist you, if the solution you seek with the Republic Senate isn't based on a line drawn across the galaxy. If a planet within your borders wishes to return to the Republic, it is to be allowed to do so without reprisal. And if a planet within the Republic wishes to join the Confederacy, the same courtesies will be applied.”

Another small bout of conferring.

And then they agreed.

Anakin tried to keep his eyes from widening, resolutely kept his jaw clamped closed.

Anakin had no idea what Bail Organa planned to do about the Senate — it would take two sides to make this work—

But the Separatists handed over passcodes, schedules, schematics.

How in blazes?

But Obi-Wan simply took it in stride, as though all of them were reasonable beings, and this was an honorable outcome.

Somehow the Separatists left without feeling like they'd sold out. Left feeling heard.
Left feeling like they'd won something, not lost something...

Left thinking that maybe not all Jedi were bad.

And as they flew deep into the heart of Separatist territory, Anakin couldn't help but glance at the man in the copilot's seat, and realize it was a good thing that Obi-Wan, not Anakin, had automatic authority on missions.

The older Jedi had a wisdom Anakin hadn't discovered yet.

*I may be more powerful... but he's been around longer. He's seen more. And he knows how to harness the power he does have.*

What was the point of having stunning amounts of raw power if he couldn't control it and direct it?

*I flail in a direction and hope to smash something.*

Obi-Wan had precision and grace.

Anakin had thought his efforts to hone that stemmed from paranoia or something possibly bordering on OCD.

Not anymore.

*I think I need him. Not just because I'd miss him, if he were gone, but because he sees things I never would in a million years.*

Obi-Wan had insight.

Anakin had the power.

*Maybe this time we can win.*

So when Dooku was in sight, and Obi-Wan murmured, “Together?”

Anakin had but one reply.

“Always.”
Chapter 21

Dooku struggled to turn this fight in a positive direction.

It wasn't working.

He'd been *aware* that people on both sides of the divide wanted peace.

That didn't explain the two Jedi who had come out of nowhere.

He hadn't sensed them coming, hadn't been prepared—

But they were heroes of the *people* now, and the *people* had decided...

And the people would *not* be told *no*.

The Sith were out of time.

His Master had a plan involving a kidnapping, which would *force* Kenobi and Skywalker to come out of their pacifistic vacation and back into hero-ing—

And Dooku was supposed to kill Kenobi *then* —

But he was *done* playing games.

*Done.*

The fact that the Jedi had gotten so close meant his pawns weren't *pawns* anymore.

Or... a darker thought... Sidious had done this to him. To test him. To see if he was too old for the job.

Kenobi was dying. *Tonight.* And Skywalker? He was going to be *humbled.* His Master didn't want him dead, but he would *surely* be damaged.

“*Do you really* think you have a chance?” he mocked. “I know how you fight, after all, and you have never bested me *once* .”

Skywalker's eyes gleamed. “*My powers have doubled since we last fought, Count.*”

“*The Pyke homeworld, was it not? Wasn't that the time Master Kenobi nearly fell off a cliff and you had to save him? I don't seem to remember the two of you being much of a problem. I achieved my intent and then left without much difficulty.*”

“*Why won't he shut up ?*” Skywalker groaned.

Kenobi shrugged. “*You know the elderly. He probably moves his mouth non-stop in order to drown out the sounds of his joints creaking.*”

Mid-strike, Skywalker snickered.

That was *quite* enough. Dooku was having painful flashbacks of Florrum, and having to spend *hours* chained to these two.
He might just *accidentally* kill Skywalker after all.

“Your arrogance is obnoxious.” Dooku pressed his attack, saber flicking in, out, around—

But Skywalker was *right*.

These two were more in harmony than before. Like a couple of planets that took turns orbiting one another, the Jedi fought like they’d been made each for other.

This was worse than when Ventress and Savage had teamed up.

Worse than the mysterious invisible assailants on Serenno.

His heart thundered in his chest, and for the first time since his battle with Yoda on Geonosis, Dooku felt fear of the outcome.

If they worked *together*, he was lost.

He had to incapacitate Kenobi and isolate Skywalker. Enrage him, unbalance him...

Yes.

He danced to the side, behind—

His fingers twitched—

The Force slammed behind Kenobi's knees, dropping him heavily to the floor.

“That’s better,” Dooku praised, keeping the pressure heavy across Obi-Wan's calves, holding him there as the Jedi struggled to stand. “Kneeling. Where you belong. It's about time the universe stopped idolizing a pathetic whore.”

Dooku felt the snap in the Force.

The sudden twist as Skywalker fell out of sync with his Master.

Felt Kenobi's alarm as he realized they'd lost their advantage.

Now they were Dooku's.

He scooped Kenobi up in the Force and hurled him against the wall with a speed that would pulverize bone, while simultaneously fighting off Skywalker's assault.

* * *

Obi-Wan might be trapped, but he could still breathe.

And as long as his brain had oxygen, he could *think*.

So he saw the wall.

*And* had the presence of mind to fling out a counter blow—
The wall exploded from the conflicting messages, the ceiling toppling in.

Obi-Wan choked on the dust, struggled to retain consciousness—

At least Dooku's hold was gone—

Anakin.

Obi-Wan stumbled forward, only to be struck by the rest of the wall giving way.

* * *

Skywalker's first blows were anger-crazed. Clumsy, imprecise.

They reminded Dooku of Savage when the zabrak had first sparred with him.

Anakin didn't have the physical strength of Savage, but his power in the Force dwarfed the could-have-been assassin's.

And then something changed.

Dooku saw it in Skywalker's eyes.

This wasn't a pure soul who had never killed in a cold, vicious rage.

No.

And suddenly, Lord Tyranus knew Sidious had betrayed him.

He saw Skywalker's blood-drenched Force-signature and the pieces clicked together.

Light and dark.

One wasn't a certain *set* of moves, and the other another collection.


It wasn't even the Force itself. There wasn't one half light and one half dark.

It was all about *intent* when the user tapped into it.

Reach with selflessness, and light came to you. Reach with selfishness, darkness.

Dooku had been so focused on the fact that Skywalker was so selfless so much of the time, that he'd glossed over Skywalker's Force-signature's *color*. He'd assumed it had something to do with the boy's turbulence or impatience.

Hadin't realized it was a manifestation of the selfishness that lurked in the soul beneath.

If it continued to grow and spread, it wouldn't *be* red for much longer.

It would be dark as night.
Sidious knew this. Had been slowly creating the boy. Had allowed Dooku to try to enrage Skywalker.

Well...

He'd done it.

Skywalker was filled with hate.

And in some time in the past, he'd already gone through the can't-find-finesse-in-the-midst-of-it phase.

Sidious hadn't told him.

And Dooku had just made his own grave.

Desperately, he tried to regain his control over the situation, but the fear blazed from his eyes.

Skywalker saw it.

And the little peasant had hunger lighting up his face.

He would feed off Dooku's fear, his pain, his death—

Somewhere, Dooku sensed Kenobi struggling to get involved.

And then the Sith's right hand was missing, lightsaber gone—

* * *

Anakin paused half a moment, then decapitated the Sith. He watched the head roll across the floor, watched the body writhe.

Loved every second of it.

This was what he hadn't been allowed to do to the hecklers or reporters.

This felt right.

The haze of red across his eyes seemed to darken.

That couldn't be right. He'd come to fight Dooku to save the galaxy, to help people he didn't like, to bring peace, and to avenge Obi-Wan—

And then he felt a tremor in the Force.

He spun around, feeling disoriented. Found Obi-Wan, trapped under durasteel.

Just a couple cuts with his lightsaber, and the older Jedi would have been freed. In fact, one of them had been made, and the second begun.

Obi-Wan's eyes stared up at Anakin, wide.

But what punched Anakin in the gut was the deep, deep fear written across his face.
Anakin raced to him, reached to help pull him out—

Obi-Wan shrank away from the touch, shivering.

Anakin couldn't believe it. They'd been so perfect together at the beginning of this fight, his Master falling into the old, comfortable banter—

“What did I do?” Anakin pleaded. “Please don't be scared of me—”

“You killed him in anger, Anakin. He was beaten. Disarmed. Didn't you see the look in his eyes? He was done fighting. He would have surrendered —”

“He hurt you!” Anakin thundered.

Obi-Wan cringed and fell silent.

Anakin reached out for him, feeling unspeakably guilty. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. Please—” one hand found the older Jedi's shoulder. “I—”

“You didn't see yourself,” Obi-Wan whispered, pulling himself free from the wreckage. “You— the red went away.”

Anakin shook his head. “Isn't that a good thing?”

Obi-Wan returned his lightsaber to his belt, straightening his robes as if that could somehow center him, his fingers nervous and shaking. “What Korkie didn't say, but what I suspected, now I know. Darkness will take even selfish love away from you. Eventually... eventually even the care you have for me will go away. And in that moment, standing over Dooku, you killing him had nothing to do with love for me.”

“That's not true—”

“It was like looking into a black hole,” Obi-Wan whispered. “I could see you, but I couldn't reach you. You didn't hear me, you didn't feel my contact across our bond—”

“I may have gotten carried away—”

“You were gone .”

Anakin watched in horror as tears slipped down Obi-Wan's cheeks.

Obi-Wan was afraid of him. Didn't trust him.

No. He must trust me. He invited me back. I'm missing something.

Anakin shoved aside the feeling of betrayal and took a deep breath.

And chose to look closer. To make the effort to really listen.

What he found chilled him to the core.

Obi-Wan was afraid for him. Felt utterly helpless.

Was afraid of what would be done to Anakin.

By darkness itself.

When Anakin took a step forward into Obi-Wan's personal space, he made sure to do it non-
threateningly. He reached out and gripped Obi-Wan's shoulder. “I will never turn,” he promised.

Obi-Wan looked up into his eyes, and Anakin saw that his words had only added a terrible grief to to them. “Have you ever heard of Darth Malgus?”

“He was there when the Temple burned.”
Obi-Wan gave him a nod. “He was also falling in love. Do you know what he found? He discovered that even selfish love tainted his darkness. That it weakened him. But by then he was too addicted to power. So you know what he did?”

“No.”
“He killed her. He had just saved her, just gotten her back... and he killed her.”

“You think I could hurt Padmé?”
Obi-Wan shuddered again. “I think that if darkness takes you, there will come a day when you don't see her. When you look at her, and your inflexible little categories of loyal to me or enemy swing the wrong direction. When all you see is you.”

“Master. I'm not taken. Look at me. See? Same old crimson self? Yes, I'm self-focused, but it's not —”

“You don't understand, Anakin. Darkness is selfishness. It's not some arbitrarily defined evil. The Sith are not evil. They are self-focused... to the core. All selflessness has bled out of them. They cannot touch the light because to do so would be to act selflessly. Anakin, the reason why you aren't surrounded by the dark is because you have moments, beautiful moments of selflessness. But the way you love me, Ahsoka, Padmé... it's opened the door, Anakin.”

Obi-Wan stepped closer to him, shocking Anakin. His Master gripped his shoulders tight in his hands, staring straight into Anakin's eyes.

He felt like a Padawan all over again.

There was a quiet urgency. A desperation, in his Master's face. “You must decide. The darkness will not wait for consent before it consumes you. If you keep ignoring this... and you keep placing yourself in violent situations... you will wake up one morning and discover there is blood on your hands, on your pillow, and you will wonder what you've done, and you will look out the window and see...” He paused, trying to steady his broken breathing. It didn't work. “You have to decide, Anakin.”

And then Anakin found himself wrapped in a hug.

He could tell it was hurting Obi-Wan, was something Obi-Wan was doing for him.

What better place to start than what was right in front of him?

“Obi-Wan, you can let go. Show me you love me your way.”
Obi-Wan pulled back and sent a worried, unsure glance his direction.

“Use your language. Hug me your way.”
Obi-Wan nodded, his eyes filling with tears again as his lashes fell shut and closed them in.

Anakin held still.

There.
A sensation he'd felt a million times throughout his childhood. Gentle hands, cradling his mind. Holding it as if it was the most precious thing in the universe. Fragile, beautiful, infinitely valuable.

The hands protected, the hands supported.

Anakin let his eyelids fall shut so he could focus more closely on his other senses.

He opened his heart and listened.

What he felt nearly knocked him off his feet.

Pride.

Force. Obi-Wan was so proud of him. Believed in him so much it made Anakin feel guilty.

Trusted him. To the end of the universe and back.

Fierce love that made Anakin feel as though his heart might crumble to dust against its clear fire. White flames that didn't burn, didn't harm... but cleansed.

Was this what Obi-Wan had been saying all along? All those years when Anakin had grumbled that Obi-Wan didn't see him, didn't praise him, didn't love him?

He told me in every way he knew how, and then some.

Tears tracked cold lines down his face.

The urge to pull Obi-Wan back into a hug struck him.

But another idea surfaced.

He wanted to try something.

He took everything he felt for Obi-Wan, and tried to boil it down to its most condensed form.

Then, instead of reaching out for Obi-Wan with his physical hands, he used the Force.

Obi-Wan's signature started, betraying his surprise.

And then his Master melted.

Clinging to Anakin's Force-signature like it might be a life-raft in a sea of acid.

“It's either avoid confrontational situations, stop carrying weapons, stay away from things that make me angry... or be rid of the red.” Anakin drew in a deep breath. “And I get rid of the red by choosing others over self. I'm not sure how to see it. I thought killing Dooku was for other people. But—evidently not. Evidently I did that for me.”

And surrounded by Obi-Wan's beautiful light, Anakin could see it now.

Things looked so different through the murky crimson haze. It was so much harder to identify things.

“I can't just step back from helping people. Even if I left the Order, I have power. I can't just sit back while people suffer. So I'm going to find a way to clear myself of the red. I'm choosing, Obi-Wan. I choose you. I choose Padmé. I choose Ahoska.”

Anakin's knees buckled as he felt Obi-Wan's response. His eyes flew open as he crashed to his
knees.

Obi-Wan stood, apparently relaxed, head bowed and eyes closed...

And there was only a tiny smile, just barely curving his lips.

*My Force. I had no idea what hid behind that serene expression.*

Obi-Wan’s eyes opened, and he held out his hand. Anakin allowed his Master to help him to his feet.

“Shall we get out of here?” Obi-Wan asked.

He could have been asking about the weather.

But the Force *sang.* All around Obi-Wan, it felt like a full-blown orchestra of emotion—

So thoroughly *experienced,* so deeply *felt* —

Anakin somehow gave him a nod. “Grievous next?”

“Yes. And this time, don't focus on how he has offended against you by hurting people you care about. If we bring him back alive, and the Separatists try him publicly, how will that affect the Senate's response when the CIS requests peace?”

It clicked into place. “The Senate is going to be wary. Wanting proof of good intentions. Punishing Grievous for what he's done... that's an enormous gesture of goodwill.”

“It certainly is. So when we fight Grievous and you have an opening to kill or disable, *which* would be the selfless path?”

“Taking him alive.” Anakin ran his mechanical hand through his hair. “*Force,* I don't know if that's possible. He always runs away.”

“Then we'll have to make sure he *can't* run.”

“That's... a *lot* of damage, Obi-Wan.”

“The instant he surrenders, we'll stop.”

Anakin tried to comprehend what it would take to slow a monster like Grievous. Losing several limbs, at *least.* Striking a match and throwing that into the mix might help.

He glanced sideways at Obi-Wan, thankful their shields were in place.

*I have got to get a handle on this need for retribution.*

He didn't understand Obi-Wan's ability to let go of the need for revenge.

*But I do know why. Because the pursuit of revenge hurts the people around you.*

*And Obi-Wan will always put others before himself.*

Anakin had mistaken Padmé for an angel once, long ago.

*I shouldn't have asked him if he was a Jedi too.*

*I should have asked him if he was an angel too.*

Obi-Wan led him back to the ship, and Anakin allowed himself a small, amused smile. It had been
rather disappointing to encounter a real angel on Iego. She hadn't held a candle to Padmé, and in the Force, she didn't have anywhere near the beauty his Master did.

Wings or no wings.

* * *

Grievous growled as he lost a leg.
And then an arm.
He tried to run.
The Team wouldn't let him.
There were no battledroids to get in the way.
No civilians or clones to protect.
Nothing to hide behind.

Even so, Grievous was going to get away. Anakin could feel it. Could feel his own personal desperation and frustration— not again—

Obi-Wan stood between Grievous and the door.

Anakin couldn't quite believe his eyes when his Master's fingers loosened their grasp on his saber and it spun away into the corner.

Obi-Wan ended up thrown on the floor.
All Greivous had to do to escape was step past him.
The cyborg hesitated, Anakin could practically see him calculating—

Obi-Wan lashed out at Grievous's shin with his own as though to sweep his remaining leg out from under him. Of course the metal didn't give.
Anakin winced as Obi-Wan screamed in pain.
But Grievous wasn't thinking about running anymore.
The cyborg General thought he scented a wounded enemy. Someone weakened. And he could not pass up the opportunity to go in for a kill.

Anakin redoubled his attack, and as Grievous reached for Obi-Wan, the older Jedi rolled, using the Force to draw the saber, ignited, from the floor, but not to his hand.
Caught off guard, Grievous lost a second arm.
Anakin took out his other leg.
And then Grievous recognized he'd been played.
Dragging himself along with his remaining two arms, he tried to escape.

He couldn't fight back anymore, but he could move fast.

Anakin Force-leaped, ending up in front of him, and taking the last two arms.

Grievous shrieked curses at them, completely helpless.

Obi-Wan walked to join them.

Anakin stared down at the defeated criminal, breathing heavily. Not quite sure he believed they'd made it.

And instead of resenting the fact he couldn't kill him now...

He thought of what peace between CIS and Republic would mean. All the civilians who wouldn't die in bombings. All the clones who wouldn't die on the battlefields.

All the Jedi who could return to disaster relief and mediation.

Perhaps they would even have time to hunt down slaver rings now.

Hell yes.

Putting aside the personal satisfaction of killing Grievous was worth it.

Obi-Wan reached his side. Quiet. Controlled.

“That shin thing really worked. Can't believe you let go of your lightsaber.”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “We were going to lose him if he didn't decide to stay of his own accord. Had to make it enticing.”

“Bet it hurt.”

“Oh, no. Not at all. You just loosen the muscles in your fingers and let gravity take over. Quite relaxing, actually. I understand now why you do it so often.”

Obi-Wan was teasing him.

*Force* that felt good.

And Anakin understood it this time too.

It was Obi-Wan's way of telling him he'd seen Anakin make his choice. That he was proud of him.

“Think Padmé is ready?” Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan sent him a nod. “I warned her there wouldn't be much time. Bail seemed cautiously optimistic.”

Well.

They'd just have to find out.
Sidious stormed back towards his office.

The plan had gone to hell.

Dooku was dead, Grievous being punished by the CIS—

Sidious' only warning had been when he felt his apprentice's death in the Force.

And then the CIS reached out, requesting a cease-fire and peace-talks.

Palpatine had tried to manipulate the situation, but with Grievous and Dooku both clearly punished, and the Jedi Order throwing in its support of the situation and the people clamoring for peace—

But he might have pulled it off if only.

But damn that Senator Organa and his ties to Master Kenobi! The Jedi must have tipped his friend off to the fact that the heads of the Separatist army were going to fall and the CIS about to request peace, because the Senate had clearly been prepped.

Sidious' spies had noticed that the we-want-peace faction had been disgruntled and verbal, but they hadn't realized it was something that could end up being productive or relevant—

Stupid, stupid people.

They hadn't seen fit to bother him with something so normal and trivial.

Force take them.

The script may have been derailed before.

Now it was torn up and burned.

The droids were temporarily deactivated, pending permanent deactivation.

The clones had been told to stand down.

The Senate had shown the audacity to declare the war over, and that it was simply the details that needed to be arranged.

And guess who was presiding over said negotiations, like a Jedi of old?

Frakking Kenobi.

And worse.

Skywalker.

Which handed the whole thing the legitimacy that Palpatine had been creating to be aimed his own direction. Sweet hell, he hadn't built Skywalker up into the public idol in order to back peace negotiations.

Bail Organa and his massive following were poised to start decentralizing the government the instant the war was over. The power Palpatine had accumulated was going to be whittled away.
The 212th and 501st had been moved from their ships into the Jedi Temple for temporary housing while the ships went out to collect the men from the military bases on occupied Separatist planets.

There were more clones out there than ships to ferry them back.

His beautiful plan was gone.

He was out of time.

The talks were close to finishing up.

Everything was just about settled.

So he called on the last privileges he had as Chancellor, and demanded Skywalker and Kenobi come see him.

On a matter of a security threat to the proceedings.

Kenobi protested, said at least one of them should stay—

“Trust me, Master Kenobi, this may make the difference between the success and failure of these proceedings.”

They came. Like moths to a flame.

He heard the door slide open.

They would be here in a moment.

He pressed a button, activating a long-range comm.

“Execute Order Sixty-Six.”

He had one more directive to give.

This one went straight to Rex and Cody.

* * *

Padmé studied the hologram of what her children looked like physically.

Very unimpressive, given what Yoda had described.

She found herself wondering which was which.

The politician... the Jedi...

She knew. Somehow, staring at those tiny, unformed bodies, she knew.

She wanted them.

The Jedi Healer, a beautiful alien named Doctor Nema, hovered her hand over Padme's belly. “I'm going to introduce myself to them in the Force. Watch closely.”
The Jedi’s eyes fell shut, and a smile played around her mouth.

One of the tiny life-forms vibrated. The other seemed to glow.

Padmé’s jaw dropped open. “That wasn’t what it looked like— couldn’t have been—”

Nema laughed and backed the recording up so Padmé could see it again. “They're strong. And very aware. This one—” she pointed to the not glowing one— “is quite ferocious. Has very little patience for a Force-signature that does not belong. She gave me quite the kick.”

“She?”

Nema went still. “I know gender is something the little ones will have to define for themselves once their minds are farther developed, but it just felt right. I'm sorry. Don't expect a certain body style for that one because of what I said.”

“Of course. No harm done. How about the glowing one?”

“Curious. Wants to know more. Was excited to encounter someone new.”

Hell, yes. She wanted to keep them.

But for now, she needed to get back to the Senate. She hadn't wanted to postpone her appointment with Nema, but she also wanted to witness the final moments of the peace accord.

* * *

“You're kidding. A circus?” Korkie shook his head in disbelief.

Byph nodded his head, gesturing wildly.

Petro leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. “We were pretty good, too.”

“And then Grievous showed up and Padawan Tano did her best Master Kenobi impression and convinced Hondo to help us, but if Katooni hadn't talked him out of it, he would have left us there.”

Zatt grinned. “I have some holos from the flight home.” He produced a disc and showed off images of the small band and a grinning Weequay.

Korkie leaned in close for a better look. “Wow. But you ended up with your lightsabers, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Petro tossed his towards the Mandalorian.

Korkie caught it with only a hint of hesitation. “Are you guys supposed to let me look at them?”

Ganodi batted her eyes at him. “There's no rules against it.”

Korkie studied the lightsaber to avoid having to meet her gaze.

Goodness. The little Rodian certainly had quite the crush on him. He wasn't entirely sure how to deal with it, so he decided that he'd pretend he hadn't noticed for now.

She was half his age, for Force's sake.

He smiled at the thought. Swearing like a Jedi didn't feel strange here.
And if he accidentally did it out loud, it wasn't going to start a war.

He looked up at the sky above his head, obscured by gently rustling leaves.

He never would have guessed the clouds and sun to be fake. The plants all seemed to be quite fooled as well, looking full and healthy.

Though being situated in a giant house filled with Jedi, he wasn't sure how a plant wouldn't thrive.

Korkie still needed maps to navigate the massive structure. At least he now knew his way from his room to most of his classrooms, and to the dining halls without having to check his datapad. But only if he went in a certain order. If he went from current politics to geography to the dining hall, he still got lost. He had to zip over to the library between star charts and lunch in order to keep the labyrinth straight.

These kids found it amusing to watch him squint his eyes at the various cross-passages, trying to remember which ones to take.

I am getting better, and they have nine years of practice on me.

“Want to turn it on? Try some forms?”
Korkie looked over at Petro. “I don't know your forms. Sword-fighting on Mandalore is very different; we use metal blades. The balance is completely opposite—a heavy blade versus a weightless one. And we have our own styles of combat that reflect it.”

“Okay, show us some of that, then,” Katooni urged.

Byph squealed his agreement and Gungi looked hopeful.

“Alright.” Korkie stood up, waved them all back, figured out where the ignition switch lay, and began his demonstration.

This had been the one violent art Satine had allowed Korkie to study. At school, he and his friends studied fencing.

This was not fencing.

His private instructor had initiated him into a style used specifically for combat. Where the rules had nothing to do with fairness, and everything to do with energy conservation.

And where the edge was more lethal—and more useful—than the point.

When you stabbed an opponent, your blade was trapped until you freed it.

Not something to take lightly when you're not using a lightsaber. Of course, with a blade made of light, flesh would give way like butter and you didn't have to obey certain rules of fight dynamics.

“Try spinning it,” Petro called.

Korkie barked a laugh. “Where I come from, you would never waste energy like that. The point of a fight is to tire your opponent, and not yourself.”

“But they're pretty,” Ganodi protested.

Korkie shrugged. “And take effort away from the end-goal.”

“They're super useful for intimidation,” Petro argued.
“And with a blade that *weighs* nothing, maybe it's an acceptable trade-off.” Korkie experimentally wove the blue beam in a figure-eight.

Another difference between fencing and real-blade sword-fighting: *no* lunges.

For two very simple, very solid reasons.

They took more energy than accomplishing the same end with a less dramatic path.

And they risked putting strain on the four most precious joints in a sword fight.

The knees and ankles.

And Korkie had been trained to *never* risk them. No matter how pretty the result might look.

Satine had never attended his lessons, and she had instructed Korkie to keep them secret.

To this day, Korkie had no idea *why* his Aunt had been in favor of him learning something so blatantly violent... and of course, now he couldn't ask.

Still, somehow he felt closer to her than he had since her death as he moved from one guard to the next, always mindful of his feet, focus widened to take in his surroundings and prevent tunnel-vision.

He could almost see her smile.

* * *

Rex prowled down the hallway, looking for Cody.

He knew he should be happy that the war was practically over.

But...

He'd been designed to *complete the mission*, and the mission had been to *win*.

This wasn't... winning. This was... something else.

And it had nothing to do with how much his brothers had fought and suffered.

He felt inadequate, incomplete; like he'd failed somehow, even though his mind put the thought down ruthlessly.

He'd been able to see the nervous tension throughout the 501st and 212th. They all felt it.

That, and the worrying of what would become of them. They had nowhere to *go*.

Yes, the Temple had thrown its doors open to them, ready to house them until something more permanent could be figured out.

And yes. It had been built to house ten thousand Jedi without feeling crowded, and most of the Jedi weren't home, so there was room for a *lot* of brothers, so they wouldn't be *immediately* homeless.

But that didn't give him *any* hint as to where they were supposed to go from *here*. 
There was Cody. Rex moved past Ahsoka, Fives, and Tup to reach him.

Maybe Cody could make sense of his jitters, calm him down.

Rex dimly realized that was what General Skywalker turned to General Kenobi for.

*When did we start becoming like our Generals?*

It wasn't a comfortable thought.

It could only be a good thing, where Cody was concerned, and it *had* been.

But Rex...

He shook his head, trying to dislodge the headache trying to take hold.

*My General snapped and did something terrible.*

According to the Jedi, individuals weren't locked into destiny. They could choose their own path.

*I don't have to be like him that much.*

His comm signaled, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Cody receive the same message.

It was a command channel. The *highest* command channel.

Not a call you could duck.

So, rattled though he was, Rex answered.
“Chancellor. You said it was urgent?” Obi-Wan masked his impatience as best as he could. He wanted to be there when the final agreement went down.

No, he wasn't needed, at this point, but he wanted it.

Wanted to watch and murmur, Satine, we did it.

We stopped the violence.

We found an answer.

But instead he was standing here.

So he took a deep breath and centered himself.

“I'm afraid it's more than urgent, Master Kenobi,” Palpatine said, looking earnest and concerned. “It's not just the peace-talks that are in danger, but every—”

A lance of pure agony stabbed through Obi-Wan's soul.

* * *

Anakin heard Obi-Wan scream.

Heard himself scream.

The Force— blood and horror—

Jedi dying everywhere, all at once —

Betrayal, horror, disbelief, heartbreak—

In a second, thousands of them fell.

In the next second, thousands more.

In the following five seconds, hundreds yet.

They dropped from ten thousand to a couple hundred.

In less than ten seconds, they'd been decimated.

Ahsoka.

Anakin staggered for the door. The Temple was under attack —

The few Jedi who still lived were there —
And the struggle, the desperate fight for survival—

They needed help —

Obi-Wan groaned, inarticulate, shook his head in a futile attempt to clear it.

Then raced for the door.

Somehow, Anakin followed, somehow making his legs work against the darkness and death shredding his mind.

The blood vessels in Obi-Wan's eyes had burst, leaving him red-eyed, and the itching in Anakin's own told him he had to look the same. He could barely breathe. It was too much, too horrible, it didn't matter how strong his shields were, the sheer betrayal and devastation was too smothering.

The weight of the slaughter dragging his mind towards unconsciousness.

He fought it off. He had to. Lives depended on his actions—

Obi-Wan fell.

One second he'd been running, the next his feet froze and he toppled forward like a felled tree. His knees didn't bend, his hands didn't reach out to break his fall. He landed flat on the carpet and didn't move.

“Kark! Obi-Wan!” Anakin crashed to his knees beside his Master, rolling him over.

* * *

The mission wasn't over.

He had a chance to complete the mission.

Orders. Duty.

Traitors.

Rex spun on his heel and located one of the Jedi assigned to him.

A young Togruta.

He wasn't sure of her name. Had no memories of working with her. Just a throbbing terrible pain in his head.

And orders.

She was a traitor.

By the time she was turning to look at him, wide-eyed and bewildered, he'd already put five rounds in her back.

The question never formed on her lips.
He sent several more rounds into the twitching body that collapsed at his feet, just to be sure.

Jedi were tricky bastards. They feigned death, then killed your brothers while you slept.

Traitors killed clones. Traitors *butchered* clones.

There was only one Jedi Rex could remember clearly.

Krell.

He knew better this time. You couldn't let the traitors have a moment to twist your mind.

His brothers were on the line.

Traitors kill brothers.

Orders.

Brothers.

The *mission*.

Rex went hunting.

* * *

Nema stiffened at the doorway, her eyes going glassy with horror.

“What is it?” Padmé demanded.

And then images shuddered through her mind. *Death*. Jedi after Jedi falling—

She couldn't see why —

But her children were horrified, terrified, in *pain* —

Fury rushed through her blood that she couldn't protect them from an energy she couldn't manipulate.

A clone in the hallway stopped before the door, turning to look at them.

“Trooper!” Padmé called, hurrying forward. “What is *happening?*”

Between the space of one heartbeat and the next, Nema was sliding dead down the wall, eyes wide, leaving a bloody smear down the once-beautiful wallpaper.

Her blood was blue.

Padmé whirled on the clone, expecting to feel pain exploding through her body, but the man turned and strode away.

He had no interest in her.

“What the *hell* was that?” she demanded, racing out into the hallway.
Only to be struck by screams.
More blood.
Bodies falling, the harsh thud of armored boots—
Padmé found a fallen clone. Grabbed up his blaster.
Raced for the sounds of battle.
What in hell's name was happening?
Her mind offered up a single word.
Massacre.

* * *

Two of his young friends were dead before they realized something was wrong.
Then small lightsabers were out, deflecting bolts.
Small hands shoved Korkie back as small Jedi moved in front of him to defend him.
That was all kinds of wrong.
But they were faced with a meadow.
No cover.
Except two paltry trees.
“Behind the trees!” Korkie demanded.
They lost another as they took refuge.
Korkie drew in a deep breath. He still held Petro's lightsaber.
The human boy had been one of the first two to fall.
Korkie took count.
He still had Gungi, Ganodi, Katooni.
His heart clenched tight.
But his battle instructor had been thorough.
There's time later for grief.
There's never time in the moment.
Korkie took a quick glance around the trunk.
The clones were advancing.

There were at least two-dozen of them, coming from both exits... and leaving snipers in the doorways.

“Is there another way out of here?” Korkie demanded.

“An access door behind the waterfall,” Katooni stammered. “What is happening?”
Korkie met her gaze, ensuring his face was calm, eyes hard. “I don't know. But we're going to make a run for the waterfall. It's our only chance. You three continue deflecting the bolts. We keep close together, cover for one another. Understood?”
Two heads nodded, but Ganodi cowered. “We're their friends. There must be some mistake. If we surrender, surely they'll stop—”

“No. They won't.” Korkie had survived the devolution of Mandalore.

He knew merciless when he saw it.

“When I say run, you run.”

She shook her head in terror, freezing up.

“Do it for me, Ganodi.”

Her eyes widened.

Maybe later he would feel guilty for giving her a special smile. For manipulating her like that.

Or maybe they would all be dead and it wouldn't matter.

Either way, she was nodding now. Focused.

Ready.

They made it to the access door.

When they opened it, they found troopers pouring in.

They lost Gungi.

The wookiee fell without a sound, eyes wide.

Korkie slammed the door shut and drove Petro's saber through the catch mechanism.

It wouldn't hold them long. He turned, looking out at the troopers who were almost upon them.

“If we wait here, they'll stay out of reach and pick us off one by one. We have to get past them, get out of here.”

“But if we do, they'll shoot us in the back!” Katooni pointed out.

Yes. They would. “That's why we have to kill them all. We close, we take them down, and we run. Stay close together, block the blasts. Ready? Start on my mark. We'll go for the left flank first and work our way around.”

“Why are they doing this?” Ganodi wailed.
The answer was obvious to Korkie. “They were sleeper agents. Designed to kill you. But they never knew it—that way you wouldn't sense it.”

It might be classic, but he'd never heard of such a stunt being pulled on so massive a scale.

“Everyone is dead,” Katooni choked. “All over the galaxy! We're dying!”

“Our only chance is to get out of here. To do that we have to take them out.” Korkie now wished he'd headed down the access hallway.

Then again, this was his third engagement, and he supposed it was only natural to miss things.

It was insanity, it was wrong to lead children into battle.

But if he went out to defend them, he would fall.

And they would die huddled in a corner.

At least this way...

It was an attempt at survival.

Korkie hoped that wherever his Aunt was, she wasn't ashamed of him.

***

Padmé discovered that once she fell in beside the desperately struggling Jedi and started shooting at the troopers who were mowing them down, they lost the distinction they'd been following.

Apparently her designation had changed, and she was someone to kill now too.

Even though she'd pulled out her Senate authority and demanded an answer, demanded they stand down.

Even though she was only using stun blasts.

There were too many. Far too many.

And coming from every direction imaginable.

At first she'd been horrified that the Jedi were killing the clones.

And then she'd recognized the sheer numbers... and the fact that there were children upstairs...

And that when a clone fell, horribly wounded, he still crawled towards them, an all-consuming need to murder overcoming pain or the loss of limbs.

Padmé had no idea what had been done to them. Whatever it was had completely stripped them of their personhood, any concern for their own survival.

She'd called some of them by name, but they didn't respond.

They didn't seem to know their names.
And there was no hint of recognition when they looked at her, either.

From the incoherent, anguished words of the Jedi around her, and the images flashing in her mind, Padmé realized this was being repeated everywhere.

Where is Anakin?

Was he even alive?

Kids, if you can, call your daddy! We need him, or none of us are going to walk away from this!

As it was, given the sheer number of opponents, and the intimate knowledge they had of Jedi strengths and weaknesses...

She wasn’t sure even Anakin could survive.

That thought had her switching her blaster from stun to kill.

If every man she shot could recover, only to attack her husband?

I’m sorry, but I have a family to protect.

At least now every trooper she took out couldn’t kill Anakin.

Ever.

* * *

Hell.

The Temple had gone from the stalwart defender of freedom and the epicenter of compassion in the galaxy to a shrine of blood in seconds.

And with every hallway overrun, more washed its stones.

Jedi. Clone.

The Temple burned.

Walls and floors and ceilings gave way to the depredations of explosives.

Priceless works of art, gifts from the people Jedi had assisted over the years, fell shattered and stained.

A historian would be weeping.

The best friends the Jedi had in the galaxy were the clones.

And the reverse was also true.

But friend slaughtered friend in a desperate attempt to survive.

An attempt that became ever more clearly futile.
But they were Jedi.

They couldn't just stand by and watch children die.

So they fought. They fought until they couldn't stand, until they were on their knees, bleeding from innumerable wounds, and still fought.

They fought until their lightsabers shattered and their bones gave way, and still they tapped into the Force to collapse hallways, to fling troopers back, to—

Death.

It claimed them, one after another. An endless march.

And with every one lost, the Force decayed just a bit more, requiring more effort to use. Causing more pain when its children tried to reach it for strength.

Fragile minds in the Healing Halls, damaged from the war or missions gone wrong, broke under the weight of the Force's violation.

Their screams could be heard shattering through the Temple, uncannily high.

They didn't fight the clones who came.

But the silencing blaster bolts couldn't seem to stop the ringing among the columns.

* * *

It took all of Palpatine's control to not throw his head back and drink in the pure, unadulterated agony of the present.

The only moment that was going to be better was when the clones awoke and realized what they'd done.

Exquisite.

A revenge fitting for the Sith Order.

The fact that it wasn't the Jedi who had wiped them out was irrelevant. The fact that Darth Bane had been the one to annihilate the Sith was hardly the point, here.

The Sith wanted the galaxy. They wanted to control everything, down to the very breaths its inhabitants took, and the Jedi had stopped them too many times.

The clones would be worthless as an army after this.

That was all right.

There was a planetful of Mandalorians, eager to prove their supremacy.

All you had to do was pay them, and they would do anything.

Very useful, that.
Ahsoka had been one of the first to die. Palpatine had made sure that would be the case.

He didn't want Anakin to be dragged away from this room by a need to protect his former Padawan.

Anakin had felt it even as he ran for the door.

He knew.

Tears streamed down his face as he shook his Master, desperate not to lose him too. “Obi-Wan, please,” Anakin looked up in a panic. “I can't leave him, but the Temple is under attack —”

Palpatine gave him an understanding nod. “Of course you can't leave him. What is happening to him?”

Anakin searched his Master's Force-signature.

What he thought was Obi-Wan's.

No hint of a smile betrayed Palpatine's hidden self.

Thanks to his future apprentice, the Sith knew what Obi-Wan's shields were supposed to look like.

Mimicking unconsciousness, with just a little something wrong was easy.

Concealing what was really happening.

Kenobi's shields might be arranged differently now, in the wake of Skywalker's betrayal, but they were built the same. Kenobi would always be susceptible to attack.

Not that it mattered.

This was the final attack.

Well done, Lord Vader. You handed me his soul on a platter, ready to take. A fitting gift, my true apprentice.

He had waited years. Suffered through Dooku in order to reach Anakin.

And he was ready.

No more waiting.

“There's something wrong with him, but I don't know what, I don't know if I can leave him!”

Anakin looked up at Palpatine, desperate for guidance. “He's helpless, and I don't know what the hell is happening—”

“Anakin.” Palpatine put on his concerned, fatherly voice. The one the boy had always had a weakness for. “Do you remember what you told me about the Sand People?”

Confusion and impatience crossed Anakin's face. “Yes?”

“It's my turn. I have something terrible to confess to you.” Oh, the grieved expression. He'd perfected that one. He was very pleased with it. “I have seen horrible visions concerning Padmé and your children.”

Padmé. Who was in the middle of peace negotiations, and likely had no idea that her husband's family was being slaughtered.
The script might be rushed, but it still had beauty.

Anakin stared at him, uncomprehending. “Visions?”

Palpatine felt Obi-Wan thrash against him, felt him struggle to reach out to his Padawan.

The Sith quietly kept him underfoot.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was slowly dying, cut off from his former apprentice, Anakin completely unaware of the agony dragging his former Master away.

Palpatine left Obi-Wan just enough awareness to hear what was happening.

To know.

Watch as I take him from you.

All Palpatine had to do was stall. Obi-Wan's life would drain away...

It would be a welcome bonus if Obi-Wan survived long enough to see Anakin betray him one last time, but it wasn't necessary.

That had always been Maul's greatest flaw. The need to gloat before the prize was reached. Before the enemy was dead.

He lost his legs to it, and then he lost his freedom to it.

Who knew what the failure of a Sith would lose next.

He never learned.

“Anakin, my boy, you are the son I never had.” Palpatine spoke the words heavily, allowing grief to whisper all through them.

Obi-Wan struck out at him.

Come, come, Master Jedi. Die in peace, perhaps?

The man's efforts were amusing. Very, very pathetic, but amusing all the same. He had a fire that just would not be put out.

Let's see how eager to fight you are when you remember.

It was but the work of a moment, and then it was done.

Obi-Wan was trapped on Zygerria again. Surrounded by his abusers.

Screaming for Anakin... who wasn't hearing him. Who was focused on something else entirely.

Now if Obi-Wan tried to fight Sidious, the memories would grow more intense. More vivid. More throttling.

The quieter he lay, the fainter they would become.

Obi-Wan understood the terms. Oh he understood them.

The rebellion seething through his soul was polluted by the terror, the horror, the freezing panic—
Palpatine let it soothe his frustrations away as he focused his will upon Anakin.

“I love you too much to stand by and watch Padmé waste away. I couldn't let you lose your love and your children.”

Anakin was staring at him. “Visions?” he demanded again, this time a bit more stern.

“Anakin, my mentor taught me everything he knew about the Force. Including the nature of the dark side.”

“You know the dark side?” A shiver ran through the kneeling Jedi.

Palpatine gave him a patient smile. “Anakin, to become a wise and balanced leader, one must embrace a... larger view of the Force. Not just the narrow, dogmatic view of the Jedi.”

It was amusing to claim that he used both light and dark.

There wasn't a selfless bone in Sidious' body, therefore the light was a sealed volume to him. He couldn't touch it, couldn't use it. Certainly had no desire to.

And even more certainly had no interest in diluting his apprentice's power with something so vulgar as compassion. He would bleed the selflessness from Lord Vader until not even the memory of remained. Until his apprentice would face down his own loved ones and murder them, feeling nothing but a cold satisfaction.

Would watch them plead with him, weep...

Without it affecting him in the slightest.

“You are the Sith,” Anakin snarled, no longer kneeling but crouched protectively over his dying Master, saber in his hand. “What have you done to Obi-Wan?”

“He is fine—” Palpatine soothed.

“You've murdered the Jedi, murdered Ahsoka!”

Palpatine could sense his desperate need to save the last few still alive at the Temple.

But Obi-Wan Kenobi was the chain around his ankle.

Anakin would not leave him alone with the Sith Lord.

“I understand your anger,” Palpatine murmured. “It's only reasonable. It's only right, that you should hate me. To cheat death is a power that comes at great cost. I was willing to pay that price for you, Anakin. Padmé will die if the sacrifice is incomplete. I chose to begin this myself, to spare you. So that you don't have to bear the weight of guilt. And believe me, it is a terrible weight. But to save her, we must focus darkness to an extent it hasn't been in thousands of years. It must be thick enough that we can compel it to save her. Bend it to our will.”

Anakin's snarl deepened. “Obi-Wan promised we'd figure it out—”

“So you knew?” Palpatine feigned studying his face.

The snarl faltered. Vanished. “I've... seen visions too—”

“Then you've seen Obi-Wan succeeding? Saving her?” Palpatine asked, everything about himself eager, knowing full well Anakin hadn't.
It hadn't been engineered into the dreams.

“No—”

“He means well,” Palpatine lamented. “He has always meant well, but he doesn't have the strength. Anakin. You know exactly how far Master Kenobi's strength goes. He couldn't save his own love. He cannot save yours, though he would be willing to die trying.”

* * *

Korkie fell to his knees as a bolt struck him in the thigh.

He took out two more troopers.

It wasn't enough.

He willed Ganodi forward, but she placed her back to his and fought until she fell.

Wouldn't listen to his commands to run.

Katooni did.

She died surrounded by a pile of dead clones.

Men she'd killed.

Korkie looked up into the muzzles of blasters. So many, despite all those he'd slain.  

I'm sorry, Auntie.  

I'm sorry, Uncle Ben.

He hoped his Uncle had survived.

He doubted it.

Oh...

He doubted it.

* * *

The seeds Palpatine had sown three years ago were paying off.

After his Mother's death, Anakin couldn't even fathom the thought that his dreams might be false.

Might be sent to him.

This part of the plan, at least, had gone beautifully.
Anakin stared up at him, the conviction draining from his face.

A quiet knell, like the tolling of a bell through the Force.

The last Jedi at the Temple had fallen.

There was a breath, then two—

And Palpatine braced his soul against the coming wave—

*There* it was.

Clones all over the galaxy blinked, stared down at the blood on their hands—

Wondered where it had come from—

Looked up to find hell.

The realization of what they'd done.

They knew nothing about the chips in their heads.

They didn't know why, they didn't know how.

All they knew was that the nightmare was *here*.

* * *

Some brothers killed themselves, convinced this was another dream.

Usually, when they died in the dream, they *woke up*.

Others ate their blasters knowing full well this *wasn't* a nightmare.

Horror, despair...

Their reasons for living were dead by their hands.

And the Jedi were *traitors*— the most vile word ever— but *believing* it was so *difficult*— *did* they believe it?

And if the Jedi *were* traitors…

Would the clones want to be anything *else*?

But if the Jedi *hadn't* been traitors— then the clones *themselves* were the traitors—

And traitors deserved to *die*—

Many chose death.

Others struggled with reality until it bested them, sinking into a catatonic state.
Others kicked at the wall, muttering over and over that they'd done the right thing. Good soldiers followed orders. Good soldiers. Traitors.

Trying desperately to hate the beings they loved because it was the only way to survive what they'd done.

Fives, Wooley, and Kix had gone down while there was still fighting.

Cody was pacing, trying to make sense of it all.

Boil was one of those kicking a wall.

Tup had killed himself.

Rex didn't know where Jesse was. Whether he lay among the masses of the fallen or if he'd run away. Or chosen death.

Rex crouched by the body of his Commander, fingers tracing a torn lekku.

She was so beautiful in death. So young. So innocent.

Could she really have been a traitor?

And why hadn't he been able to remember her name when he—

When he—

He shuddered.

He desperately needed General Skywalker to come walking up and explain it all. To make sense of this hell. To either kill him and end this, or to save him from it, but he needed orders. He needed an explanation.

But General Skywalker was a Jedi.

That meant he was a traitor.

And Rex knew... knew...

That if the man walked through those doors...

Rex would be flying for his throat, trying to slaughter him.

He didn't know how he knew.

But he knew.

Stay away, he begged. If you're alive, stay away.

And then his mind buckled, because he was wishing a traitor success.

What kind of soldier did that?

* * *
A hush fell across the universe.

The Jedi, down to the last Padawan, were all dead except for the two in this room.

Not a single one had survived.

_Not one._

The weight of it closed in around Anakin, driving the breath from his lungs, crushing his heart.

The darkness was cloying, a syrup that wanted to crawl up his nose and into his eyes and down his throat. He tried to push it back, but it wouldn't let him go.

It seeped through his pores into his veins, tasting like blood in his mouth.

The worst thing about it was it didn't hurt.

It didn't taste... _bad._

The darkness called to him, whispered words of assurance. Promised release from the agony.

Promised he could hide in its warm depths.

It embraced him, and offered safety.

Offered him the strength _to force_ the reporters to stop. To _force_ war to _never_ start again. To _force_ Padmé to live.


The only thing that sounded sane in this warped, twisted reality.

“I am so close to saving Padmé, but there is one final thing you have to do.”

Anakin looked up, wanting to scream at him, wanting to _kill_ him for what he'd done...

But the man looked and _sounded_ so caring...

And all of this, he did for _Anakin_. To _save_ Padmé _for_ Anakin.
Any respect for himself that Anakin retained died as he looked up into Palpatine's weathered face and asked, “What is it?”

“Sit and hold Master Kenobi,” Palpatine said, tone so gentle.

“What? Why?”

“He is dying, Anakin.” Compassion spilled off the old man in the Force.

Panic seized Anakin's throat. “What?”

“I am draining his life, and I will pour it into Padmé. Search the Force. He is not in pain. He is not conscious. It's like dying in his sleep. He didn't know ahead of time. No fear. Just gentle sleep. Don't you think he's owed some peace?”

“But—”

“Think of how broken he would be to awaken and find everyone dead. Everyone, Anakin.”

His mind wouldn't work, he couldn't think — the darkness was so thick, it made his thoughts sluggish, he couldn't string them together— “You—”

“Isn't giving up life so another can live the essence of being a Jedi?”

“But—”

“And isn't Obi-Wan Kenobi the best Jedi you've ever known?”

It made so much sense. Didn't it? No, no, something was wrong — Palpatine was lying, right? That's what Sith did? But Obi-Wan had said Sith weren't evil. Just selfish. That light and dark had nothing to do with good and evil.

Palpatine loved him selfishly, hadn't wanted him hurt.

That didn't make him evil.

It made him dark. Selfish.

And Obi-Wan had once said that he didn't see death as an enemy. Anakin had claimed that death was the end, was the ultimate terrible...

Obi-Wan had looked at him with those clear gray eyes and told him that to die knowing you had done your best... was a well-deserved rest. Sleep.

And that to die so that another could live...

Wasn't a bad fate by any means.
That was before Zygerria.

Anakin searched Obi-Wan's signature in the Force, but Palpatine was telling the truth.

Peace. His Master was at peace.

And if he woke up... he would never find peace again.

Something pushed against the quiet of the room. Something violent. It manifested itself in a weak plea. “Padmé wouldn't want—”

“But what would Obi-Wan want? Would he want her to die so he doesn't have to?”

The words were spinning around. So confusing. Something wasn't quite right. What wasn't quite right?

It felt like something Obi-Wan might say.

Only... not like something Obi-Wan would say.

“Anakin... my boy... Korkie Kryze is dead. To save your wife. Do you really want to force Obi-Wan to live with that? Wouldn't that be Zygerria all over again? Forcing him to live a nightmare? Refusing to let him go?”

Cold sank fangs into Anakin's heart. “But—”

“Would you selfishly demand he stay with you? Afraid to cause yourself the pain of losing him, would you force him to endure unfathomable pain? Isn't it kinder to let him go? Isn't it the selfless thing?”

It sounded right. It sounded wrong.

“I know you try to ignore it,” Palpatine murmured, so loving, “but he longs for death. Craves it. He's lost everything. The Jedi, his love, Korkie, his Padawan. He doesn't know it yet, but he's lost his clones too. It would be the height of cruelty to force him to endure it against his will, when he has the chance to be a hero, one last time. Imagine him waking up to discover Padmé and your children have died, to save him for such an empty existence. It would kill his soul. You know it would. Letting him go... it would be a mercy, Anakin.”

“I— can't.” There. That was coherent. He couldn't stand by and watch Obi-Wan die.

It just wasn't in him.

“He would forgive you, you know. He always forgives you.”

Finally. Something that made sense.

He stared down into the beloved face. Knew he would die for Padmé in a heartbeat.

“Padmé would live?” Anakin asked. He hadn't meant to ask. He hadn't—

“I can guarantee it.”

Anakin rubbed at his eyes with his fingers, hoping to clear his mind, clear his vision— “Can't we get the power some other way?”

“No. I have never lied to you, Anakin, and I wouldn't start now. Not with this.”
“Can't you take my life to feed hers?”

“Anakin, my dear boy, if I did that, what would be the point? It was you I wanted to spare.”

Something clicked in the fog in Anakin's mind.

*He's not being selfless. He wants me alive. This isn't about saving Padmé for me. I'm not the point here. What I want doesn't matter to him.*

Selfishness.

Sith.

Anakin yanked his lightsaber out and aimed it for Palpatine's heart. “*Release him.*”

“What are you doing?” Palpatine pleaded, sounding so *reasonable*. “Padmé will *die*. Think about this. *Please*. Kill me, if you must, if you cannot break free from your slavery to the Jedi Council, but save her.”

The comm at the desk pinged and a mini Mas Amedda appeared. “The peace treaty is signed, and the motion has also passed. The Senate elected you Emperor of the Republic to give you the authority you need to protect them from the betrayal of the Jedi. To protect the infant peace. Congratulations, Emperor Palpatine. Your Empire awaits.”

The holo vanished.

Anakin's eyes glittered. “What did you tell them?”

“That the Jedi demanded the war continue. That they tried to sabotage the peace negotiations. That they threatened the Senate and were going to restart the war.”

Anakin felt the anger swirling in his heart, the darkness. He couldn't help it. This man was *vile.*

“You've killed so many already. Who next? Next it's going to be the people who protest that you killed the Jedi. It's going to be the people who would expose the betrayal as a *lie*. It's going to be the people who resent an *empire*. It's going to be politicians who believe in democracy—”

“You don't believe in democracy, Anakin. I've listened to what you've said over the years. You believe a stronger government is necessary. Help me make it a *good* one. A *just* one. It's the *only* way to prevent war from returning. You know how corrupt the Senate is, how greedy. With this power, we can ensure the peace is never broken again. *No more deaths.*”

Anakin hesitated.

*This is my moment. The moment I decide between me and others.*

But...

Wouldn't saving Obi-Wan be for Anakin, and choosing to put an Empire's needs before his own be *selfless*?

The choice wasn't supposed to be this confusing. It was supposed to be *obvious*.

The Jedi were dead.

There was nothing that could be done about it now.

He could make their sacrifice *pointless*. He could make it so they died for *nothing*. Or, he could do
what he could with the cards dealt him. Padmé could live. The Empire could be good. There would be peace.

Wasn't that what the Jedi were willing to die for? To save lives?

No, this wasn't what any of them or Anakin himself wanted, but it was done, and wasn't making the best of it a Jedi trait? Instead of wailing over the past, forging the future into something better?

Obi-Wan lay so quietly.

The lines of pain, of fear that so often marred his forehead gone.

He didn't know his family had been annihilated.

He didn't know.

Anakin felt his heart break.

Obi-Wan would never accept an empire. He would think it slavery for the average citizen.

Obi-Wan would be miserable. An avian trapped in a gilded cage.

Anakin stared his decision in the face.

Padmé and his children... or his Master.

Palpatine was right. He knew which Obi-Wan would choose.

A memory of Mortis flitted through his mind. “Their powers are too strong for us, Anakin. Save Ahsoka.”

It hadn't been Padmé, then, but if it had been, his Master's words would have been the same.

He'd given permission. No, a command.

Ahsoka was dead.

Ahsoka, who Obi-Wan was now responsible for.

No.

No.

The agony Anakin felt at her loss was not something he would inflict on his Master.

He had Obi-Wan's wishes on the matter.

And in this moment, Anakin chose to respect them over his own heart.

I love you.

He turned off his lightsaber and sat beside Obi-Wan.

He gathered his Master in his arms, drew him close, cradling his body.

If Obi-Wan must die so that others could live...
At least he would die surrounded by love.

Even though Obi-Wan wouldn't know it, wouldn't feel it, he would be bathed in gratitude and sorrow. He would not die alone. Not like the rest of the Jedi.

Anakin would make his sacrifice, and the sacrifice of the other Jedi, have value. Have meaning. He would take something horrible, something terrible, and bring life and security in its wake.

And...

Anakin would be with Obi-Wan in his final moments. Walk beside him to the brink. Would know what it felt like to die with him.

He would carry that knowledge, that burden, forever.

He owed Obi-Wan that.

He pressed a gentle kiss to the death-white forehead. Thank you.

In life, Obi-Wan had given him everything.

Death would be no different.

He lowered his forehead to press against Obi-Wan's hair. Closed his eyes.

And one last time, gently pushed his way through the shields, to hear the silence, feel every pulse of his heart.

In half a standard second, he knew.

Knew the Sith had lied.

Knew Obi-Wan was aware. He was not asleep, unconscious, unknowing.

Knew Obi-Wan's excruciating anguish, body and mind and heart.

Knew Obi-Wan was screaming, and there was no-one to hear him.

Knew Obi-Wan was keenly aware of all he'd lost.

Knew Obi-Wan was trapped on Zygerria.

Knew that the harder Obi-Wan pushed against the illusion to try to rush to Anakin's aid, the more viciously the memories closed in on him.

Knew Obi-Wan knew he was dying. Felt the slow draining agony as life was torn centimeter by bloody centimeter from his clutching fingers.

Knew none of Obi-Wan's muscles obeyed him.

Knew Palpatine had placed false shields around Obi-Wan to keep Anakin docile.

Knew Obi-Wan had heard everything that had been said.

Knew Obi-Wan's point of view on it.

Obi-Wan's vision was so much clearer.
Palpatine wasn't trying to muddle his judgment. He wanted Obi-Wan seeing clearly.

And the way Obi-Wan saw it burned through Anakin's soul.

Palpatine didn't love him.

Not even selfishly.

Palpatine wanted his power. Palpatine wanted control over the Chosen One, wanted to mold Anakin into something that would give Palpatine more power. Wanted to use him, and would cast him aside once he no longer wanted him.

Obi-Wan saw that Palpatine had stripped away all of Anakin's friends except for Palpatine himself. Leaving him the only one Anakin could turn to.

Anakin knew.

Half a second.

His eyelids had just brushed closed when they flew open again. His head snapped up with a snarl. “This ends here. Let him go.”

Palpatine knew he knew. He dropped the facade of kindness, his eyes turning hard and cold. “You will bow the knee or Padmé dies.” “Padmé would rather die than have me bolster your power and hand you the Republic.” It was difficult to say, so difficult—

But every word was true.

And what Padmé wanted mattered.

It sure as frip mattered.

“How about your unborn children? Would she be so careless with their lives?”

The cold surged through Anakin's blood. “I will save them.”

“You can't if you're dead.” “I'm not dead yet.” Anakin was on his feet, lightsaber lit, moving to stand between Obi-Wan and the Sith.

“Bow to me, Skywalker, or they die.”

“They're dead already, because they would fight you to the bitter end, whether I gave in to you or not. If I betrayed them, they would wish they were dead, and they would fight on. I'm done forcing my will on them.”

Palpatine prowled to the side, and Anakin turned slowly to always keep him in view.

“Let's get to the heart of it, then, shall we?” Palpatine smiled. “You. You don't want to lose. You're so young. You have a little power. Think of how much more you could gain. You could achieve all you ever wanted: you could make Padmé's dreams of the end of corruption come true. Surely she would forgive you, if you could accomplish that. You can learn how to beat death. And you could make the reporters stop saying those vile things about Obi-Wan. If you bow to me.”

How in hell could he know all that, unless he'd been touching Anakin's mind over the years? Somehow reading his thoughts, his feelings, without Anakin's knowledge or consent?
The thought sent a shiver of revulsion down his spine.

What else had Palpatine seen?

This must be how Obi-Wan felt when his memories were violated.

Anakin gripped his lightsaber and his muscles tightened, ready to spring.

Palpatine gave it one last effort. “If you die, there will be no-one to help Padmé. I won't have the power, and all those who would have helped her are dead. You can either kneel before a new Master, or die with the old one.”

Force, why wouldn't he shut up?

Even as Anakin lunged forward, a red saber meeting his blue, he knew.

If Obi-Wan hadn't been here...

*I would have fallen for it. I wouldn't have been able to see my way out of the web.*

He owed Obi-Wan his soul.

Anakin fought as he never had before. He released himself to the Force, gave himself over, allowed its surging light to twine through his arms, his legs, his mind—

It was beautiful. It was terrifying. It was exhilarating.

It was exhausting.

Death hung heavy in the room, grabbing at him. It felt like fighting underwater. It shortened his foreknowledge of what was about to happen. Gave him less warning.

It had the opposite effect on Sidious.

Palpatine was no old man, apparently.

The battle raged around the room, destroying art, destroying the desk—

Anakin knew the moment when the tide turned.

It was the three and three-quarter minute mark.

From there, it was a matter of five more blows and then Anakin's lightsaber shattered and Anakin was driven to his knees.

Even as he fell, the thought cut through the fog that would not leave.

He was going to die. Right here, right now.

*I'm sorry, my love. I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. I'm sorry, Snips.*

But at least he could look all three in the face.

There was a cleanness here he'd never known he needed.

It wasn't so bad to die, when there was that.
A blue blade erupted through the Sith's chest.

Anakin stared at the lightsaber tip, baffled.

Palpatine's eyes rolled up in his head and he fell forward—

Anakin rolled out of the way and onto his feet, just in time to catch Obi-Wan as his Master collapsed.

“How did you—?”

Anakin thought of what he'd seen when he'd stepped into Obi-Wan's mind.

And then realized.

Obi-Wan had chosen to allow the illusion to have its way, as brutally as it could inflict, because he was going. To. Help. Anakin.

He'd thrown away any attempt to save himself, to try to hide, to minimize the damage.

He'd walked through Zygerria, while it tore his soul asunder.

Suffering in silence.

Because he hadn't fought back, Palpatine hadn't sensed him. Had assumed he'd given up.

Hadn't realized.

Anakin sank to the floor, holding Obi-Wan close. The blood dripping from his Master's nose and ears terrified him.

Obi-Wan had endured it all over again, by choice—

For Anakin. To save the boy he loved.

“Live, please,” Anakin begged through the tears running down his cheeks.

Obi-Wan's gray eyes found his face. “Anakin... they're all gone.”

“Yeah. Yeah, they are.” Anakin could feel the gaping tear in the universe. “And I may lose Padmé and my kids. If that happens, you're all I have left. Please don't leave me.”

“Anakin... your Force-signature... it's clean...”

“What?” Anakin stole a quick glance at himself.

His jaw nearly fell open in stunned disbelief.

No longer blood-soaked. Where it brushed against Obi-Wan's, it no longer seemed to taint his Master's by proximity.

It... it matched.

And where they overlapped, strength and beauty burned brighter.

For the first time in his life, Anakin felt worthy of the man bleeding in his arms.

“Look at that,” Anakin half-laughed, half-sobbed. And then something else caught his attention.
Yes. The galaxy's wound was terrible.

But the throttling darkness was... lifting.

The pall that had fallen across the Force on a galactic scale, that had been slowly creeping for decades and had become so thick in the last three years...

It was receding. Falling away.

Light, so besieged, so sickened for so long, spilled across the universe.


The sense of freedom that spilled into Anakin's soul almost made him feel giddy. “Did I do that, or did you? I think you did that, when you killed Palpatine.”


His Master must have seen his confusion—

“Balance... it was never about light and dark.”

Anakin looked closer.

Saw it.

Obi-Wan's gift for the Cosmic Force, Anakin's own for the Living Force, overlapping in perfect harmony.

He's right.

“Finding our balance did all this?” Anakin stared into the Force's breaking dawn, overwhelmed.

Obi-Wan half-smiled. “I'm sure overthrowing the Sith didn't hurt.”

“Well. That, at least, was something you accomplished.”

* * *

Obi-Wan lay still and watched the spectacular colors streaking across the Force.

It had been shadowed for so long, the hues muted, muddied, broken.

He hadn't been alive when the Force originally looked like this. He had only ever lived under the threat of the Sith.

This was...

Beyond his most beautiful dreams.

Anakin could say he was sure it was Obi-Wan who had brought it, but Obi-Wan knew better.

“We both did,” Obi-Wan murmured. There was no way he would have been able to kill the Sith
himself. Not without Anakin casting his lot in with the light.

In the end, it had been Anakin who decided which way the galaxy would go.

Brought balance.

*You were right, Qui-Gon. So right.*

Cosmic and Living Force unified.

The light returning to where it belonged, and the shadows to their place.

Stillness had fallen. A peace and a hope that drove memories back into darkened corners.

The Force was so close.

_Anakin_ was so close.

For the first time in his life, Obi-Wan could just *rest* in Anakin's presence in the Force. Perfect. Finally whole. So, so beautiful.

And this amazing creature called him *Master.*

What a gift.

One Obi-Wan had never been worthy of.

Quinlan Vos had been wrong. Standing in Anakin's wake wasn't a demeaning place to be.

Content. Very content.

Oh look... there was Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan smiled to him, felt warmth seep into his bones as his Master smiled back.

“_You did it, Obi-Wan._” His Master's voice so proud...  

“I'm not a failure?” Obi-Wan asked, feeling fear again—

Qui-Gon's eyes gentled. “No. You were never that.”  
The years of self-doubt, of self-hate drained away.

It was so beautiful here, so quiet.

Satine... Ahsoka... the thousands in his family...  

They were waiting for him.

But there was one very special person left in the land of the living.

Obi-Wan pushed back, away from the golden drift of the Force.

Away from Qui-Gon.

He became aware of the _pain_ first. Tearing through his body.

Something still so, _so_ wrong.
He blinked up at Anakin. His Padawan was still caught by the song of Light's morning.

“It’s— it's not stopping,” Obi-Wan rasped. Anakin deserved to know.

* * *

Anakin stared down at Obi-Wan, shocked by how weak, how *pained* the voice sounded. It broke him free of his wonder. “You're still dying?”

“Yes.” A cough wracked the thin frame.

Panic. Sharp and cruel.

“*Listen to me.* You've got to find out what he did. What's wrong, and then *heal* it. Alright?”

Obi-Wan nodded his head and his eyes drifted shut.

Anakin felt his heart hammering in terror, each beat a pounding pain in his head. *You can do it. Come on. We can make it through this.*

Obi-Wan's eyes flew open, gray staring up at him in horror. “*Your twins* — Palpatine *did something* to them—”

Anakin shuddered.

So much— *so much* being taken from him—

He had to focus.

If he wanted to save any of them, he couldn't flail. He had to fight *smart* this time.

One thing at a time. What was right in front of him, first. “Find what he did to you, Obi-Wan. *Now.*”

Obi-Wan tried, but the effort was draining what strength he had left.

Soon he wouldn't be able to heal himself even if he *did* find what he was looking for.

“I can't find it. And if I can't find it, I can't heal it,” Obi-Wan panted, his agony pulsing harsh in the Force.

“Let me in. You rest, and *I'll* look.”

“You can't *heal* — it's not your gift.”

Anakin held him tighter, knowing what he was asking Obi-Wan to endure. *Knowing* how cruel it was. “No. But I can *search*. Then you can heal it. You'll die if we don't. Please let me in.”
Tomorrow morning, if all goes according to plan, I will post the final chapter and epilogue.
Obi-Wan stiffened in his arms as Anakin's request sank home. “Aren't you just... going to barge in? Like— last time—”

Anakin thought of that horrible day when Obi-Wan had come so close to killing himself.

Thought of the hell he'd inflicted on his Master in the process of trying to save him.

And ultimately failing.

“No,” he whispered. “I'm not going to invade your mind again. It's your decision. Please let me save you.”

He couldn't breathe.

Obi-Wan hesitated for seconds that tore at Anakin's soul.

And then he whispered, “You may.”

Anakin felt him lower his shields, felt his body trembling in his Padawan's arms.

* * *

Palpatine... Palpatine had been hell.

But it was so much easier to take that kind of torment from an enemy.

Obi-Wan called on every scrap of willpower he possessed to hold still.

“I'm sorry,” Anakin whispered into his mind.

His Padawan tried to be as gentle as possible.

But Anakin's mind searching through his own put him so close to being back where Palpatine had held him down.

Rooms Obi-Wan kept resolutely locked were opened. Their contents brought back into view.

Obi-Wan writhed, keening in anguish.

He felt Anakin's arms close tighter around him, pulling his Master to his heart.

Something wet fell on Obi-Wan's face.

Then again, and again.

Anakin's tears.
“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” Anakin murmured as he searched.

And then a moment of stillness—

“I found it. It's here, Obi-Wan. Right here.”

Yes.

It was.

Obi-Wan was too tired to be able to translate the sensations into anatomy charts, but fortunately that was unnecessary for healing.

Obi-Wan reached for what Palpatine had broken. Tried to pour strength into it, tried to draw the shattered edges together—

And couldn't. He didn't have the strength.

He was too far gone.

Far too gone.

The pieces slipped from his numb grasp.

He felt Anakin's alarm, hands shaking his shoulders, words in a desperate, tear-choked voice.

It was so far away. So distant.

* * *

Anakin had only one option left.

He had to heal Obi-Wan himself.

Hoping to hell and back that he wouldn't somehow make things worse —

That had happened, last time he attempted to save a dying Jedi—

He poured his soul into trying to mend the rent. He drove himself further than he knew he could, refusing to even take a breath.

He focused like had never in his life before.

Almost.

Almost —

And then he felt something snap in his own mind and body.

Felt blood trickling from his nose.

Feeling just a bit detached from it all, Anakin realized that now he’d done it.
He was dying too.

Obi-Wan wasn't saved...

But Anakin was joining him.

A low, pained laugh escaped him.

Obi-Wan had always warned that one of these days he was going to try something that he just couldn't do... and he wouldn't walk away from it.

_I guess he was right._

He gently pulled away from Obi-Wan's mind, nudging the shields back into position as best he could in the wake of Palpatine's surgical strike.

Obi-Wan shuddered in his arms.

Curled there, on the floor of Palpatine's office, a dead Sith prone nearby...

_What a way to go._

Certainly wasn't what he'd envisioned. Though... he'd never actually envisioned _anything_. He'd always subconsciously assumed he _would_ get out. Somehow, someway.

He'd never looked death in the face and actually _expected_ it to take him.

Not until Palpatine had him disarmed.

And now... here again.

Obi-Wan cupped his hands together, and Anakin watched a feeble glow appear between them.

“What is that?” Anakin asked suspiciously.

“I can't— heal myself, but I have a little strength left. If I can concentrate it. Put it in one place.”

“What for?”

Obi-Wan's gaze focused on his hands. “To save you.”

“You already have.”

Gray eyes raised to meet his blue, and Anakin read anguish in their depths. “Let me save you,” Obi-Wan pleaded. “You I can heal. It's a simple break. I—”

“No. Listen to me. The twins. You said something about the twins.”

“Dying.” Obi-Wan's eyes lost their focus as he reached out, the small healing talent he possessed burning inside him. “Padmé— Padmé is fine—surrounded by the dead, but unhurt—”

“Obi-Wan.” Anakin swallowed hard. “Save the twins.”

His Master's forehead furrowed. “You won't be alive to meet them. You—you and Padmé can always have another child—”

“But it won't be _these two_. The gentle one, the fiery one—it would be a different child. I know it makes no sense, I know it's unreasonable, but I _love_ them. _Those two_. Please, Obi-Wan. I want them to have their chance. I want them to show the universe how amazing they are. I had my chance.
Master... save them. Not me.”

He couldn't believe the force of the love he felt for those little life-forms.

Desperate. Consuming.

Never, in his life, had he believed in dying for someone. Not when he had been confident he could bend fate and force the future in order to live with them.

But...

The thought of dying so his children could live wasn't... it wasn't as bad a thought as he would have expected.

Obi-Wan read it in his eyes.

Considered.

Chose what his brother wanted over his own desire to see Anakin live.

Put Anakin first, himself second.

And Force, Anakin loved him for it. I asked him to show me.

Here it is.

“The twins it is, then.” Obi-Wan focused. The light between his hands grew brighter.

Anakin watched it with a swelling heart. Obi-Wan's life-force.

He didn't have Obi-Wan's ability to focus so precisely, but Obi-Wan's hands were trembling so badly from the pain and from the drain—

Anakin covered Obi-Wan's hands with his own. Stilled the shaking. Allowed his own power to add to the fragile orb of light. The effort was clumsy, but Obi-Wan welcomed it.

“When I send it, it's over,” Obi-Wan warned.

Anakin nodded, feeling Obi-Wan scanning him desperately, searching for any sign that Anakin wanted to live. Of course he did. But he wanted his children to live more.

And he was willing to give himself to make that happen.

And no, Obi-Wan...

“I don't resent it.” Aloud, he said, “Not a bad way to go.”

“No. It's not.” Now reassured, Obi-Wan's face glowed with an almost perverse triumph. “I love you, my brother.”

“And I you, Dad,” he murmured back, throat thick with feeling. “Together?”

“Always.”

And then somehow, the sphere of light was gone.

A myriad of images assailed Anakin.

Padmé, demanding an answer from clones who had ceased their aggression the moment the last Jedi
had fallen. The broken-hearted confusion of the men.

Padmé, refusing to believe the clones had betrayed them. Seeking out answers, until a plot was unveiled. Anakin couldn't see the details, but he saw— was that Senator Organa? No... Chancellor Organa... and Vice-chancellor Amidala...

Their term marked by seeking out the clones, removing what had controlled them. Ensuring as many of them found healing as possible. Finding futures for them. Finding rights.

Anakin saw clones standing in small groups, tears running down their faces as they were declared innocent of the Jedi slaughter. As they were declared legitimate human beings. As they were declared free.

He saw Rex refusing to leave Padmé's side. Begging to be allowed to be her family's personal guard. Padmé agreeing.

Anakin saw—

A shiver ran through him—

He saw a young woman with her mother's eyes. Intense. Outspoken. Determined. The youngest Chancellor the Republic had ever known.

The main goal of her administration...

The complete eradication of slavery from the galaxy.

Anakin tried to take it in.

The desperate dream of his childhood realized....

By his daughter.

His daughter. So beautiful. So grown up.

The images just kept coming, so fast, so vivid, so full of texture and feeling—

A young man, with a gentleness that reminded Anakin of Obi-Wan, watching over his mother. Finding future generations of Force-sensitive little ones, and introducing them to its light.

He seemed to be a clone magnet.

Trooper after trooper sought him out, as if proximity to him helped heal their own broken psyches.

Anakin saw the Order rising from the ashes, life from death, led by his son, watched over by countless clones, who threw their lot in with the new Jedi.

They lived with the Jedi. They guarded their Jedi from harm.

They helped raise the orphans.

They went on missions with them, turning themselves over to the goals of bringing compassion and healing across the universe.
He saw the white armor becoming almost as iconic as a lightsaber and robes, symbolizing hope.
Justice.

Mercy.

They built on a foundation Obi-Wan had laid. Obi-Wan had reached out to help people.
And years later... apparently his kindness and dedication hadn't been forgotten.
The people reached back.

Anakin saw the memory of all the Jedi who died today treasured. Grieved.
The lies Palpatine had spread brought crashing down.

He saw that of the names that were now revered...

It was Obi-Wan's at the top of the list.

Anakin saw.

He had wanted to make people see Obi-Wan for who he was, not what had been done to him.

It happened.

He practically became the patron saint of the downtrodden.
The hero of heroes.
The images moved too fast to hold on to. Too much information spilling through his soul, Anakin could only comprehend so much.

He saw his son again.

He's the gentle one.

Saw him working alongside—

“Korkie's alive,” Anakin whispered.

A vibration of assent came to him across his bond with Obi-Wan.

His Master was seeing this too.
The three of them— Anakin's children and Satine's—

Determination that took Anakin's breath away—

He'd seen the efforts of his love and his children.

But Korkie had a plan too, and Anakin's family backed him up.

Mandalore.

He saw Cody at Korkie's side. Standing by him in every victory and defeat; guarding, encouraging him.
Slowly coming to forgive himself.
Finding purpose in the child Kenobi had claimed.
And Mandalore...
Slowly... surely... giving way to Korkie's passionate will.
It was a fight of decades, but Korkie was winning, centimeter by centimeter, flanked by the the twins.
When one felt discouraged, the other two bore them up, only to be encouraged when their turn came. Where one was weak, another had strength. It was a triad that refused to break, no matter what came their way.
The wave of elation that came crashing into Anakin from Obi-Wan nearly made him black out.
His best friend had felt the sacrifice worth it before.
Now... knowing it would redeem Mandalore...
He was beyond content.
He was happy.
And then a new image caught Anakin's eye.
Many, many years ahead...
A young man with dark hair...
Named for Obi-Wan.
And when darkness tried to rear its ugly head again, in a new form—
He was there to resist. To stop it.
Ben.
The images faded, and the two Jedi knew the time was here.
Anakin felt Obi-Wan squeeze his fingers tight, too overcome for speech.
Anakin cradled Obi-Wan even closer.
Death beside him wasn't a lousy option.
It was perfect.
Epilogue

Korkie awoke in a hospital bed.

No.

_Not_ acceptable.

He should have died alongside his new family. He should have—

He recognized the woman sitting by his bed.

Senator Amidala.

Mother of Master Skywalker's children.

He wanted to ask if his uncle had survived. Wanted to ask if anyone in the Temple had.

The woman seemed to know, even though his lungs wouldn't work.

She took his hand, and through quiet tears, told him.

* * *

Padmé had seen Anakin's last moments.

She'd been in the middle of yelling at blank-eyed troopers who seemed disoriented, almost more angry that they _hadn't_ killed her alongside the people she had struggled to protect than angry at them _for_ killing.

Standing alone, unassailed, when these precious people lay _dead_ —

She had never felt so... filthy in her life.

But in another place, the twins' father had been in trouble.

Mid-rant, Padmé crashed to her knees, the Temple and troopers blotted out by the strength of what her children were channeling to her.

Anakin's emotions echoed through her as she _watched_, helpless to do anything but submit to the twins' attempt to communicate.

She saw, she _felt_ Obi-Wan's parting gift.

Saw, _felt_ Anakin's choice. His love.

_Knew_ what they'd done.

Knew what it meant.

Slowly, her vision returned.
She could feel the turbulence of the twins. Their anxiety. Their confusion.

“Your daddy was a hero,” she whispered, placing a hand against the stomach that had yet to show its occupants. “And he loved us very much.”
She had no doubt of that now.

She shared it with Korkie. Telling him of Obi-Wan's final moments.

Of Anakin's.

The twins didn't know what it was that Anakin and Obi-Wan had seen. That bit was very, very fuzzy. Clearly, the dying Jedi had seen something in the three seconds before silence claimed them. They'd been practically glowing with awe and wonder.

All that could be picked out was that when Anakin murmured, “Korkie lives,” Obi-Wan looked like he'd been given the world.

The young Mandalorian hid his face in his hands and wept.

He had lost too much.

Padmè understood.

She felt the same.

She drew Korkie into her arms and soothed him, her tears dampening his hair.

* * *

Bail took the Senate by storm.

They'd caught Mas Amedda red-handed as he tried to erase security footage of the Chancellor's office.

The holos had been most enlightening.

Amedda was in prison, where he belonged... and Padmé replaced him.

Bail, elected in an astounding landslide, immediately started relegating authority back to the planetary systems, limiting his own power. Slowly returning what the Chancellor had gathered up.

Bail offered to take in Korkie, but Padmé had beaten him to it. So instead, he kept an eye on his friend, unable to imagine just how difficult all that had happened must be for her.

Hell. He was hurting.

The loss of Obi-Wan was a wound that would take a long, long time to lose its pain. But somehow, when he was actively involved in helping Jar Jar process and recover, he caught his own heart taking sneaking steps towards healing.

Strange, how seeking to help someone else helped himself.
The birth of the twins went smoothly, with no complications whatsoever.

A healthy boy and girl, and a healthy mother.

Breha practically adopted the little ones, and the attention she lavished upon them vied even with that of their Naberrie grandparents.

* * *

The first time Padmé placed infant Leia in Rex’s arms, the clone had been terrified of breaking the baby.

In fact, he only agreed to try when Padmé insisted.

For long moments he cradled the child, staring down into the scrunched-up face...

And something started to heal, deep inside him.

It stole Padmé’s breath to see it. The crazed agony that never left those eyes quieted. Eased.

The earliest days of the infancy were the easiest Padmé had experienced in the last several months.

She was too busy, and then too exhausted, to think much. One baby would have been a tremendous change. And she had two.

She had no idea what she would have done without Korkie.

He changed diapers. He walked for hours with one or the other when they would not stop crying.

The stacks of homework from a local academy mingled with datapads stuffed with information on baby-raising.

Padmé wondered if she should feel guilty that he’d read more of them than she had.

But there came a time when the twins started sleeping through the night.

A time when watching the milestones of their growth made the loss of Anakin raw all over again.

Yes. She shared these moments with Korkie and Rex, both of whom adored her children...

But they were Anakin’s.

And he would have worshiped them.

There were mornings when it was hard for Padmé to face the day ahead. Mornings when she stood on the balcony, looking out at Coruscant’s skyline and all she could see was blood rising like a mist from the ground.

Luke always seemed to know when it was one of those mornings.

As soon as he was mobile, he would escape whatever barricade might get in his way so he could scramble out to where she stood leaning against the railing.
It happened.

Every time.

At first, Korkie or Rex would come running after him, horrified and utterly bewildered how Luke had escaped this time, when they’d made so very sure —

But they saw how Luke's snuggles chased the lines from Padmé's forehead. Saw how the edge of her pain would dull to something that could be endured.

So they stopped fighting the escapes. Luke never strayed from his focused path, and he didn't seem interested in escaping at other times.

It became a comforting thing. Something Padmé could count on.

A little some one she could count on.

She would swoop Luke up and hold him tight, and turn away from staring out at all that had been lost.

Turn to cherish what had been saved.

The little ones loved Naboo, especially once they reached the point where they could scamper about on their own feet.

Padmé wondered if they felt the life that saturated the planet. Whether it made them feel safe and whole.

Anakin used to say things like that.

She suspected it might not just be the Force-sensitives who felt the gentle pull of life there, as she watched Rex take the toddlers running through one of the flower-strewn meadows and heard genuine laughter from the battle-scarred man mingling with the sweet giggles of her children.

Long before the twins could talk, Korkie had begun murmuring stories to them of your Dad and Uncle Ben.

At first it had hurt, and Padmé had needed to lock herself away in her bedroom and cry.

And then it became something bittersweet...

And, eventually... something that made her smile.

Now they would sit rapt, staring up at Korkie with earnest faces, unable to get enough. They wanted to hear about the war. About the peace. About Aunt Satine.

About how Dad and Uncle Ben saved Little Luke and Leia.

That last was their favorite story.

Padmé wasn't sure how Korkie had the strength to tell it, but he always did, whenever they asked.

And they asked often.

Your Dad and Uncle Ben were very hurt from fighting the Sith.
“The Sith was a bad man, right Korkie? He wanted to make Dad into a bad man and take away freedom.”

*That's right. But your Dad and Uncle Ben didn't fall for his tricks. There was a great battle, and —*

“And they *killed* the Sith.” That part impressed Leia far more than Luke. “But the Sith hurt Uncle Ben.”

*Very much. Your Dad tried to help him, but the hurt was very strong. Soon your Dad was hurt too.*

The children would scoot closer, breathless, even though they couldn't remember a time when they *hadn't* known how it went.

*And then Uncle Ben realized the Sith had hurt Little Luke and Leia too —*

“Little Leia!”

*You’re right. Little Leia.*

“And Dad wanted to save us.”

*Do you know why?*

“He loved Little Luke and Little Leia.”

*Very much. So he and Uncle Ben held their hands together —*

“Like this?”

*Yes. Like that. And they sent all their love to Little Luke and Little Leia, and it went all the way inside to their hearts —*

“And the hurt went away!”

Small faces lit up and eyes sparkled.

*It certainly did.*

“And now Dad and Uncle Ben are one with the Force.”

*That's right.*

“It means they live in the flowers.”

Gentle laughter. *Close enough.*

“Dad and Uncle Ben are heroes, aren't they?”

*Yes they are.*

At first, Padmé had been afraid of what such a story might do to their young minds, but hadn’t wanted to tell Korkie *no*.

And then she *saw* the effects.

Saw how even though Anakin was gone, he had a very real presence in his children's lives, created by the stories Korkie told.

Saw how they revered their father and “uncle.” How they would run about with sticks in their hands,
pretending to be their Jedi heroes.

Heard little voices lisping to imaginary foes about how it's better to find peace through negotiations than through fighting.

And realized she would never have to field the question, why don't we have a dad?

That alone made her thank the Force for Korkie Kryze.

Somewhere along the line Korkie must have said something, because five-year-old Leia started chattering to her mother about Big Sis Ahsoka.

At that point, Padmé's concern that the twins might not have strong enough ties to the past vanished.

Korkie watched over the children Obi-Wan had given his final breath to save with a dedication that reminded Padmé of the way the Negotiator had taken him under his wing.

Korkie was just always there, when the little Skywalkers needed him.

As more years passed, Padmé found herself at a loss how to answer many of the questions the twins asked relating to the Force. Maybe it was cowardice, but she made Korkie field their inquiries.

Padmé didn't know if he knew what he was talking about, but it sounded like it made sense, and it seemed to help Luke and Leia.

That was good enough for her.

The great library and holocron vault of the Temple had been destroyed in the attack, so they didn't really have anywhere to turn but to memories.

Korkie's. Rex's. Cody's.

Once the clones discovered that there was a family who wanted to hear what they remembered about their Jedi, they began to appear out of the woodwork. Sometimes they would talk for hours.

Others would sit staring at their hands, manage to choke out the most important thing their Jedi had taught them, and then dissolve into tears.

It's no wonder Luke responded so warmly to them and had to find a way to incorporate them into his efforts to rebuild the Order.

He was incapable of standing by and watching when he saw people in pain.

The aging troopers adored him, and they adored the little Jedi Luke started to train as he stumbled across them.

And then one morning Padmé stood at her balcony, the old ache in her heart a shivering wail, and realized it had been years since the last time.

Her son had moved out, into his own home long ago.

A man. Her boy was now a man.

Instead of him being her Little Luke, she was now his Little Mother.

He wouldn't be coming to her aid anymore. Those were treasured memories of a time now passed.
She missed him.
And she missed his father.

So much.

It took a few moments to recognize the speeder's rumble.
And then the sound changed to well-loved footsteps.

Strong arms wrapped around her from behind and she leaned back into Luke's strong embrace.
He didn't say a word.
He simply held her and watched the sunrise.

* * *

Boil ignored the pleas of his brothers to join them and the new General Skywalker.
The Jedi didn't have a military title, but Boil's brothers just couldn't manage to let go of the beloved word.
It didn't matter if no-one else saw him as one. He was their General.
Their second chance.
And in spite of everything, he believed in them.
Boil saw the good that the new Skywalker had done for his brothers, and he was glad they'd found a way to make peace with their lives.
But he was done with Jedi. Very done.
He almost fell into his new career.
Bounty hunting.
It made so much sense. Yes, it took some time to get used to not having orders to follow...
But Boil never wanted to take another order again.
And this job allowed him to hunt war criminals to the ends of the universe and back. Members of both the Separatist and Republic war machines who had crossed the line again and again were finally being called to account for the lives of his brothers and civilians.
And Boil made sure they kept their appointments in court.
It was a grim satisfaction, but it was satisfaction.
And it allowed him to sleep at night.
And he might... make the occasional visit to a certain dusty planet with brightly-colored people...
And he *might* spend time with one green-skinned Twi'lek child...

And he *might*... smile...

Every time she calls him *nerra*.

* * *

Qui-Gon Jinn watched Luke, careful to let him learn on his own.

The boy would learn best if he made his own mistakes.

But when he finally came up against something he couldn't beat on his own, Qui-Gon would be there.

He was sorry that he'd never had a chance to train Obi-Wan in the ways of the Whills.

He would have enjoyed the company of his former Padawan.

But he also knew that Obi-Wan had been more than ready to find peace and rest.

Traces of him whispered through the Force.

Wherever it went, hints of Skywalker followed not far behind.

Even now, consciousness scattered across the unending sea of time and space, the two were inseparable.

Qui-Gon smiled at the thought.

They were safe. Out of reach of any more harm.

And the sky was bluer, the oceans wilder, the winds sweeter, the rains gentler for their presence.

Qui-Gon wasn't sure if he was imagining things...

But there was a scent that occasionally crossed paths with the whispers of Obi-Wan.

Something that reminded Qui-Gon of war *and* nonviolence. Passion *and* self-control.

And when this hint and the traces of Obi-Wan collided...

The Force hummed with the sheer *rightness* of it.

And a sunrise turned into a masterpiece of unspeakable beauty.

And a baby giggled.

And Mandalore took one tiny step closer to change.
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