Precipice

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Summary

An AU in which Anakin Skywalker does not follow Mace Windu and the others to Palpatine’s office after they leave to arrest the Chancellor. As a result, he doesn’t get that final push over the edge, and doesn’t Fall.

Notes

As I have not seen Rebels, some of this contradicts backstory established there. I apologize for that, and hope you’ll forgive said inconsistencies/mistakes. For more details regarding the decisions I made with regard to how the timeline should be altered, see this post on my tumblr.
Part 1: Aftermath; Chapter 1

“Come on, hurry.” Anakin deflected a last handful of blaster bolts before slamming the High Council chamber doors shut behind the little Togruta initiate--*what’s her name, I should know her name.*

He’d had six younglings with him three floors ago. Now it was just him and her, a little seven-year-old with lekku and montrals and markings and giant blue eyes like Ahsoka’s and--

*And I ran up why did I run up I’m smarter than this!*

But it had all happened so fast, and he’d been up here when it started--ever since Master Windu had sent him here to wait, before going to arrest the Chancellor. He’d been thinking, wrestling with himself, trying to decide whether to do what he *should* be doing, or what he *needed* to do, and then…

Then the first bomb had gone off, several floors below him, and he’d felt the first wave of deaths. In that moment, it was like waking up from a dream, or a fever. Everything was *clear* again. He’d looked down and seen himself on the edge of a cliff, poised to dive off, and thought--

*What have I done?*

*Nothing--yet.*

He’d forced himself not to think of it, and given himself up to the simplicity of combat instead. Most of that was a blur, of trying to protect who he could, of trying to find cover (there wasn’t much, not here in the Temple, and why should there have been, except that he’d *needed* it today), of fighting and retreating.

That would probably explain why he and the little girl had ended up here, come to think of it. This was where he’d come from, after all, so when he was forced to retreat, ‘up’ was the only direction left for him to take.

The two of them would probably be safe here, at least for a little while. The doors were solid; it would take the clones a while to cut through. But there was no way out, except through the army below them, or the windows around them, with a very long drop that he wasn’t sure he could make safely, even at his best. The youngling, even if he carried her, wouldn’t stand a chance.

Still, breathing room was breathing room. He’d think of something.

And then his legs went boneless under him, and he sank into his seat on the edge of the circle, feeling the impact of another handful of deaths. *Five floors down. Mostly clones, but another Padawan went with them.*

“Master Skywalker?” the little girl asked him, eyes bright with worry.

He forced a smile and tried to sit up straighter. “It’s okay, we’re safe up here.” *Two more clones down. I should stop counting. Counting isn’t helping.*

She nodded. “Okay.”

*And we’re not actually safe yet and--two more initiates--there’s no way out. Think, Anakin, come on, how are you getting out of here?*
He had to call for help. He could call--no, he couldn’t bring Padme and the baby into this hell, and Obi-Wan was systems and systems away in Utapau, and something must have gone wrong with Master Windu and the others--I was supposed to be the Chosen One, why didn’t I see it, see what the Chancellor was, I should have seen it and there goes another clone--so who did that leave?

Senator Organa. Maybe. Yeah. I guess. He’s probably my best shot--two more Padawans, down in the dining hall--I know Padme trusts him, and he’s on Coruscant.

He smiled again at the little girl, trying to project a calm and confidence he almost felt. Her face was swimming a little in front of him. How many hits did I take on the way up here? Four? And then there was the shrapnel when that one wall got--there goes another initiate, I think that one was less than five years old...

He shook the thought off as best he could, and started digging in his pocket for his comlink. “I’m gonna call for help. We’ll get out of here.”

Her eyes full of trust, she nodded again, then bit her lip.

“Don’t worry,” he tried to assure her. There it is, finally. And there go another half-dozen kids.

He pushed the button to activate the comlink, and it stuck. The whole thing was gummy with blood--mine? It’s probably mine, but I can’t tell, and another clone just died--and had shorted out. He swore under his breath, the comlink dropping from suddenly nerveless fingers, hitting the floor with a faint click and rolling away from him.

“Master Skywalker?” she asked, more subdued this time.

“I’ll figure something out. We’ll figure something out,” he said, as much to convince himself as her. “We’re Jedi, right? We can get out of this.”

He could hear booted footsteps in the hall outside.

“They’re coming,” she whispered.

“Stay low,” he ordered her. “Try to get behind one of the chairs.” He stood up and reactivated his lightsaber, and his head spun for a second.

“Master Skywalker?”

“Get down!”

He heard the shot just as she started to move. He dove for her, but slipped--the floor was slick below him, and he couldn’t tell why--and she fell, her eyes and mouth a trio of surprised circles, a fourth smoldering in her chest.

Another initiate down.

He knew, in that moment, that he’d outrun death as far as he could. He knew he was going to die up here. He would never get the chance to make up for his failures with the Chancellor, never see Obi-Wan again, never see Padme--never meet his child.

For a moment, the loss was almost unbearable. But he was a Jedi, still, and Jedi did not give in to despair.

There is no death, there is the Force.
He was going to die here. There was no way to prevent that now. But he’d be damned if he didn’t take as many of the kriffing clones outside with him as he could.

*Look on the bright side--maybe this is enough to change it--to change what I saw. Maybe if I die, she doesn’t have to.*

There was no way of knowing that, not for certain; no way of knowing that this wasn’t just the first step down the road to what he’d seen. But he would cling to that hope for as long as he lived. Hope was powerful, after all. It just might buy him a few more seconds of fighting back.

He took a deep breath, centered himself, and waited.

*There is no death, there is the Force.*

But when the door finally burst all the way open, everything changed. Because he recognized the clone in command.

“*Rex,*” he whispered, the fight abruptly going out of him, replaced by pain, so much pain. “*Rex, no--*”

The clones lined up across the chamber from him, textbook formation, a half-dozen blasters now staring Anakin in the face.

He backed a few steps away, keeping his lightsaber between them and him. “*Rex, come on, Rex, it’s me, you know me. You have to stop this, I know you can stop this. You’re better than this, how much have we been through together? How many times have we fought side by side? You can stop this, Rex, come on. Rex, look at me. Rex--*”

Rex didn’t answer.

For a split second, everyone was still, and Anakin thought maybe--just maybe--he’d gotten through to him.

But then Rex moved his hand, silently giving the order to fire.

Two, three, five more hits; Anakin was good, but he kept *slipping* in what he realized, too late, was blood, *his* blood; there were too many of them and he was already badly wounded.

“*Rex, please!*”

His back hit the window. There was nowhere else to run. At this point, the only thing keeping him moving was years of training and muscle memory; the only thing keeping him *upright* was the solid transparisteel behind him.

And then one of the clones placed his shot badly, and the window behind Anakin shattered.

Before he could even process what had happened, he was falling.

Instinct took over.

He scrambled for purchase on the sill, missed; the walls below it were too smooth for even his cybernetic hand to dig in.

Below him, dimly, so dimly, he felt--a friendly mind, a *familiar* mind, a *speeder.*

He reached out for the vehicle through the Force, and *yanked* it into position to catch him just
before he lost consciousness completely.

He never even felt the impact.
Bail Organa’s hands were not shaking.

He might have been proud of himself for that, for his composure, for his self-control, if he hadn’t known damn well the only reason they weren’t was because he was gripping his steering column too tight to allow for it.

His heart hammering in his throat, he peeled away from the smoking Temple, trying to forget the image of that boy, that boy cut down in front of him, by GAR soldiers, by the clones they had all trusted for so long.

It didn’t work. The boy and his lightsaber danced in front of his eyes, darting in and out of traffic.

Bail had come to the Temple expecting the worst; or what he’d thought, until just moments ago, was the worst--another bombing, like the one that Padawan had orchestrated, months ago.

Obviously, this attack was bigger. He’d known that going in. The smoke on the horizon, visible from his apartment building, had told him as much. But he’d been on battlefields before, and he’d seen bodies. He had done his best to prepare himself for the destruction. He had prepared himself to help, if he could--even though he’d figured it was far more likely he’d be told to stay out of the way.

But if he hadn’t gone…

Less than an hour ago, Bail had gotten a frantic call from Padme’s protocol droid, begging him to come talk sense into her. Their apartments were close, and he’d managed to catch her just as she was heading out the door. She’d been wild, terrified; but she’d had that steely I’m-doing-this-no-matter-what-Bail-don’t-argue look in her eyes.

“I’m going to the Temple,” she had said flatly, daring him to challenge her.

He’d looked over at it, through the windows in the corridor, belching smoke into the sky. “You can’t.”

“I have to.”

“You don’t know what’s going on, if it’s--”

“Of course I don’t!” she’d snapped, her voice cracking. “That’s why I have to--Bail, I have to know what’s…if…”

He had understood, more than perhaps she’d realized. Ever since he’d heard that first distant boom, ever since he’d first seen the smoke out his own windows, he’d been trying his damnedest not to think too hard about his own friends in the Order, or the children, or…

“You can’t,” he’d said quietly, keeping his fears at bay as best he could. He had to focus on the immediate problem, and calm her down, keep her from getting herself killed. The rest could wait. “It’s not safe. We don’t know who’s behind this attack, or why.”

“I don’t care,” she had said. “I don’t care.” She had tried to push past him then, but he’d caught her arm.

“What about your child?” he’d asked.
That had been the first time either of them—or any of their other friends, so far as Bail knew—had acknowledged the open secret aloud. It was a low blow, and he’d known it; but if that was what it took to get Padme to see sense...

And, sure enough, she’d frozen for a second. “My…my child,” she’d whispered, and slumped against him, all the fight going out of her in a rush.

He had caught her and guided her back into the apartment and over to the couch as gently as he could before signaling C-3PO to get her some water.

“Are you all right?” he’d asked.

“No,” she had said, numbly. “How can anyone be all right, when--” She’d looked out at the horizon again, her voice trailing off as she’d started to shake.

Bail had stood up and started to black out the windows. If she can’t see it, maybe she’ll calm down.

“Don’t,” she’d said. “Please?” She’d accepted the water from Threepio, but just sat there, toying with the glass. “I can’t… I need to… if I’m not there, if I’m not at least watching, if he’s--” She’d cut herself off abruptly and looked down at her hands, drawing in a deep, shaky breath.

He’d known that they were entering into dangerous waters then, dancing around secrets that Bail had half-guessed, but did not want to know. But she and—well, they had never really been subtle, though he imagined they’d thought so. In truth, Bail was fairly certain that almost everyone who knew them had known how they felt each other.

But there were rules, and Bail—and, most likely, everyone else—had assumed they’d followed them, and kept their distance. And he had been sure, after realizing she was pregnant, that she’d finally put it behind her. Moved on. Found someone available.

He’d tried not to think too hard about the alternative. It was her business. And he didn’t want to know.

So all he’d said was, “All right,” and he’d left the windows as they were before joining her on the couch again.

She’d fidgeted silently for a minute, then shook her head again. “I can’t… I can’t just sit here, Bail. I have to know what… please.”

“I’ll go,” he’d said, even though he hadn’t really been planning on it. Even though it was the last damned thing he’d wanted to do—because he’d have been in the way; because, as used to battlefields as he was, this one would be something else entirely. He’d known that, even before knowing just how different this one would turn out to be.

But if the alternative was letting Padme, who, for all her diplomatic skill, was endlessly stubborn and almost as reckless as—if the alternative was letting her run into that mess, in this mood, he would do it. He had to do it. “If you promise me that you’ll stay here until I call you, I’ll go and see what happened. Please, Padme?”

She’d stared up at him for a long moment, her eyes glittering, then nodded. “I will. I promise.”

He had stood up and let himself out of her apartment, making his way for the garage and his speeder as quickly as he could.

And all of that--a favor to a dear friend, and the need to protect her, especially with the likely loss
of so many others as plain as the smoke on the horizon--had led him here, to grim lies about a rebellion, a boy dead on the Temple steps, and the sickening knowledge that someone, somewhere, had betrayed them all.

And his own friends? He still had no idea--but not all of them were stationed on Coruscant. Maybe the ones who were still out on the front, at least, were all right. Bail tried to take comfort in that thought, irrational as it would have been on any other day. He decided to look into that possibility first. He would find out if there were--if this had happened everywhere, and then call Padme when he had more information. He didn’t want to frighten her more with nothing but guesswork and a brave, dying boy who--

Without warning, the steering column jerked under his hands, as his speeder developed a mind of its own. Bail yelped and fought for control--losing--as the speeder plunged through traffic, back to the burning Temple.

*No, no, no, I want to get away from that place, what the kri**f**ing hell--*

With a wet *thunk*, a bloody, slightly charred body landed sprawled approximately in his passenger seat. One hand, still clinging tight to a deactivated lightsaber hilt, slammed into Bail’s face, and he saw stars for a second.

And then his speeder stopped ignoring him and his brain caught up.

*A survivor--this is a survivor!*

Only one, but one was a damn sight better than none. He would take what he could get.

He yanked on the Jedi’s blood-soaked robes--Skywalker, it was Skywalker; Bail recognized the bulking glove on his prosthetic; he’d etched distinctive carvings into the buckles--to make sure he was fully in the speeder, then headed off into traffic again.

*Don’t speed, you can’t afford to get pulled over right now.*

He spared a glance over at his passenger, and immediately looked away again, swallowing hard. He wasn’t any kind of medical expert, but he didn’t need much more than that glance--and the wet, ragged sound of the Jedi just barely breathing--to know Skywalker’s condition was critical. He had survived the attack itself, by some miracle, but if Bail didn’t act *quickly...*

*All right. New plan. Get him off-planet, to an underground medcenter just in case, then try to contact the other Jedi, any other Jedi, and find out what--if what happened here was an anomaly. Please, please, let it have been an anomaly.*

All thoughts of Padme and her half-guessed secrets now buried deep under the urgency of the situation and Skywalker’s dire injuries, Bail made his way as fast as he legally could to the spaceport.
“It appears this ambush has happened everywhere.”

Senator Organa’s words had been tumbling back and forth through Obi-Wan’s mind since they’d first made contact, about a half hour before. They had played on a loop as he made the quick jump to the coordinates the Senator had fed him, and were continuing to do so as he docked with the Tantive IV.

It was a good thing, the portion of his mind that had somehow remained rational through the fog of shock noted, that he had completed procedures like this one often enough that he could have done this in his sleep. He might as well have been asleep.

“...happened everywhere.”

The implications were too--too terrible to contemplate.

It can’t be, he told himself. It can’t be. Master Yoda and I can’t be the only ones. If I survived, then surely--surely Master Windu, or Master Fisto, or Master Plo, or...

He couldn’t tell. That was the worst of it, in some ways. If there could be a ‘worst’ part of this. The Force was raw and wounded, screaming around him. It was all but impossible to pick out individual voices in the chaos around him.

There is no chaos, there is harmony.

He found precious little of that, no matter how he reached for it. And he knew his current state--this numb fog of shock--wouldn’t last forever. But, at least for now, it was cushioning the blow; keeping him moving, keeping him functioning. It would do, until he had a chance to breathe.

A green light flared on his console; he was secure in the docking bay, with enough air and pressure to leave his ship safely.

He closed his eyes and let out a long slow breath. Focus. You can do this. There is no emotion, there is peace.

As composed as he was likely to get for the time being, Obi-Wan pushed open the canopy and climbed out of his borrowed ship.

Senator Organa was waiting for him. He seemed tired, strained; but, apart from a truly impressive black eye, unharmed.

“Thank you, Senator,” he said, trying to contain a universe in those words.

Organa half-bowed in acknowledgement. “Are you injured?”

He shook his head. “No, I--I got away clean.” The word felt wrong as soon as he said it, but he let it pass without correcting himself. “What about you?” He knew he was asking as much as a deflection as out of genuine concern for his friend. And hiding from his own problems in someone else’s wasn’t the right way to handle things, but he didn’t have the luxury to do otherwise right now.

When did doing things properly become a luxury? he wondered, dimly, then moved on. Later, later,
Organa reached up and touched his face lightly, with a faint wince. “It looks worse than it is,” he said. “When General Skywalker crashed into me at the Temple, he--”

“Anakin--Anakin is alive?” Obi-Wan interrupted, all other relevant details briefly washed away under an onslaught of giddy--and somewhat guilty--relief.

Attachment, he thought, trying to suppress the edge of faintly-hysterical laughter that came with it. I’m as bad as he is.

Still, that one hint of good news--as small as it was, compared to the darkness surrounding them--was enough to help him center himself. There is no chaos, there is harmony.

And then he caught the look on the Senator’s face. “What happened?” he prompted, as calmly and as gently as he could.

“I saw….” Organa drew in a deep breath. “I saw thousands of troops attack the Temple.”

The words hit Obi-Wan like stones, and he struggled to hold on to what little composure he’d managed to regain. The Temple--they even attacked the Temple? “Are there...how many other Jedi managed to survive?”

He shook his head. “Skywalker was the only one who...I was taking him to Polis Massa when--”

“I--I’m sorry, where?”

“A medical facility,” Organa said. “Associated with an archeological research project my mother’s family invested in. Almost no one knows of my connection, and no one’s paid much attention to it in the past decade or so, but the facility is still operational.”

Which meant the equipment would likely be correspondingly out of date, but, on the other hand…

“So whoever--whoever is behind this--” the Sith Lord, of course, but we still don’t know who that is “--won’t think to look there.”

“That’s the idea.”

And, right now, I think secrecy and safety win out over all other concerns. He nodded. “So, you were headed there, and…?”

“That’s when we picked up Master Yoda’s distress call, and then yours,” he continued.

“But you haven’t heard from anyone else?” Obi-Wan asked quietly, though a part of him already knew the answer. The Senator had said as much obliquely, but until he heard it straight out, it wouldn’t be real. And, until it was real, he couldn’t process it and find a way to move on.

“No.”

And Anakin was the only one who had made it out of the Temple.

There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force.

The Code felt like meaningless platitudes, in the face of all of that.
“How badly is he injured?” Anakin’s absence was telling, and Senator Organa hadn’t mentioned him arguing about being taken to a medcenter, which was even more alarming.

And, worst of all, Obi-Wan couldn’t even sense his apprentice, not really. He should have been able to, quite clearly, now that he was this close; even with everything else echoing through the Force. Their bond remained tight enough for that.

But all he got was the barest flicker, all but swallowed up in the maelstrom surrounding them.

*There is no chaos, there is harmony.*

Senator Organa’s face went grim, only confirming what Obi-Wan had already guessed. “I don’t have much on board,” he said quietly. “I haven’t ever—even with the War, I haven’t ever needed more than a basic medical droid. We’ve been doing what we can to stabilize him, but…” He shook his head. “He’s still breathing. Master Yoda is with him now.”

All right. Somewhat worse than Obi-Wan had already guessed. *There is no emotion, there is peace.*

“Which way?”

“Follow me.”

Obi-Wan didn’t need to be told twice. He followed the Senator through the ship, to the ship’s basic medbay. Despite the Tantive’s considerably larger size, the medbay was no bigger than the one on the Twilight, and substantially less well-equipped.

*Which is only logical,* he reminded himself. *This is a Senator’s private vessel, used for diplomatic and mercy missions. The Twilight was, for all intents and purposes, a military ship. Even Anakin hasn’t ever been foolish enough to--*

*There is no emotion, there is peace.*

The ship’s single medical droid was beeping—not quite anxiously, though Obi-Wan almost wanted to attach the word to it. Master Yoda was perched on a chair on the other side of the bay’s single table, humming thoughtfully to himself, mind opaque.

And on the table--

*Oh, Anakin…*

He was so *still*; that was the first thing Obi-Wan noticed; and Anakin was *never* still. His hair was matted with sweat and blood; a gash went along his chin, coming perilously close to his throat; another crossed his right shoulder, disappearing under a chestplate that seemed to be holding his ribs in place. A small pile of extracted stone and transparisteel fragments, some of them disconcertingly large, had been gathered on top of his tattered, bloody robes, which had been cut off to allow the droid easier access for treatment. There were at least four distinct blaster burns that Obi-Wan could see, none of which would likely be fatal on their own, but compounding each other were cause for grave concern. His flesh arm was strapped to a splint; the mechanical one seemed undamaged. He was chalk-white, near colorless, despite an empty bag indicating he’d been given at least one transfusion; his breathing was shallow and unsteady; Obi-Wan had barely taken a cursory look at half his Padawan’s body and already--

“Master Kenobi.”

The faint hint of reproof in Master Yoda’s voice called him back to himself.
There is no emotion, there is peace.

“Master Yoda,” he said, with an abbreviated bow.

Master Yoda eyed him for a minute, then sighed. “Stubborn, he is, the boy you trained--but nearly gone.”

Obi-Wan swallowed, and looked away. He knew what the Grandmaster was saying. This wasn’t--yet--an instruction to give up hope, to let his friend go; merely a warning to prepare himself. If they didn’t get to Polis Massa in time, or if the center there was inadequate…

There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no death, there is the Force.

“I understand, Master.”

“A moment with your Padawan, take,” he said, not unkindly, as he jumped down off the chair. “Then decide, we must, how to proceed.”

“Yes, Master,” he said, bowing distractedly as Master Yoda collected his gimmer stick and stepped past him, leaving with Senator Organa.

There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no death, there is the Force.

Obi-Wan sank into the chair, resting a hand as gently as he could on Anakin’s and closing his eyes. “I’m here,” he whispered, drawing on the bond they still shared to send what strength he could; to at least dampen his friend’s pain a little. He doubted it was doing much good--it was a feeble enough effort, as healing had never been his strong suit--but he had to try. “I’m here.”

There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no death, there is the Force.

The hand under his twitched, just a little, and the droid let out a startled beep.

...what? No, am I--is he--can this be possible?

Obi-Wan opened his eyes, hardly daring to hope, and, sure enough, Anakin was awake, and looking at him; his eyes were cloudy with pain and not altogether focused, but he was awake. “M-master…?” he croaked, uncertainly.

“Shh, shh, easy,” Obi-Wan said, ruthlessly suppressing the urge to cling tighter and risk hurting him worse. “It’s all right, Anakin, you’re safe now, Senator Organa got you off Coruscant, we’re- -”

“Palpatine,” Anakin interrupted.

“What?”

“Sith Lord,” he said.

The information wasn’t--wasn’t exactly a surprise. It was unexpected, yes, but once the words were out there…

With everything that’s happened today, who else could it have been?

Or so the small corner of Obi-Wan’s brain that remained rational said.

The rest of him was consumed by a white-hot burst of raw feeling, the likes of which he hadn’t
experienced since Maul had cut Qui-Gon down in front of him. Anakin had trusted Palpatine, he had for years; what the man must have been doing to him--

*I left you alone with him, I allowed this to--*

*There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony.*

He took a breath and let it out. “We’ll handle him,” he promised Anakin quietly. “Don’t wo--what on earth are you doing?”

Anakin was struggling to sit up. The droid started beeping frantically, sorting through its vials, probably seeking a sedative.

“Have--have to--” He went, if possible, even paler.

*Oh, for the love of--you can’t possibly intend to go after him yourself, not right now!*

“No, Anakin, stop,” Obi-Wan said, as firmly as he could. He would have shoved him back down into place, but restrained himself in an effort to avoid accidentally aggravating his injuries. He was doing enough of that on his own. “Anakin, you’re--if you go now, he will kill you.”

He could feel Anakin’s thoughts, echoing around them--*I have to stop him, this was my fault, I was supposed to be the Chosen One, I was--*

“No, Anakin--listen to me, this isn’t your fault. It isn’t, I swear it. And we will fix this, trust me on that, but with--with everyone else--if you go back, he will kill you. He will kill you, and we can’t afford to lose you, there are...there are so few of us left right now, and we need you, Anakin, I need you.”

Obi-Wan wasn’t sure if it was Anakin’s current physical limitations catching up with him, or simply the pain; or if he had, for once, actually gotten through his apprentice’s thick skull, but Anakin at last sank back, eyes closed.

“Now, let’s have no more of that,” he said. *Please.*

Anakin didn’t answer, just let out a slow breath. But he stayed down, at least. *Progress. I’ll take it.*

“We will deal with Palpatine, I promise,” Obi-Wan said. “And then…” *We’ll rebuild. Somehow.*

The droid had finally found its sedative, and was approaching with a needle.

*Probably for the best, he thought. Or he’ll just try to get up again as soon as I walk away.*

“Rest now,” he said, squeezing Anakin’s hand as gently as he could. “All right?”

Anakin’s eyes flickered open again, and he tried to wave the droid off.

“Anakin--”

“Master,” he whispered, and there was a different sort of urgency to it now. “Master, I...h-have to...have to tell you…”

“It can wait.”

He shook his head, and hissed a little at the pain as the gash on his chin split open again. “M-master, I...P-Padme and I...”
Oh.

On any other day, it might have mattered. But in the face of everything else that had happened, Obi-Wan couldn’t quite bring himself to care about his friend’s violation of the Code.

“Shh, it’s all right. I know,” he said instead, as soothingly as he could.

Anakin blinked. “Wh-what…?”

“I have for a long time,” he admitted. Well, not for sure, not until just now, but only because I was very careful to avoid knowing for sure. You two really aren’t anywhere near as discreet as you think you are, you know.

“Why…?”

There were at least a dozen answers he could have given, all of them true to an extent.

Technically, I only suspected the truth. I had no evidence you’d actually acted on your feelings, and I didn’t want to ruin both your lives without actual proof.

I was waiting you to come to me. I wanted you to trust me with this.

She made you happy, and you’ve had so much pain in your life. How could I possibly take that away?

You seemed to make her happy, and she deserves that, too.

I’ve been where you were, and perhaps a part of me was living vicariously through the choice you made, the one I couldn’t.

If I had told anyone, they would have expelled you from the Jedi Order. I would have lost you.

But the droid was beeping indignantly now, finally in position to sedate Anakin, so Obi-Wan went with the simplest answer, to be sure he heard it before he slept.

“You’re my brother, Anakin,” he said quietly. “I love you.”

Anakin’s eyes widened just a hair, then started to drop as the drug kicked in.

“Rest, little brother,” he said. “Heal. We can sort everything else out later.”

He went limp, safely drugged past arguing now. Hopefully, he’ll stay that way.

“General Kenobi?”

He jumped a little, and turned to face Senator Organa. I wonder how much of that he overheard…

“We’re about to drop out of hyperspace,” he said.

Polis Massa, at last. Anakin had made it this far. Obi-Wan felt himself relaxing a little at the thought.

“All right. Thank you.”

“And…we’ve received a coded retreat message,” Organa added quietly. “It requests all Jedi return to the Temple. It says the war is over.”
Part of Obi-Wan, the part still a little drunk on the euphoria of Anakin, alive; Anakin, conscious; Anakin, lucid; wanted to believe that that meant more survivors.

But the rational part of him knew better.

“A trap.”

The Senator nodded. “Master Yoda said the same.”

Which meant his moment was over, and they needed to plan their next move. “Of course.” He stood up, gently setting Anakin’s hand down, then paused.

If I tell him, and he doesn’t already know--no, it doesn’t matter anymore.

“...when we get back to Coruscant, if you...if you happen to speak to Senator Amidala…”

He trailed off. What do I say? The smart move would probably be to let everyone, including Padme, think that Anakin is dead, in case--in case we can’t bring Palpatine down on the first try. That would be safer, I think. For both of them. For all of us.

But that would also be incalculably cruel. And Anakin would likely never forgive him.

Senator Organa’s eyes flickered over to where Anakin lay, and he nodded slowly. He does know. That simplifies matters. “I won’t compromise his safety.”

It was probably better that way; better to leave the decision in someone else’s hands. Obi-Wan was, he realized, quite thoroughly compromised on the subject. His judgment could not be trusted.

“Thank you,” he said.

Organa smiled at him briefly, then led the way to the ship’s conference room, where Master Yoda was waiting for them.

Things felt different than they had just an hour before, though not much had really changed. The world had still ended, and the Force was still raw and screaming, and a Sith Lord still had total control of the Republic. But--Anakin was alive, and as long as that were so…

There is no emotion, there is peace.

It wasn’t the right way to go about things, and Obi-Wan was more than aware of that. But as long as Anakin was alive, despite the maelstrom of death and darkness that had descended on them all, he found it in him to hope.
Padme had been in public service for over a decade and a half, and it took every single drop of skill and experience gained from every single moment of every single one of those years to keep her composure, or at least a decent facade. Despite her best efforts, though, that was pretty much all she was accomplishing at the moment. She knew she wasn’t paying nearly as much attention to Palpatine’s speech as she should have been. She was noting down what few key phrases did penetrate, at least. And, of course, she was recording everything, to analyze later. Hopefully, by the time she sat down and went through it all, she would have stopped reacting and would be able to think again.

I trusted you, she thought, numbly. Not so long ago. You were my friend, my advisor...I trusted you. I put you in power. I ruined Valorum, on your advice. I didn’t suspect you until it was already too late.

It all seemed so obvious now, in hindsight. Little things, starting from that moment in his office when he’d first suggested that kriffing no-confidence vote; little things that had led to...this. How could she--how could any of them--have been so blind?

True, she (and others) had recently become concerned about some of his maneuvers, especially in the last few months of the War. But she doubted any of them had realized exactly how far Sheev Palpatine was willing--let alone planning--to go to maintain his power. She knew she hadn’t. And Anakin had--

She closed her eyes briefly. She could not afford to think about Anakin right now.

“The Jedi hoped to unleash their destructive power against the Republic by assassinating the head of government and usurping control…”

That, Padme knew, had to be a lie. Whatever differences the Order had had with the Senate in general and Palpatine in particular, she knew they wouldn’t have launched a full-scale coup. True, the recording of Master Windu attacking the Chancellor was damning, but--

But it’s only a partial recording. Incomplete, due to damage to the surveillance cameras sustained during the attack. Supposedly. Ha. Who knows what’s on the parts Palpatine won’t show us? If Master Windu did something that drastic, I’m sure he had a good reason.

And now they would never know what that reason was. But it had been the excuse Palpatine had used to--

She clung a little tighter to the arms of her chair, focusing on keeping her face at just the right level of impassivity. She found herself missing the makeup she’d worn as Queen, heavy and annoying as it had been to wear all day, every day. It had been so much easier to keep her thoughts off her face with that mask to help.

On the other hand, makeup or no makeup, she might not have been having so much trouble keeping it together if she’d known what the hell had actually happened in the Temple the night before. And, yes, it was stupid and petty and selfish of her to focus on--on the people she loved, to fret herself to pieces over what had happened to a handful of individuals, all while a man she had admired and trusted until all too recently was methodically destroying everything right and good in the galaxy right in front of her. All while there were so many dead. Even if she couldn’t trust the reported numbers, she knew hers were just a handful of drops in an ocean.
But all Padme could think about was how no one had contacted her. She’d tried reaching out—to Anakin, to Bail, to Obi-Wan, everyone she could think of. She’d even tried tracking down contact details for Ahsoka, in case they’d gone to ground and sought help from her—she wasn’t a Jedi anymore, after all; she should have been safe.

No response, from anyone.

*He would have called. If he was—he would have called. So that must mean…*

She blinked back tears again, angrily this time. She’d done more than enough crying last night; her head still ached from it. She had to do better than this. Too much was happening, and she couldn’t afford to miss any of it.

She took a deep breath and tried to force her full attention back to the speech. If she could just focus on the bigger problems, maybe she’d be steadier. Find the professional distance she needed to survive this. Besides, she had a duty here, as a reasonable, halfway-decent sentient being, let alone a Senator.

“Our loyal clone troopers contained the insurrection--”

No such luck. Palpatine’s words just washed over her.

Padme knew she was failing in that duty, she knew this was important; she knew they—and the others who had signed the Petition of Two Thousand, and their more discreet allies—would need to move quickly and decisively to try and fix this. And to do that, they’d need all the knowledge and perspective they could get, as soon as they could get it.

But, despite her best efforts, all she could think about was Anakin, her Anakin; who had been falling apart at the seams for lately. He hadn’t been sleeping, and she knew some of that was the dreams (dreams about me, did I do this to you, why couldn’t I comfort you enough, why couldn’t I help you), some of that was the stress of being put between the Chancellor and the Council (which was a terrible idea, why couldn’t they see that using him like that, especially when he was already off-balance, was a terrible idea) and maybe some of it was some level of—maybe he’d sensed some kind of disaster coming, if not the specifics (at least I know he wouldn’t ever have agreed to this, not my Ani).

And then he’d been in the Temple when--

*He’s good. He’s strong and he’s skilled and he’s the best at what he does. If anyone could have survived that--*

But Anakin hadn’t been sleeping. He’d been unsteady, on edge, more volatile than usual. The state he’d worked himself into...she’d been worried about him even before the attack. Obi-Wan had been, too. *(And what about Obi-Wan? Is he alive? Dead? Lying injured and alone somewhere?)* And, officially, while there were presumed survivors scattered about the galaxy on missions, no Jedi had escaped the Temple alive.

*Of course, she kept telling herself (because otherwise, no matter how hard she tried, she would start crying again), ‘official’ reports aren’t always completely accurate. And that was true even last week, before all of this happened. Who the hell knows today?*

No word on Anakin, or Obi-Wan, or any of the other Jedi she knew and cared for, and that was bad enough. But Bail was also a constant ghost in her thoughts—she’d let Bail talk her out of going to the Temple herself, and now Alderaan’s box across the chamber sat empty, a mute reproach.
She didn’t have any idea where he was, either.

Padme wanted to bury her face in her hands, but she couldn’t afford to let any of her distress show. And she may have been spiraling out of control internally, but she still had at least that much presence of mind. She settled for leaning forward as best she could and resting her chin on her fist, trying to swallow back her guilt. Bail Organa had a wife, they were trying to have a child, and the only reason he’d been at the Temple was because he’d wanted to protect her. If he had—if anything had happened to him, that was on her. I’m so sorry, my friend. I shouldn’t have listened to you. I shouldn’t have let you walk into that hell. I’m so, so sorry.

There was movement behind her in her box. She ignored it; the combination of her private misery and the horror unfolding before her left no room for anything else. Motee and Typho would handle it, if it was a problem.

“...and the Jedi rebellion has been foiled…”

“What’s happened?”

She let out a startled breath and turned. Bail!

He was alive. He was alive, and she was so relieved she could have strangled him.

Why didn’t you call me you promised you would call me tell me what’s going on tell me if he’s alive please I need him to be alive--

A decade and a half in politics kept it all off her face, but her voice shook a little as she answered. “The Chancellor’s been elaborating on a plot by the Jedi to overthrow the Senate.”

He twitched a little, but nodded as he took a seat beside her. He was much better at maintaining his surface calm than she was; she doubted anyone except her, and maybe Motee and Typho, could tell how disgusted he was by the lie.

There was a fresh bruise on his face, she realized, getting a better look at her friend—he’d tried to cover it up, and done reasonably well; but she could still see it up close. “What about you?” she asked. “Where have you been?” How could you be late to this session how could you just disappear like that you promised me you’d call why didn’t you call me?

He shifted a little in his seat, delaying his response by watching Palpatine for a moment.

“The remaining Jedi will be hunted down and defeated.”

“Bail?”

He sighed, and, keeping his eyes on Palpatine, chose his words with obvious care. “I was...delayed. I apologize for not updating you sooner, but my errand...it wasn’t as successful as I hoped it would be.”

Her breath caught in her throat as the universe stuttered to a halt around her.

She thought she’d made peace with it last night, with the fact that Anakin—her Anakin, her husband, the father of her child—was probably dead. As the hours had stretched by with no word, she knew, some part of her knew, that...

But it was one thing to guess, and another thing to hear it, straight out.
I can’t--oh, Ani, no--

The baby shifted inside her, the purely physical sensation rooting her back in the present; reminding her of everything that was at stake, everything she still had left to lose.

“The attempt on my life has left me scarred and deformed…”

She took a deep, shaky breath, and tried to focus on Palpatine again. Act now. Grieve later. Remember who you are. Remember where you are.

At least she knew now. And if it wasn’t--if it was the farthest possible truth from what she’d wanted…

At least she knew. At least she was no longer stuck in that horrible limbo of mingled hope and dread.

Bail was watching her out of the corner of his eye, his face composed into a mask of serene attention. “But I was…I was able to retrieve your package.”

...what?

Her heart skipped a beat. If she was parsing his on-the-fly verbal code properly…

That means he knows.

Really? she asked herself. Really, Padme? That’s your takeaway here?

“So,” she said, and swallowed. “So, not a complete loss, then. Your errand.”

The baby kicked, hard, and she slid a hand surreptitiously under her cloak to try and soothe him-her? Your father thinks you’re a girl, little one. Thought? Thinks. Bail said--

“It was damaged in transit,” he warned her.

...damaged…?

The bottom fell out from Padme’s universe again. Which is it? Is he alive, or is he dead? How badly--what do you mean, damaged? Damn it, if only you’d gotten here sooner, and we’d been able to talk somewhere private!

She shook her head, trying to derail that train of thought before it got out of hand. Stop it. That isn’t helping. “We can...we can talk about this later,” she said. “After the session. My apartment?”

“Of course,” Bail said. “I’m sure we’ll have a great deal to discuss.”

“Yes.” She felt herself flushing a little at the reminder, though she was sure Bail hadn’t meant it that way. You have a duty here. You can’t do anything more about Anakin right now. At least you know you have real, dependable, first-hand information coming. You’re better off than you were ten minutes ago. But if you don’t find your kriffing self-control…

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and resolutely turned her focus back to Palpatine. With actual answers on the horizon, and confirmation that at least one of the people she’d been so afraid for was alive, it was easier to shelve her personal problems for the moment and devote her full attention to the galaxy’s.

“In order to ensure our security and continuing stability, the Republic will be reorganized into the
first Galactic Empire!”

The Senate gallery burst into cheers.

The baby kicked again.

*What kind of world am I bringing you into, little one?*

Part of her wanted to be charitable, on her colleagues’ behalf. Surely, not *all* of them really meant it.

_Some of them are probably just...afraid_, she told herself. _They don’t want to draw the mob down on themselves. But how many? And will we be able to convince them to take a stand later?_

Problems for tomorrow. But for today...

“So, this is how liberty dies,” she murmured. “With thunderous applause.”

She felt Bail’s hand on hers, warm and reassuring; steady.

_We will fix this. We will find a way. Whatever--wherever Anakin is now...wherever you are, my love, I promise you that I will not allow this to be the galaxy our child inherits._

“For a safe and secure society.”

_For a free and peaceful tomorrow._
The warren of hallways outside the Senate Rotunda was eerily quiet. Normally, after a session, especially an emergency full session like this one, there would be the constant babble of thousands of languages, as knots of Senators gathered throughout the complex, arguing over what had been said and plotting strategy for their next maneuvers. Today, though, what little conversation Bail noticed was quick and quiet, and on the move. Mindful, too mindful, of the risk of being overheard.

No one’s even pretending, not out here, he thought. I suppose faking adulation is easier than faking normality, when you’re this afraid.

He and Padme were likewise quiet as they made their way to her apartment. She kept her head down, eyes on the datapad she’d been using to take notes, but that might have been a cover. He thought he saw her exchanging hand signals of some kind with her handmaiden--Motee; he was pretty sure this one was Motee. Sometimes it was hard to tell, under their hoods. He supposed that was part of the point, for them to be more or less interchangeable and fade into the background--at least until their lady was threatened and they needed to spring into action.

For his part, Bail kept his eyes on the other Senators surrounding them, trying to gauge their reactions beyond the general raw fear as discreetly as he could. Even if--even when--Master Yoda and General Kenobi removed Palpatine from power, the damage he’d done while in office wouldn’t be easy to undo. It would take months, maybe years, of hard work. The more he knew about what they’d have to work with in the Senate when the time came, the easier it would be. Unfortunately, he couldn’t get much of a read on anyone. Maybe it was too soon, or maybe he was just too tired, too stressed--maybe everyone else was, too. He did spot a few known allies in the crowd, but was careful not to meet their eyes just yet. If...if the worst should happen, if the Jedi were to--if a conspiracy should become necessary, they could not let anyone catch on until they were well-established. Until they were too widespread to wipe out.

Mostly, he was successful, but, as luck would have it, Senator Mothma managed to catch his eye from across the hall. She looked intensely relieved, and started towards him, but he shook his head minutely.

Not here, not now, not safe yet, he thought, and hoped it was clear to her and no one else.

She frowned faintly, but nodded her understanding and continued towards her office without approaching him, joined shortly thereafter by Senator Bel Iblis. Bail allowed himself a faint sigh of relief, and moved on.

By some miracle, he and Padme avoided any further interruptions as they continued down to the garage and her speeder--his was still covered in Skywalker’s blood, so he couldn’t exactly drive it openly at the moment, and he wasn’t sure he ever would again; but for now, it was well-hidden. Padme set the datapad aside, but continued her conversation with Motee, verbally now, rather than starting on the questions Bail knew she was burning to ask him.

The message in her conduct was clear, and almost certainly accurate. Not here. Not now. Not safe yet.

She was holding up better than he’d thought she would, given how distressed she’d been the last time they’d met. Her eyes were a little red, and she was pale, but composed. He only hoped he was
doing half as well.

With that in mind, he took the opportunity, as Typho moved them through traffic--*out here, if you manage to avoid seeing the ruin of the Temple, it almost feels like everything’s normal again*--to make a few calls to his staff, and to leave a message for Breha at home. Things that any eavesdroppers would find innocuous; some might even question why he *didn’t* check in, since he’d been offplanet on an undisclosed personal matter right before the session.

*Business as usual,* was the impression he was trying to give. *There are no conspirators here. Certainly no fugitive Jedi under my protection.*

He also, with great care, sent a coded message to General Kenobi. Hopefully, he’d figure out what it meant, and he and Master Yoda would know that their planned meeting place had to change. Bail worried about them being exposed, if they went to his apartment as discussed and he wasn’t there to meet them.

Those tasks kept him busy, and their speeder made good time back through the city. Typho let the two Senators and Motee off at Padme’s balcony, then headed off in the direction of the building’s parking garage. Motee went straight into the bedroom in the back; Padme took Bail’s hand and pulled him into the sitting room.

He started to speak--there was so much he needed to tell her--but paused.

*I never noticed how open this room was before,* he thought. Between the balcony taking up a full third of the outer wall, and the expansive windows taking up most of the rest…

“*We can talk freely now,*” she said. His reticence must have shown on his face. “*I’ve put the best possible anti-surveillance measures in place. I’m…very careful about my privacy in here.*” She met his eyes. “*I think you’ve guessed why.*”

*You would have to be. The scandal would have, if not ruined, at least derailed your career, and what it would do to him…* He nodded. “*I trust you. I trust that you believe we’re safe here, in any case.*”

On the other hand, he had promised Kenobi he’d be careful, and until they knew exactly what surveillance capabilities Palpatine had at his disposal, he couldn’t be entirely certain how secure Padme’s apartment actually was. With that in mind, he decided to hold back certain details--Skywalker’s current location principle among them--as a precaution. He’d play it by ear, depending on what she asked.

She took a deep breath, and started with, “*Is he alive, Bail?*”

“*He was when we left,*” he said.

She sank down onto the couch. “*But it’s…it’s bad.*”

“*Yes.*” He would be circumspect, but he wasn’t going to lie to her.

“*How bad?*”

He hesitated, not entirely sure how to phrase his answer. He didn’t want to mislead her, but he wanted to cushion the blow as much as he could; it had been a heavy enough one even *without* being particularly close to Skywalker. A litany of burns and lacerations of varying severity from blaster bolts and shrapnel; broken arm; shattered ribs; the *blood* he’d lost… Bail hadn’t had the heart to read the full results of the med droid’s diagnostic scan--though he was fairly sure General
Kenobi had gone over it in detail—but he’d seen enough to know the mere fact that they’d gotten Skywalker to Polis Massa still breathing was some kind of miracle.

Clearly, she read enough of that in his face. “Oh,” she said, her voice very small. She blinked rapidly a few times, resting a hand on her stomach and, at least in that moment, did not press for further details. “But he’s...he’s safe now, right?”

“As safe as I could make him,” Bail promised her. “Offplanet, being treated.”

She nodded. “Right.” She paused. “You said...who’s...who’s ‘we’?”

He hesitated half a second—but, on the other hand, Palpatine might already know the two Jedi Masters had survived, if they’d been observed or recorded at the Temple. If he didn’t, he soon would, when they came after him directly. The greater danger was Bail--or Padme--being tied to the two of them. But Padme was a part of this now, she needed the information, and if they let caution cross too far into paranoia, they and their efforts would be crippled by it, rather than protected.

Compartmentalization can come later, he decided. Besides, I already at least tried to tell Kenobi he’d find me here. It’s a little late for second thoughts on the subject. “Me, Master Yoda, and General Kenobi.”

It was the right choice, he saw immediately. Padme sat up straighter, something like hope starting to kindle in her eyes. “They survived? Are they all right?”

“Yes, and they’re not hurt,” Bail said. Though whether or not either of them could be described as ‘all right...’ Both were Jedi, of course, and Jedi played things close to the vest, but he’d seen little flashes, particularly from Kenobi, of utter devastation behind the mask of serenity. “They’re...they’re the only others I found, though. The two of them and Skywalker.”

“Hell,” Padme breathed, deflating a little again. “Wh...where are they now?”

Before he could answer, there was a soft noise on the balcony.

Padme stiffened a little and rose at once, producing a blaster from--

“You keep a gun in your couch?” Bail asked, blinking at the hidden compartment between the cushions as he pulled his own from his boot.

“You don’t?”

On second thought, knowing Padme, he probably shouldn’t have been surprised.

The door from the balcony pushed open softly and--

“Don’t shoot, it’s us.”

Bail relaxed and lowered his gun. Beside him, Padme did the same. “General Kenobi. I see you got my message.”

“I did, yes.” He came all the way into the room and pulled his hood off, followed close by Master Yoda.

“Obi-Wan,” Padme started, her voice cracking a little bit.

He took half a step back. “Padme.” His eyes spoke volumes; the same look Bail had given Mon in
the hallway earlier.

_Not here. Not now. Not safe yet._

She nodded once and sat back down on the couch, deliberately setting her blaster on the table and clenching her hands together. “It’s...I’m relieved to see you. Both of you,” she added, her eyes flickering over to Yoda, who remained inscrutable as always.

“Gratified we are as well, Senator,” the Jedi Master said, after a moment. He climbed up into a chair across from her; Kenobi remained standing behind him.

“I intend to leave the planet,” Padme said, after a moment, glancing up at Obi-Wan again. “Discreetly.”

Kenobi bowed slightly, but said nothing.

“Wise, this may be,” Yoda agreed. Bail found himself wondering exactly how much he’d known—or guessed—about her relationship with Skywalker before now. Neither he nor Kenobi had put what they knew in explicit terms, but they’d likely said enough for him to put the pieces together. Particularly now, with the evidence of Padme’s pregnancy right in front of him.

At any rate, he did not ask where she planned on going. None of them did. Whether they acknowledge it aloud or not, they all knew.

“Palpatine,” Yoda went on, changing the subject and interrupting Bail’s thoughts. “What said he, to the Senate?”

“That you had attempted a coup,” Bail said quietly.

“Of course,” Kenobi muttered. Yoda’s ear twitched.

“I recorded everything,” Padme said, getting up and retrieving her datapad.

“Good,” Yoda said. “Review this, we will.”

She nodded, then hesitated, turning the ‘pad over in her hands. “I don’t want...I have no desire to see it again. Not yet. And I have some final arrangements to make with Motee. Please excuse me.” Without waiting for them to respond, she set the datapad on the table next to her blaster, and headed into the back room.

When neither of the others moved, Bail leaned forward and activated the recording. The three of them watched without comment, as Palpatine began his speech and presented the clearly-doctored so-called evidence of the Jedi plot to the Senate.

Bail had missed that part, arriving late. He wondered what the reaction was; if there was any way to tell how many of his colleagues actually swallowed it. He closed his eyes, briefly, ashamed of what the Senate had become under this man.

For nearly a full minute after the recording ended, none of them spoke.

Yoda, at last, broke the silence. “To destroy this Emperor, then, I will go,” he said decisively.

A great deal blunter than Bail had expected him to be, but--well, what other choice did they have at this point? Especially given what Skywalker had told Kenobi. If that were true, if Palpatine was a Sith Lord...
There was a time when even the Jedi had to be ruthlessly pragmatic. Bail was just sorry he had to live in such a time.

If this works, if we do this right, no one else will ever have to again, he reminded himself, ignoring the chill creeping down his spine. Let us bear this burden, so our children do not have to.

“I’ll go with you,” Kenobi said. A perfectly reasonable decision, so far as Bail was concerned.

But the little green Jedi shook his head. “No. If fail today we do, to the future, you must look.” He very pointedly did not look towards the bedroom, where Padme was still finalizing her arrangements with her staff.

He frowned. “Master, with all respect, there is a time for holding forces in reserve and I do not believe this is it.”

“Hmm. So certain are you,” Yoda said, eyeing Kenobi.

“Yes.” He met his gaze, and for a long moment, they stared at each other.

Bail resisted the urge to fidget, looking up at the ceiling to avoid intruding on...whatever it was they were doing. It felt wrong, to witness this. The Jedi had always--at least in front of outsiders--presented more or less a united front (firebrands and mavericks like General Skywalker aside). This glimpse behind the curtain was something Bail had never wanted to get, and the circumstances made it that much worse.

Whatever it was that passed between the two Jedi, though, it ended with Kenobi backing down. “Very well, Master.”

“Good,” Yoda said. “Senator Organa, retrieve me, you can, from the Senate, if things go wrong?”

“Of course, Master Yoda,” Bail said.

“I will take Senator Amidala to safety,” Kenobi said. If he still wanted to contest his assignment, he had hidden his reaction behind what was almost his usual serenity.

It had been--what, a day and a half, two days, since that first explosion at the Temple? The strain was starting to show, on all of them.

I wonder if he’s slept at all. I can’t imagine he has. I know I haven’t.

“We’ll need a ship,” Padme said, at last rejoining them from her room. She was now out of her regalia, dressed more practically in soft brown suede, no longer even attempting to disguise her pregnancy. “Mine is far too recognizable. Besides, Motee and Typho will need it.” She smiled faintly, with no joy. “We’ve worked everything out between us. Just in case.”

Kenobi nodded. “I agree. It would be best to take a ship that can’t be tied to any of us.”

Which, given that they had no time to waste, likely meant commandeering one. Or would he just be outright stealing one, now that the Jedi no longer have any official authority?

Bail decided he didn’t care about the legal niceties right at that moment.

“Go, then,” Yoda said. “When finished my business with Palpatine is, join you, we will.”

Kenobi nodded again. “May the Force be with you, Master.”
“And you,” Yoda said quietly.

Kenobi bowed politely, pulled his hood back up and, with Padme following, left the rest of them to get into position to take back the Republic.
Careful to avoid security cameras and police droids, Obi-Wan led Padme down through her apartment building and out through a convenient service exit. There was a shipyard of questionable integrity not too far away. By himself, he could have reached it in about an hour; with Padme, heavily pregnant as she was, it took about twice as long. Still well within an acceptable timeframe, provided he could sneak them past air traffic control.

*It should be Anakin here,* he thought, not for the first time. Anakin was, after all, the better pilot--and the reason Obi-Wan knew about this particular shipyard in the first place. He had, as with many other things, pretended not to know that Anakin occasionally snuck down to join in an illegal street race after a particularly stressful day. At least one of those races had left from this particular shipyard; Obi-Wan knew this because he had, once or twice, discreetly followed his apprentice down to the underlevels, to make sure his choices, while questionable, were not *actively* harmful to himself or anyone else. Still, while Obi-Wan at least knew where he was going and what he was looking for, Anakin would have known the ships and the area much better, enabling a faster selection and cleaner escape.

But Anakin was--*still alive,* he’s *still alive*--in critical condition on the other side of the galaxy. Obi-Wan’s more limited knowledge and abilities would have to suffice.

*There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

The shipyard was, as he had hoped, all but deserted when he and Padme arrived. They skulked around its edges for a while, to confirm that fact and look for a way in. There was only a single, bored-looking Duros on guard duty. *We can probably avoid him, at least until we’re actually on whatever ship we take,* he thought. He *could* mind trick the guard if necessary, of course, but if he didn’t time it right, he might be spotted before he gained control of the situation. Better to avoid a confrontation that might last too long, that might draw witnesses, if at all possible.

Padme nudged his shoulder, pointing at an approximately waist-high hole in the fence. He nodded, eyeing it and stretching out with the Force to detect any signs of a trap. It was conveniently out of the guard’s view; all too easy.

But he detected nothing untoward. Whatever had made that hole wasn’t a threat to the two of them.

On the other hand…

*Perhaps not so easy after all.* It was highly unlikely Padme would be able to duck or crawl through, which meant the hole would need to be expanded. Easy enough, with his lightsaber--unless the distinctive hum and light caught someone’s attention--the guard’s or even just someone walking by.
“Do you have a knife?” he asked her quietly.

She blinked, then nodded, comprehending. “Yeah. Right boot, I can’t bend that far.”

He crouched down; the blade was right where she said it would be. He removed it with care. “Keep an eye out.”

She nodded again, and stepped back into the shadows as he ghosted towards the fence, hoping the knife was strong and sharp enough to suit their purposes.

It took thirty seconds of quiet sawing, and drew a few sparks that set his teeth on edge, but he managed to cut a hole tall enough for Padme to get through safely without getting caught.

He signaled Padme, stepped aside to allow her room, then ducked through the hole after her, taking in the closest few ships at a glance.

“That one,” he said, pointing to a small freighter that didn’t look too heavily modified. It would be easier to hotwire if it wasn’t particularly idiosyncratic.

She nodded, and started towards it.

He followed her, keeping a wary eye out and one hand on the hilt of his lightsaber. The Duros at the gate remained oblivious to their presence, but there was still whoever had cut through the fence before them. And, while he still didn’t sense any active threat when he considered it, the question of who or what he might be dealing with left him uneasy.

But that question was, as they arrived at the ship, unexpectedly answered.

*Beep!*


The little droid wheeled out from under the shadow of the ship Obi-Wan had selected, and beeped again softly.

There were several dozen questions, at least, that Obi-Wan wanted to ask the droid--starting with how he had gotten here, not to mention why here, specifically. But, unlike Anakin, he couldn’t understand the droid without some sort of text interface; and the longer they stood around, the likelier it was they’d be caught.

*Artoo might have come here for the same reason I did--needing an escape route, seeking somewhere familiar. It’s more than likely Anakin brought him along on at least one of his escapades. But it doesn’t really matter at this point, I suppose. Besides, having him along will hardly hurt us.* “Can you unlock this ship?” he asked, instead.

The droid beeped again, in what he assumed was an affirmative, and went back to fiddling with the ship. In mere seconds, the boarding ramp slid open with a faint hiss and an unnervingly loud creaking noise.

“I think our luck’s run out,” Padme said, glancing towards the shipyard’s entrance.

“Get on board, quickly,” Obi-Wan said. “Artoo, get the ship started.” He positioned himself at the base of the boarding ramp to cover their exit.

None too soon--Padme had just barely disappeared into the ship when the Duros, now no longer
bored and armed with a heavy pistol, ran around the corner.

The guard didn’t bother yelling, just aimed his blaster and started firing. Obi-Wan deflected the bolts with ease--concealing his identity as a Jedi no longer served any purpose. Barring any major problems with the engines, they would be on their way before any substantive pursuit could be organized. And he highly doubted the Force would have allowed him to choose this ship if that was a significant risk.

“Artoo, close the ramp!” he called, backing along it as he shifted to deflect another volley from the guard.

He almost missed one; it singed the base of his tabards, but he remained unhurt. The ramp sealed shut and the ship rocked into motion.

“Are you all right?” he asked Padme, pausing for half a second to wait for her answer.

“Yes, I’m fine. You?”

He nodded once, and continued on to join Artoo in the cramped cockpit.

The droid had, fortunately, found an outlet and plugged himself in, which meant the readouts enabled actual communication. “Any difficulties with air traffic control?” he asked.

“This ship belongs to a small-time smuggler. I am locating their sliced access codes now. Once I have them, we should have no trouble.”

“Good,” he said. He strapped himself in--heard Padme do the same behind him--and concentrated on piloting them out between the buildings and into the atmosphere. He did his best to behave as though this were a perfectly ordinary departure, as though they weren’t fugitives in a stolen ship, and trusted in Anakin’s highly-modified pet droid to get them past security in one piece.

The Force was with them; they made it through the last layer of shields just as an alarm burst across their com channels, containing a fairly accurate, if vague description of Obi-Wan himself--male human, bearded, roughly 1.8 meters tall, mid-thirties, Jedi survivor, kill on sight--and thankfully nothing about Padme.

“Where are we going?” Artoo asked.

“Polis Massa,” he said.

The droid ruminated on that for a moment, seeking the appropriate navigation data and making his calculations for the jump to hyperspace.

“Polis Massa?” Padme asked. “That’s...pretty far out.”

“Yes,” he said. “Senator Organa brought us there before. It’s only very tenuously connected to any of us, and there’s a...there’s a reasonably well-equipped med center.”

She looked away, gripping the arms of her chair a little tighter. “Right.”

Artoo had finished the calculations, and Obi-Wan pulled the lever to send them into hyperspace, holding his breath in case something went wrong.

Nothing did. He slumped a little in his chair. We did it. We made it. We're clear, at least for now.

Behind him, he heard Padme sigh, and shift a little in her seat. She said nothing, but he could sense
that, now that the adrenaline of their escape was wearing off, she had the mental energy to think again. And her thoughts were starting to twist in on themselves, forming a tight, tense spiral of keen distress.

“What exactly did you and Motee decide to do?” He was mostly asking her to distract—well, both of them, if he were completely honest with himself. His own anxiety and grief was feeding off of hers, and vice versa. Best to try and derail the feedback loop before things got too out of hand.

He had guessed at least a portion of their plan, of course. Obviously, the end goal was for Padme’s departure from Coruscant would go unnoticed for as long as possible. And, given that Padme had indicated Motee and Typho would need her ship, they were probably going to lay down a false trail, going anywhere but Polis Massa.

Still, he was somewhat curious about the details. And it would give them something relevant but distracting to discuss.

“She’ll give us a few hours’ head start,” Padme said. She glanced at the ship’s chrono. “So...probably about now, or in the next half hour or so, she’s going to collapse. Typho will take her home, citing a medical emergency.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Coruscant’s medical centers are more than adequate. Won’t people question why you left at all?”

“Maybe,” Padme acknowledged. “But my pregnancy is...at this point, I’m pretty sure it’s an open secret, even if no one’s said anything to me yet. And it’ll have to be made public now. We prepared a couple of...scenarios, so depending on how things...depending on what happens next, we’ll upload a set of forged records to a medical droid. Given the circumstances—whatever those end up being—I’m sure people will understand why I wanted to be at home.”

“I see.” He didn’t particularly like the idea of one of the ‘scenarios’ she had hinted at, but she was probably right to consider all possibilities. Even the unimaginable ones. And the part about her condition being an open secret was almost certainly true. He was hardly an expert on such things, but she was...well, a little obvious at the moment. She’d been dressing carefully to conceal it, but...

“Whatever happens from here,” she said quietly, staring out the viewport with one hand on her stomach, “whatever happens from here, I will make sure my child is safe, and I’m free to act.”

He nodded. “I’ll help, in any way I can,” he promised.

She gave him a quick, fierce smile. “Thank you.”

He managed a small smile back. “Of course.”

She paused for a minute, her smile slipping, and—now we get to the questions she really wants answered. There was, after all, no longer any excuse to delay the conversation—no more pressing needs, no chance of eavesdroppers to put Anakin at risk.

He took a deep breath to center himself. There is no emotion, there is peace. He sought the detachment he’d need to walk her through Anakin’s injuries; to prepare her, as best he could, for what she might find when they arrived, with...somewhat mixed results. There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no emotion, there is peace.

He opened his mouth to start, but his inner turmoil, despite his best efforts, must have shown on his face, because she held up a hand to stop him, shaking her head. “I’m not--do you have any...any scans, anything written down? I don’t...I’m not going to ask you to tell me. That’s not...that’s just
“I...oh,” he said, far more relieved than he should have been. “Yes, I...I should still have it with me.” He’d copied the scans onto a data card before leaving. It accomplished absolutely nothing, except that it made him feel like he was accomplishing something. As if just having the information at his fingertips meant he was doing something to solve the problem, even from a distance. As if knowing exactly what was wrong with Anakin made it easier to set right.

*There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

And there it was, still safe in his pocket. He passed it over to her.

“Thank you,” she said, and retreated to find a datapad to read it.

He sank back into his seat, staring bleakly out the viewport at the swirling sky. They were safe in hyperspace now; he didn’t need to focus on piloting anymore, and he had--there was far too much on his mind for him to function properly. He’d done rather well so far, but now that he was left with nothing to do…

*Master Yoda was right, to send me away,* he thought, with no little chagrin at the way he’d initially reacted to the suggestion. *I’m in no fit state to confront anyone right now; let alone Palpatine.*

Well, the trip to Polis Massa would take several hours. Time enough for him to at least start to put himself back together.

He shifted into a proper meditative posture, closed his eyes, and sought whatever small measure of peace he could.

“Obi-Wan?”

“Mm?”

Time was hard to track in hyperspace under the best of circumstances, but a glance at the ship’s chrono showed Obi-Wan that it had been several hours since Padme had left him alone in the cockpit with Artoo.

He’d been--not quite meditating, despite his efforts; but not quite aware, either, of much of anything other than the swirled sky of hyperspace around them. Artoo was doing most of the piloting, so it had been safe to drift for a moment (or, apparently, much longer), and he had needed--something. He wasn’t quite sure what he needed, really, other than the ability to turn back time and undo the past few days somehow.

But, as that was, so far as he knew, utterly impossible--*there is no ignorance, there is knowledge*--and as he had been unable to focus properly, he had settled for drifting aimlessly in his head. He had been, to not put too fine a point on it, hiding in his fog of exhaustion, just close enough to alertness to be able to act if something went wrong, but far enough from it that he didn’t have to think.

“What’s our ETA?” Padme asked. He wasn’t sure exactly when she’d come back into the cockpit; she hadn’t brought the datapad with her, but she still looked pale, and had her hands clasped tight,
white-knuckled, in front of her. She was full of nervous tension, mixed with something else that he couldn’t quite read.

And it wasn’t hard to guess why. She’d had more than enough time, he guessed, to read through and fully grasp what was on the scans he’d shared with her. It was one of the many worries he was hiding from, in his comforting fog. “He’ll still be…” He trailed off. Anakin was still alive at the moment, he knew that much. He’d devoted a tiny tendril of energy to their bond, monitoring it, making sure it didn’t wink out while he wasn’t paying attention. But this moment was no guarantee for the next one, or the next. How could he reassure her, when he could barely reassure himself?

“No, I know,” she said, though she sounded approximately as certain as he felt. “I just…how much longer?”

A simple question, one that could be answered with raw data, concrete facts. He could handle that. “Of course.” He checked the readouts. “Ah, about two hours.”

“Right. Okay.” She took a deep breath. “We…may have a complication.”

Obi-Wan blinked. “What do you mean? Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine, but…” Despite what she said, her voice was tight and he could feel a new spiral of anxiety starting to work its way out of her. She took another shaky breath. “Um. I think the baby is coming. Now.”

For half a second, Obi-Wan’s world whitened out at the edges. Not back into the fog; this was an entirely different sort of non-place. What? No. No, I can’t deal with this. I simply cannot take one more thing going wrong and I’ve barely even been to a creche since I aged out and I have never done this before, and if I do this wrong, if we lose her, too--

But only for half a second. As off-balance as he still was, he had been a Jedi for far too long to let blind panic take over. He tried releasing it into the Force and, when that didn’t work, locked it down in a corner of his mind to process properly later and focused on what he could do, immediately, in that moment.

“Right,” he said, his voice remarkably steady, he thought, given the circumstances. “What can I do to help? I’m afraid I don’t--have much experience in this particular area.” Although apparently I’m about to get some. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.

“I know,” she said. “I know this isn’t--um, I’ve been reading, but I never...I never thought it would be like this. I didn’t want it to go like this.” She was starting to cry. “W-we were...w-we were supposed to go home, a-and h-he was supposed to be there, I don’t...I-I don’t th-think I can do this alone.”

“I know,” he said, projecting calm as best he could, when it was all he could do to keep from breaking down himself. “I know, none of this is going how any of us planned. But you’re not alone. I know I’m not--I’m not who should be here, but I am. I promise. You’re not alone. I’m here, all right?” He rested a hand on her forehead briefly, trying to soothe her without actually sedating her--he had no idea how that would interfere with the...process. And it was all too easy to overdo this sort of thing.

This time, he seemed to gauge it right, taking the edge off the worst of her fear without making her groggy or disoriented.

Then she cried out, stumbling into him.
The next hour and a half were something of a blur. Obi-Wan made decisions based on subtle hints from the Force, and what Padme could relay of her research between contractions. He tried to keep her calm, to ease her pain—though, the way she was screaming told him that that last, at least, was somewhat less than successful.

And then--

“I’m...I’m fairly sure that’s a head,” he said. “All right? We’re close, Padme. Almost there. Almost…”

She cried out again, he felt her push, and then--

Oh. My.

There was an entire tiny human in his hands. An entire very tiny human, slick with blood and the other effluvia of childbirth. The Force sang around him, welcoming the new life; this new, bright and shining entire being that--

“Obi-Wan?” Padme said.

“A boy,” he told her. “Your son.” Anakin’s son. I am holding Anakin’s son.

“Luke,” she said. “His name’s Luke. I was right. I was--”

She tensed again, and the Force surged around him, because--

Oh, dear.

“Padme? Padme, I think--I think there’s another one.”

And he had nowhere to put Luke while he helped with the child’s sibling; he shifted him a little, as gently as he could, and then Padme pushed and…

The second child, the little girl, handled the transition from what was probably a very nice, warm, comfortable, safe place with far less aplomb than her brother. She made her displeasure known with an impossibly loud wail that should not have been able to come from a baby that small.

“Is--” Padme panted.

“A little girl,” he told her. He was smiling; despite everything, with these two golden presences in his arms, shining bright through the Force, he felt like he might never stop.

“Leia,” she breathed. “I guess we were both right.”

“About what?” he asked. “Shh, shh, Leia, it’s all right, you’re all right…”

“Is something wrong?” Padme asked. “Let me see them--Obi-Wan--”

Oh. Right. He very, very carefully stood up, moving around to stand closer to Padme’s head. “Here they are. They’re fine, they’re perfectly fine.”

“They are,” she said. She let out a little choking noise, halfway between a laugh and a sob, and, feather-light, ran a finger down Luke’s cheek. “Hi.”

Obi-Wan held his breath for half a second, trying to hold on to this island of perfect joy; with his brother’s children in his arms and the faint sense of Anakin still alive at the back of his mind. The
sheer sense of hope, of life, was almost enough to make him forget the horrors of the past few days, and the darkness that all too likely still lay ahead of them.

But there was still work to be done. Very, very gently, he set the babies down next to their mother. As he cut the cords, an alarm went off in the cockpit, bringing a rather abrupt end to that idyll.

Padme blinked, and tensed a little, briefly distracted from her children at her side. “What’s…?”

“We’re coming out of hyperspace,” he said. “Will you be all right for a moment?”

She nodded, relaxing again.

He hesitated for half a second but—everything he could see or sense indicated that she and the children were fine. And they would be landing at a med center in just a few moments.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, then headed for the cockpit to help Artoo bring them safely into Polis Massa.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter ended up way longer than I thought it would—I thought about splitting it into two, and there is a breakpoint I could have used, but I wanted the happy at the end to go up this week. Obi-Wan is just very...wordy.

Also, a couple people asked about Yoda after last week’s update. Just wanted to let you guys know that I’m not going to show his duel with Palpatine, because it goes pretty much exactly the same as it does in canon.

Thanks so much for sticking with me this far! ~shadowsong
Chapter Notes

Note that there is some discussion of medical issues. Also, I am not a doctor, and this is pulled from vague research and watching a lot of hospital soap operas. Please do not take anything described in that portion of the fic as sound medical information/advice.

It was over a day before Padme was allowed to see her husband.

To be fair, most of that day was spent hooked up to monitors herself, with the med droids and Kallidahin on the asteroid base making sure she and the twins were all right. So, she doesn’t mind the delay (much), especially since they helpfully provided her with updated scans as soon as she asked.

Anakin was doing better. Or, she thought he was, anyway. She wasn’t exactly a medic, though she did have some basic first aid training, but based on the notations she could decipher, all the broken bones had been set correctly, and were holding; the burns and lacerations had been tended, and there were no signs of serious infection.

But his condition was still listed as critical, and there were a couple of serious problems that meant that he still might...

The first problem was, while the medcenter had bacta, they didn’t have enough for a full immersion tank, so they’d had to prioritize, and Anakin would be down for a while. Down, and in pain, with open wounds and shattered ribs. But he was alive, and he was healing, if slowly. And slow was--well, slow progress was still progress.

The bigger problem, though, was blood.

Anakin had lost a lot of blood, and the Kallidahin didn’t exactly keep human blood around for transfusions. For all that humans were the most common sentient species in the Galaxy, they were few and far between in this sector. And neither she nor Obi-Wan matched Anakin’s blood type. Probably Bail didn’t, either, or they would have gotten him to donate before he left.

There were stopgap solutions, and the medics here were employing each and every one they had access to. It was enough to keep him alive, but there wasn’t really any substitute for an actual transfusion. She had been repeatedly assured by the droids doing the bulk of the work tending him that he was stable now--still critical, but stable--but the low blood volume made him significantly more vulnerable to complications. And just because nothing else had gone wrong yet...

Between that and the horror stories Bail’s med droid had fed them about Anakin trying to get up, when he had briefly regained consciousness on the way here, they were keeping him sedated for now. Just until he was a little stronger.

So, as soon as she and the twins were cleared, Padme collected them and moved into Anakin’s room. As much as it hurt to see him like that, she wanted to be there when he woke up. When the medics had tried to object--on the grounds that very young crying infants might disturb him--Obi-
Wan had sided with her.

“They might help,” he’d said quietly.

“Really?” she’d asked. They hadn’t talked about it yet, but she knew that her children--that Anakin’s children--would be strong in the Force. And she knew what that meant. She’d had several months to think through what that might mean--though this particular scenario hadn’t exactly occurred to her.

But they were so small, and he was so hurt, and she didn’t want…she didn’t want that kind of pressure put on them. Not yet. Not ever. “Hope always does,” he said, with a faint smile.

Well. That was okay, then.

Then he’d found his own corner of Anakin’s room and very courteously passed out.

For her part, Padme slept on and off--when the twins did, mostly; miraculously, they were both pretty consistently sleeping at the same time, and she prayed to every deity she knew that they continued to do so. When she was awake, watched the displays monitoring Anakin’s vitals, tried to plan her next move, and tried to get to know the babies.

Luke was quieter than Leia, most of the time, but once he got started crying it was at least ten times harder to get him to stop.

Leia knew exactly what she wanted at all times and had about as much patience as her father did, but as easily as she became upset, she was just as easy to soothe--once you figured out why she was crying, anyway.

It’s easy enough now, anyway, Padme thought, at one point. But in a few months, her needs are going to get a lot more complex.

But then she would get them to sleep, side by side in the little beds the Kallidahin had found for her; or one of them would yawn, or cling tight to her finger, and she would feel a deep, unshakeable warmth at the base of her spine and think--I made them. These are my children. My perfect, beautiful children.

She wanted to remember every second of these first few days with her children, when they were new and precious and perfect and just needed her love. Before everything got dark and complicated again.

And, whatever she did now, whatever she and Anakin decided--and it would be their decision; even if they decided...even if they decided that the twins had to go away, with Obi-Wan or Yoda or one of the other survivors (because there had to be other survivors). Even if, it was still their decision. The twins were theirs for at least six months, whatever happened after. That was how this worked. And she would make damned sure it worked that way still.

Three days passed like that, with no visible change in Anakin’s condition, though the scans the medics took every four hours showed gradual, continuing improvement. Padme, despite her fears, managed to settle into a routine that wasn’t really a routine, because newborns didn’t exactly keep a regular schedule. Wake with the twins; tend to them; check on Anakin; maybe talk with Obi-Wan a little bit; sleep while she could; repeat.

And then Bail and Yoda joined them.

Unsuccessful.
Padme was no Jedi; she couldn’t sense these things. But she didn’t really need the Force to read the answer in Yoda’s grim quiet, or the slight slump of Bail’s shoulders.

Palpatine remained in power.

A part of Padme felt obscurely guilty for that--maybe if Obi-Wan had stayed on Coruscant, had gone with Yoda to attack him, it would have played out differently.

*But if he hadn’t been with me, if I’d gone into labor in hyperspace with only Artoo to help…*

If he felt the same way, he didn’t telegraph it in any way. Not that she could see, at least. And, she tried to console herself, she hadn’t really had any part in that decision.

*But I could have refused his escort.*

She tried not to think about it too much. They were all alive, and wishing she’d played her hand differently, those last few hours on Coruscant, wouldn’t undo what had been done. No more than going over and over her very first visit to the Senate, thirteen years ago, and wishing she hadn’t listened to Palpatine then, could change things.

*Move forward,* she told herself. *The situation is what it is. Simply wishing won’t make it any different. And we’re all alive. We can fight back. It’ll just...it just might take some time. And that hurt to acknowledge, knowing what Palpatine would be able to do in the meantime, but there wasn’t much else they could do. Fight as hard as they could, and pray it didn’t take too long.*

Obi-Wan left, to go sit with Bail and Yoda in the conference room and try to plot strategy. Padme joined them as soon as she got the twins to sleep--she left Artoo on watch; there was no one else she trusted who wasn’t otherwise occupied--and found that the others had come to more or less the same conclusion.

“Appear, an opportunity will,” Yoda said quietly. “Patient, we must be, until then.”

“But in the meantime, we can’t simply sit by and do nothing,” Obi-Wan said.

“I agree.” Padme found a seat at the table, next to Bail. “There are enough in the galaxy who will refuse to accept what Palpatine has done. We can fight.”

But Bail shook his head. “I don’t think it’ll be that simple, Padme. He has resources. He has the army. He has the capital. He has most of the Senate--you know what it’s like. Even among those that don’t actively support him, too many of our colleagues are more concerned with protecting themselves, or, more charitably, their individual constituencies. Even if they don’t like what’s happened, they won’t risk active resistance.”

“There are those who will.”

“Not enough,” he said. “We need time, to build a strong enough coalition.”

“But if we just sit by and do nothing in the meantime, he’ll become too entrenched,” she pointed out. “The longer we wait, the harder it’ll be to undo everything he’s done.”

“Correct, you both are,” Yoda said. “Patient, we must be, but complete inaction, we cannot risk. Resist, we must--but in small ways. A long road this will be--difficult. Dangerous. Slow. Your coalition, you will build in the Senate, and limit expansion of this evil from the Core, we will.”

“Sabotage,” Obi-Wan said.
“Yes.”

It made sense, Padmé knew, even though she felt like it wasn’t anywhere near enough. Bail had a point—they didn’t have the resources to do much else.

But it would take *years*. And then even longer, to fix what he would break while he had absolute power.

Power *she* had given him.

And that was what kept sticking at her, what kept undercutting the optimism she tried so hard to maintain. Not that she didn’t think they could do it—they could, they *would*—or even how long and hard a fight it would be. She had never been afraid of a fight.

But the fact that it was her fault...

The guilt, that she had made Palpatine's empire possible, wouldn't go away.

Yoda, across the table, looked right at her, one of his ears twitching. “The blame for this, place where it belongs: with the Sith, no others. Blind, we *all* were—but for Sidious’ actions, this does *not* make us responsible.”

She flushed and inclined her head, acknowledging the point, even if she didn’t quite believe it yet.


Padmé stiffened, and started to answer—she hadn’t expected this from *Obi-Wan* of all people—but Master Yoda beat her to it.

“Hmm. Wait, we will,” he said. His eyes flicked over to Padmé. “A decision for the parents, this is. Training—in time, yes. Need it, they will. But perhaps not in the traditional way.” He sighed, and it was as if the weight of all his near nine hundred years settled on him in an instant. “Too long have we relied on tradition and nothing else. Complacent, we have grown. Adapt, we must, if to survive this, we are.”

For a moment, the four of them were silent.

“I agree,” Obi-Wan finally said. “But that wasn’t...that wasn’t what I meant. Not entirely, anyway.” He glanced over at Padmé, silently asking her forgiveness for botching this.

She nodded. “What, then?”

“If Palpatine knows—and I think it would be unwise to assume he doesn’t—he will come after them.”

“Oh,” she said.

She hadn’t thought of that—but, now that he mentioned it…

*I won’t let him*, she thought. *I will not let that monster warp my children.*

“Hide them, we should,” Yoda said. “But where, and how…”

Padmé stood up. “We can’t talk about this now. Not until—Anakin *has* to be a part of this conversation.” Because they were right. The children would have to be hidden, and if that meant her and Anakin going into hiding, too, spending the rest of their lives on the run, one step ahead of
Imperial patrols--

Maybe. It would be a hard life, and even harder because we’d have two small children, and we’ve never actually lived together before, so we’d be learning how to do that at the same time. As much as we love each other, as much as we’ve always dreamed of living together, being together--well, neither of us is exactly adept at compromise. And, with everything else such a mess around us, it would be...it would be hard. But we could do it. If it meant keeping the children safe...we would make it work. But if we run, if we hide...if we do that, we won’t be able to help. And there is so much work to do.

She’d told Obi-Wan that she planned to remain free to act, and she still did. She had laid the groundwork with Motec for just that purpose. It had been a promise--to her friends, to herself, to the galaxy as a whole. To fix what she had accidentally helped break.

But it was one thing to plan, and to promise, and another to have the problem actually in front of her, to be confronted with the reality of--

“I’ll discuss it with Anakin,” she said, interrupting her own increasingly bleak thoughts. “When he wakes.”

“Whatever you decide,” Obi-Wan said, “I will help you keep them safe. I promise.”

“Thank you,” she whispered. She closed her eyes briefly, collecting herself, then sat back down at the table.

Bail took his cue from her, and shifted the topic to practical considerations, things they could do right away. Contacts they could cultivate, possible locations for drop points, sources for supplies, potential safehouses, ways they could communicate securely.

That, at least, she could help with--she and Anakin hadn’t spent three years secretly married without learning some creative ways to slip messages past eavesdroppers.

By the time the twins woke again a couple hours later, Padme was less uneasy. Those unanswerable, uncomfortable questions about her children and her own role in events to come, were still there, but she was doing something. Even the guilt seemed a little more manageable, at least for the moment. And Yoda had a point--while she had played a part in setting the stage, Palpatine's choices, his crimes, were his own.

So, there it was. Anakin was still unconscious, her children were still in danger, and this was only the start of what would be a long, hard war, but they could do it. This rebellion they had started, in a too-white, too-sterile conference room in a hidden hospital on an isolated asteroid base; the four of them, and Anakin--they would see this through. They would make things right. Padme had faith that there was light at the end of the road. She refused to give up on it.

Now they just had to hold together, to stay alive long enough to reach it.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update--this chapter gave me a lot of trouble. It still feels a little messy, but I decided it was time to put it out there and move on, otherwise I’d keep fiddling with it for another week or two...
Anyway, here it is. Thanks so much for sticking with me through this story so far!

~shadowsong
Anakin was cold.

Which, all right, wasn’t exactly anything new. He was almost always cold; the desert, apparently, was still seared deep into his bones, making it hard for him to ever feel truly warm.

But this--what he was feeling right now--wasn’t normal-planet cold, though; it went deeper than that, somewhere between deep-space cold and bloodloss cold instead, something draining that he couldn’t push through and ignore.

There was pain, too, pretty much everywhere; but it was muffled--drugs? I think I was drugged, maybe.

Huh. He could string a coherent thought together. That was a relief. It couldn’t be that bad if he could string a coherent thought together.

Less heartening was the fact that he couldn’t quite seem to draw a full breath. There was a sort of pressure on his chest, backed up by pain.

Oh. Guess my ribs broke.

Okay. That was okay, and familiar. Refreshingly familiar? His life was weird. At least he knew how to deal with that. At least that was a touchstone, an anchor point to reality in all the kriffing drug(?)-induced fog.

Cautiously, he tried opening his eyes, and--nope, bad idea. The lights were too bright, driving spikes into his already-aching head. And, maybe it was the drugs, or the pain, or maybe it was just too damn bright, but everything was blurred, out of focus, making him a little nauseous.

Okay. Let’s try something else. He took as deep a breath as he could, trying to center himself and get some sense of where he was.

Medcenter. He knew that feeling, too; no matter what planet or base or installation he was on, hospitals always felt the same. Other than providing another familiar anchor point, it wasn’t really all that helpful, though--between the pain and the drugs and the broken ribs, it was a reasonable guess.

Asteroid, I think. He didn’t pick up on a lot of ambient life. ...where am I? Who brought me here? I don’t...I don’t remember much after...

He shied away from those memories, or at least tried to. He could feel his heartbeat speeding up a little; one of the machines was beeping.

All my fault this is my fault my fault I didn’t see it didn’t stop it I was supposed to stop it I was--
He squeezed his eyes shut; scrambled through the Force, looking for something--anything--familiar and positive to ground him.

There.

Obi-Wan was close; he could sense him--warm and comforting and slightly veiled. Sleeping.

He’s alive. Thank the Force, Obi-Wan wasn’t...he’s alive.

The relief at finding him cut through the panic and the guilt, and he felt himself relaxing. He was shaking a little, he thought; reaction, or--no, I can’t be that bad.

...wait, I knew he was alive, didn’t I...? I think...Yes, I did know that. I saw him, he survived the--he survived. That’s important. Remember that. Don’t forget again.

His memories of the last few--of however long it had been were a little fuzzy. But, now that his brain was waking up, he did remember seeing Obi-Wan. The memory itself was a little hazy--more pain, more drugs, hovering on the edge of consciousness--but it was there. Hazy or not, he remembered waking up, finding Obi-Wan hovering nearby, a beacon in the chaos (like he always has been; he didn’t abandon me, didn’t betray me, how the hell could I have ever doubted him); and he remembered talking to him; telling him to get to Palpatine, and to get Padme--

Padme.

He nearly managed to sit up on the stark adrenaline of that thought alone. Is she alive is she safe did he kill her the baby what about the baby was it all for nothing this wasn’t what I wanted this wasn’t--

Adrenaline, despite its best efforts, wasn’t quite enough to outweigh the pain. He fell back with a faint cry. His head was spinning, and he couldn’t get a deep breath to center himself--kripping ribs--

He might have blacked out again. He wasn’t sure. But after some time, he was able to process more than just raw pain, and tried opening his eyes again. The light didn’t hurt as much this time, at least, but the room was still blurry, still cold; everything still hurt.

Okay. Calm down, and try again. Don’t move too fast. You can do this. Just...

He closed his eyes again and stretched out with the Force. Finding Padme was sometimes hit or miss, even for him, unless they were in pretty close proximity. She wasn’t a Jedi, so her Force signature was a lot less--

Huh. That was strange. There were, very close by, two slightly erratic pulses in the Force, unlike anything he had ever sensed before. They seemed to be gravitating towards him, or he towards them. They were...muted, sort of. Not veiled with sleep, like Obi-Wan’s, but sort of...uncertain? Unfinished?

He didn’t have a word for it. He’d never sensed anything quite like them before. But they were full of Light, full of life, and they were--soothing. He felt better, just knowing they were there. Whatever they were. Which was sort of weird, and maybe should have worried him, that something so wholly unknown could have so profound an effect on him, especially when he was wounded and could barely sit up but...

They made him feel better. They didn’t--it wasn’t that the pain was gone, with them there, but more like...it was easier to handle. Like he knew, indisputably, deep as the desert in his bones, that
the pain would end someday. And there was no layer of threat whatsoever in their presences. He could have stayed there, drifting, aligning himself to those two soft starbursts, for hours.

"Padme," he reminded himself. Find Padme. You’ll be able to find these two again later, now that you know what they look like. You can figure out what they are, or draw comfort or...whatever.

Reluctantly, he disengaged and stretched his senses out further and--

She was here. She was _here_, that was _her_, cool and soothing like summer rain, and he could have cried with relief.

_She’s safe. She’s safe, she’s alive, she’s okay, we didn’t—we’re all—I didn’t lose her. I didn’t lose her, or Obi-Wan, or--_

All at once, that relief evaporated, and the memory of the Temple dying all around him crept into its place.

_I’m a terrible person. I’m a terrible Jedi, a terrible Chosen One—so many people died, people I was supposed to protect, and still, still, all I care about is—I was blind, so blind, and so selfish have I learned nothing?_

“Ani?”

Padme’s voice cut through his spiral of self-loathing, if only for a moment. He felt her hand, cool and smooth, resting on his forehead, then his cheek.

He opened his eyes.

“Ani!” She was a little blurry, but her smile, like always, lit up his entire world.

“Hi,” he managed to whisper. She was so beautiful, and safe, and _alive_, and he hadn’t had to—he hadn’t had to take Palpatine’s offer ( _how could I have even considered it she would never have forgiven me I would have lost her anyway lost Obi-Wan lost everyone_) after all.

Something was—something was different, though. And maybe it was because of the pain, or maybe because there were still _way_ too many drugs pouring through him, but his brain didn’t seem to be running properly right now. It took him a minute to figure it out.

Padme wasn’t pregnant anymore.

His heart sank.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. Her smile slipped a little, and she fussed with something he couldn’t quite see. “Are you—if you’re hurting, I can get one of the doctors, we can—”

“The baby?”

“Oh,” she said, and relaxed, smiling again. “Do you think you can—here, let me help you sit up. There’s someone you should meet.”

And his heart leapt up again, lodging somewhere in his throat. _Not gone. Not dead, just—the baby was born I have a baby Padme and I have a baby._

He started to sit up on his own, and she rested a gentle but unyielding hand on his shoulder.

“Easy,” she said, some of the light draining out of her smile. “Don’t...don’t overdo it, you’ve
been…you’re still…”

“Padme,” he said, and okay it was a little whiny but--

“Let me help you,” she insisted.

Arguing with his wife rarely ended well for him, and it would just waste time and his child, his little girl--or maybe his son? Padme had thought they were having a boy--was right there.

“Fine,” he conceded.

Inch by inch, with a lot more support than he liked to admit he needed, he managed to get a little better than halfway upright, leaning against the headboard. The effort left him breathless, and it hurt, but he made it. More of the cobwebs seemed to be clearing out of his head now, too; the room was less blurry, it was easier to focus.

Easier to see it when Padme frowned a little.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I want to...want to see the baby. Please?” He tried to smile, as reassuringly as he could, and thought he managed to pull it off.

She quirked a smile of her own, but he could still feel worry bleeding after her. He did his best to look fully alert and awake and not as breathless and pathetic as he felt. “All right. Don’t move.” She slipped off, out of view, returning a few seconds later with a squirmy little pile of blankets. “This is Leia,” she said, very carefully setting the baby on his lap.

Leia.

She was so tiny.

“Hi,” he breathed, barely noticing when Padme slipped off again. “Hi, Leia. I’m...uh, I’m your dad.”

Leia made a faint noise, batting around with her tiny, tiny fists, narrowly missing hitting him.

“And this,” Padme said, carefully perching on the edge of the bed holding--

Wait, what…?


????????!!!!!

“Luke…?”

“Mnhmm.” She shifted her hold on the baby--the other baby, there were two babies how were there two entire babies--so he could see his son’s face a little clearer.

Luke was asleep, or at least he had his eyes closed and he wasn’t wriggling like Leia. But he had the cutest little nose Anakin had ever seen--is that a weird thing to notice? --and then he sighed faintly and burrowed deeper into Padme’s arms.

“Oh,” Anakin breathed, realizing he’d been silent for way too long, staring. “Oh, wow.”

Padme grinned at him. “They’re pretty perfect, aren’t they?”
Starbursts, he realized. These--the twins--they're are my starbursts.

“They’re absolutely perfect,” he corrected her.

“Absolutely,” she agreed.

“How...how did we miss that there were two? ” Never mind that he should’ve sensed them, but she’d had a carefully-maintained and frequently-wiped med droid looking after her. Didn’t prenatal care usually come with scans, pictures…?

She shrugged, and, rather than attempting to solve that mystery, leaned over to kiss him.

Okay. He liked that answer just fine.

And, oh, he could’ve stayed like that forever--with Padme and the twins; just together, like they were right here, right now. This was all he’d ever really wanted, after all. This was what he’d been willing to--

No. I’m not going to spoil it. This is a happy moment. I’m happy.

Leia wriggled again on his lap and he automatically reached to catch her before she fell and--

Ow. Okay. Uh. Guess my arm broke, too. ...could be worse. Could be gone.

“Ani?”

“M’okay,” he said, blinking back the stars. He tried to recapture that feeling, but the moment was gone. “I’ve got her, don’t--I’ve got her, I won’t let her fall.”

“I know you won’t,” she said. She shifted position, so she was practically lying down next to him, leaning against the headboard with the twins between them. “Ani, what are we going to do?”

The same question she’d asked him--it felt like forever ago, when he finally got back to Coruscant, when she first told him about the baby. And he wanted, oh, he wanted to tell her the same thing--We’re not going to worry about anything right now.

But he couldn’t. There wasn’t anything but ‘right now’ anymore. Palpatine was still out there--Anakin knew that, as surely as he knew he himself was still alive. I’d know if he was dead, and isn’t that a kripping uncomfortable thought?

And Palpatine would come after the children.

No. No, I won’t let him--I will never let him anywhere near my children, I will do whatever I have to do, I will--

Leia shifted again, making a faint, almost unhappy noise.

He blinked. Wait, can she--?

And then came the guilt.

Never again. I will never let myself come that close to the edge again.

Because he knew damn well how close he’d come. His children deserved better from him.

“Ani?” Padme asked softly, pulling him out of the spiral and back to solving the problem at hand.
“I don’t know,” he said. “We can’t--we have to keep them safe.”

She nodded. “Yeah.” She paused. “We could run,” she offered.

We could. Maybe, just maybe, there was a part of the galaxy Palpatine didn’t control yet. Somewhere they could take their children and just be together--Obi-Wan could come too, if he wanted--somewhere they’d be safe, from Palpatine and from what Anakin had almost become and what he had failed to live up to and everything else he hadn’t thought of yet.

Except--

No. We couldn’t.

This was on him. He had screwed this all up. He was responsible. He had trusted Palpatine, had played right into the Sith Lord’s hands like the idiot he tried so hard to pretend he wasn’t. He was responsible for the death of the Jedi, of the Republic.

And I could never forgive myself if I just--walked away. If I gave up. If I didn’t even try to fix what I broke.

And, he realized, Padme probably wouldn’t, either. Forgive herself, at least, for walking away from the fight.

This is what I WANT, something inside him cried. A life, with his wife and his perfect children, just-- being together, and he had the chance, but he couldn’t…

Look at where thinking only of what you want has gotten you, he reminded himself.

He closed his eyes, took as deep a breath as he could, and, for possibly the first time in his life, he let go.

“We can’t,” he said. “There’s too--there’s too much work to do here.”

She sighed, and nodded, resting her head against his. “And…” She swallowed; she was crying, and he knew he couldn’t make this better, and he hated himself for it. “And my work is…it’s still in the Senate. Whatever’s left of the Senate now.”

And if I go back to Coruscant, if I stay with you...

“And mine is...I’m not...” he said. “If I...I’ll just...he’ll…”

“I know,” she said. “I know, I know…”

This isn’t fair. We’ve had three years of this already.

“This isn’t forever,” she whispered, kissing his cheek softly. “It isn’t forever, it won’t be, we won’t let it. I love you. That part’s forever.”

“I know,” he said. “I love you, too. Forever. Even if--” He swallowed.

She nodded; he felt her head move against his, heard her shaking breaths as she tried to get control of herself. “But that still...the twins, we have to...what are we going to do?”

He couldn’t ask her to give up her children. They were hers, at least as much as his, and every single fiber of him rebelled at letting either one of them out of his sight. He knew Padme had to feel the same. But she was the one who would be more visible; she was the one who would be
closest to—to Palpatine.

On the other hand, as soon as he bullied the medics here into letting him out, he planned on making life very difficult for the Chancellor, the only way he knew how, at least until he got a chance to stab the Sith Lord right in the kriffing face. And doing that with a pair of infants along was...

“We have to hide them,” he said, because he knew that was true. “But--but I can’t--I don’t want--”

“What if…?” She hesitated. “What if we...what if each of us takes one of them? That...that way…”

She didn’t finish the thought, and he didn’t want to, either.

*If the worst should happen, at least one of them will survive. And we won’t have to give them up, and we won’t be--neither of us will be alone.*

“Okay,” he said. “Okay.”

But that left another question.

“How--how do we…?” *How do we choose?*

“…” She trailed off, then curled closer. “I have Luke. You have Leia. Let’s just...keep it that way.”

He nodded. “I have Leia. You have Luke.”

“Not forever,” she said. “Right?”

“Not forever,” he echoed, and closed his eyes. “And you’ll--don’t go yet, please?”

“I won’t,” she promised. He felt her kiss the top of his head. “I’ll stay a little longer.”

*Just a little longer. And it won’t be forever.*

Anakin repeated it in his head, over and over and over again, trying so hard to believe.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this was an emotional roller coaster of a chapter and took a while to get right.

I spent a long time trying to figure out how I was going to handle this--Anakin being fully *Anakin* again, despite how close he'd come to becoming Vader. He's got a long road ahead of him; but it basically boils down to: Anakin, for lack of a better term, hit rock bottom in the Temple (right before he hit rock bottom/Bail's speeder outside the Temple) (look this AU’s working title was 'The One Where Anakin Doesn't Fall [Except Literally]). ...Anyway, he starts making better choices now; or at least trying to. Like I said, he's not all the way there yet, but he's made a good start, anyway, and it will be an (at least mostly) upward trend from here. And he will have help because ahaahahaha Anakin is in no way capable of raising an infant by himself, and he's actually in a position to admit that he needs help, so he and Leia will get it.

Anyway, uh...I guess now I've demonstrated why I don't typically leave ANs like this,
mostly because I start babbling at great length...

(Also this fic is turning out way longer than I originally anticipated it would be...@.@ close to 20k in and we're not even done with Part One...Thank you all for your patience and endurance!)
Part 1, Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two weeks.

It had been two weeks since the world had come crashing down, and they’d found sanctuary on Polis Massa. Part of Obi-Wan still expected to blink and be back on Utapau, standing over Grievous’ smoking corpse--or even earlier, perhaps; back on Coruscant, saying goodbye to Anakin.

A goodbye that had come all too close to being permanent.

Maybe that, really, was where everything had fallen apart.

Things were better now, to a point. Anakin had been conscious for the last week. Obi-Wan hadn’t had much chance to speak with him yet, but there would be time enough for that in the days to come.

At first, he had held back because--well, it wouldn’t have been fair. Padme and Bail had had to leave all too soon after Anakin finally woke, to resume something as close to their old lives as they could. Obi-Wan hadn’t wanted to intrude on what small, precious time Anakin had with his wife.

Especially since, in all likelihood, it would be years before they saw one another again.

He had stayed close, though, and that had been enough. Like Padme and the children, he had slept in Anakin’s room (which he was fairly sure had brought Master Yoda’s disapproval, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to care at the moment). And they had managed to say the important things--we survived, we’re side by side just as we have been for thirteen years, we will get through this, thank the Force you’re alive, don’t ever scare me like that again.

And then, after Padme had left, Master Yoda had rather unsubtly ejected Obi-Wan, with a pointed suggestion that he use the time here to meditate, to reclaim his center. Which was fair; he knew he needed that time as much as Anakin needed the Grandmaster’s council. He could guess, to an extent, what the two of them were discussing. The things Anakin had done--and hadn’t done. There was, at this point, no real question of expelling Anakin from the Order, at least. Which, while merited under the old rules, was something of a relief for Obi-Wan. He wasn’t entirely sure what he would have done, in that case. Particularly after coming so close to losing Anakin in a much more complete, irrevocable way.

Still, a part of him did wonder if this was right. Anakin’s violations--while he himself was more than willing to turn a blind eye, and had been even before everything had fallen apart--were serious ones. For him to escape any sort of sanction for the things he’d done…

But what sanction could there be, that wouldn’t just compound their shared misery? Or, failing that, fade into the background of everything else that had gone so very wrong?

Besides, there were brutally practical concerns in play--there were, quite simply, too few Jedi left. And Anakin, despite his violations, was good. They could not afford to lose him. Not now.

A messy question, and not one that Obi-Wan could answer--he was too close to it, without being quite at the actual center. So he had left it to Anakin and Master Yoda, to reflect on, and find a way through it.
For himself, he had taken the advice he’d been given, and retreated to a quiet corner of the base to try to sort through everything that had happened, to find a way to come to terms with it, insofar as he could. Leia helped, especially on those rare occasions when Anakin let her out of his sight and Obi-Wan got to hold her. Luke had, too, before Padme had left, taking him away. And that shining thread of his little brother’s presence, stronger and brighter every day, was a lifeline to which he clung.

He had, he thought, somehow reached some sort of new equilibrium, at least, but peace, true peace...came and went.

It would be a process. This grief, this unnamable, unimaginable grief...learning to live with it would be a process. One that would, most likely, take him the rest of his life.

But I have that life, he reminded himself. So does Anakin, and so do the children...

With that thought to give him hope for the future, he managed. Most of the time.

It would be easier, perhaps, when they got moving again. He smiled a little to himself at the thought. Anakin’s rubbing off on me, I think. Always on the move.

As if that thought had prompted him, he stood up and stretched, and started working his way through the complex, back towards Anakin’s room.

“...been having the same conversation in circles for three days now,” he heard Anakin saying as he rounded the last corner.

Obi-Wan paused. He wasn’t entirely sure he should be hearing this, but--well, he had been worried. And if he wanted to know how to help his brother--better than he had been lately--he needed to know things Anakin would never tell him. Things he himself could never ask directly. It wasn’t their way.

“Hmmm,” Master Yoda was saying. “And?”

“I don’t know,” Anakin said quietly, after a long pause. “I feel like I come up with a different answer every time.”

“Yes,” he said. “I, as well.”

That wasn’t an admission Obi-Wan had expected to hear. For all Yoda had pointed out the Order needed to change...

We are all adrift. He, as much as Anakin or I. The future is--not clouded, precisely, not the same way it has been the past few years, but...lacking in any sort of foundation.

“So, what happens now?”

Obi-Wan’s attention was caught again at that. Anakin’s tone was...different, than he had come to expect. Particularly in those last few weeks, before he had gone to Utapau, and left Anakin caught between the Council and Palpatine.

I should have brought you with me, he thought. Whatever the Council said, I should never have left you with him.

He closed his eyes and released that guilt into the Force. Agonizing over past mistakes wouldn’t unmake them. He would learn from it, and move on. And, the next time someone--whether it was
Anakin, or Master Yoda, or Obi-Wan himself--went to face Palpatine, it wouldn’t be alone. He would see to that.

But that change in Anakin’s tone concerned him. Rather than bitter, verging on desperate, he just sounded...tired. Resigned.

*I’m not sure I like that any better*, he admitted to himself. *But--we’re all tired. We’re all grieving. Hopefully, this will pass. Hopefully, he will come out of this--better than he was. Stronger, steadier, but still himself. I don’t want him to lose himself, as frustrating as he can be, I just...*

“Years, we will have,” Yoda said. “What meaning these changes have, to determine. And what shape, the Jedi Order will take.”

“Years,” Anakin said.

“But now, more immediate questions, we have to answer,” Yoda said, his voice turning brisk. “Join us shortly, Obi-Wan will.”

*Ah.* Another, thinner thread of guilt released into the Force--he really shouldn’t have been eavesdropping.

That done, Obi-Wan took the last few steps down the hallway and tapped on the door.

“Come in,” Anakin called.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said.

Anakin was upright, mostly unsupported. Leia was in his lap, as she almost always was; sleeping quietly, for once.

“No,” Yoda said. “Finished, we are,” he added, one ear twitching. “Until over, this war is, at least. Meditate on these questions, we both will, and find an answer then.”

Obi-Wan nodded, and found a seat on the other side of Anakin’s bed. “How are we going to do this?” he asked. Simply stated, but not simple to answer. *How are we going to fight the army that we once led? How, when there are so few of us to do it?*

“A place I have found, to hide from the Emperor’s sight,” Yoda said, with a faint sigh. “Too old am I, for a war like this. And too valuable a target, for the Sith. Derail any mission, my presence would. But coordinate I can. Observe, identify--plan.”

“Is it...” Anakin trailed off, then visibly steeled himself. “Is it going to be just the three of us?”

And that was Anakin, cutting straight to the heart of a matter, whether or not doing so was wise. Obi-Wan would have eased into it, but--well, the question needed to be asked, and was there really any way to soften it?

“Heard from no one else, have we,” Yoda said. “From the Temple, did any others escape?”

Anakin closed his eyes. “I don’t...know,” he admitted. “I could tell you...I could tell you how many died, before I lost consciousness. But...”

“There may be others,” Obi-Wan said. Such a thin thread of hope, but it was there.

“There must be,” Anakin said.
He wasn’t wrong. Even if—even if the official reports were true, and only Anakin had escaped the Temple alive, surely not every Jedi who had been actively deployed had been killed.

“I agree,” Obi-Wan said quietly. “But the question...the question, then, is whether we seek them out.”

The three of them let that hang in the air for a moment.

“No,” Yoda finally said. And, as much as the word felt like yet another blow, Obi-Wan knew he was right. “Safer, it is, if scattered we remain.”

Anakin looked like he was about to argue, but then he looked down at Leia, sleeping in his lap, and nodded once.

“Draw attention, you two will,” Yoda said dryly. “Always, you have. Never change, do some things. Find us, others may. But seek them ourselves--we should not.”

Another silence.

Anakin broke it this time. “So, when do we start?”

“Leave, I will,” Yoda said. “Soon. Tomorrow, or the next day. Obi-Wan, when ready you are, some targets, I would suggest.”

Obi-Wan half-bowed in his seat. “Yes, Master,” he said.

“What about me?” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan and Yoda exchanged a long look. As you said, Master. Some things never change.

“You are staying here,” he said.

Anakin frowned. “I’m not--”

“Leave this to you, I will, Obi-Wan,” Yoda interrupted, hopping off his chair. “Speak again before I go, we will.”

Anakin watched Yoda go, holding his argument back until the door shut and the two of them were left alone. “I’m doing a lot better,” he said. “I’m not...I need to do something. I can help.”

“I know,” Obi-Wan said. “And, as soon as the doctors here clear you, I will be more than happy to have your help. But right now, your only responsibility is to heal.”

“But--”

Obi-Wan simply raised an eyebrow.

Anakin shut his mouth, and glared off to the side. “How long?”

Oh, good, that worked. “As long as it takes,” he said.

Anakin sighed, then winced a little, putting one hand to his ribs. “I’m fine,” he said, quickly, probably catching Obi-Wan’s concern through their bond.

He frowned. “Anakin...”
“I’ll behave,” he said. “I just...I’m fine.”

No, you’re not. But I’m not, either, I suppose. Though I’m a little closer than you are, I think. At least I’m not physically injured on top of—everything else.

Things fell quiet between them; a silence heavy with all the things they hadn’t said, the past few years. All the ways they had failed each other, coming to the brink of—

Obi-Wan didn’t know, and, frankly, he didn’t want to, but one of the things he had been thinking through, the past two weeks, was Palpatine’s intense interest in Anakin. An interest that stretched back over a decade, to his earliest days on Coruscant. An interest that had led to an intense, almost pathological loyalty—the same kind Anakin displayed towards everyone with whom he had bonded.

An interest that, given what Obi-Wan now knew, had had a very clear goal in mind.

He didn’t know exactly how close Anakin had come. He didn’t want to know. But he could guess. And he had a feeling that his mistakes, especially in the early days, had opened the door. He wasn’t to blame, of course, but there were cracks here, deep in the foundation of their partnership. Cracks that the two of them needed to repair, if they were to survive and complete the long, arduous mission that lay ahead of them.

“All right, I...” he started again, then stopped, not sure exactly what it was he needed to say. Other than too much to put into words. Especially so soon after—especially when he was still so raw.

A process, he reminded himself. It’s a process. Start with the basics.

“I think we’ve both—” He stopped. “I think we need to...there are things we have done, and not done, that...”

Anakin looked up at him, uncertain. “Master?”

Obi-Wan, silver-tongued though he was under most circumstances, found himself at a complete and utter loss for words.

Keep it simple. What is the single biggest problem here?

Secrets.

Anakin had kept secrets from him. Important secrets. Life-changing secrets. And he’d had his reasons, of course. Understandable ones, from his own perspective, at least so far as Obi-Wan had guessed. But still secrets, forming those cracks that had nearly allowed—

No. I do not want to think about that.

Besides, the problems weren’t entirely on Anakin’s end. Obi-Wan knew full well that he had handled things badly, particularly in the beginning, when he had first taken Anakin as his apprentice. For understandable reasons, again, but the damage had still been done. And he had kept secrets of his own—though the potential consequences of his were not as grave, and he didn’t do it by choice, for the most part; more often constrained by duty. Still, the Rako Hardeen incident, in particular, weighed on him. On both of them.

“No more secrets,” he said. “That’s...please? From either of us. From now on.”

Anakin blinked, then nodded once. “No more secrets,” he promised, then continued, all in a rush,
stumbling over his words. “I...I know that’s mostly been my fault, but I didn’t...I didn’t want to
disappoint you. I was going to--I was going to do it right, I would have done it right, but then the
War happened, and we couldn’t wait, because something might have happened, and I couldn’t
leave, not until--”

“Athanik,” Obi-Wan interrupted. “I’m not...I understand, at least so much as I can, why you made
the choices you did. And I don’t want to--I don’t blame you. I just want...we need to do better by
each other, in the future. And that means no more secrets. All right?”

“All right,” he said, after taking a moment to process that. “No more secrets, from now on.”

“Good,” he said.

Another silence fell between them; but a lighter one. They hadn’t quite cleared the air, but they’d
come as close to a direct apology for mistakes of the past as either of them was likely to, and they
had resolved to do better in the future. They were, once again, on the same page. Side by side.
United.

He would, he decided, stay here for another few days, before he took out one of Yoda’s targets. He
wanted to make sure their new foundation was as secure as he thought it was, and start to build on
it. And spend more time getting to know Leia, he thought, glancing down at her fondly.

Anakin must have caught the thought, or the look, because he smiled and shifted just a little. “I
don’t think it’ll wake her up if we move her. Want to hold her for a minute?”

“Yes,” he said. “Should I pick her up, or...?”

Anakin flexed the fingers on his flesh arm, considering. He hadn’t tried a full healing trance--
probably not wanting to miss any time with Padme, then needing to sort things out with Master
Yoda--but Obi-Wan knew he’d tried a few tricks to accelerate the healing process. So, as opposed
to having only one functioning arm, he was closer to one and a half. “Yeah, that’s probably better.”

He nodded and carefully reached over to pick up the child. As Anakin had suspected, she didn’t
stir.

And she was just as miraculous as she had been the first time he’d held her, if substantially quieter.

“I’m...glad you were there,” Anakin said, after a minute.

“Hmm?” Obi-Wan looked up at him.

“When she was born,” he clarified. “Since I couldn’t...you’re my brother, too, you know?”

“Oh,” he said, touched beyond speaking again. He hadn’t been quite sure how much of that
conversation Anakin had remembered--he’d been barely conscious, after all, drugged and in pain...

“I remember enough,” Anakin said. “The important parts. That was an important part.” He cleared
his throat, and flexed his hand again, before grinning up at him. “Anyway, I think Uncle Obi-Wan
has a nice ring to it. Yeah?”

He pretended to think that over for a minute, but really, the answer was obvious. He grinned back.
“Yeah, I think it does.”

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the late update! I will be on time next week, I promise.

One more chapter, and then the Aftermath/Polis Massa arc is done, and we move on to other things! The cast will...like...double at that point. Should be fun!

Thanks for sticking with me!

~shadowsong
Overall, Darth Sidious was pleased with how well the last two weeks had gone. The civil government was firmly in his grasp. There had been no overt resistance to his takeover, and he knew who the dissenters in the Senate were. He could monitor them, in the months and years to come. Some, of course, he would terminate at the earliest opportunity. But some he would leave alive, as bait for future resistance movements. So long as he knew who the traitors were, after all, they presented no serious threat.

And the Jedi--ah, the Jedi had been crushed. True, some had slipped through the cracks, but he guessed there were less than a hundred survivors. And that was a generous estimate, including those who had been confirmed as injured critically enough to be presumed dead, though no remains had been found. Even Yoda had slunk away in defeat, to keep his head down and lick his wounds. He was, perhaps, still alive, and Sidious would of course keep a wary eye out for any signs the little troll had resurfaced, but he doubted it would happen.

His Separatist puppets, too, had been neatly disposed of. Sidious had dispatched Tarkin to handle the mop up operation on Mustafar--not his first choice, to be sure, but a promising asset for the time being--and had received final confirmation of Tarkin’s success this morning.

The Clone Wars were over.

He had won.

It hadn’t been a total victory, unfortunately--or, at least, not the one he’d envisioned when he’d authorized his own kidnapping and initiated his endgame--but more than sufficient. A few pieces were missing, a few loose ends left dangling, but not enough to truly detract from his victory.

The biggest of those pieces, of course, was Skywalker. He was the one that rankled the most, too. Sidious still wasn’t quite sure exactly how that had gone wrong.

The boy had been perfectly prepared--thirteen years of effort poured into his intended apprentice; gaining his trust; carefully building and aggravating stress points in his psyche; and then applying just the right amount of pressure at just the right moment to break him in just the right way.

There was, he admitted, a slight possibility that he had overplayed his hand. But, really, Skywalker hadn’t left him much choice but to risk that. It was remarkable, that the boy could be so intelligent in so many ways and yet completely miss Sidious’ increasingly obvious hints. Most targets would have caught on weeks earlier.

Of course, he had tailored his approach with that in mind, so he doubted that had been the problem.

Perhaps he had undersold it? No, that wasn’t it, either. Skywalker had known, with perfect clarity, everything he stood to gain from turning--and everything he would lose, should he fail to do so. Sidious would not have allowed the boy to leave his office, had he not been absolutely certain of that fact.

From the time the boy had fled, the next hour had gone exactly as Sidious had planned. Word had reached Coruscant that Kenobi had succeeded in killing Grievous (not the ideal outcome--he’d rather hoped both of them would die--but Kenobi’s absence had served its purpose). And then the
Jedi had attacked him, as he had known they would.

That, he thought, was where things had, if briefly, gone off track.

He had drawn out his duel with Mace Windu as long as he could. He had known, of course, that events would quickly overtake him once they were finished; and that Skywalker had to be complicit from the beginning. So he had waited, prepared to give him that final nudge over the edge.

But the boy had not come.

There had been a moment, towards the end, where Windu had shown a rare spark of insight, and deduced what Sidious had been waiting for.

“He’s not coming,” the Jedi had spat. “You lose.”

That first statement, unfortunately, had proved true.

The second--well.

Windu had gone out the window, and Sidious had had to make some very quick decisions. Regrettably, he had been forced to sacrifice all the effort he’d put into Skywalker. There was no time to retrieve him before initiating Order 66. He could not delay the command; the Jedi would all too quickly notice something was wrong and manage to regroup.

And, having failed to secure Skywalker’s allegiance before the Purge, his would-be apprentice was lost to him forever. Sidious had known that. Even if the boy had survived—which was unlikely—he would have snapped to his previous loyalties with all the tenacity he could. Sidious would never again have the boy’s confidence. Pity.

Skywalker had fought valiantly to the last, of course. The report from the clones who had attacked the Temple—Skywalker’s own men, as they were stationed on Coruscant at the time in preparation for Sidious’ planned version of events—painted a very clear picture of how brutal the eventual kill had been.

The boy’s body was among those that had not yet been recovered, and Sidious did acknowledge the possibility of his survival. A sort of connection had been forged between the two of them over the years. His awareness of it was...somewhat muddled, at the moment. Difficult to tell if it had truly snapped, or was merely damaged or forsaken.

On the other hand, his body had fallen from the Temple into the city’s underlevels. If he had been killed, the chance of his remains ever being recovered was vanishingly small.

So, another thing to watch for. But if Skywalker did resurface, Sidious was confident he could be handled. After all, for all the boy’s power and potential, he was still a mere Jedi, and a young and inexperienced one with that.

Kenobi, though, might prove a problem. Among the known Jedi survivors, he presented the greatest threat to Sidious’ plans. A half-decent strategist, for a Jedi, with a talent for persuasion that might well allow him to win allies to his cause. And he was far likelier to resurface than the others.

Well, if and when that happened, Sidious would be prepared. Once he had acquired a new apprentice, he would train that being with that particular goal, among others, in mind.

Or, perhaps, simply lock Kenobi in a room with Maul, solving several problems at once.
He dismissed that difficulty from his mind for the time being. There was very little he could do about it until Kenobi resurfaced.

More pressing was his unfortunate lack of an apprentice. Not that he needed one for the traditional reason, but rather as an extension of his will. Tarkin and the others could only do so much. He needed another Sith Lord.

Taking Maul back was out of the question, of course. The Zabrak had failed him, rather spectacularly. There were no second chances among the Sith.

And Sidious had, regrettably, been far too confident of his success with Skywalker. He had neglected to seek out a suitable backup.

This was not a mistake he would repeat.

He had considered Skywalker’s child, of course. Disadvantages of starting with an infant aside, he was guaranteed a powerful apprentice from that quarter. But Senator Amidala’s office had released a statement that she had suffered a miscarriage, and would remain in seclusion on Naboo for a month while she recovered. Possibly a hoax, but it would be easy enough to confirm, once he discovered the location of the infant’s tomb.

As for Amidala herself—well, he would see how the loss of her husband and child affected her. If, as he thought reasonably likely, her grief cooled that irritating fire at her core, he would allow her to live. Like some of her former allies in the Senate, she would continue to be a magnet for conspiracy. Useful, so long as her spirit was dampened enough that she wouldn’t act on them.

And, if not, the tragic demise of the Senator of his own home planet would provide useful political capital.

But, in the meantime, he had an Empire to run and a new apprentice to acquire. And these few imperfections, irritating though they were in what should have been an absolute triumph, were minor when compared to his success. He could attend to them in the fullness of time.

He steepled his fingers and allowed himself to savor the moment with a smile. He had accomplished virtually everything he had wanted to. He had won. Power--absolute power--was his.

Victory had never been so sweet.

Chapter End Notes

And this concludes the Polis Massa/Aftermath arc!

Next week starts the Homecoming arc, which doubles the size of our cast as Our Heroes learn to navigate their new normal and get to work, while taking care of the babies.

Thanks so much for sticking with me so far! <3

~shadowsong
If Bail could have managed it, he would’ve slipped into Aldera City under cover of darkness, made his way unseen into the palace by one of the hidden exits he’d used to sneak out as a child, and spent a few private hours reuniting with Breha before he had to resume his public persona and reassure his people; a tall order, when he could barely reassure himself.

It might have been better that way for reasons other than his own weariness and selfish needs. Briefing Breha on everything that had happened--or, at least, everything that he knew--before any public statements or commitments were made would have helped. They had a long, complicated path ahead of them, and starting it with unclear objectives was potentially dangerous.

Still, there wasn’t much help for it. He was who he was. Short of borrowing one of Padme’s tricks and finding a body double, there was no real way for him to enter the city incognito. Besides, after his brief disappearance, it was probably better to keep his movements as open as possible, at least for the time being. Act as if he had nothing to hide, and hope that that would discourage anyone from looking.

So, despite his inclinations, he arrived in broad daylight, and went out to reassure the crowds that had gathered near the spaceport to meet him.

More have come than usual, he thought, scanning his gathered people. But they’re quieter. Restive. Unsure.

No one knew what to make of what had happened lately, and he felt a brief stab of guilt at the thought. It was his duty, not only to represent Alderaan to the rest of the galaxy, but to explain and represent what was going on in the rest of the galaxy to his people. He had gotten too caught up in the rush of events. He had failed them in that.

And I’m not going to do much better now, he acknowledged in the privacy of his own mind. He had to balance the need to reassure them with the need to placate any of Palpatine’s eavesdroppers. And, unfortunately, the second goal had to take priority. Until he and Padme could build their coalition, until the Jedi could build momentum, he had to maintain his position. He had to play his part.

He held up a hand for attention, as a helpful staff member passed him a microphone. “My people,” he began, then drew on all the oratorical skill he possessed to make platitudes sound like promises. “Many things have changed, in the capital and in the galaxy as a whole. One thing I can and will confirm for you is that the war with the Confederacy of Independant Systems has ended. Count Dooku, General Grievous, and the majority of the Separatist Council have been killed, and their congress has been dissolved.” There had been no one left to make a formal surrender, or he would have thrown that in, too.

A low murmur spread through the assembled citizens at his announcement, and he waited for it to run its course.

“There are questions that remain unanswered,” he continued. “Among them, how to reintegrate those systems that seceded, and what will become of the clone soldiers. I will be returning to the capital soon, to aid my fellow Senators in the effort to find answers for those questions.” Along with others that he didn’t dare mention just yet. But what he’d said should be safe enough.

He thought he detected a faint note of relief in the response. If only because I’ve let them know that
our Senate won’t be disbanded. That some level of democracy will still persist, despite what Palpatine has done.

It wasn’t--yet--a lie. But he doubted the Senate would last any longer than it took Palpatine to replace it with some other bureaucracy, one he controlled completely. It would be a gradual process, probably, but there would come a time when the last vestiges of the Republic he had spent his entire adult life serving were gone.

Unless we can depose him before that happens.

“As I said,” he told them, pushing that worry aside for now, “many things have changed. And we will likely see more changes in the coming weeks and months, as the galaxy as a whole returns to peace and stability.”

And here came the tricky part--how to phrase what he next said to accomplish both goals of this impromptu speech, without limiting any future direction he and Breha might take. “I ask you to remember that we of Alderaan have long existed as a shining example of peace for our neighbors. The galaxy has changed, but that role we have played need not follow suit. A new age has begun, and it is my hope that Alderaan will continue to serve as a beacon, a guide towards peace--” he stopped himself before adding ‘and liberty,’ just barely “--in the galaxy.”

He stepped back from the microphone to somewhat ragged applause. He hoped he had pulled it off--that Palpatine’s eyes and ears would take that as Bail urging his people to keep their heads down, and support the new regime. All in the name of the ‘peace’ the Emperor had promised them.

But that those who valued freedom, and justice-- true peace--would read it as a reassurance that he had no intentions of betraying those ideals, despite the dangers of the New Order. Or even, perhaps, as a call to action. Covert, perhaps, but action nonetheless.

Only time would tell.

For now, the crowd at least seemed mollified. Some of the tension in the air had dissipated. He was able to make his way over to the waiting speeder and back to the palace without any further incident.

Of course, once he was there , he had to provide the same reassurances to members of the planetary government. And they, unlike the crowd at the spaceport, would be able to ask questions.

He made it through as best he could, careful to weigh every word he said and promise nothing other than his diligence and to remain in close contact in the future.

With the expertise gained in a lifetime of politics, he dodged any and all questions about where he’d been since the Republic had fallen.

Finally, after close to an hour, he managed to catch Breha’s eye through the crowd. She nodded once and then, with the firm serenity he so adored, summarily ended the session.

Without waiting for the courtiers to dissipate, she crossed the room to claim his arm and all but drag him somewhere more private.

Not that he objected, of course.

As soon as the door to their rooms slid shut behind them he pulled her close, burying his face in her veiled hair and just breathing her in for a moment. It had been--hard; harder than he’d been able to acknowledge until now, to watch Padme and General Skywalker clinging to each other and their
children. Finally allowed to be open about their relationship, if only with their closest friends and allies, and yet--

Bail thanked every god he’d ever heard of that he and Breha had never had to endure that. And never would. For all that their respective duties sometimes required long separations, they could be--and usually were--in constant contact, even when they couldn’t touch.

And for all the--for all the children he and Breha had lost, for all he envied Padme her twins, to have to give a child up the way they had, to know their was far away and have to pretend the child was dead…

No, he didn’t really envy them that much after all.

Breha curled into him, holding on almost as tight. She had been worried about him; he knew that much. They’d spoken--briefly, and very circumspect--while he was en route here, and while she hadn’t exactly reproached him for not contacting her sooner…

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’m sorry.”

She nodded, then pulled back. “Tell me?” she asked.

He took her hand and guided her over to a seat, and told her everything.

Everything he’d seen, everything he’d done, since C-3PO had called him to Padme’s apartment on the night the Temple fell. What he and Padme and the Jedi had started. The lies they had woven to protect the children.

Even eliding over the more gruesome details--she didn’t need to be haunted by the images of dead children on the Temple steps, or the sound of what he had been so sure were Skywalker’s dying breaths--it took him over an hour.

Breha, dark eyes solemnly fixed on him, heard him out without interrupting. When he finished, she quietly asked, “It’s really that bad?”

He nodded.

She closed her eyes and took a breath. “So, we’re still at war.”

“I don’t know that we’ll be able to avoid it,” he admitted. “Technically, there are legitimate, nonviolent ways to remove him from power…”

“But he controls all those avenues,” she finished for him.

“Yes,” he said. “It won’t be open war for a while, though,” he added. “Or at least I don’t think it will. And maybe--maybe the Jedi, with our help, will be able to end this before it comes to that.”

She shook her head. “We can’t count on that. They are too few, and the problem too large.” She opened her eyes again.

“I know,” he said.

“What, exactly, will we be doing?” Breha asked.

“My role, I think, will be mostly coordinating,” Bail said. “I have contacts I plan to cultivate in the Senate, and a few outside the official power structures.”
“We’re well-positioned for that,” she said thoughtfully. “We’ve always been fairly open to immigration. If I relax those regulations a little farther, as a show of faith in the new regime’s ability to keep the peace…”

“We can move people in and out.” It would make his work easier, for sure. It also put his home and family at a greater risk than he’d wanted, but--

As she’d said, the problem was too large to hold back. Besides, Breha made her own choices. She always had. And she was good at this--part of what had freed him up to focus on diplomacy, on his work in the Senate, was her sheer genius for administration and organization. He was the diplomat, she was the leader. Between the two of them, they had kept Alderaan safe and strong, despite the troubled times.

“And supplies,” she said. “I’ll have to review a few things, but we’ll do whatever we can to support your revolution.”

He smiled at her, and brushed a strand of her hair aside. “I’m sorry, Breha. I wish I had brought better news home to you. And I’m sorry for committing to this--committing both of us to this, before discussing it with you.” Because, practically speaking, he wouldn’t be able to do this without her. Once he’d gotten involved, it was only a matter of time before his wife did, as well.

She shook her head, and smiled wryly up at him. “You can’t help the news you brought. Only what you do with it. And what you’re doing is exactly what you should be doing.”

He kissed her softly. “Thank you,” he said.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “You probably shouldn’t tell me everything,” she said, with a faint hint of regret. “I should have some level of plausible deniability. Just in case.”

He nodded, leaning his head against hers. “All right. Will you trust me to decide how much to tell you?”

“Of course,” she said. “But Bail--don’t do this again, all right?” She pulled away to look at him, to meet his eyes, to make sure he understood her. “Don’t disappear on me like that. We can come up with a code word, for when you have to be out of contact, but don’t--I worry. And I’ll worry more now, I know it.”

“I won’t,” he promised. “Don’t disappear on me, either, all right?”

She rolled her eyes. “Says the man who sneaks half-dead fugitives off Coruscant, and forms conspiracies with the most wanted men in the galaxy, and--”

He held up his hands, smiling despite himself. “I take your point, my love. I’m the reckless one.”

“No,” she said, a smile quirking at the corner of her mouth. “Just the diplomat. And spy, apparently.”

“At times, they’re much the same thing.” He kissed her forehead lightly. “But I mean it,” he added. “It’s…it’s very important to me, knowing that you’re here.”

“What else would I be?” she asked. “You’re the diplomat. I’m the administrator. Remember?”

“Humor me?”

“Of course, love,” she said. “I won’t disappear. I’ll be here, waiting for you. Always. Just so long
as you remember to come home.”

“I will,” he promised, pulling her close to lean against him. “Always.”
Part 2, Chapter 2

There was an art to going unrecognized.

Having a decoy helped, of course. At least half of what Padme had gotten away with over the years, she’d only managed because she’d had an airtight alibi with dozens of witnesses. But being in two places at once only got her so far.

It had been easier when she’d had the shell of makeup she’d worn as Queen to hide behind. But harder didn’t mean impossible, and makeup was still her friend.

For her re-entry into Theed, two weeks after her official arrival, some judicious use of paint and an easily removeable hair dye added a good ten years to her age. Having Luke with her provided additional camouflage, as did a volunteer field nurse uniform she’d acquired with Bail’s help.

Even if someone suspected that the Senator Amidala who had returned to Naboo in haste following the tragic loss of a pregnancy no one officially knew about, no one would look twice at a weary, near-forty nurse carrying a small infant.

Clearing customs had worried her at first--the spaceport staff would look at her more closely, and she wasn’t entirely sure her hastily-assembled fake papers would pass muster. But Luke had chosen an exactly perfect moment to wake up hungry, and the harried official who drew the short straw just wanted the screaming infant as far away from him as possible, as fast as he could manage.

“Thank you, sweet boy,” she whispered, once they were clear and she’d found a suitably secluded place to feed and soothe him. “Never thought I’d say that, but thank you for crying.”

From the spaceport, Padme knew exactly where she was going. It was a risk, going to a neighborhood this close to the palace, but she didn’t have much choice. She had to go here first, and make sure Luke was settled and safe, before she could do anything else.

“Five thirty-nine, five forty-one, five forty--there.” She shifted Luke a little. “Here we are, sweet boy. Ready to meet one of your aunties?”

He blinked up at her, and made a confused sort of gurgle.

“Well, at least you’re not talking back yet.” She tapped on the door, in a specific pattern she’d long had memorized but hadn’t actually used in years.

It opened right away.

“Oh, thank the Force.” Sabe’s voice, warm and familiar, underscored by the distinctive sound of a blaster uncocking, was as welcome as the hug that quickly followed. Unlike Padme’s, her Theed accent was natural. When constructing the layers of persona for Amidala, all the little details that would turn a slightly self-righteous, idealistic, reckless teenager into a Queen, Padme had spent hours locked away with her friend, learning how to mimic the accent almost exactly.

“Come in, before someone sees you,” she added. Without waiting for an answer, her hand closed on Padme’s wrist and she pulled her through.

“I’ve missed you, too,” Padme said.
“We’ve been worried,” Sabe said, clearing a space on the couch for Padme to sit before pouring shuura juice for the two of them. “I don’t think anyone outside the inner circle has figured Motee out, but...well, we don’t like not knowing where you are.”

“I know. And I’m sorry. I was...” She hesitated, not sure how much she should risk saying. She trusted Sabe implicitly, but--well, walls had ears. Especially nowadays.

“It’s all right,” she assured her. “You’re home safe now, that’s what matters.” She returned to the sitting room and pushed a half-disassembled rifle aside to make room for the glasses and a plate of cookies.

Padme wasn’t quite willing to let go of Luke to take her cup. She was pretty sure Sabe would forgive her rudeness on that count. “I didn’t have a way to send a message. I came here first. I thought about Varykino, but I need...there’s a few things I need to take care of before Motee and I switch back.”

“I see,” she said, with a significant look at Luke.

“Yeah,” she said, holding him close and considering how to explain.

On the other hand, maybe she wouldn’t really need to. Sabe hadn’t worked directly for Padme, in years, but the two of them could still read each other almost more easily than they could read themselves. She had to know what Padme was thinking. Despite a growth spurt at sixteen that left her towering almost twelve centimeters over Padme, Sabe had technically remained as a handmaiden for Padme’s entire tenure as Queen. She just didn’t really work as a decoy anymore, transitioning into a close advisor, sounding board, confidante, and more traditional bodyguard.

After Padme’s term was up, Sabe had decided to continue working for the palace rather than following her to the Senate--primarily in an advisory capacity, training Padme’s successors’ handmaiden; but also working in intelligence. Of all the people Padme knew and trusted, Sabe was the one she knew could help her pull off this deception.

And, sure enough, “I’m guessing you’ve already handled the raw records?” Sabe asked.

“The medical records, the text, the data--yes,” Padme said, relaxing a little when she didn’t have to explain. Of course, her official miscarriage had already been announced, and Sabe was smart enough to fill in the blanks when she showed up with an infant who was very much alive. Still, it was a relief. After all, the fewer times she had to go over this, the less risk someone might overhear, or she might slip up in the wrong context and put her family in danger. “But I’m concerned that might not be enough.”

“You want me to help you fake a body.”

She nodded.

Sabe leaned back, tapping the edge of her glass thoughtfully. “Yes, I can manage that.”

“The body will be a little girl,” Padme said. “I have a sample for you to use, for genetic purposes.” Coming from Leia--a further layer of secrecy.

Her eyebrows shot up. “So...twins, then?”

“Yes. You can’t tell anyone, Sabe. You’re one of about ten people who know.” Which was a lot more than she wanted, but they couldn’t exactly hide from the doctors at Polis Massa. And, once they’d decided to trust them at all, it was too late to hold back. At least they didn’t actually know
who she and Anakin were. She thought. She hoped.

“Of course,” Sabe said. “And I won’t ask where your daughter is. Safer for all of us that way, I would think.”

Padme nodded. “I know where she is, that’s enough.” Well, she didn’t know exactly, not for sure. She and Anakin had deliberately avoided confirming that--where he would go with Leia, once he was cleared to leave the medcenter. Like Sabe said, that was safer.

True, she knew where Leia was now. Anakin would have to stay at Polis Massa for a while, recovering. But she knew he wouldn’t keep his head down for longer than he absolutely had to. She gave her husband about two to three months, maximum, before he was healed enough to get restless. It all depended how persuasive Obi-Wan was. When he inevitably got moving again, she did have a couple ideas, where he might go to ground. Somewhere safe, some one safe, where he could leave their daughter for a few days while he ran missions.

But she hadn’t asked, and he hadn’t offered. She trusted him to keep her daughter safe, and tried not to think about them too much.

“So, after you’ve made all of this public…” Sabe said. “What do you intend to do with him?”

“Adopt him, eventually.” Padme was pretty sure this scheme fell into the category of ‘just crazy enough to work.’

“Clever,” Sabe said, with a small, pointed smile. “So, you need papers forged marking him out as a war orphan?”

“Exactly,” she said. “Everything has to look completely above-board, completely legal. His false identity has to be airtight.”

“It will be,” she assured her. “When do you plan on doing this?”

Her heart ached at the thought, and she held Luke a little closer. “I don’t...I don’t know. As soon as I can, but...I don’t want...it has to look natural, right?”

Sabe touched her hand briefly. “Of course. But...you know, different people have different responses to grief.”

She blinked. “What do you mean?”

“Honestly, you could probably pull it off right after your mourning period is over,” she said. “You loved your daughter, you wanted your daughter, and every morning you woke up without her was unbearable. So, you turned to an old friend for help in finding a suitable child. A little boy, so you could distinguish them, so you wouldn’t project and accidentally hurt the child you have, but the hole in your heart would still be filled.”

That was...

Padme almost burst into tears with relief. She’d thought she would have to wait a year, to avoid suspicion. But Sabe was right. She could sell that story, even to Palpatine. She wouldn’t even have to lie about the hole in her heart--Anakin and Leia were alive, but so far away, and she had no way of knowing when she’d see them again.

“Thank you,” she said, with feeling. “Thank you.”
Sabe smiled. “It’s why I’m here, Padme. To provide an outside perspective.”

She squeezed her hand. “I know. I was too close to this one, I was...how long do you need?”

“Two weeks, give or take.” Sabe paused. “You should bring Sola in on this part as well. Whether or not you tell her everything.”

True. Trust Sabe to think of those details--Sola’s first husband had been a litigator; she still had contacts in the field. Everyone Padme knew had worked for her office, not for her. Plus, she’d need someone with the right expertise, to ensure minimal complications with Luke’s adoption.

On the other hand…

Padme winced a little. “How mad at me are they? Sola and my parents.”

“I wouldn’t say mad,” Sabe said carefully. “But they’re...not very happy, that you hid the pregnancy from them. Or that you refused to come home, or let them visit you at Varykino.”

She bowed her head. “I’ll make it up to them. Somehow.” She knew the story she’d tell, of course. The one she’d always planned on telling, only now it was simpler and sadder. The baby’s father had to know first, of course, and now…

It had gotten so easy, over the years, to lie to her parents. She made herself think about it, feel the guilt every time she did it anyway. It was necessary, and it wouldn’t stop her, but she needed that. It kept her human, no matter how deadly the politics around her got.

“I’m sure you will,” Sabe said. “Just...be prepared, when you do see them.” Luke shifted in Padme’s arms, yawning, and both women smiled. “I think this little treasure might help. Especially with...with the story you’re telling.”

“Yeah,” Padme said, then hesitated. “Do you--do you think it’d be safe, to keep him with me at Varykino until everything’s straightened out? Or…”

Sabe thought for a long moment. “It would probably be safer to establish his identity somewhere besides on paper. I’m sorry, Padme.”

She blinked back stubborn tears. “Right. Of course. I know that.” She’d just hoped, with everything else--

*It’s only for a couple weeks,* she reminded herself. *Just until Sabe can get the paperwork together. And she’ll make sure no one else dares to try and adopt him in the meantime.*

“Why don’t you stay here tonight?” Sabe said, picking up on her distress. “We can work out the details tomorrow.”

Padme nodded. “Thank you,” she said again. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Sabe set her glass down and folded her hands carefully, bowing from the waist in an abbreviated full-court Presentation obeisance, and murmured the oath she’d sworn over a decade ago, when Padme had first become queen. “It is my honor and privilege to serve.”

The ritual helped. Padme felt her spine straightening. “It is our duty and fortune to receive your service.”

Just like that, Padme’s arm of the movement she and Bail and the Jedi had started began to take
shape. She would fight the way she always had, with words and secrets and painted faces; with Sabe and her other handmaidens at her side, watching her back, *protecting* her.


Right now, nothing else mattered. Tomorrow, over breakfast, she and Sabe would make larger plans.

Tonight, though, despite receiving Sabe’s renewed oath, she was just a woman in her friend’s house, securing her son’s future.

She smiled, and relaxed. “So, would you like to properly meet Luke now?”

Sabe didn’t smile often, but when she did--like now--it put the stars to shame. “I would love to meet your son.”
Part 2, Chapter 3

It had been six weeks since the Temple had burned around him, and Anakin was more than ready to leave Polis Massa and get back to the fight.

Well, all right, technically, he hadn’t been “officially” cleared to leave yet, but that was a minor detail as far as he was concerned. He felt fine, most of the time. He could breathe more or less normally again; his flesh arm, while the grip was still a little weaker than he liked, was out of its cast and functional; he no longer got dizzy when he stood up too fast. Everything else, he could push through in the field as easily as in the medcenter.

Maybe even easier. At least out there, he wouldn’t have well-meaning doctors and med droids getting upset when he tried to run through basic conditioning exercises without their approval. The droids, he could (and did) deactivate, but when one of the Kallidahin caught him, it was a little more complicated. Watching them flail a little in their concern would almost be funny, he reflected, if they didn’t keep trying to sedate him.

And...all right, he would admit he wasn’t sleeping very well. But that didn’t mean he liked being sedated, or was willing to put up with it. He’d spent an entire week unconscious. That was more than enough. Besides, he could only sleep when Leia did, which was about two hours at a time on average. That was, he was pretty sure, a normal part of raising a baby. So, even if he hadn’t been having nightmares, he’d be going short. Not that anyone knew about those, thank the Force. He hadn’t told anyone—not even Obi-Wan. Which doesn’t count as keeping secrets, he told himself. He has enough to deal with without worrying about my problems. Besides, he needs me to be okay. That’s what he said, right?

At least the nightmares weren’t about the future anymore. He’d take these over visions of Padme dying any day.

Because you’re selfish, broken, a failure—a terrible Jedi, terrible Chosen One, you never learn—

He’d gotten better at shutting those guilt spirals down, too. A little bit. Mostly.

Leia helped. She picked up on it, at least when it got really bad, and started crying. Over the past few weeks, he’d gotten to tell the difference between that cry—the one he privately translated as ‘Daddy, stop whining’—and when she was hungry, or tired, or needed to be changed. That one, though, was the worst, because it was all his fault, and he knew it. He was getting better at picking up on it himself before she had to, and shoving it aside like the Jedi he was supposed to be. And he’d keep getting better, because she deserved that from him.

Some days were worse than others. On those days, he was pretty sure he wouldn’t have made it as far as he did if he didn’t have her. Especially now that Obi-Wan was in and out, running missions (without him).

It wasn’t that he was jealous, exactly. Just...frustrated. He was meant for doing things, not sitting and waiting for Obi-Wan to come by and update him on everything that was going on.

Especially when most of the news was...not good. The Chancellor’s regime was organized, and he had an army—two things that their resistance didn’t have yet. Obi-Wan was doing what he could, but he was a cup of water flinging himself onto a blazing inferno.

And Anakin was doing nothing to help.
He felt useless—and, worse than useless, powerless, unable to do anything but watch the world continuing to crumble around him. Especially when it was all his fault anyways.

Stop it, he reminded himself.

Easier said than done.

Today, though, things were looking up. The Kallidahin had dug up a ship for him—he didn’t ask where; he didn’t especially care. It was a decent size, probably big enough for him and Leia to live on more or less full-time at least for the next couple years; damaged, but mostly internally—none of the repairs to restore basic functionality would require any heavy lifting, just a lot of time-consuming detail work. And the improvements he already had half-planned in his head would need parts he couldn’t get here, anyway.

The point was, all he had to do was fix it, and he’d be able to leave whenever he wanted. And he was good at fixing things.

(He was pretty sure this had been Obi-Wan’s idea, actually, but he wasn’t going to complain or ask, in case they decided to take it away.)

So he’d packed up Leia and everything the two of them were likely to need for the day and headed down to the hangar to get started. First thing he did, he found a safe place to set his daughter, where he could keep an eye on her while he worked. This is gonna be harder when she starts crawling. ...I’ll worry about that when we get there. Focus on right now, don’t dwell on the past or the future, or I’ll start spiraling again. Just...fix the ship.

“All right, princess,” he said, once he had her settled as best he could. “Daddy’s got some work to do, but I’m right here, okay?”

She just yawned.

He grinned, kissed her forehead very, very softly, and climbed into the engines to start rewiring them.

He spent the day like that, working on the ship, taking breaks whenever Leia needed something, until the chrono on the wall beeped, and he realized how late it was. Any minute now, one of the Kallidahin would show up and "gently suggest" that he eat something, get some rest.

And maybe they're not wrong, he decided. Not because he was dizzy or anything—he was long past that stage of things. Still, he decided to stay in the hangar for a few minutes, even risking being fussed over, and just hold Leia and think through the rest of his repairs.

“Another week, I think, princess,” he told her. “Then we’ll get out of here, and I’ll be able to start making things right.”

...would he, though?

His heart sank a little, as the problem struck him. Forget keeping track of Leia once she started moving around under her own power, what was he supposed to do with her when he was fighting? He sure as hell couldn’t carry her with him. And everyone he knew was either just as busy, taking just as many risks as he was, or…

Don’t. Don’t go there. Not right now. Think about the problem you can solve, Anakin, not the dead.

Leia made an inquisitive noise.
“Just thinking,” he said, rocking her a little to soothe her. “Don’t worry, Daddy will figure something out. We’ll be okay.”

*What about Ahsoka? I think she’s still...she wasn’t a Jedi anymore, right? So she should still be...she should still be okay. And she likes babies. She even liked that kripping Huttlet. But I don’t know where she is, or how long it’ll take to find her, or what she’s doing now, and...*

He could leave her here, maybe. Base himself off the asteroid, at least until Leia was old enough that keeping her with him wouldn’t be such a terrible idea.

Except--no, he couldn’t do that. There was a chance, however slim, that he could be tracked back here, which might lead the Chancellor back to Bail, which might lead him to Padme and Luke. Bad enough that Obi-Wan kept coming back and forth; if he did, too, someone would notice eventually.

“So, that’s too risky,” he said.

Leia blinked at him, and sighed.

“Hey, I told you, I’ll think of something. I’m pretty good at this. I think. Eventually. It just takes me a while.”

She made another little noise, then closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep.

He leaned back against the wall with a sigh of his own, trying to come up with something--anything--else.

*I could ask Bail or Obi-Wan for suggestions, I guess. But I don’t want them to think I think I can’t take care of her. I can, just not while I’m fighting. That’s the only problem. I just need somewhere safe for her to stay when she can’t be with me.*

Besides, like he kept reminding himself, he couldn’t keep dumping his problems on Obi-Wan, hoping his master would solve them. Obi-Wan had his own problems. So did Bail.

There wasn’t anyone else. He didn’t know anyone else, not who was still alive. Not who had any clue what to do with an infant.

Except--

Wait.

He closed his eyes, trying to see if there was another answer--any other answer.

He kept coming back to the same thought.

*I have a stepfather who raised a baby once.*

It would mean going back home, back to Tatooine, which was the last thing--the very last thing--he wanted for his daughter. And Tatooine wasn’t *safe*. There were storms, and heat, and *Sand People*--

He shut down that guilt spiral as fast as he could, and checked to make sure his distress, his ghosts, hadn’t woken her up.

She slept on. Good.

“But the Chancellor knows how I feel about it,” he said. “So he’d never--he’d never look for us
there. And my...and Owen’s a good man, even if I don't think he likes me very much. And Mom…” His voice broke a little. “Mom loved them. Mom found them. She trusted them. So I guess...I guess I can, too.”

It was an answer. It was even a *good* answer. He just didn’t like it.

But he didn’t have a better one.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, princess. Unless Daddy finds a better answer before then...once the ship is fixed, we’re going home.”
Obi-Wan wasn’t used to working alone.

He’d done it on occasion, of course. He’d gone on a few solo missions as a senior Padawan of course, as well as several the first year or two after he was Knighted, when Anakin was too young to join him in the field. And, more recently, there had been the Rako Hardeen mess, and his last--his last trip to Mandalore.

But, with the exception of that last, he’d at least had the resources of the Temple to call on, even if he was technically alone in the moment.

This...this was another situation entirely. No resources, no backup--not until Anakin was back on his feet, or Obi-Wan managed to cobble together some sort of network of active field agents. Regrettably, he hadn’t yet made much progress on that front, though he had a few potential allies he could try to contact.

That was, in fact, what he’d been doing on this planet in the first place--at last on a mission that wasn’t merely sabotaging or destroying a half-built Imperial installation, but seeking out potential supply routes and intelligence sources. Eventually, he’d have a network of sorts to fall back on, one that he would link to the above-ground one Padme and Senator Organa were starting in the Senate.

But that was still a very long time ahead of him, with a great deal of hard work between now and then. Particularly since this particular trip hadn’t exactly yielded the results he’d been hoping for.

All of that probably went a long way to explaining how he’d managed to find himself in such trouble now. He’d been--not expecting, nothing so conscious as that, but on a reflexive level, it seemed that it hadn’t quite hit him how alone he was. And he’d made a mistake, one that was easily covered by having a partner (or a squad of soldiers) at his back, or a safe place to retreat to. A mistake that, two months ago, would have been an embarrassing story for Anakin to mercilessly tease him about after extracting him; but in the new world had landed him trapped and under guard in a half-demolished building of uncertain provenance, at the edge of a somewhat disreputable town in the Outer Rim.

With no help coming.

*I’ll have to be better than this*, he told himself. *I am better than this. This was just... sloppy.*

He didn’t think they’d identified him as a Jedi, at least. Thank the Force for small favors. As soon as he’d realized how much trouble he was in, he’d stashed his lightsaber in a convenient hedgerow; a trick he’d remembered Lorana Jinzler pulling off what felt like an eternity ago.

*I know we decided not to look for survivors, but would that group count?* Something to consider, perhaps. Although it would tie up resources best used elsewhere for an unknown but lengthy amount of time, assuming they found Outbound Flight at all. Besides, the downsides to bringing Master C’Baoth, in particular, back might outweigh the potential benefits. Much like having Pong Krell back from the dead would.

*Pleasant thought, that. General Jorus C’Baoth.*

He found himself, shamefully, more than a little grateful that Master C’Baoth had left the galaxy half a decade before the War had started.
Focus, he reminded himself. The solitude was, perhaps, wearing on him more than he’d been willing to admit. Until now, when it had tripped him up and he had no other choice. *Something to watch for, in the future. But first, I have to get to that future.*

And he wouldn’t manage that if he didn’t solve his immediate problem.

He settled in to clear his mind of his anxieties, and his annoyance at himself, and sort through his options. His objective, at least, was simple enough—get out of this building with minimal fuss, get to his ship, get offplanet without acquiring any tails or trackers.

Step three would be the easy part. He might not be the pilot or mechanic Anakin was, but he had several tricks of his own.

Step two would be moderately more difficult, especially considering that he’d hidden his lightsaber in the opposite direction, but shouldn’t be too much trouble.

*So. The hard part. Getting out.*

He closed his eyes and breathed, counting the potential adversaries. Fortunately, there were no other potential hostages to complicate matters. He had only himself to worry about.

*Six. Not as bad as I thought. Three stationary, three moving. All solitary, but I don’t have time to study the movement patterns. I’ll have to chance it. All right. Disable the closest guard, acquire their weapon, just in case. But first, the door.*

He stood up and examined it closely—not a ray shield, fortunately, so he could brute force his way through it if he was unable to pick the lock.

*Time consuming, and not exactly discreet.* He pondered for a moment, then closed his eyes and felt for the guard’s mind. “You aren’t going to hear anything from this end of the passage,” he murmured. “If anyone contacts you, all is well. All is--”

Perfectly timed to contradict him, an explosion somewhere above them rocked the entire building, and Obi-Wan lost his grip on her thoughts.

“What the kriff--” He heard her fumble for her comm, but missed what she said in the noise of a second explosion, followed by rapid blaster fire.

He took advantage of the opportunity, using the Force to shove the door off its hinges. The chaos upstairs wasn’t *quite* enough to cover the noise, but it took the guard a split second to bring her attention back to him, and he was already moving.

Obi-Wan slammed into her full-tilt, intending to tackle her to the ground and subdue her as quickly as possible. She kept her footing better than he’d been expecting, throwing an elbow at his face, which connected, and a knee that *just* missed him. She was good.

He was better.

He dropped his weight, throwing her off-balance long enough to get behind her and establish a choke hold. “Don’t fight it,” he murmured, throwing a bit of a suggestion behind it. “Sleep.”

Seconds later, she went limp. He set her down carefully, propped against a doorway he was certain would remain stable even if there were more explosions, and grabbed her weapon and comlink before making his way towards the end of the passage.
He inched along, stretching his senses out ahead of him to identify the threat before he had to actually deal with it. *Not the Empire,* he decided, after a few seconds. *I’m in danger, but not quite that much. Some third party then. Rival smugglers, most likely, or--*

The door at the other end of the passage slid open, and Obi-Wan pressed himself as tight against the wall as he could.

“...prob’ly nothing worth nothing down here, anyway,” a voice grumbled.

A vaguely familiar voice.

“Captain still said check, so we’ll check,” another responded, sounding bored.

And then it clicked.

*Well. This could be...very, very bad. Or it could not.* He made sure the blaster was set for stun, and waited.

Two Weequay pirates at last came into view, and stopped, immediately turning their blasters on him.

*Wait,* the Force whispered.

He didn’t move.

“Wait a bit--I know you,” one of them said.

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan said, leaving his borrowed weapon pointed at the ground.

The pirates exchanged a long look. “Come with us,” the second said.

He inclined his head. “Lead the way.”

“Hand over the gun first.”

He hesitated for half a second, then complied. If he did this right, he wouldn’t need it. If he did it wrong, it wouldn’t do much good. “There’s no reason we can’t be civilized about this,” he said.

“Shut up,” the first pirate said, taking the gun. “Come on then, move.”

He followed them back towards the still-open door, up a short flight of stairs, and into a slightly charred room where Captain Hondo Ohnaka was directing his crew in looting the place.

The pirate turned, and paused, visibly surprised. “Well, well, well, what do we have here?”

Obi-Wan smiled a little, and bowed. “Hondo. I must say, I wasn’t expecting to find you here.”

Hondo waved a hand dismissively. “Oh, you know me--always running about. But you, my friend.” He eyed Obi-Wan. “I heard you were dead.”

“Oh, I’m not dead,” he said, releasing the pain of those memories into the Force as best he could. He considered for half a second, then amended, “Not...not yet, anyway.”

“So I see, so I see;” he replied. His pet Kowakian monkey-lizard leapt from the table to its usual place on his shoulder, eyeing Obi-Wan with considerable suspicion. “Well, I cannot deny it’s good to see you, Kenobi. You do always make things so interesting;”
“Yes, well,” he said. “As I’m sure you can imagine, I am trying to...avoid that, at present.”

“Ah, yes, the Empire.” Hondo tutted faintly. “One hears such terrible things about them. But this
was true of the Separatists, yes? And Black Sun, and Death Watch, and the Hutts...there will
always be terrible people doing terrible things, my friend.”

“I think you’ll find the Empire is worse than anything you’ve faced before,” he said mildly.

Hondo considered that for a moment, then waved a hand dismissively. “Bah, what do I know of
politics, anyway? I am just a simple businessman, trying to make his way in a cruel, uncaring
galaxy,” the pirate said, turning with a flourish and stroking the monkey-lizard.

_You know more than you claim, my clever friend, Obi-Wan thought. You always have._

And, sure enough, the pirate continued, his voice going harder. “But--in these troubled times, it is
bad business, being friends with Jedi.”

_Ah._ Obi-Wan shifted his stance slightly, considering the two pirates closest to him, estimating how
quickly he could get his hands on a blaster again. _I was hoping this wouldn’t turn ugly._

He wasn’t in a very good position; at the entrance of a corridor that only went deeper into the
complex, so far as he knew, facing an extremely clever adversary who _knew_ him and his tactics,
outnumbered, without his lightsaber.

Still, he could fight through them. It would be a bloodbath for the pirates, and he most likely not
escape unscathed himself, but he could do it.

“Of course,” Hondo said, “it has never been good business to be a Jedi’s _enemy_ , either.”

Some of the tension in the room lightened, but Obi-Wan didn’t relax. Not yet. “I have no interest in
being your enemy, Hondo.”

“No, no, I imagine you don’t.” Another pause. “A good thing, then, that my unfortunate friends
here had no interesting hostages in the basement, yes?”

_Now_ he relaxed, and smiled again. “Indeed it is.”

The pirate on Obi-Wan’s left stiffened a little. “Captain--”

“No hostages, I said,” Hondo repeated, sharply.

Obi-Wan stepped out from between the two pirates, bowing politely. “Thank you, my friend,” he
said. “I’ll be on my way.”

He sighed. “Such a pity,” he said, stroking his monkey-lizard again. “Another time, perhaps, I
might have liked to see my poor, dead friend Kenobi again.”

He nodded. “Perhaps,” he agreed, then pulled his hood up to hide his face and headed for the exit.

Some of the pirates glowered at him, but none attempted to stop him.

Maybe this trip hadn’t been quite as unproductive as he’d thought. Hondo was--if not on their _side_ ,
at least no friend to the Empire.

_Or he simply realizes that handing me over would get his crew wiped out as likely as rewarded, a
small, cynical voice at the back of his head thought._
Either way, he would remember this. And someday, the next time the two of them met--

Well. Perhaps by then, he’d have the infrastructure he needed to bargain with the pirate. Hondo Ohnaka had been a surprisingly valuable ally in the past, after all.

The door was open, when the time came. There were few enough of those. Obi-Wan was glad to have found and unlocked this one again.
Chapter Notes

As a note, there is a fair amount of discussion about dead babies in this chapter. There are no actual dead babies, but officially/on paper there is one, and Padme's family reacts accordingly.

After several long discussions with her handmaidens, Padme had decided not to stage an actual funeral for the child she had officially lost. It would raise too many questions--why she'd waited so long after her miscarriage, to start--and the performance she would have had to give, no matter how private they tried to make it, would have been excruciating. It was hard enough, having to walk away from her husband and daughter, knowing it would be years before she saw or held or spoke to them again, without having to visualize the worst possible alternative.

So, two days after she joined the others at Varykino, they simply buried the casket Sabe had provided in a corner of the estate. The tiny grave was visible from the balcony; from the same spot where she and Anakin had first kissed.

Padme wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about that. Especially when she stood on that balcony, looking down at the tiny, graceful headstone, which stood in stark contrast to her memories.

But whatever her personal feelings about the site, it was in a pretty, quiet, shady part of the garden, just in from the beach. Exactly the sort of place she might have chosen, if her lie had been true.

And when she was down there--she went every morning, especially now that her handmaidens had very carefully decreased their vigilance against the inevitable paparazzi--she almost found it comforting. A place where she could actually give voice to her grief.

She was grieving; though it had taken her until the first morning after the burial, when she’d first slipped out and gone to lay flowers on her daughter’s false grave. Even if the people closest to her were still alive, she had still lost--so many friends. So many allies. An entire world she’d believed in, from the moment she was old enough to believe in anything. She was grateful--beyond grateful--that it wasn’t worse, but the loss still burned her. Having that space to grieve helped her more than she’d realized she’d needed.

She wondered, once or twice, if Anakin or Obi-Wan had found a way to do the same thing. She hoped they had.

Her genuine grief had, she was slightly ashamed to admit, helped her in other ways, too. She knew that eventually reports and images of her solitary retreat would work their way back to Palpatine, for one thing. And, for another, it had mostly quieted her parents’ reproaches when she’d finally allowed them to visit, three days after Elle and Dorme had buried the casket.

“You should have told us,” Mom had said.

Padme had looked down at her hands. “I know. I know, I should have, but I couldn’t...I had to tell h-her father first, and...”
At least she hadn’t been lying about that part.

“Who is the father?” Dad had asked.

“He’s…” The catch in her throat there hadn’t been feigned, either. “He’s…”

“Oh, Padme…” Mom had said, and held her close.

She’d cried then. It had been...good, to feel like a little girl again, safe and warm and comforted in her mother’s loving arms.

Mom had held her like that for a long time, stroking her hair and murmuring soft, gentle things, the words unimportant, blurring together. She and Dad hadn’t asked about her child’s father again.

Sola’s reproach, on the other hand, had been...harder. Harder to sidestep. Harder to face.

“You used to tell me everything,” she’d said over a cup of tea on the balcony.

Padme stared down at the grave, mostly to avoid looking at Sola. “Not everything.” Which was an evasion--and an awkward, clumsy one at that.

Sure enough, Sola refused to let her get away with it. “You know what I meant. Personal everything.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know it doesn’t mean much, but...I’m sorry.”

Sola sighed heavily. “I know you are.”

That had been three weeks ago. Her parents, Sola, and Pooja and Ryoo had stayed a few days, before going back to Theed, back to their lives.

Padme knew she should have done the same. Her official retreat was only supposed to be for a month, and she’d been away from Coruscant for over six weeks now. Bail had sent a message this morning, asking very carefully when she planned to return. And a part of her felt guilty for leaving him hanging like that--she was supposed to be helping him build a resistance coalition in the Senate, but…

I can’t leave. Not until I have Luke, publicly and officially and legally, she decided.

Which would--hopefully--be soon. Sabe had all the documentation for his identity established, and Sola was coming up again to visit, so she could get all the legal paperwork together. With her rank and connections, she could expedite the process and probably be back on Coruscant within another two weeks.

(It wasn’t fair, that she could do that and so many would-be parents and children had to wait for so long. Something to fix, once the galaxy made sense again.)

“Padme?”

Startled out of her thoughts, she turned to Sabe. “Is Sola here yet?”

She shook her head. “No, not yet.” She paused, studying her for a minute. “Are you all right?”

“I am,” she said, turning resolutely away from the grave. “Just...worried about the details, I guess.”

“All right.” She reached out and touched Padme’s arm, a comforting gesture. “This will work. I
promise. Everything’s in order, you just need--”

“I know,” Padme cut her off. “But everything’s been going so wrong lately. I can’t help but worry.”

She nodded. “Of course.” She glanced down into the garden, at the grave. “There’s something you should know.”

“Yes?”

She lowered her voice. “You know I set up cameras, right?”

Padme stiffened. Yes, she’d known, and that was at least half of why there even was a grave, but that didn’t make it any easier to hear. “Someone visited.”

“Yes.” Sabe squeezed her hand. “They scanned it, and took a very small sample. The idea was, I think, to keep their desecration discreet.”

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “And?”

“Thus far, they seem satisfied.”

“That’s…something, at least.” She still wanted to strangle whoever had done it. Not Palpatine—though she knew he was ultimately responsible, she acknowledged that there were several people ahead of her in line for that—but the person who had actually violated something as sacred as an infant’s gravesite. For what? What could possibly have motivated them? Money? Fear? Actual loyalty to the tyrant?

“We’ll keep an eye on things,” Sabe said, watching her. “Dorme and I are putting together a contingency plan, in case your subterfuge fails.”

“Thank you,” Padme said. But if we did all this work, told all these lies, for nothing…

“It won’t,” Sabe said. “But we prepare anyway.”

“Milady?” Elle joined them with a brief bow.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Sola’s here,” she said. “Are you ready?”

Padme closed her eyes briefly, and squeezed Sabe’s hand one more time before letting go. “Ready as I’ll ever be,” she said. “Send her out here.”

Elle bowed again, and headed back into the house.

“Should I stay?” Sabe asked.

“No,” Padme said. “At least, not at first. It should be just me and Sola. I’ll call you in for the specifics once I’ve explained what I can.”

Sabe nodded, and followed Elle back into the house.

Padme turned back to watching the tiny grave, determinedly ignoring the mental images of someone searching it.
Forgive me, she said, to her absent daughter. I know it’s not really you in there, but...I’m so, so sorry.

She heard footsteps on the balcony behind her, but didn’t turn.

“Hey,” Sola said, coming to stand next to her.

“Hi,” she replied softly. “Thank you, for coming out to see me.”

“I’m always happy to see you, Padme,” she said. There wasn’t exactly a reproach there, but it still stung a little bit.

I’m not being fair to you. Or to Mom and Dad. But I have to protect Ani and the children, and myself. I hope, someday, you’ll understand.

She took a deep breath, and turned away from the grave to look at her sister. “I...um.”

“What is it?” Sola asked.

“I…” She dropped her eyes. “I asked you here because...I wanted to see you, you’re my sister, I love you, and we don’t--my work doesn’t…”

“Padme,” she interrupted, taking her hand and squeezing it briefly for reassurance. “It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize for your work. Not to me. And I know you’re going back to Coruscant soon.”

“Imperial Center,” she said, and hated herself a little for it. “We’re supposed to call it Imperial Center now.”

“Imperial Center,” Sola echoed, with a hint of distaste. “My point is--I know you’re getting back to work. And I think...it’ll be good for you. Instead of sitting here for weeks, brooding about…” Her eyes flicked over to the grave.

“That’s...that’s part of why I asked you to come here,” Padme said. “Not to say goodbye, not yet, I’m not...going back. I mean, I am, of course, I’m not resigning or anything.” The Queen had offered her the option, given her recent personal tragedies, but she had declined. There was too much work to do. “Just...not quite yet. But you’re right. I need to stop…” She swallowed. “I need a favor.”

“Anything.”

“I need a litigator.”

Sola sat up straighter. “Don’t you have five or six already?” she asked.

Padme shook her head. “Senator Amidala has a handful of lawyers,” she corrected. “I don’t.” She didn’t always draw the line between the two so sharply, but it applied here.

“Right,” Sola said. “I can...I can give you a few names, but what...?”

“I’m adopting a baby.”

She stared at her for a long moment, then out at the grave, then back at her. “What?”

“I can’t…” She turned away, gripping the balcony railing tight. Remembering, in an almost tactile way, Anakin’s fingers ghosting along it, right before he’d leaned down and...
“I can’t keep...I can’t keep l-looking out at that...at her, every day, and thinking...” She felt tears pricking at the corner of her eyes. Not faked. Not forced. “There are...there are so many war orphans who need mothers, Sola, and I’m--”

There wasn’t a word for it. Not in Basic, not in the old Naboo dialect or the Gungan language or Rodian or any of the others she’d learned over the years.

There was no single word for a parent whose child had died.

Sola softened, and pulled her into a close, silent hug. It just made Padme cry harder.

“I get it,” she finally said. “Of course I’ll help. I can give you a couple names.”

“Thank you,” Padme said, sniffing a little. “I...there’s a little boy. Sabe--Sabe found him, when I st-started talking about this. He’s almost...he’s about...she’d be his age. He has the sweetest blue eyes, you wouldn’t believe...”

“Of course you already have one in mind,” Sola said fondly, and with a hint of exasperation that made Padme smile, despite everything else that was going on.

Probably why she said it out loud. I love you, Sola, and I’m so, so sorry I can’t show it properly.

“You always did go full-tilt at things, once you’d made up your mind,” Sola continued. “Have you met him, or just seen pictures?”

“Just pictures,” she said. Which was true, at least for the past few weeks. Since Sabe had placed him somewhere safe, to help establish his new identity. “I didn’t...I didn’t want to leave. Not yet. Not until I was ready to...to be the Senator again. And I didn’t want to...he shouldn’t have to deal with public scrutiny until this is a sure thing.”

“You’re still planning to go back?” Sola asked. “Even with a small child to look after?”

“I know it won’t be easy. But I’ll make it work,” she said. “I just...I need this. And he needs a mother.”

“All right. I’ll help,” Sola said. “He can stay with me and the girls, if you don’t want to bring him to Cor--to Imperial Center.”

“Thank you,” Padme said, meaning it. She didn’t plan on leaving Luke behind, ever, but...well, her work had always been dangerous, and it would be even more so now. Besides, even with her handmaidens to help, infants were a lot of work, on top of their regular duties. It might become necessary, to accept Sola’s offer. And even if it didn’t, she knew she’d need all the help she could get.

“We can work out the details after your adoption is finalized,” Sola said, hugging her again.

“Yeah,” she said, leaning into her sister for a minute.

“Does he have a name? Or have you picked one for him?”

“Luke,” she said. “His name--his name’s Luke. It’s what--” She cut herself off. The last thing she wanted to do was talk about Ani. Not here, not now. Especially not with Sola, who had figured out what was going on between them before even they had.
“You’d already picked names,” was all Sola said, quietly and without judgment.

She nodded.


“It does,” Padme agreed.

They stood there quietly for a moment, looking down at the too-tiny grave in the garden.

“Thank you,” Sola finally said. “For trusting me with this.”

“I do trust you,” Padme said, her heart aching a little. “I always have. I just…”

“I know,” Sola said, then let her go and stepped away from the railing. “I’m going to make a few calls, find you that litigator. Then I want to see those pictures Sabe has. All right?”

She nodded. “Of course,” she said. “Thank you.”

Sola smiled a little, and went back into the house, leaving Padme alone once more.

True, her handmaidens were still with her, but...

*It’s not for much longer,* she reminded herself, looking out at the lake instead of the grave, Anakin’s phantom hands tracing the railing beside her. *Luke will be here soon.*

He couldn’t come soon enough.
The ship the Kallidahin had given Anakin was a little bit smaller than the *Twilight*, and not as fast (not yet, at least—as soon as he could scavenge the parts he’d need, he would fix that), and it wasn’t all that well armed (another thing he planned on upgrading as soon as he could), but he’d made a point of installing the best shields he could, given the resources he’d had on Polis Massa.

But the ship, which he’d decided to call the *Waterfall*, would get him from Point A to Point B. For now, that was the most important thing. True, the medics here wanted him to stay another week or so, didn’t think he was strong enough yet, but his ship was ready. *He* was ready. It was time to go.

So he’d loaded himself and Artoo and Leia and their things onto the ship and left a message for Obi-Wan—*Went to the farm, will contact you soon*. Which was vague enough to not screw him over if someone unfriendly came calling, but hopefully Obi-Wan would be able to figure it out.

Still, he hesitated for half a breath. His eight-week-old daughter had never seemed so small, or so fragile, as when he was taking her to one of the most dangerous planets in the galaxy on a ship that wasn’t *perfect* yet.

Which had led to him sitting in the cockpit, Leia in the special rig he’d set up in the copilot’s seat where she’d be secure, staring out of the hangar, the ship silent around him.

*You know why you have to do this,* he reminded himself. *Stop kriffing stalling.*

“Okay, princess,” he said. “Ready to go on an adventure?”

Leia babbled a little and smiled at him, which helped a lot to calm him down. It had every time, since she’d started doing that about a week ago.

*And once you’re settled, I can get to work.*

Artoo beeped a question at him.

“Yeah, buddy, let’s get going.” He steeled himself and finished his last few preflight checks, then hit the ignition.

The *Waterfall* hummed to life around him, and with that familiar, friendly, happy-working engine sound, the last of his worries melted away, at least for the moment. Flying always did that for him.

He maneuvered them out of the hangar bay and through what little atmosphere the surface of Polis Massa had, out into the stars.

“I love asteroid fields,” he told Leia, tossing her a quick grin. “They’re a challenge.”

She babbled and kicked at her seat, but stayed secure.

“Watch this, princess,” he said, moving the *Waterfall* into a graceful spin that cleared one of the asteroids by an exhilaratingly slim margin.

And then froze for half a second.

*What am I doing? I am showing off for my eight-week-old child, who can’t even understand what I’m doing yet, while she’s riding with me, oh, hells, I am the worst parent ever*--
“Kriff!” He tugged on the yoke and narrowly avoided a collision with another asteroid. “Uh. Sorry.”

Artoo whistled a reproach at him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m paying attention now.” His heart was pounding. It took a few seconds for it to get back to normal.

He navigated the rest of the way out of the asteroid belt, carefully, and got them into hyperspace with no further incidents.

Anakin sighed, and sat back in his chair. “That was fun,” he said. “Okay, new rule: don’t get carried away like that again. At least not when Leia’s with me.”

Leia yawned next to him, drifting off to sleep. The soft humming—or maybe just the vibrations themselves--of the hyperdrive seemed to soothe her.

Good to know.

He stared out at the swirling sky, trying to relax himself. He had six hours to kill until they got to Tatooine.

“Want to kick my ass at dejarik again?” he asked Artoo. “Or I could try meditating or something...” That would probably be more useful, assuming he could focus.

Artoo blew a raspberry, showing what he thought of that idea.

“Dejarik it is,” he said. “Go easy on me, all right?”

The droid’s response was a mechanical equivalent of rolling his eyes, and pulled the portable set out from one of his compartments, setting it up to play.

You know, I was considered a tactical genius, Anakin thought, staring down at the dejarik board and trying not to actively sulk at it. Or at least halfway decent at it. I should be able to beat my kriffing droid at this stupid game.

And yet, for the fifth time in a row, Artoo had managed to maneuver him into what was shaping up to be a humiliating defeat. Even the breaks he’d taken between games to tend to Leia, make sure she was clean and happy and fed, weren’t enough to regroup and regain some ground.

Just as he was considering giving in to the inevitable, the console beeped at him.

Saved by the bell.

Artoo beeped a smug question at him.

“I am not surrendering,” he said, blithely ignoring the fact that that was exactly what he’d been planning to do. “I have to get back to flying now, that’s all. If we’d kept going, I would’ve won this one.”

The droid gave a disbelieving chirp, but deactivated the board and put it away.
“I would so!” Anakin said, strapping himself back into the pilot’s seat. Then, glancing back to make sure Artoo was otherwise occupied with the navicomputer, he whispered to Leia, “Hey, let’s not tell Uncle Obi-Wan about this, princess, okay?”

She just blinked at him and cooed softly.

He wrinkled his nose at her. “Ah, nevermind.” He turned his focus back to piloting, dropping them out of hyperspace and into orbit around Tatooine.

Already, he could feel his shoulders tensing up.

He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, trying to release the anxiety along with it, with...mixed results.

“Oh, Mos Eisley.” Closest spaceport to his stepfather’s farm, and fewer people actually knew him there. Except possibly from the news. How much of the news filtered all the way out here, anyway?

_**I’ll keep my face covered, just in case.**_ Not something he was really looking forward to. Full-face masks made him claustrophobic. But he’d put up with it, to get Leia to safety.

Landing was a breeze--almost suspiciously easy. _No one asks questions here_, he reminded himself. _As long as you bribe the right people, anyway._ And he had a small supply of credits for that. With any luck, between that and hiding his face, he’d be all right.

“You should probably stay with the ship,” he told Artoo. Not a lot of people could tell one astromech droid from another, but he’d rather keep the possibly-recognizable members of his party to a minimum. Especially with Leia along.

The droid beeped an accusation at him.

“No, of course not,” he said. “But if this explodes on me, I might need you to come pick us up.”

Artoo mulled that over for a minute, then asked another sly question.

“I am not!” he protested. “I mean, yeah, okay, my track record with things exploding is--just shut up.”

He snickered, but promised to stay and settled himself in to quickstart the ship if Anakin called.

Anakin gathered up Leia, a couple stuffed toys the Kallidahin had scrounged up for him, a blanket, and some water, pulled on his cloak, and slipped out of the Waterfall to bribe the appropriate authorities and make his way to the Lars homestead.

He arrived just after the first sun set, with the second more than halfway there, riding an eopie. He’d’ve preferred a bike, but the animal was more discreet, and cheaper to rent. There was a pretty blonde woman standing on the porch, watching the sky as he approached. He recognized her as his stepbrother’s girlfriend (maybe wife now?), though it took him a minute to remember her name.

_Beru. Right._
She called into the house as he dismounted, hitting the eopie with a Force-suggestion to stay put while he figured out how to juggle Leia, his supplies, and staking the animal in place.

Just when he figured it out, Owen Lars came out of the half-sunken house.

He hadn’t changed much, in the past three years. A little older, a little harder, but that same guarded wariness coloring everything he did and thought.

“Can we help you, stranger?” he asked.

Anakin reached up and dropped his hood back. “Um. Hi.”

Owen blinked. “Oh. It’s you.” He was even more guarded now, which Anakin completely understand. The one time they’d met hadn’t exactly been--

He closed his eyes and swallowed, his mother’s grave burning at the edge of his perceptions, coming perilously close to unlocking things he couldn’t face right now.

Leia fidgeted and whimpered a little in his arms.

Beru immediately softened. “You two should come inside,” she said firmly.

Owen didn’t argue.

“Thank you,” Anakin said, quietly.

Beru flashed him a smile, and he followed her and Owen inside.

“How old is the baby?” she asked.

“Eight weeks,” he said. “She’s, uh, her name’s Leia. She’s my daughter.”

“She’s beautiful,” Beru said. “Can I hold her?”

“I--uh.” Every instinct he had wanted to cling even tighter to his precious baby girl. Mine.

Remember why you’re here.

“Okay,” he said, and placed her in Beru’s arms, trying not to let his reluctance show too much.

She smiled up at him again, then turned all her focus to the baby, humming softly. Anakin caught a faint thought drifting out from her, a kind of wistful, endless longing, an aching emptiness.

He tightened his shields.

Owen led them into the kitchen. “So. Anakin. What brings you back here?”

Right to the point.

Okay. I can work with that. Anakin pulled his attention away from Beru and Leia. “I...how much do you know about what’s happening--what happened, to the Republic?”

“Not a lot,” he said.

Beru looked up briefly from playing with Leia’s toes. “But what we’ve heard isn’t good,” she said, somehow managing to keep up a lighthearted, sweet tone.
"I need her to show me how to do that," Anakin thought, admiringly. If he could figure out how to have important conversations without distressing Leia…

“What did happen?” Owen asked.

Anakin hesitated for a second. It would take time—and energy, and, as ashamed as he was to admit it, emotional stability—he didn’t have to explain everything. *What do I leave out?*

“Did the Republic really fall?” Beru asked. “Did the CIS win the war, or…?”

“No,” he said. “Technically, they lost. But really...really, everyone lost. The Chancellor has formed an Empire.” His mechanical hand tightened into a fist on the table. *Breathe. Calm. There is no passion, there is serenity.* “Things are going to be worse now. Even if the war is officially over, even if things are...less chaotic. They’re gonna get bad.”

Owen and Beru exchanged a long look.

“So you’re going to fight him,” Beru said.

“Yes.”

“We can’t,” Owen said abruptly. “I don’t know what you want from us, Anakin, but we’re not soldiers. We have our lives here.”

“I know you do,” he said. “And I wouldn’t--” All right, maybe he *would* have asked, if he’d thought it might do any good. They needed all the active help they could get.

*But this is just as important.*

“I’m not asking you to help fight,” he said instead.

“What, then?” Owen asked.

Anakin glanced over at Leia and Beru. “I can’t...I need her to be...safe.”

His stepbrother and sister-in-law went quiet.

“I know I shouldn’t--” He took a deep breath. *There is no emotion, there is peace.* “You barely know me. I have no...no claim on your aid. The war was...awful, and I was a part of it, a big part, and things are just--it’s going to be even uglier, at least for a while. And you’ll be--I’ll do everything I can to protect you, to protect this location, but I can’t...I *have* to fight, and Leia is...she’s so little. And I need...I need your help.” He closed his eyes. “I need your help,” he repeated, in a whisper, then forced himself to go on. “If she could...if she could stay with you, just sometimes, just while I’m...”

It was too much. He realized that now, should have realized it sooner. He shouldn’t have come here. He had no right to impose on him like this. And there was what Beru had felt, her immediate, bittersweet adoration of his daughter, and he…

*How many people am I going to hurt, before I’m done?* he asked himself bleakly.

“Of course she can,” Beru said firmly.

He looked up at her, half-convinced he was hearing things.

“You’re family,” Owen said, simply. “So is she. This is what families do.”

Beru frowned a little, then passed Leia carefully to Owen and put a tentative hand on Anakin’s. “Stay here tonight,” she said. “You look exhausted, and we need time to work out all the details, anyway.”

“I’m fine,” he said, but he didn’t pull his hand away. “But...all right.”

She beamed at him, and squeezed his hand. “Good. We still have some food left from dinner, are you hungry?”

“I--uh, I should feed Leia,” he said, reminded. It had been a couple hours since the last time he’d stopped to do that.

“Not what I asked, but that’s probably a good idea, too,” she said, then stood up and started going through the cabinets.

Owen passed Leia back to him. “Show me how?” he asked.

Anakin blinked. _Well, if she’s going to stay here, he will need to know._ “Sure. Uh, there’s milk and a bottle in my bag.”

He nodded, and went to retrieve the supplies.

A tranquility Anakin had never really known fell over the room; not even when he’d been a child, before the Temple. Not even with Padme. One that was warm and comforting, domestic and loving.

_Leia will be safe here._ Despite everything--everything that had happened her, the thought rang absolutely true. He _knew_ it, deep inside him, as sure as he knew the suns would rise in a few hours. As sure as he felt the Force singing through him with every breath.

This place, this farm, was _safe_ .

Anakin let that thought sink into him, hoping it would worm its way past the worst of his fears and _stay_. And, if only for a moment, as he showed his stepbrother how to feed his child, he slowly started to relax.
It felt like they had all been holding their breath for six months.

It wasn’t that the disasters had stopped happening—though nothing, Bail knew, would ever match that first, terrible week. The Emperor had introduced several other sweeping changes, one right after the other; the Senate had been powerless to do much more than ceremonially ratify the decisions, even a massive overhaul of the physical infrastructure on Coruscant.

Including an announcement, just days ago, that what was left of the Jedi Temple would be rebuilt as the Imperial Palace.

Bail had sent a coded message to one of the dead drops he and Obi-Wan had set up after hearing the news—not that the Jedi wouldn’t find out eventually, of course, but he thought (or hoped, anyway) it might be marginally less awful coming from a friend.

But that aside (as heavy a burden as it was to set aside), things had stabilized for the time being. At least on the surface. Even Padme’s return to Coruscant, while it had come with all the expected press fanfare, had yet to give any indication that her deception had been discovered. After four months, the chance that Palpatine was holding back on his retaliation, letting them think they were free and clear and setting them up for some future disaster, was starting to feel more like destructive paranoia than sensible caution.

Padme had agreed with him, when they'd discussed the matter over dinner last night. Her apartment, so far as either of them or their trusted security personnel could determine, was still the safest place for them to discuss such sensitive subjects. Not least because, while he had made drastic, if subtle, improvements to the security on his own apartment, it was easier for him to visit her without raising eyebrows than vice versa. Not least because, since Luke was on planet with her, he had a perfectly above-board excuse to drop by, outside of anything to do with work. Legal or otherwise.

Particularly given the conversation he and Breha had had that morning.

“The next time you come home,” his wife had said, smiling, “and I hope that’s soon, because, there’s a little girl I want you to meet.”

As dark and difficult as these days were, as oppressive as the atmosphere on Coruscant—on Imperial Center—was, Bail had carried the joy of those words with him all day long.

She had sent a picture (along with a few other small items, including one from one of the dead drops), of a tiny child with large, soft eyes and a sweet, if slightly confused smile. The girl was a little older than he and Breha had discussed—close to eighteen months—but Bail didn’t care. The holo had already found pride of place on the desk in the study in his apartment. He would move it to his Senate office once everything was official. And, as far as he was concerned, she was perfect—Breha had found her, after all. So, unless the little girl decided she hated him, Bail would have a daughter very soon.

Of course, as uplifting as it was, that probably also contributed to his feeling that they needed to move forward, now. They were supposed to be fixing the world for their children, so that the twins—and now his little girl, to say nothing of the trillions he had never met—would never have to see or do the things that they had seen and done.
And so he was heading back to Padme’s apartment, as arranged by a flurry of quick and carefully coded messages. It was time to expand their network. It was time to start their rebellion in earnest. It was time to stop observing, and begin to actually build.

When he arrived, one of Padme’s handmaidens--Sabe this time--opened the door for him. “Please, come in, Senator. She’s in the back room with Luke, but will be out shortly.”

“Of course,” he said, and followed her in. “Is Senator Mothma here yet?”

Sabe shook her head. “No. I imagine her excuse for visiting required more...creativity...than yours, in any case. We won’t worry for another half hour or so.”

He nodded, and took a seat on the couch, accepting the cup of tea she poured him just as Padme emerged from the bedroom.

“I thought I heard you come in,” she said, waving him off when he started to stand. “I just put Luke down. He’s sleeping through the night every night now.”

“That’s good news,” he said, smiling. One advantage of starting with a slightly older child, I suppose--my daughter already does that. So far as I know. Most children do by eighteen months, if I remember correctly. He’d done quite a bit of research, the first time Breha was pregnant.

“What about you?” she asked, taking a cup from Sabe’s tray. “I know you and Breha have been talking.”

He felt his smile widen. “Nothing’s official yet, but…”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” she said, with a bright, genuine smile of her own.

“Don’t mention it to anyone yet, please,” he said. “Not until everything’s formalized.”

“Not a word, I promise,” she assured him. “I want to see pictures the minute you have them.”

“Of course,” he said. “I’ll be going home at the end of the week. Hopefully, after that…”

“I’ll keep you in my thoughts,” she said, then set her cup down. “Any news from our other friends?”

Ah. And here was a slight difficulty. The surprise from the dead drop weighed heavily in his pocket--especially considering what it was. A handwritten letter, on a couple sheets of flimsi; Please give this to her if it’s safe--A .

Just like Skywalker; reckless, to leave something that could identify them like that. And, just like Skywalker--cleverly taking a kind of refuge in audacity. Flimsi was easy to destroy if anyone was compromised; and almost certainly there would be no trail, no other copies, unlike with an electronic message. And it would positively thrill Padme to hear from her husband, to have concrete proof in her hands that he was alive and safe, at least when he’d written the letter.

On the other hand, given the nature of the meeting they were about to have, she needed to be focused. And he doubted she could manage that, if he gave it to her now. Were he in her position, he knew he wouldn’t be able to ignore a letter from Breha, no matter what pressing business was at hand.

Fortunately, he was spared having to make a decision when the bell rang.
Padme sighed, her eyes tracking Sabe as she went to the door. “Tell me after?”

“Of course.”

He heard Senator Mothma’s voice, soft and measured, thanking Sabe for her courtesy, and then she at last joined them.

“Senator Amidala, Senator Organa,” she said, with a brief bow. Both Bail and Padme rose and echoed the gesture.

“Thank you for joining us, Senator Mothma,” Padme said. “Especially at such an unusual hour.”

She inclined her head, and took a seat on the couch next to Padme. “I think I can guess why I’m here,” she said.

Skipping the pleasantries, he thought. Probably for the best. Mothma had been with them, at least in spirit, for a long time--she had signed the Petition just as they had, after all.

Some of the Two Thousand had already disappeared, or been openly killed. Mothma had publicly recanted--as had he and Padme; a devastating necessity--so she was safe for now. But he knew that her private convictions remained unchanged. As had theirs.

“I’m sure you can,” Padme said, meeting her halfway. “But I don’t know that you grasp the extent of what we’re proposing.”

Mothma arched one elegant eyebrow. “I’m listening.”

“Revolution,” Bail said quietly.

The word hung between the three of them for a moment, the only sound coming from Mothma’s spoon clicking faintly as she stirred her tea.

“You really believe we cannot resolve this through legal channels, in the Senate,” she finally said. She had said much the same thing herself, months ago. Bail remembered it well. But now, there was a different tone to it. Something resigned, almost--hopeless.

“Unfortunately, we do,” Padme said, putting a gentle hand on Mothma’s.

“It’s gone far beyond that now,” Bail added. He did not look out the window, in the direction of the scaffolding around the Temple. Padme had her windows blacked out now, anyway.

Mothma was quiet again for a moment, considering, then sighed and set her cup down. “I am with you,” she said. “I want to be with you. But what recourse do we have? What resources? We cannot fight a war. Not against him.”

“Not yet,” Bail said. “But it will come to that someday, I think.” As much as he wished it weren’t true, he knew better.

“Our job is to be ready when it does. To have support for...for the people who will do the direct fighting,” Padme said. “Funds, equipment, supplies...”

“To say nothing of rebuilding when it’s over,” he continued. “We have...contacts in the field, who are already taking direct action. Their half of this will grow. And so must ours.”

“I see,” Mothma said. “Forgive me, but I must ask--do you speak for yourselves, or for your planets?”
“Breha is with us,” Bail said. “She has requested plausible deniability, but Alderaan will be a waystation for supplies and personnel, and information.” As it already was; Skywalker’s letter burned in his pocket.

“It’s...complicated,” Padme said, staring down into her tea. “Apailana is in an extremely difficult position. We both are. She won’t do anything to endanger our people, but she is as--ashamed of our connection to all of this as I am.”

She nodded, sympathetic. “I will speak with key members of the Assembly on Chandrila, as soon as I can do so securely. But for now, I speak only for myself and my personal resources.”

“That’s not an inconsiderable advantage for us,” Padme said.

Mothma bowed her head briefly. “Thank you, Senator.”

“Padme,” she corrected, then smiled wryly. “If we’re going to conspire to commit treason in my sitting room, I think we should be on a first-name basis.”

Mothma--Mon--smiled at that. “Of course,” she said. “Padme.”

The necessary question out of the way, Padme then changed the subject--something lighthearted, a public reason for their meeting; a way to pass the time until it would not be suspicious for Mon and Bail to leave.

A small step forward, but a step forward nonetheless. Bail could already feel some of the tension easing from his shoulders.

They could win this. And the galaxy he would leave for his daughter--his precious daughter, who he already adored, even without having held her--would be the one she deserved.

Sidious studied the boy kneeling at his feet--not the one he’d wanted there, which still irritated him, but a tolerable substitute. At least for the time being. He had other candidates, of course--a human woman, a male Mirialan, a Twi’lek child; a few others--but this boy had the most potential.

Fifteen, born and raised in a slum on the underlevels; he had slipped through the cracks. He was bitter, vicious, clever--and ripe for exploitation; unstable in all the right ways. Not the strongest candidate in terms of raw power, but even untrained, he was skilled at using what he had to best advantage. Most importantly, he could be ready for action sooner than the others, and suit Sidious’ needs quite nicely.

Besides, he would need backups, in case this one failed--or overstepped--and needed to be disposed of. He would keep the other candidates close, for that purpose and perhaps others. Time, and the Force, would tell.

“Your name,” he said, the words hissing past his lips, spoken by the darkness deep within him, “is Specter.”

“Yes, Master,” the boy murmured.

“Rise,” he said; and it was only his own voice now. “We have a great deal of work to do.”
Obi-Wan sprawled flat on the ridge, observing the base tucked away in the valley below them. It was their third day of observation, and he was fairly certain he had all the patterns down now. *Looks like they haven’t changed security rotation protocols yet. Good. We can use that against them, if we time it right.*

Which meant moving this afternoon--not at night, the guards would be more wary in the dark. Assuming they were even halfway decent. Two he’d seen without helmets were new faces, so he couldn’t answer for how well they’d been trained.

Still, they had been watching for three days, and were fast approaching the line between being ill-prepared and risking discovery.

He glanced over at Anakin, at his right hand again, back where they both belonged; he was a coiled spring, full of anticipation.

Oddly comforting, that. Some things, at least, hadn’t changed.

Anakin met his gaze, and arched one eyebrow.

*Ready?* He stuck to hand signals--there were no signs anyone was close enough to hear, but better safe than sorry.

He nodded.

*Head south. Make some noise.*

He grinned and nodded, slipping off into the underbrush and almost immediately out of sight.

Obi-Wan watched him go anyway, trying to release his--it wasn’t doubt. He did not--*could not* --doubt Anakin. He was...concerned, though. This was the first time Anakin had been separated from Leia for more than a day, and Obi-Wan knew he was fretting about her. Despite knowing she was perfectly safe, back on the farm.

*That was a fairly inspired choice on his part,* Obi-Wan thought. He never would have believed Anakin would head back there, to the place where he had known such intense pain, with someone so precious to him. With any luck, Palpatine and his agents would make the same assumption. *And he seems to be doing...all right, despite what...reminding himself must have been like.*

Still, he’d been on edge the entire time they’d been here, even more than usual. Add to that the fact that this was Anakin’s first active combat mission since Palpatine’s takeover, and it wasn’t going to be an easy one...

*We don’t have the luxury of planning around that,* he reminded himself. *If he wasn’t ready, he wouldn’t be here. Even he wouldn’t risk it.*

Besides. Difficult as this was, given that there were two of them against a garrison, it was also a fairly simple mission, one they’d done hundreds of times over the years, even before the war. And they’d faced odds this uncertain before, though it had been a while. They would be fine.
Of course, their lives being what they were, Obi-Wan had scarcely had the thought when things started to drift away from the plan.

First, there was an explosion on the horizon, in the general direction Anakin had wandered off--one at least twice the size of the explosives Anakin should have been carrying.

“Is it really so much to ask for a small distraction?” he muttered, annoyed but not altogether surprised, picking himself up and making his way down the slope, flitting from shadow to shadow to the all-too-familiar accompaniment of blaster fire.

Trust that he’ll do his job, he reminded himself. And if he has any problems--well, the sooner you do yours, the sooner you can rescue him if he needs it.

The thought was parent to the deed, and he found the back door of the base helpfully unguarded. He paused for a split second, debating the best way through it, then simply cut the lock. His original plan had been to avoid leaving obvious indications that any Jedi survivors were involved in the incident, but--well, by the sound of things, Anakin had completely thrown that out the window.

No one immediately inside the door, either, which made him briefly worried, that Anakin maybe had overestimated his own capabilities, and drawn the entire garrison out of the base.

I can’t do anything about that just now, he reminded himself. He closed his eyes to center himself, then crept down the hall, operating on a familiarity that was almost muscle memory at this point.

We’ll be in bigger trouble if Palpatine ever decides to redesign the standard base layout, he thought idly, when he reached the comm center--exactly where it was supposed to be.

This time, he manipulated the lock rather than cutting it. Best to minimize the chances of hostile interruptions. The fewer obvious signs of where he’d been now he was inside, the better.

Unfortunately, this was where the second thing went wrong.

Anakin may have drawn out most of the garrison--maybe more than he can handle, maybe he’s in real trouble, I should be there, I shouldn’t have left him alone--but there were a half-dozen left here to protect the comms.

And, more importantly, Obi-Wan’s target--a set of thirteen theoretically unsliceable code keys.

He didn’t waste any time on reacting, to the sudden change in circumstances or to the too-familiar helmets bearing down on him.

Or, worse, the one who had taken his off.

And was very much not a new recruit.

His lightsaber was active before the first shot went off, and he spun into action, reflecting it back to the source. A second--stormtrooper--narrowly missed him; he slid out of the shot’s trajectory at the last second.

Shift. Block. Strike. There is no emotion, there is peace.

A too-brief moment later, there were six dead men at his feet.

He closed his eyes. This is getting easier. I’m...not sure how I feel about that.
The first few times, it had been difficult to separate out the present from the past. Sometimes it made him more desperate, more brutal. A few times, it had made him hesitate, remembering that awful mess with Fives and--he couldn’t remember the other one’s name, the one who had gone mad ahead of schedule.

*They were victims, too. As much as we were.*

It was a good thing that he was a Jedi, and had forsworn revenge. Thoughts like that one were...tempting. His lifelong commitment, so deeply ingrained it was reflex, kept him on the right path.

He only hoped that Anakin--

*Get the keys. Then go help him.*

It was somewhat unlikely the keys would be useful for decoding intercepted communications for very long. The theft would hardly go unnoticed--wouldn’t have, even if they’d managed subtlety. But it would cause no end of difficulty for the Emperor’s war machine, while new codes were developed.

*And then, I suppose, we’ll have to steal those keys, and on and on.*

It took about five tense minutes for him to break into the sealed compartment where the hard copies of the keys were kept, but there were no further interruptions. And, fortunately, all thirteen were there, along with a datapad that likely contained highly sensitive--meaning *useful* --information.

Obi-Wan slid both it and the keys into one of the pockets of his robes, then picked his way over the bodies and started working his way towards the south end of the base, towards the ongoing sounds of battle.

*Well, if they’re still shooting, he’s still fighting,* he reasoned with himself. Which was a good thing.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Anakin’s mind brushed his lightly, checking his status.

*Finished here. Time to go.*

A brief acknowledgement, and Obi-Wan sensed Anakin beginning to withdraw. He paused for a minute, reconsidering.

*I’ll loop around,* he decided. *If Anakin thinks I’ve been pinned down trying to get to him, he’ll come back, and that risks the rest of the mission.*

He doubled back the way he’d come--encountered another pair of guards; these fortunately unfamiliar and unmasked; much easier to deal with--and reached the ridge mere moments ahead of Anakin.

Who was limping slightly, and still leaking adrenaline into the Force.

“Lost ‘em,” he said. “At least for now.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I have what we came for. Are you all right?”

Anakin waved a hand. “Just a graze, I’ll be fine.” He pushed on down the other side of the ridge, towards where they’d left the *Waterfall*. 
Obi-Wan followed close behind, ready to deal with any pursuit, but the Force was with them— Anakin had managed to pull far enough ahead that they were in the air before the shooting started.

“Clean up,” he advised, as soon as they were out of range. “I can take the controls for a minute.”

He shook his head. “I’d rather be here, least ‘til we’re in hyperspace.”

Which meant he was upset—probably for at least some of the same reasons as Obi-Wan—and, since he didn’t have anything to take apart and reassemble, piloting was the best way for him to calm down.

Still, despite the faint traces of lingering distress bleeding into the Force, it felt--comfortable. Familiar, strapping himself in next to Anakin, a successful mission behind them.

And, to his relief, Anakin did relax a little, after he navigated them through the planet’s rings and out into hyperspace. “So. That went well,” he said. “Told you I was ready.”

“You did,” he said. “And I’m glad you were. I was able to get what we came for, and neither of us was captured. Although you could have been a little more…”

He gave Obi-Wan a perfectly innocent look. “You said you needed a distraction.”

“Yes, well, next time, try not to draw so much attention you get yourself shot,” he replied dryly.

“I told you, it’s just a graze,” he said. “I’m fine.”

And he was; Obi-Wan would have sensed it if Anakin were seriously hurt. Still, with the added context of—who he’d seen in the base, who he’d killed today, it was difficult not to remember him lying unconscious in the Tantive ’s medical bay, barely holding on.

Difficult not to remember--

A moment with your Padawan, take .

“I know,” he said, and fought down the urge to add, but we can’t replace you, so do try to be more careful; I don’t want to say--I’ve had to say too many goodbyes, please don’t be one more .

“Are you okay?” Anakin asked.

“I’m not hurt,” he said. “Not even grazed.” And if that last was maybe a little pointed, well.

“Fine, fine, I can take a hint,” he said, rolling his eyes and unstrapping himself. “I want to do a couple intermediate jumps, but we should head for the farm. You haven’t seen Leia in a while. Or held her. Everything’s better, holding Leia.”

“Hm.” Well, Anakin probably wasn’t wrong there. And a long, circuitous route to Tatooine would give him some time with the datapad and the code keys, before he deposited them in a dead drop for Senator Organa to deal with. “That sounds like an excellent plan.”

Anakin grinned at him. “Good, ‘cause I already programmed in the course. It’d be a pain to reset everything if you said no.”

It was Obi-Wan’s turn to roll his eyes at that. “Go clean yourself up. I’ll be right here if you need anything.”

He nodded, and limped back out of the cockpit, and Obi-Wan sighed. Today had gone well. Better
than he’d expected. Better even than he’d hoped. But it was still--there was still a long war ahead of them.

On the other hand, they were together again, a team again, falling back into seamless collaboration as if Anakin hadn’t just spent six months healing. As long as that was true--as long as he still had his brother beside him--Obi-Wan knew they’d make it through. They always had, and they always would.

No matter how long it took them to do it.

Chapter End Notes

And this concludes the Homecoming arc!

Part Three, which is tentatively titled 'Captain,' starts next week, with a bit of a timeskip. I hope you will enjoy ^^.

<3

~shadowsong

(And, as a thank you for sticking with me thus far, have a teaser for Part 3:

*Even after over two standard years on the run, Rex still felt hellishly uncomfortable in civilian dress.*)
Even after over two standard years on the run, Rex still felt hellishly uncomfortable in civilian
dress. He’d been a soldier all his life; it was what he was designed to be, and, more importantly,
what he was good at. It was one thing to step out of uniform for an undercover mission with—with
a ranking officer, under orders, and he had done that before without question or complaint. But this
was different. No one had sent him here. No one had ordered him to dress this way.

On the other hand, even if it had been safe, just the thought of the alternative made his skin crawl
even more.

He didn’t dream about the Temple anymore, not like he had the first six months or so, but it still
haunted his every breath. Putting on his armor again, or even a duty uniform, would make it
impossible to move on from the way he and his brothers had betrayed everything.

The way they’d been betrayed.

Most of them, so far as he knew, had stayed with the GAR—the Imperial Stormtrooper Corps now.
Rex—and maybe some others, but he hadn’t met anyone—hadn’t had it in him to do that. He’d
delivered his report to his new superiors after the Temple, because it was easier to stick to rote
routines and established procedures than to think about what had happened. About what he’d done.
And then, the first chance he’d gotten, he’d done what he always swore he would never do.

He’d abandoned his brothers, and deserted his post.

He’d stripped off his armor—the bodyglove underneath was nondescript enough—stowed away on a
semi-legal freighter leaving from one of the seedier districts of Coruscant, and done his best to
disappear.

First chance he got after that, he left the freighter and stole a medical droid to cut out his chip.
Once it was done, he’d destroyed the droid as thoroughly as he knew how, scattering the pieces
among a half-dozen junk dealers so no one could use it to trace him. He wasn’t proud of that,
exactly—of any of it—but the alternative was, again, worse.

From there, he’d ghosted from place to place until the nightmares stopped, keeping his head down
and doing whatever he had to, short of outright murder, to survive. But every day he woke up, and
saw the scar on the side of his shaved head, and knew—never again. I will never again be forced to
hunt down and kill my—to hunt down and kill children. I am my own man. Now and forever more.

With enough repetition, he’d managed to convince himself of that fact. As time went by, he’d
gotten better at coping with the reality of his life after the Temple. Bit by bit, he built a new
existence for himself. He stuck to the fringes of the galaxy still, because it was safer. He favored
planets on the Outer Rim with climates that were inhospitable enough he could get away with
covering most of his face, and where there was minimal Imperial presence.

He hired himself out as a security guard, but shied away from making any sort of connection with
the Bounty Hunter’s Guild or any other organized entity. Sure, it would have made things easier (and he wouldn’t have been alone anymore) but the risk of recognition was too high. He cultivated
a quiet reputation for competence and discretion, and he got enough offers that he was able to eat
and move from place to place by more or less legal means. Or as legal as things like that ever got in
this part of the galaxy. It wasn’t a good life, not by a long shot—not as he defined it—but it wasn’t a
terrible one, either.
Rex was, for the moment, between jobs. He’d stopped on a planet whose name he had already forgotten; it was mostly used as a waystation by various travelers and small-time traders, legal and otherwise. There was a bigger garrison than he liked, due to a valuable mine on one of the planet’s moons, but the other advantages of the place outweighed that consideration for the moment. Due to the near-constant dripping rain, almost everyone went around with hooded cloaks, and no few wore scarves around some part of their face. In short, especially if he kept his blasters mostly hidden from sight, Rex blended in nicely. Provided he wore the kriffing uncomfortable civilian clothes.

He’d headed down to a covered market near the spaceport early this morning. Places like that, he’d found, were the best for him to find work that was at least mostly honest but didn’t involve too many questions. Cantinas tended to skew too far away from the former for his liking, and just about anything else had issues with the latter. So, markets—with the added benefit that he could stock up on what supplies he preferred to carry with him.

He’d been at it for about an hour, outwardly relaxed, letting his eyes drift over the crowd for likely employers or useful supplies, when everything changed in a heartbeat.

It was only a glimpse, as his eyes wandered over the crowd, but, bent over a fruit stand, covered in a hooded cloak exactly like the ones everyone else in the market was wearing, he saw--

He knew the set of those shoulders.

In that instant, Rex couldn’t breathe. He had to get out of there.

With less far grace and discretion than he would have liked, he pushed his way out of the market to the alley outside, loosening his scarf just enough that he could suck in more air.

It can’t be him. You’re losing it, Rex; your brain must be waterlogged or something, it wasn’t him. It wasn’t him. It can’t have been.

The body language hadn’t been right, anyway. But that was no guarantee; Rex himself didn’t move the same way he used to, either, and it was entirely deliberate. After all, it was one thing to move like other people to avoid standing out, but moving exactly like millions of other men around the galaxy was another thing entirely.

Besides, given everything that had happened when—that had happened that day, a change in Anakin Skywalker’s body language was all too easy to explain.

He sank down onto his haunches, burying his face in his hands.

No. No, no, it’s not him. He’s not--you saw him--

Unbidden, memories flowed into Rex’s head.

Skywalker, perched on a ledge--one of what must have been thousands in Rex’s memory--ready to swan dive into an entire kriffing droid battalion and come out intact; he somehow always came out intact.

Skywalker, joining him and the others around a fire when they were stationed on a nameless backwater not so different from this one, trading stories and good fellowship.

Skywalker, sparring with Commander Tano, while Rex and the others kept watch, the two Jedi fondly teasing each other even as they searched resolutely for weak points they rarely found.

Skywalker, incandescent with rage, storming off to rescue Tano or Kenobi or that Senator he
pretended he wasn’t in love with—even Rex and his brothers a few times.

Skywalker, drenched in blood, the floor slick around him, his robes heavy with it, barely holding onto his lightsaber, a dead child who looked too much like the Commander at his feet.

Skywalker, pleading with Rex, begging him to stop; for the first time since Rex had met him, his reckless, indomitable General was *begging*.

Skywalker, falling.

Skywalker, dying.

*You have to stop this. I know you can stop this. You’re better than this. Rex, look at me. Rex--*

“Rex?”

Slowly, Rex returned to the present and looked up.

Skywalker still had his hood up, screening his face, but there was no denying that voice. Rex had listened to it, day in day out, for three years. He knew it almost as well as he knew his own.

His General was standing at the mouth of the alley, his stance guarded but not yet aggressive. One hand was deceptively casually hidden beneath his cloak, but Rex knew that it was on the hilt of his lightsaber, ready to pull it out in an instant.

No denying it now. Somehow, miraculously, Skywalker had survived. Somehow, he was *here*.

*This is it. We killed just about everyone he ever loved, and then I ran so I wouldn’t have to deal with the consequences. I am a coward and a murderer. I have dishonored the service I gave him.*

“I’m sorry,” Rex whispered, lowering his eyes again, knowing damn well that saying it wasn’t enough. It wouldn’t *ever* be enough. He had learned to live with what he’d done, but he would never be forgiven. Not by Skywalker, not by himself. He would die in this alley, and know it was justice.

At least he got to know, in the end, that Skywalker at least had survived. That, somehow, he’d survived getting shot close to a dozen times, bleeding all over the Temple from at least a half-dozen shrapnel wounds, and falling off of the High Council spire.

*I should have known. There’s not much can kill my--not much can kill General Skywalker.*

It was a comfort, in the end, to have one less death on his conscience.

But all that happened was Skywalker’s visible hand—the prosthetic, Rex noted—flicked slightly, and Rex felt his own hood fly back off his head.

And then, to Rex’s surprise, Skywalker visibly relaxed.

“You cut your chip out,” he said, his other hand coming out from under his cloak, without the lightsaber.

*What? “Yeah,”* Rex said. *“As soon as I could. I didn’t…I should’ve done it sooner. I should’ve...I should’ve listened to Fives.”*

Skywalker bowed his head, tensing up again without going for his lightsaber. “We all should have,” he said quietly.
For a long moment, neither of them said anything, and Rex felt the air grow close around him again; dense and full of static tension. The only sound was the incessant patter of rain on the sidewalk. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

None of this made sense. Yes, he’d cut out his chip, but it didn’t change what he’d done, not any of it. And how the hell had Skywalker survived all those shots, that much bloodloss, that fall? Even he had to have limits.

Skywalker took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and the air lightened again.

Rex took a breath of his own, not at all sure what to make of any of this. The fact that he was still breathing at all chief among them. Yes, he and his General had been close—or as close as they could be, given their professional relationship; certainly closer than most Jedi got to their clone 2ICs—but that was before…that was before the Temple.

“Come with me,” Skywalker said.

“I…what?” What the kriffing hell?

“Come with me,” he repeated, offering a hand for emphasis.

Rex just stared at him. That’s it. I’m dreaming. There is no kriffing way this is real. Even if he survived, even if he found me--there’s no way in hell this would happen.

Skywalker shifted a little, clearly sensing his doubts. “I could use your help. You know me. You know how I think. We’ve worked together before.” He shifted his hood a little, so Rex could meet his eyes, and see them clearly. “And I trust you,” he finished, quietly, but with conviction.

He looked—he looked almost the same. Same blue eyes, same thin scar cutting across one of them. There was a new one, sliding down his chin to taper off at his throat, but any other—any other evidence of what Rex and his brothers had done to him was still hidden.

Skywalker looked almost exactly the same as he had two years ago, and that just made this whole situation that much more unreal.

“We worked together before,” Rex said, after taking several minutes to find his voice again. “Before. The…what I did, sir, I can’t…”

Skywalker shook his head. “It wasn’t you,” he said, with a bite of impatience in his voice.

Again, a string of memories flooded through Rex; Skywalker, bloody and begging for his life, falling from the Temple; the weight of his blaster in his hand; the river of dead he and his brothers had left in their wake.

“That’s not how I remember it,” he said quietly, shaking off those ghosts a lot faster this time.

Skywalker didn’t answer right away. “Well, you cut that part of you out,” he finally said. “Maybe if you hadn’t, we’d be having a different conversation. But you did. You’re not—you wouldn’t—you wouldn’t do something like that again, right? Even if I ordered you to?”

“No,” Rex said. “No, I would never.” Unbidden, his hand drifted up to the scar on his scalp. Never again. I am my own man.

“Then that’s good enough for me,” Skywalker said firmly. “It wasn’t you.”
Rex wanted to believe him. More than he had ever dared to let himself hope, he wanted this to be true. He wanted General Skywalker’s forgiveness; he wanted to fight with him, for him, like before. It would give his life meaning and purpose again, restore almost everything he’d lost when he’d fled Coruscant and put on civilian clothes.

This was what he was designed for. This was what he was good at. This was all he wanted--all he had ever wanted, from the moment he was mature enough to want anything.

But it couldn’t be this easy. It couldn’t be just--steal a medical droid, cut out his chip, and all would be forgiven.

Skywalker faltered a bit, his hand lowering a few centimeters. “I’m not going to make you,” he said. “It’s your choice. I just…I want you to come with me.”

Rex hesitated for another second. He still wasn’t sure he should do this, wasn’t sure he could accept what Skywalker was offering. Not his forgiveness, nor his trust, at least not yet--if such a thing could be done, he would have to earn it. He knew that.

But Skywalker was giving him a chance to try. And this--this was right. This was where he belonged, serving a Jedi General the way he had been bred to do. After everything he’d done, Rex knew that, deep in his bones, deeper than even the chip had gone. So deep it became a reflex.

Before he could change his mind again, he reached up and accepted Skywalker’s hand.

The Jedi grinned, and hauled him to his feet. “It’s good to have you back, Captain.”

“It’s good to be back, sir.” Even if he didn’t feel all the way back yet, just getting as close as he had already made him feel more like himself. “What’s the mission?”

“Three guesses.”

On reflection, Rex didn’t really need them. “Taking down the Emperor.”

Skywalker nodded, grim. “Yeah. But, since that’s going to take a while, in the meantime, we’re doing everything we can to limit his expansion. We’re fighting back however and wherever we can. Still on board?”

Rex knew why he was asking. He knew that, if he stayed committed, he’d possibly--probably--end up fighting his surviving brothers.

He closed his eyes, and tried not to think of Umbara.

This is different. I know what I’m getting myself into this time. I’m not being manipulated into another massacre.

“Yeah,” he said, opening his eyes again. “I’m in.”

“Okay,” he said. “Get your gear, and meet me at my ship. Docking bay ninety-four.”

“Ninety-four,” Rex confirmed. “Uh, any reason we need to bug out in a hurry?”

Skywalker got that look in his eye, one that Rex knew all too well.

“You’re gonna go blow something up, aren’t you.”

“See? You know me.”
Oh, yeah. Just like old times. “There’s nothing here I can’t live without,” he said. “I’ll come with you.”

Skywalker paused for a minute, and Rex could practically see the wheels turning in his head, as he made quick adjustments to however much of his mission he’d actually planned out in advance this time. “All right,” he finally said. “If you’re sure.”

*I am not about to let you get yourself killed less than an hour after you’ve given me the second chance I don’t deserve.* “I am.”

He grinned again. “Then follow me.”

Rex nodded, and fell into step behind his Jedi, pulling his hood and scarf back up over his face, struck once more by how right it felt, watching Anakin Skywalker’s back again.

*I’ll do everything I can to earn what you’ve given me, even if it takes the rest of my life. I’ll do everything I can to make things right.* His scar itched faintly under his hood, and he felt the incalculable, ghostly weight of too much blood on his hands. *And I will never betray you or let you fall again.*

*I promise.*
“No,” Luke said, with all the finality a toddler could muster.

Padme sighed internally. Every morning, at least for the past week or so, had started out this way, because her beloved son, in all his infinite two-year-old wisdom, seemed to have decided that shoes were the ultimate evil and must be avoided at all costs. She’d let him get away with it a couple of times—which she was now deeply, *deeply* regretting—because it didn’t really matter all that much on a regular day. Because on a normal day, he spent most of his time in the apartment anyway, with one of her handmaidens babysitting while she was at work.

But today, she had a rare morning off, and since the *other* thing Luke was certain of this week was that butterflies were the single most amazing thing in the entire galaxy, the plan was to use that time to go to the park and chase some together.

The problem was, of course, that this plan required shoes.

*Why is it,* she thought wearily, *that I can draft a law, beat back an invading army, run a kriffing planet,* but *not convince my two-year-old child to finish getting dressed?*

“Lulu, sweetheart,” she tried wheedling, “if you want to come to the park to play with Mommy, you have to let me put them on.”

Luke pondered that for a moment, and Padme was almost starting to hope he’d caved, when, “No,” he declared, sitting on the ground and blinking up at her, as if to say ‘your move, Mommy, but I bet you can’t beat that.’

*All right. New plan.* “Well, then, I guess I’ll just have to go by myself,” she said, setting the shoes down and starting to get up.

“Noooooo!” He latched onto her legs and stared up at her with his giant, sad blue eyes. “Mommy, *butterflies!*”

“Shoes first,” she said.

He frowned, then brightened as inspiration struck. He wriggled over to the side and, trying to block her view of it with his tiny body, kicked the shoes under the bed. “Uh-oh. All gone!”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

He gave her his most winning smile. “Butterflies?”

She sighed again, but before she could respond, Sabe tapped on the door.

“Sorry to interrupt,” she said.

“By all means,” Padme replied, as Luke tried to take advantage of her brief distraction to shove the hated shoes further under the bed. “Nice try, Lulu, I saw that.”

Sabe bit back a grin. “Senator Organa’s here,” she said.
Padme frowned. Bail didn’t usually drop by unannounced like that--he appeared to, frequently, so it wouldn’t raise red flags if there was an actual emergency, but that was carefully-choreographed, staged spontaneity. This was real.

“Mommy?” Luke said, peeking up at her. Probably picking up on her worry--which, as she had learned from reputable research and frequently reassured herself, was something all, or at least most, small children could do.

So she smiled at him, and ruffled his hair. “Nothing to worry about, sweet boy. Mommy just has to go talk to Uncle Bail real quick. That’s all.”

“’Kay,” he said, but he wrapped himself around her legs again.

Very gently, she pried him off. “Why don’t you play with Aunt Sabe for a minute, hmm? I’ll be right back.” She met Sabe’s eyes briefly and nodded at the half-hidden shoes. Hopefully, she’d have more luck with them.

And hopefully Bail’s news wouldn’t be that perfect combination of awful and actionable that meant the park trip had to be cancelled entirely.

Sabe nodded back and scooped Luke up before he could start clinging again. “All right, precious child, what are you trying to hide from Mommy? Can you show me?”

Without waiting for Luke’s response, Padme slipped out into the sitting room. “Good morning,” she said, when she caught sight of Bail, standing off to one side with his hands clasped behind his back, staring out the window.

“Padme,” he said, turning around to greet her with a smile. “I’m glad I caught you.” His tone was carefully light--ready for a few seconds of innocent small talk while Dorme, who was on counter-surveillance duty today, double-checked the equipment.

“You almost didn’t,” she admitted, gesturing him to a seat. “We were planning on going to the park, but my son refuses to put his shoes on.” She sighed, and moved a slightly-toothmarked baby book aside before sitting down herself. “Does your daughter ever give you trouble like that?”

He shook his head. “No, she doesn’t have a problem with shoes.”

“Clear, Senators,” Dorme interrupted quietly.

“Thank you,” Padme said. “Bail, what happened?”

“Senator Alavar was killed last night,” he said.

Padme sucked in a breath. Yet another member of the Two Thousand, who had walked back their position but stopped short of fully recanting. Nee Alavar had been a friend, if a distant one--not part of their network yet, but Mon had been in the process of sounding her out for active recruitment. “Hell,” she said. “Are we…?”

He shook his head. “No chance of compromise. It was quick.”

“Right,” she said. “How did he stage it this time?”

“That’s the problem,” Bail said. “He didn’t.”

She blinked. “He--you mean he had her openly murdered?”
“It gets worse,” he said grimly, pulling out a datapad. “I have a reporter contact on Lorrd. They were able to get me this.”

After a quick glance at the bedroom door to make sure Sabe still had Luke safely shut away behind it, Padme nodded for Bail to play the footage.

It was, as he had said, quick.

Senator Alavar was walking down a street in a flickering, low-quality security hologram. She was accompanied by another Human, a man who may or may not have been an aide. And then--

A shadow flitted across the image; Senator Alavar crumpled in its wake, her head lolling at an unnatural angle, and the aide started to scream.

*Oh, no.*

Padme swallowed. “Play it...play it again?”

Bail replayed the video.

On second viewing, she saw the shadow--a tall humanoid heavily cloaked in black, moving with preternatural speed and grace, and melting away as suddenly as they appeared.

“Oh, no,” she whispered.

“I know,” Bail said quietly, and shut the datapad off.

Padme sat in stupefied silence for a long moment. Her first, selfish thought was-- *Luke. Luke, oh, hells, if that--if that creature comes here, will he still be safe?* Obi-Wan and Master Yoda had done *something* to shield him from Palpatine’s notice, but if that was too tailored to the Emperor, if…

*Stop it. Stop panicking. I doubt it is, they must have--they must have recognized this possibility. They would have planned for it. And, worst case scenario, I can always have him stay with Sola for a little while. It’ll be all right. He’ll be all right.*

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Can I have a copy?” she asked, her voice shaking only a little. “Elle’s good with holovids, she might be able to clean up the footage. Give us a little more detail about…about this being.”

He nodded. “Of course.”

There wasn’t much chance, given the quality they were starting with, but all she could tell right now was that the--assassin *(apprentice? Assassin, stick with assassin, that’s less devastating)* was humanoid, but not human. The proportions were all wrong, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on exactly *what* didn’t line up right. Hopefully, Elle would be able to tell them more.

“What do we do, in the meantime?” she asked. *What could* they do?

“I...don’t think I should leave this at a dead drop,” he said. “It’s too much. Too important.”

Right. Of course. Because that would be the next step--assassin or apprentice, the Jedi would have to know.

Her heart fluttered a little bit. “You want to make direct contact?”

“If I can,” he said. “And if you approve.”
They’d talked about the possibility, two years ago on Polis Massa. Padme herself would be too closely watched. Bail had a little more professional distance, at least so far as anyone knew. If direct contact had to be made (beyond handwritten letters left at dead drops; letters she couldn’t bring herself to burn like she knew she should; a part of her wondered if he was burning the ones she had Bail leave), it would have to come from him. But they had to agree to the breach in protocol.

“I think this situation calls for it,” she said. “Let me...let me know what you hear?”

“Of course,” he said, and stood up. “I have some routine documents to send you, I’ll include the video with them. You remember this week’s code for the filename?”

“Yes, of course,” she said. It was their usual code. They were still on enough of the same committees--for refugees, for education, other basic services--that a flurry of data going between her office and his was a perfect cover. “Will you let Mon know?”

“As soon as I get a chance,” he said. “After I speak with our other friends.”

Even here, even where they knew they were safe, there were some words they didn’t dare speak.

“Of course,” she said. “Good luck.”

He smiled, and let himself out.

She stayed on the couch for a moment more, picking up the baby book and turning it over and over in her hands.

*Butterflies,* she reminded herself. *Act normal. Just be Mommy today. Put on your smile, put on his shoes, and go out and chase the butterflies. Right now, that’s all--you can’t do anything else right now. So do that.*

“Dorme,” she finally said.

“Yes, milady?”

“We need a contingency plan. A cover story, if I send Luke to stay with Sola for a while.”

She nodded. “Motee and I have a list of possibilities. We can narrow it down and finalize when you get back from the park?”

“Good,” she said, then stood up. “Think Sabe got his shoes on?”

“I think Sabe is probably two inches from screaming and absolutely *covered* in fingerpaint,” Dorme said dryly.

“...yeah, that’s probably more likely,” she agreed, and smiled--a real smile. “I’ll go rescue her.”

“Good luck,” Dorme said, then turned back to her equipment.

Shaking her head, Padme headed back to the bedroom to do battle with Luke and his shoes and his stubborn, toddler brain once more.

Chapter End Notes
lol what even are children.

Um. Yeah, sorry for any...there are no tiny ones in my life right now, so I can't vouch for the accuracy of how Luke is being written here. Apologies for any major errors. <3

~shadowsong
There were days when Obi-Wan felt he had accomplished very little over the past two years. For the most part, of course, he knew that was simply a matter of perspective—progress was being made. But for every Imperial installation he or Anakin or another resistance cell disrupted or destroyed, Palpatine had at least another dozen waiting in the wings. Looking at the raw data, such as it was, it was difficult not to get discouraged.

On the other hand—well, there were pockets of resistance spread all over the galaxy, and for every one the Empire wiped out, at least one or two more rose up somewhere. It wasn’t much, but it was still something. The fight continued, inch by inch; and their impact, while small, was still there.

Besides, this was going to be a long war. He knew that. He always had, from the very start, when they proved incapable of deposing Palpatine in the immediate aftermath of his takeover. As long as he kept reminding himself of that, as long as he was able to maintain that perspective, he could be patient. He could hold on to hope.

So he did what he could with his own hands, and made contact with as many rebel cells as he could. While very few actually knew who he was—there were too few Jedi left; he couldn’t risk too much on that score—he was gradually drawing his contacts into a loose network. A network, so they could share information and eventually supplies (once he had secure lines in place, which was still a work in progress). But loose, so that if—when—one cell was compromised, it didn’t bring them all down. It was safer that way, at least for now. Obi-Wan knew that.

But he was often extremely conscious of how fragile it all was. Even as independent as he had kept things, it wouldn’t take much to unravel things. The web was held together only by his efforts and the coded data he sent Bail (so that if he fell, they wouldn’t crumble). He was keeping an eye out for other recruits he could put in coordinating positions, but so far even the most promising leaders had to focus on keeping their own cells going.

In time, he knew, it would grow, and strengthen. He just had to hold things together until then. Until the web was truly self-sustaining. They just had to last that long. And, to be fair, on most days, he was confident they would.

Of course, on most days, he wasn’t kept waiting for contact from a cell that had gone dark for a mission, and was now over an hour late getting back in touch. Add in the fact that said cell was Anakin…

Well, today was not a particularly hopeful day.

I’m sure he’s fine, he told himself. I would know if he weren’t.

The problem was, he hadn’t known the last time Anakin had been in serious danger—but, of course, given everything else that had happened that day, even their bond had been drowned out. Those circumstances were not a factor now, and never would be again. So this time, he would know.

But it wasn’t like Anakin to be late like this. Oh, he would still drop off the grid sometimes, but even at his most evasive, back during the war, he would at the very least check in via comm after a dangerous mission before disappearing again.

Something’s gone wrong.

Maybe not quite to the point where Anakin was in serious danger, or at least not yet, but still
something. Particularly given Anakin’s extraordinary talent for finding trouble.

A talent which is matched by his ability to find his way back out again, he reminded himself. And that helped, somewhat.

Still.

I’ll give him another hour, Obi-Wan decided. If I haven’t heard from him by then, I’ll--

At last, interrupting his increasingly gloomy thoughts, his comm buzzed at him--the private one, that only Anakin, Bail Organa, and Beru Lars knew about.

Oh, thank the Force, he thought, and accepted the call.

Anakin’s hologram flickered to life. “Sorry it took so long,” he said, not wasting any time on a greeting. Which, to be fair, wasn’t unusual--they were never sure how long these conversations would stay secure.

“Well, you’re calling now,” Obi-Wan said, feeling a knot of tension at the nape of his neck ease. Anakin was upright, clear-eyed, coherent--unharmed by whatever had delayed him. “What happened? Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m not hurt,” he said. “Mission went fine, too. Blew up the depot, got away clean.”

“Good to hear.” A significant disruption to that particular mining operation might buy them as much as week or two of breathing room while similar resources were brought in from other sectors. There was some sort of massive infrastructure project going on, but Obi-Wan had the sneaking suspicion he was only seeing the vague outline of it. And, whatever it was, it was massive. So, the more delays, the likelier it was he would be able to fill in the gaps before Palpatine inflicted any more disasters upon the galaxy. And the quotas for the moon in question had nearly tripled over the last eight weeks, which meant it was worthy of immediate attention. “Any hints as to why they were stepping up production?” he asked.

Anakin shook his head. “Nothing I could find. I looked, but…” He shrugged.

“Well, we’ll piece it together soon enough, I’m sure,” he said.

“Yeah,” he said, then paused.

“Something wrong?”

“Uh. No,” he said. “There was a complication.”

Which Obi-Wan had known; otherwise he wouldn’t have been so late checking in.

But before he could ask, Anakin hastily added, “I’m fine, everything’s fine, but I had to sort of adjust my plans a little because I found Rex.”

Obi-Wan blinked and sat back a bit, taking that in and trying to quickly process everything it might mean.

They’d been fortunate, until now, in that neither of them had run across any clones they knew personally, but it had only been a matter of time. It was difficult, even after two years and much repetition, to deal with strangers with a too-familiar face. It certainly couldn’t have been easy, for either Anakin or Rex, given...everything. Because no matter how much the clones were victims,
too--well, memory was often irrational. Particularly when the circumstances were this painful.

At least, from everything Anakin had said thus far, the meeting couldn’t have gone badly.

“His chip’s gone,” Anakin went on, hiding his hands in his sleeves the way he always did when he was nervous and wanted to keep himself from fidgeting. “I made sure of it. It’s safe. He’s safe. And I know we said we wouldn’t go looking, but he was there, on the planet, and I couldn’t not approach him, so I--”

“I understand,” Obi-Wan said, holding up a hand to cut him off. “Where is he now? Is he with you?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” He paused again. “Is--are you okay with that?”

Obi-Wan’s impulse was to just immediately say yes, of course-- the clones were victims, too, after all. But instead he took a breath, and gave the question the attention it deserved. It wasn’t an simple one, even if the objective truth was clear. And he had walked through the ruined Temple, where Rex had been that day; he had seen what had been done, and…

This was not a question he could answer impulsively. It wasn’t fair to anyone involved.

He closed his eyes for a moment, weighing all the factors and seeking clarity and confirmation from the Force.

Would I have done anything different, if it were Cody? he asked himself.

If I were sure-- absolutely sure--he was fully himself now...no, I would have done the same.

So, “Yes,” he said, opening his eyes, and the rightness of it settled over him like a blanket, warm and comforting. “Yes, I’m fine with it.”

Anakin brightened, and the hands came out of his sleeves again. “Oh, good. I was--good. That’s good.” He grinned. “Rex helped me with the depot.”

“I imagine he would have,” Obi-Wan said. “He’s all right, too?”

“Yes, he’s fine. We’re heading to the farm.”

“Ah.” Well, if Obi-Wan had had any misgivings left about the whole situation, they would have melted away at that. Anakin may have been heartrendingly cavalier about his own safety, but he would never do anything that might put his daughter at risk. “Give Leia a kiss for me, will you?”

“Always,” Anakin said. “Will you meet us?”

It was a tempting thought--it had been over a month since he had last seen the child, and they grew so fast at this age. He had no idea how much he was missing.

But he still had a few things to wrap up in this sector. “I’ll try,” he finally said. “No promises. If I don’t meet you there, next week I’ll be at the rendezvous point where we met Jaira, you remember where that is?”

Anakin rolled his eyes and sighed theatrically. “How could I forget? I think I still have mud in my hair.”

“Given that it was eight years ago,” Obi-Wan said dryly, “I very much doubt that.”
“If you say so, Master.”

He bit back a grin, and was about to give a clever reply when the commlink vibrated—a system they’d set up, to warn them when they’d been on too long. Enough time to share important information, while limiting the chances of interception.

“Ah. Time’s up, I’m afraid,” he said.

“Right,” Anakin said. “I’ll see you soon, then.”

He nodded. “May the Force be with you, my friend.”

“You, too.” And with that, Anakin signed off, leaving Obi-Wan once again alone with his thoughts.

Better ones, though. He knew it was a mistake, letting himself draw so much comfort from his little brother and his family, but he couldn’t quite stop himself. Whether or not Anakin was the Chosen One (and forgive me, Qui-Gon, but I’m no longer certain I believe in the Prophecy at all; I’m no longer sure I care), he was a beacon of hope. At least for Obi-Wan. At least for now.

When things are stabler, when the network is more secure, I can be better about that, Obi-Wan promised himself. But if this gets me through until then…

For now, he put the thought aside. He was going to try and make contact with some old allies on Mon Cala, and he should check the dead drops, and then he would meet Anakin and they could plan the next few weeks’ strategy, and--

The commlink buzzed again.

Obi-Wan stared at it for a minute, then picked it up.

Something has changed, the Force whispered to him.

And when he checked the message—a few lines of text, not a holocall or even voice-only—the tension started to creep back up his spine.

It was from Bail.

Who, in two years of communicating through messages and supplies and intelligence left at dead drops, had never used this frequency.

He took a breath, let it out slowly, and opened and decoded the message.

A set of coordinates; a time—three days from now.

And that was all.

Something had changed, something significant enough that the Senator was willing to risk an in-person meeting. Just requesting such a thing was...

“Oh, I have a bad feeling about this,” he said to himself, as he plugged the coordinates into the navicomputer.

If he got moving now, he would just barely make it in time.

For a moment, he hesitated, considering calling Anakin back. Sending him the same coordinates. If
it was *this* important, maybe they should both be there.

On the other hand, if it went wrong, better at least one of them was free to maneuver. Anakin could rescue him and Bail, if need be.

*I'll contact him while I’m on the way,* he decided. *Let him know I’m taking a risky meeting, and to be on standby just in case.* That would have to be enough.

Hoping very much that he was making the right call, he waited a few seconds for the navigational calculations to complete, then took a breath and made the first jump to lightspeed.
Anakin brought them in through Bestine. It was one of the farther settlements from the farm, and had more soldiers than the other cities, but he hadn’t used that spaceport in months. Anonymity outweighed the other concerns. He tried to switch up his approach at random--usually he had Artoo pick the landing site and fake transponder he’d use for the Waterfall; today, she was the Blue Giant instead.

He picked his own name, though. None of his false IDs would pass muster on an actual civilized planet, but out here, as long as he had enough money (or applied a half-decent mind trick) no one would care.

“Sir?” Rex asked, while he was sorting through the cards, trying to pick one. “Can I ask--what exactly are we doing here?”

Which was a fair question. It wasn’t exactly a secret how much Anakin disliked this place, after all. And maybe he was rushing this a little, but he could feel how wary Rex was, how much he distrusted Anakin’s trust in him.

It was an uncomfortable tangle, and he’d spent too damn long in one too similar to let this go on any longer than he absolutely had to.

Besides, he was officially between missions until Obi-Wan called again, and that meant going to see Leia.

This one, he decided, putting the rest of the ident cards back behind the hidden panel in his pilot seat. I like this one. It was a little obvious, maybe, but it felt like home. It would bring him--luck.

He slid the card into his pocket and stood up. “You’ll see.”

And, yeah, the way he was doing this was maybe a little unfair, but he was really looking forward to Rex’s face when he saw Leia for the first time. It would be better if she was a surprise.

Besides. It wasn’t often that he got an opportunity to be the enigmatic one. He was almost looking forward to it.

“Right,” Rex said.

“Artoo, you know the drill.”

The droid beeped out a few profanities and settled into his usual spot, ready to quickstart the ship if things went south on them.

“Yeah, you too, buddy,” he said, patting his dome and heading for the boarding ramp, pulling his hood up. “Rex, if anyone asks, my name’s Ben Naberrie.”

“Right,” he said. “I’ve...uh, just been using my name?”

“That’s fine,” he said. “We’ve got a bit of a hike to where we’re going.”

“Won’t be a problem, sir.”
He nodded. “Knew it wouldn’t be.” He grinned, and led the way out of the ship. Once past spaceport control, they’d have to pick up a pair of eopies—they’d hold up better over the distance than a speeder.

And, as he’d expected, they hadn’t had any trouble with the officials in Bestine. He hadn’t even had to pull out a mind trick, and no one had tried to follow them. Either to the livestock market or out of the town.

It was nice, having Rex here with him, he realized as they made their way into the desert proper. Partly as another layer of camouflage—he almost always came to Tatooine alone; while he and Obi-Wan did sometimes come straight here after a mission, it was more typical for his master meet him here for visits—and partly as a distraction.

When Anakin travelled through the desert alone, the sky seemed to weigh down on him, overburdened with everything he’d seen and done here.

*Another advantage to Bestine,* he thought, as Bestine disappeared into the heat haze behind them and Rex started attacking his question, just like Anakin had known he would. *I never travelled this route before Leia came to live here. If I have time, maybe I’ll loop around in the future.* Something to think about. For next time.

They reached the farm about four hours after double noon, with sundown still a ways off.

“Here we are,” Anakin said, leaping down off his eopie and staking her in place.

“Right,” Rex replied, dismounting with a little more decorum.

He had barely had time to finish tying their mounts down when a tiny comet launched herself out of the house, barreling right into him.

“Daddy!” Leia shouted. “Daddydaddydaddy!”

Behind him, he was vaguely aware of Rex stiffening, and possibly—probably—swearing under his breath in startled Mando’a.

That didn’t matter, though. Nothing mattered anymore, all of his problems melting away as he stooped down to catch Leia before she tripped and went flying.

Which, of course, meant she promptly grabbed onto the closest, most convenient handhold to steady herself.

“Ow--okay, princess, we talked about this--ow-- please don’t pull Daddy’s hair. ”

She obligingly untangled one sticky hand—he *still* hadn’t figured out how the hell she was so sticky all the time; but Beru said it was just a toddler thing and he’d long since decided to accept her wisdom on such matters.

“Thank you,” he said, holding her close and kissing her cheek.

“Daddy!” was her response, and she grinned at him.
“Missed you, too, princess,” he said. “Have you been good for Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru?”

“Uh-huh!” She nodded vigorously, bouncing a little in his arms.

“Good,” he said. “That’s exactly what I like to hear.”

She giggled and nestled closer, leaning her head on his shoulder, and finally getting her other hand out of his hair.

“Listen,” he said. “There’s someone I want you to meet.” He turned around, and Rex was there, looking exactly as poleaxed as Anakin had expected.

*He’ll probably forgive me. Eventually. ...worth it.*

“This is Daddy’s friend Rex,” he told Leia. “Can you say hi?”

“Hi,” she said dutifully, waving.

Rex just stared.

“Rex, this is my daughter, Leia,” Anakin prompted.

No response.

*Oops.*

“Uh-oh,” he said softly. “I think Daddy broke Rex, princess.”

Leia pulled back and stared at him, her tiny eyebrows furrowing into what would probably be a very impressive glare if she weren’t two and tiny and the cutest child in the known universe.

“Daddy, mean.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“Say sorry,” she demanded.

Since arguing with Leia was about as productive as arguing with--

He held her a little closer, and grinned at Rex, scrambling to cover that spike of pain. This was a happy moment. “Sorry,” he said. “Want to try again?”

His captain finally managed to find his voice. “I. Uh.”

*I’ll take that as a yes.* “Rex, this is my daughter, Leia.”

“Oh. Hello, *ad’ika.*”

That word he knew, at least vaguely. Or he knew ‘ika’ was a diminutive suffix, anyway. *Much better.*

“Hi,” Leia said again, then wriggled a little. “Daddy, down.”

*No,* he wanted to say. He wanted to keep holding her for a little while longer.

But he’d learned a lot, in the last two years of being a parent.
“All right,” he said. “But stay right here, where you can touch Daddy’s robe, okay?” With him and Rex right here, the worst risk was her getting under the eopies’ feet, but better not to take chances.

She nodded, and he put her down.

“You...you have a daughter,” Rex said.

“I do.”

“So...so you and the Senator really were...”

It was Anakin’s turn to stare. “Me and--did everyone know?”

Rex coughed and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. “Uh. Not that--you know, not that there was any chance of a little one, but…we could all see how you felt about her, sir. Uh. Sorry.”

Anakin buried his face in his hands. “Daddy’s an idiot, princess,” he announced.

Leia blinked up at him. “Uh-huh,” she said.

Rex was suppressing laughter. He could hear him.

He was about to retaliate when--

“Ani! I thought I heard you out here.” Beru, smiling bright and exaggerating just a little (because she would never have let Leia run up here if she hadn’t known there was someone to catch her), was standing on the stairs, leaning against the wall with a towel in her hands.

“Aunt Ru!” Leia said, bouncing up and tripping on the hem of Anakin’s cloak. He caught her he by the collar and steadied her carefully.

“Easy, princess,” he said. “Hey, Beru. This is Rex.”

“Nice to meet you,” she said. “I’m Anakin’s sister-in-law.”

“Pleased to meet you as well,” Rex said, with a sketch of a salute.

“Owen’s out on the ridge, but he’ll be back soon,” she said. “Why don’t you two come inside, have some water?”

“That would be great,” Anakin said, scooping Leia up again. “After you?”

She nodded, and led the way down into the slightly-cooler underground house. Anakin felt the last of the desert’s weight slip off his shoulders as he ducked under the doorway, his daughter in his arms and Rex at his back.

If only Obi-Wan and Padme and Luke could be here, it would be perfect.

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Specter’s work was now public, and it was almost the most pleasing thing he had ever experienced. True, it was hardly the debut he’d been dreaming of in the two years since his Master had found and elevated him, but he still relished watching the whispers and dread spread through the Senate
and beyond.

It hadn’t even been a particularly flashy or spectacular kill, the kind Specter knew he was capable of. The kind he was burning to try on something a little more real than the assassin droids he trained with.

Because yes, of course, his Master was right; a shadow appearing out of nowhere to kill swiftly and mercilessly and then vanish without a trace inspired terror. Delicious terror. More, perhaps, than a messier murder might.

But Specter had known how to do that--or most of it, anyway--since he was a child. He knew how to melt into shadows, how to perfect an ambush, how to stalk his prey. He had certain biological advantages there, of course, to say nothing of the Force, but any half-decent pickpocket from the underlevels could do it.

Not as well as him, of course, but they could.

He sighed, and toyed with his lightsaber for a minute. The fact was, as successful as it had been, as pleasant as the victory tasted, his first actual mission as the newly-minted official Sith Lord Darth Specter had been just...unsatisfying.

It also concerned him. That he had been given such limiting instructions. That he was still not trusted with an actual display of power.

He had not been his Master’s first choice. He knew that all too well. Lord Sidious never failed to take advantage of an opportunity to remind Specter that he was vastly inferior.

That he was not, nor could he ever be, Anakin Skywalker.

Specter snarled to himself, and flipped on his lightsaber. He meditated on the crimson blade for a minute, imagining it plunging into his rival’s chest.

Well. Maybe not his chest. Maybe he’d start somewhere a little less...immediately fatal. Really take his time. Have some fun with it.

That, Specter knew, would demonstrate how strong and skilled he was. That would show his Master he had chosen well. That would prove him to be a worthy apprentice.

And it was the only thing that would.

Best of all, as he had learned only hours ago, it was actually possible.

Specter had spent the last two years competing, ironically, with a ghost. He and his Master had suspected that Skywalker may have been one of those few who had survived the execution of the Jedi, but had had no proof. And his Master had decreed it a lesser priority, and he had obeyed.

But now, Specter had a recording of his own. It was even poorer quality than the one he’d left, unfortunately, but it was clear enough for him. After all, he knew Skywalker’s face almost as well as his own now--maybe even better, he hated him so.

To him, grainy as it was, the footage of the exploding mine was quite illuminating.

His rival was alive.

His rival could be killed.
All he had to do now was find him.

“And when I do,” he murmured, the soft hum of his lightsaber a perfect accompaniment to his vow, “when I find you, Skywalker, you will burn. And I will rise from the ashes.”

And once he did, nothing would stand in his way.

Chapter End Notes

lol what even are children: the sequel.
The problem with being a very public figure was that it made setting a clandestine meeting with a wanted fugitive--let alone one so recognizable as General Kenobi--a logistical nightmare. Bail couldn’t go anywhere out of the way enough that the Jedi could show his face openly, not without exciting comment. And, unlike those first terrible weeks, the galactic political situation was largely stable enough that he couldn’t simply disappear for a few days without questions.

Not for the first time, as he had approached this problem, Bail wished that Alderaan shared Naboo’s custom for using body doubles.

But, as they did not, he’d had to come up with another solution. When he couldn’t, he’d done what he always did in such situations--he’d asked Breha for advice.

When she had answered the call, she’d had their daughter on her lap. Which, naturally, meant five very important minutes of making silly faces before he could take care of any other business. But then he had posed his question at last--carefully, of course; preserving the plausible deniability she’d asked him for when this all began. The conversation itself, at least, was secure enough that he didn’t need to be too opaque beyond that.

“Demarix,” Breha had said immediately. “Set it up there.”

He’d blinked, a little surprised. “Really?” It was small, out of the way--primarily arid plains and rocky pasture, some mediocre farmland on the primary landmass, but too far out of the way to be much exploited. Yet. So it would do well to keep the General safe, but he might still have some issues justifying his visit.

“Yes,” she’d said, gently prying her necklace out of their daughter’s hands. “They’ve recently had some massive seismic disturbances in the southern hemisphere. I received a petition for aid this morning.”

Ah. Yes, of course, that would solve several problems at once--his own, General Kenobi’s, and hopefully Demarix’s citizens’ as well. Trust Breha to have the answers.

“Thank you,” he’d said. “I’ll pick up the relevant supplies and head there directly.”

She’d smiled. “Wonderful. Everything’s in place, of course. If you hadn’t called, I was going to reach out before assigning someone else.” She’d paused for a second, then added, hopefully, “Will you come home for a few days, after?”

“I will,” he’d promised. It had been a while--too long--since he’d last seen his wife and daughter in person. Holocalls like this one, while frequent, were not the same. And, yes, that was the life he’d chosen as a Senator (as a rebel), but he’d missed them.

“Yay!” The baby bounced in her mother’s lap, clapping her hands.

“We look forward to seeing you,” Breha had said, then glanced off to one side and sighed. “But I have a budget meeting I’m now officially late for, and I know you have your own preparations to make.”

Sadly true. But he’d see his family soon enough. “All right,” he’d said. “I’ll see you in a week or so. I love you both.”
“Love you, too,” she’d said.

“Bye bye, Daddy!”

“Bye bye!” He’d smiled at them both and waved for his daughter, then switched off the comm and gotten to work.

From there, the arrangements had been simple enough to make. He’d told Captain Antilles where they were going, then sent General Kenobi a coded message with a time to meet and a location a few hours north of where they’d set up their base, on one of Demarix’s sparsely-populated plains. He’d been fairly sure he’d be able to slip away unnoticed for a few hours—this type of relief work almost always had just enough of a cover of controlled chaos for that.

That had been three days ago. Bail and his people had arrived yesterday, and gotten things set up. He’d met with the planetary leadership for several hours, to get more detail about their specific needs. And now, that being done, he had the cover he needed to slip away.

He nodded to Captain Antilles, then returned to the ship. Officially, he was communicating with Alderaan and coordinating the additional, updated aid and supplies. In reality, his trusted staff would handle that for him, while he snuck out on a speeder bike they’d brought along for this very purpose.

His people could cover for him for about half a standard day. Enough time to go to his meeting, deliver his message, and return.

He was, unfortunately, running a little behind schedule—almost an hour late; General Kenobi had beaten him there.

The Jedi was sitting on a rock, cloaked and hiding his face. There were scorch marks and wear patterns on his robe that hadn’t been there the last time Bail had seen him, but he seemed otherwise all right. Bail was relieved to see it.

Kenobi tracked his approach and rose gracefully as the bike came to a halt.

“I was beginning to think I’d misread your message,” he said, dropping his hood back.

“I apologize. It took me a little longer to get away than I thought it would,” Bail said, then paused before adding, “It...it is good to see you again.” The circumstances were, of course, awful, but…

“Yes,” the General agreed quietly.

For a moment, neither of them spoke, then Bail pulled out his datapad. *Might as well get the unpleasantness over with as quickly as possible.* “I need to show you this,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Kenobi raised an eyebrow and said nothing, nodding at him to start the recording.

He did so, and then quickly looked away. He’d watched Senator Alavar’s murder more than enough times already. If he never had to see it again, it would be too soon.

Fortunately, the General only felt the need to watch it once.

“I see,” he said. “Thank you, for bringing this to me.”

“Of course,” he said, with a half bow. “This is all I have at present. We’re working on enhancing the footage, but...” He shook his head. “I know none of this is what you were hoping to hear.”
He shrugged. “No. But it’s not entirely unexpected, either.” He paused, then added. “It... is coming rather sooner than we’d anticipated, though.”

Well, that was...it made Bail feel marginally less awful, to know that the Jedi had planned for this. Of course, the fact that this being had apparently shown up too soon might mean a prodigy of some sort, which could mean disaster. Or, on the other hand, it might mean Palpatine was rushing things, finally making a mistake they could exploit.

Or, possibly--

A horrifying thought occurred to him.

“You don’t...you don’t think he’s someone...” He trailed off, unable to quite put it into words.

What if this is another survivor, someone Palpatine found and broke?

But, to his relief, General Kenobi shook his head. “I...can’t be certain, not without more information, of course, but I don’t think so.”

“Good,” he said. “That would be...”

“The worst-case scenario,” he said. “I do try not to go there too often.”

And that was a reminder, now that the immediate necessity had been taken care of. “Padme asked if...she’s worried,” he said. “Do we need to move Luke?”

“No,” he said, immediately. “It doesn’t...” He paused, as if considering the best way to explain. “The protections we built for him, either they work or they don’t. Barring a savant from outside the galaxy, who interacts with the Force in a way completely foreign to our understanding...this doesn’t change anything. He is no less safe than he was before.”

Oh, good. “I’ll tell her,” he said.

“How are they?” he asked. “I didn’t tell Anakin who I was meeting--I didn’t want him to panic until there was a reason to--but once he’s through being cross with me over that, he’ll want to know.”

“They’re doing well,” Bail said. “It’s...hard, sometimes, for Padme, I think.” She still feels guilty, for her part in this. And there’s very little I can do to convince her otherwise, because she knows it’s not really her fault; she knows it’s irrational, but... “But she’s getting by. The letters make all the difference, I think.” Which, as soon as he said it, he realized he wasn’t entirely sure General Kenobi knew about those.

But he nodded. “Anakin’s much the same,” he said, with a wry smile. “He has most of her letters memorized, I think.”

Oh, good. I was hoping I hadn’t overstepped. “We’re making some progress, and that helps, too. Not quite enough to start more overt coordination with your network but...well, maybe in a few years.”

“Right,” General Kenobi said. “Unless something else changes, we’re in a similar situation on our end. We’ll see how things go.”

And that--that being, the one in the video, could change everything. But, like the General had said, imagining the worst-case scenario was far from productive. Bail chose to focus on happy things
instead-- *hopeful* things. “And Luke, of course, lights up any room he’s in.”

“Yes, I imagine he would,” he said, then paused. Almost wistfully, he asked, “I don’t suppose you have any pictures?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” He picked up the datapad--it did feel a little odd, keeping baby pictures on the same machine as something so awful, but this was his personal ‘pad, the one he always carried with him; the one that had every defense against slicing or mirroring his security could come up with. All of his most valuable data--whether deadly or precious--was on here.

He skimmed through until he found the right directory. “Here--” He called up a picture of Luke, with his head tilted looking quizzically up at the camera, covered in bright yellow paint. “I took this...oh, I think two weeks ago? Padme and I, and a few others in our coalition, were interrupted when he got away from his minders.”

General Kenobi laughed, and Bail smiled to himself at the sound. It was a very nice one, and he had a sneaking suspicion it was a rare one, these days. “Could I have a copy?” he asked. “To show Anakin, of course.”

“Of course,” Bail said.

“Thank you,” he replied. He tapped the screen idly, probably hoping to see another picture of Luke, and instead landed on one Breha had sent the day before. “Oh, and this must be your daughter!”

“Yes,” he said, grinning. “She’s a few months older than Luke--I’ve never brought her to Coruscant, so they haven’t met yet, but someday, I like to think they’ll be friends.”

“Someday,” he agreed. “She’s beautiful.”

“She is.” Because, really, that should be obvious to anyone with eyes. And then, as long as they were sharing... “Do you have any pictures of Leia?”

General Kenobi ducked his head a little. “I have one,” he admitted. “Which I shouldn’t carry, I know--it’ safer that way--but...well.” He pulled out a datapad of his own and called it up. She was sitting in her father’s lap; General Skywalker was pointing something out to her, and she was staring up at it in wonder.

“She’s adorable,” he said. “They look happy.”

“She is, when I’ve seen her,” he said. “And he is, when he’s holding her.”

“Good,” he said. Though the way he’d phrased it was--well, given the realities of the work Skywalker was doing, it made sense. But it was a sad story. One of far too many for such a young family to bear.

*We’ll make the next ones better,* he thought, looking down at the picture again. *For all three of the children.*

Kenobi watched him for a minute, as if weighing something internally, then said, “I can give you a copy. To show Padme. You probably shouldn’t keep it, but...”

“Thank you,” Bail said, sincerely. Even if they had to destroy the file afterwards, for Padme to get just a glimpse of the family she’d left behind was too great a gift to refuse.

It was the work of a few seconds to send the files--the pictures of the children, and a copy of the
security tape—to one another, working their way through all the relevant encryptions. And, no sooner had they finished, that Bail’s datapad beeped at him.

“Ah,” he said. “That would be Captain Antilles. I have to get back.”

The General nodded, putting his own datapad away again. “And I shouldn’t stay much longer anyway. You have work to do, and I have some news to deliver.”

“At least not all of it’s bad?”

“At least,” he agreed. “You’ll let me know, if you learn anything else about our new friend?”

“Of course,” he said. “Be safe. Please.”

He smiled faintly. “As much as I can.” He pulled his hood up and bowed. “May the Force be with you, Senator.”

“And with you,” Bail replied softly, before turning back to his speeder and leaving his clandestine meeting with a wanted fugitive behind; ready to resume his role as a very public figure once more.
Specter had delivered concrete evidence, in the form of a poor-quality surveillance video, that Skywalker had survived the attack on the Temple. He had presented this to Sidious in much the same way a pet feline might provide its owner with a dead rodent--full of smug satisfaction for a gesture that was neither necessary nor particularly wanted.

Particularly since Sidious, of course, had already known. He had suspected from the beginning, of course; he had never sensed Skywalker’s death. Besides, he knew rather intimately how the young man operated, and certain acts of rebellious sabotage over the last year and a half were clearly the work of his erstwhile protege. It was vexing to think that his current apprentice thought he needed further proof than that.

The boy was chomping at the bit now, all too eager to hunt down and kill his rival. Sidious, however, did not consider Skywalker’s removal a priority at this time. So he had sent Specter off to accomplish more productive tasks, and set himself to re-examining his candidate list. Sooner or later, after all, the confrontation that Specter so craved would happen. And, at present, it was unlikely to end in the boy’s favor.

Well, Sidious had learned the value of backup plans. The next time, though, he thought he would perhaps start with a more mature candidate. Children were easier to manipulate, to mold; but often proved volatile and irritatingly undisciplined.

Still, he did not intend--yet--to replace Specter as a response to his performance, simply to be prepared for the increasingly-likely necessity of doing so. The boy’s excess of enthusiasm would be curbed, and had not caused any difficulties or failures. Merely annoyance. As did his attitude towards the tape and all it represented.

Sidious paused for a moment, picking up the datastick and turning it over in his hands as a thought occurred.

Perhaps there was a use for the dead-rodent recording after all.

He had known for some time that Skywalker still lived. The question was--had certain other interested parties been aware?

Yes, he would keep Specter a while longer, despite his adolescent exuberance. The boy had potential, and had, if unwittingly, provided his master with an interesting opportunity.

He summoned Senator Amidala to his presence and set the grainy recording playing on a loop in the center of the audience chamber.

When she arrived moments later, and saw what he had laid out for her, her outward behavior was almost entirely perfect. Nothing in her expression showed her response to the security footage of her presumed-dead lover; she didn’t miss a step. Then again, she had been performing politics since she was a child, and he had expected no less. But that didn’t mean there was no reaction; her breath caught very slightly in her throat, and she carefully avoided looking at the hologram, even as she knelt less than a meter away from it.

Internally, of course, she was a storm. Her thoughts flickered madly between the boy she had adopted and her daughter’s grave. There was a deep well of mingled terror and grief and defiance backing it up.
Uninformed, non-sensitive imbeciles tended to assume the Force bestowed the ability to read minds, as clearly and accurately as reading text on a screen. This was, at best, a vast oversimplification. He could see Amidala’s thoughts and feelings, of course, as plainly as if she were projecting them right alongside the security footage. The trouble was that specific words were rare, unless deliberately projected. Which left what he saw open to a certain amount of interpretation.

She *was* surprised by the footage. That much he knew for certain. She had covered quickly, but not quite quickly enough. And, while that could have been because she was unaware that Skywalker lived, it could have been only that she was unaware such recent images existed, and had been caught off guard.

And while she was not sensitive and so could not shield, as such, she was all too aware of how she presented herself to him, so apart from that first ambiguous, tangled flash of raw feeling, her reaction was overshadowed by how she felt about Sidious.

This was not the first time such a thing had happened. True, he continued to conceal his true identity as a Sith Lord from all but a select few, but he had abandoned the kindly, avuncular mask he had worn for so long as no longer necessary.

And, for the most part, it wasn’t. But when it *was*, he could no longer assume the pretense as he once had. Scars aside, some masks simply could not be replaced with any sort of credibility.

“You sent for me, Majesty?” Amidala asked softly, breaking the silence after nearly a full minute. She kept her eyes lowered, her shoulders deceptively relaxed, but he could practically taste her desperate defiance in the air; a blunt, stubborn refusal to give him the satisfaction of seeing her pain.

But whether her grief was at the sudden reminder of a long separation, or at a perceived betrayal, at having been deceived by the father of her dead child...

“Yes,” he said, sinking back into his throne. Another test, then, was in order. She had made no suspect communications, with Skywalker or any other undesirables. But, then again, he hadn’t really given her much of an opportunity to do so, as he had with certain other Senators and officials he suspected. And Padme Amidala had never been particularly good at restraining herself. If he gave her an opening, she was bound to leap through it. “Recently, as you can see, there was a traitorous act of sabotage at a mining facility.”

“I condemn such acts when I learn of them,” she said quickly—a hair too quickly, but that was due to simple fear, mere desperation to keep her head on her shoulders. She camouflaged it better than most, but it still shone through.

“Yes,” he said. “I am sending you to oversee a portion of the reconstruction. Several of the miners lost their homes, among other assets. You are, I believe, no stranger to such mercy missions?”

Her eyes flicked up to the recording, just for an instant, and she knew it was a trap.

*But knowing and avoiding are not, in fact, the same thing,* he thought, amused by the wild patterns her thoughts carved under her skin. *Whether or not you manage to sidestep now, when the time is right, my dear, you will make extremely effective bait.*

“No, Majesty, I am not,” she said quietly.
“You may go and prepare,” he said. “I expect a report on your progress within three days.”

She bowed, then rose and left the room, again studiously avoiding looking at the hologram still flickering between them.

Sidious deactivated it with an impatient wave of his hand. That had been a reasonably productive interview, though he hadn’t quite gotten what he wanted out of Amidala. He had set her on a path that would likely lead there, at least. And there would, he was certain, be further opportunities in the future.

More importantly, it had solidified his understanding of a weak point in his regime. He no longer had the access he once did to unguarded thoughts, unguarded reactions. Oh, professional politicians were always careful about such things, but not to this extent.

What he had gained in exchange for that camouflage, of course, was worth the price and more, but the simple fact was that he might be missing key details. This placed certain... limitations ...on his ability to manipulate the beings in his domain; and it made it marginally likelier that a traitor might actually cause some damage before they were detected and brought down.

He could not regain what he had lost--so, much as he had had to substitute the lesser talents of Specter for all he had cultivated in Anakin Skywalker, he would need an alternative. A proxy. One who could observe and wrangle the Senators, the Moffs, the High Command, as he had five years ago.

And, naturally, one over whom he had absolute control.

Specter, of course, would never function in that capacity. The boy was a thief in the night, an assassin; not the kind of person people ignored. Not the way Sidious needed his proxy to be ignored. Besides, he had no intention of putting that much authority in a single person’s hands.

As for Tarkin and the rest, even if he were willing to invest that much influence in any one of them, those he had elevated had been promoted for other talents. Ones incompatible with what he needed now.

There was a possibility--one of the potential candidates for Specter’s successor; a woman named Daya. She could be trained and presented as someone merely ornamental. Decorative. She lacked the raw power he wanted in an apprentice, but had enough strength to learn a few subtle tricks.

On the other hand, she had already committed at least three murders that he knew of, though none could be tied to her legally. She might, like Specter, have too much of an independently violent streak to play the role he needed. At least not without significant time and effort spent breaking her. And such operations were delicate; all too easy to go too far and render her useless. No, Daya would not serve him in this way.

He started to move on, then paused.

Daya would not serve him directly in this way.

But she could still provide him the asset he sought. She could have a child.

Sidious had considered taking such a step in the past--there had been a point in particular, a little over half a decade before he had at last become Chancellor, when the political expedience had almost--almost--outweighed the risks. But Plagueis had advised against it, and he had found another way to solve the problem of the moment, and let the notion fade away.
But not, apparently, die entirely.

It was still a risk, of course. Not for the same reasons it had been twenty years ago, necessarily, but still a risk. This would put a considerable amount of potential power in another person’s hands. And training an asset from infancy was, as he had learned with Maul, sometimes a tricky business. To say nothing of the delay in actually being able to use said asset.

Still, there were significant advantages as well. While everyone would know the child was a spy—or, if they didn’t, they wouldn’t be worth spying on in the first place—most sentients had a peculiar blind spot where younglings were concerned. And it would be remarkably effective bait; for ambitious subordinates seeking to rise, and for bleeding-heart traitors seeking to ‘rescue’. It would serve as a deterrent, too, to Specter and any who followed him. A constant, living, breathing reminder of how easily he could be replaced.

The risk it presented—Sidious could mitigate that, he was certain, with the right sort of training. Assuming it had any intelligence at all; which, as his child, it certainly would. The delay, on the other hand, unfortunately could not be helped, but did he really lose anything in the meantime? It wasn’t as though he couldn’t keep an eye out for extant candidates as well.

He smiled to himself. A child would not solve his current dilemma, but in the future, would be worth the wait. And if it was not, he was not so arrogant as to be unable to recognize when his experiment had failed and dispose of the results.

Sidious pulled up Daya’s file again, searching for anything in her records that might make her a poor candidate for the endeavor. If nothing else, simply the attempt would certainly draw a reaction from his enemies.

And once they were reacting to him, moving down the paths he laid out for them…

This trap might be decades in the making, but it would, he thought, be well worth the wait.
It wasn’t the fact that Palpatine was trying to trap her that bothered Padme. Or, at least, not much. No, what bothered her was that it was so obvious. That wasn’t like him--like the man who had spent at least a decade and a half quietly accumulating power and setting the stage for the war and his ultimate takeover. A clumsy, obvious setup like sending her off in Anakin’s wake…

There was something buried here, something she wasn’t seeing. Probably, to her chagrin, because she’d been caught off guard, distracted by the very recent video of her officially-presumed-dead husband.

She didn’t know how the Emperor was reading that, either, so she wasn’t sure how worried she needed to be. She knew her surprise must have shown, despite her best efforts. At least to him. Fortunately, she had long since resigned herself to the fact that Palpatine knew about their marriage. Clearly, she and Anakin hadn’t been anywhere near as discreet as they’d thought. At least that was a reaction she hadn’t had to scramble to guard against.

And then there was the content of the video itself. Anakin had looked...he had looked good. Healthy and strong and confident, moving with that sure, easy, almost predatory grace she so loved; comfortable in his own skin in a way that he so rarely was. And, all right, maybe (probably) a lot of that was just her extrapolating, filling in the gaps of a very poor-quality surveillance recording with a combination of memory and wishful thinking, building him up into the man she saw in her dreams.

The good ones, at least. Not the nightmares, where he was pale and broken and too, too still. Like he’d been the last time she’d seen him--the last time she’d touched him--more than two years ago.

Maybe, if she was lucky, seeing that recording--seeing him whole and healthy and active again--would banish those images forever. But for now, all it had really done was open those wounds all over again. To have him so close, just meters away, but only a hologram, not something solid she could hold--in fact, something she could barely look at without risking giving herself away…

She missed him, so much that it actually, physically hurt.

His letters helped, a little--she was supposed to burn them; he always closed by telling her to burn them, but she hadn’t been able to do that. She had a small and growing cache behind a false wall at Varykino, along with her japor pendant and his Padawan braid. Little pieces of her missing love, things he had touched, things he had created; scraps of flimsi covered in his spidery handwriting and endearingly idiosyncratic spelling.

She’d teased him about that once, in better times. He’d grinned a little sheepishly at her and admitted that Artoo always went over his reports or anything else official before he submitted them. Because unless you were used to it, it sometimes took awhile to parse anything he’d written. She liked it, though. Partly for practical reasons--it added an extra layer of security to anything Ani wrote--and partly because it made his letters purely him. So much so that she could practically hear his voice, whispering in her ear, when she reread them.

So, they helped, but even they were only pieces. And even that small comfort was lightyears away from her now.
All in all, Padme was grateful that she had a driver to get her safely back to her apartment. If she’d had to drive herself there, after that audience, lost in those thoughts, she was almost positive she would have crashed.

By some miracle, she managed to mostly compose herself by the time she arrived. All four of her handmaidens were gathered in the sitting room, waiting; all four of them visibly relaxed when she came in through the balcony door--still shaken, but unharmed.

“Welcome back, milady.” Motee found her voice first, while Dorme rose to check on the counter-surveillance measures so they could speak freely.

“Thank you,” Padme said, finding a spot on the end of the couch and curling up there. “Is Luke still asleep?” She’d just settled him down for a nap when she’d been summoned, and waking him up unexpectedly was about as good an idea as it was with any toddler, but…

“Yes,” Elle said. “I just checked on him a couple minutes ago.”

“Right.” So, she wouldn’t go pick him up and hold him close for a while, as much as she desperately needed to. She would wait ‘til he woke up.

“What did the Emperor want?” Motee asked. “Did something happen?”

Dorme hadn’t signaled the all-clear yet, but any listeners would be expecting that question before too long. And they could at least get started on the logistics of her assignment. With that in mind, Padme said, “His Majesty is sending me to Vydrex IX. There was an...incident at the mining facility there earlier this week, and he would like me to oversee the relief efforts.”

The three still sitting with her exchanged a long look, then Motee nodded. “Will you send Luke to stay with your sister?”

“Yes.” She obviously wasn’t bringing him with her, but she could--every detail of how the Emperor had staged the audience, Anakin’s involvement in the incident in question, everything.

“So,” she said, after she finished. “What am I missing?”

“I’m not so sure you’re missing anything,” Elle said slowly, after a moment when none of them spoke.

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, then paused to gather her thoughts, “What if this--exactly this--is what he wants? Send you on a twisted, inward path, second-guessing everything, get you so worked up and paranoid, looking for ulterior motives, that you stop paying attention to the obvious and make a mistake.”

“Huh.” She thought about it for a minute, toying with a strand of her hair that had come loose.
“That...actually makes a lot of sense.” Palpatine was a master of subterfuge, of weaving plans within plans, but if he knew she knew that was how he operated...well, keeping her off-balance going for something simple, contrary to all previous patterns and expectations, might be his best move.

“I agree, to a point,” Dorme said cautiously. “In that I’m not sure this is overly complex, but--what if the trap is just as simple as it looks, but you’re not the target; you’re the bait?”

Padme winced and curled a little tighter. *That’s what I’m afraid of.* Because maybe Anakin was smart enough to not go right back to a place he’d just blown up because she was there and so much closer than she had been in years. *Maybe.* But if there was even a whisper of a hint that she was in danger there, somewhere he could actually get to and do something about it…

“Maybe so,” Motee said, “but if that’s the case, there’s nothing we can do about it, other than hope that cooler heads prevail.”

“Or that the General simply renders him unconscious for the duration,” Sabe murmured. And, if it came right down to it, Padme was sure Obi-Wan would do exactly that. And he’d be right to do it.

“As I said,” Motee said dryly, “we can hope that cooler heads prevail. *My* concern is that this isn’t a *trap,* so much as a way to get you off Coruscant. Either to remove you temporarily while he does something you could stop, or to take you somewhere less secure.”

*And remove me permanently,* Padme finished for her.

“That may be the case,” Dorme said. “But it’s what we plan for every time you leave the planet.”

She nodded. “Of course. Thank you. So, we file that away as ‘possible-shading-probable,’ but continue as if we haven’t picked up on it anyway?”

“More or less,” Motee said. “We usually do. I mostly brought it up because of the quick turnaround, and the fact that *he’s* arranging it this time. So it’s likelier than usual.”

“It’s not the case,” Sabe said. “He may be trying to use the inevitable collateral damage to force a breach. Either a...personal one, or a larger one, between the political and military arms of the movement.”

Well, the first wouldn’t be a problem. The recording hadn’t shown much, but it was far from the worst she’d seen from Anakin. Nothing she’d seen in the audience chamber was remotely like that awful day in his stepfather’s garage. Besides, the simple fact was, no matter how justified, no matter how careful, collateral damage happened in war. A philosopher she had read once--she couldn’t recall his name--had said ‘All wars are crimes.’ She’d lived through enough conflict to know that to be true. It was simply a matter of degrees. And she trusted Anakin--at least in his official capacity--to do everything in his power to minimize it. There *were* things that made him lose all sense of perspective, but there shouldn’t have been anything at that mine to do it. And if there had been, it would have *shown.*

*I really, really hope that this isn’t a trap for him,* like Dorme said.

As for the second…

It could happen. Someday. Extremists would rise, as they did in any movement. Barriss Offee was only the harshest example that came to mind. And some of them would, almost certainly, part ways with the larger movement. In both directions--because they were too militant, or not militant
enough.

But she doubted that this moment would do it.

“I don’t think it’ll happen. Not this time,” she finally said. “But that might be his goal. And it is something to watch for, in the future.”

Sabe nodded. “I think we’ve covered the likeliest ulterior motives,” she said. “And any further speculation risks running us into Elle’s trap.”

“I agree,” Motee said.

Padme nodded, and reluctantly uncurled. She had a task to complete, and preparations she had to make. Fortunately, it was midafternoon in Theed, which made her first task a little easier. She and Sola had discussed having Luke stay with Sola in situations like this before, at least in abstract, but a little notice would almost certainly be appreciated. “I have to call my sister. Please take care of the rest of the arrangements. I want to--” Saying ‘get this over with’ felt wrong. There were people there who needed help. And it was, at least in part, because of people she worked with. People she loved.

But this was a trap. And there were too damn many reasons Palpatine might be sending her into it, and Bail hadn’t reported back about what the Jedi had said about the Dark Side assassin, and this might be putting Anakin at risk, and...

There was too much at stake, and yes, this was important, but she needed to be here, doing her real work. Not chasing her husband’s ghost and trying to pretend it didn’t hurt, to be where he’d been, to have missed him by days.

But her handmaidens understood. They always had. And she would do her duty. She always had.

“We’ll be ready to leave in a few hours,” Sabe said. “Do you have a preference for who goes with you and who goes with Luke?”

“No, I trust you.” And she’d have to get Luke ready to go, and hope he wasn’t too upset that Mommy wasn’t coming to Aunt Sola’s with him. “Let me know if there’s anything you need from me.”

“We will,” she said.

Padme left them to it, heading into her study to call Sola and get this--

And get to work.

Chapter End Notes

Yay for handmaidens! Wanted to feature some besides Sabe. Plus, a little bit of backstory/headcanoning/etc.

Also! I will be doing a bonus fic of some kind for Star Wars Day (May 4). A bit more info on that on my writing tumblr. Feel free to let me know if there's something specific you'd like to see, on that list or otherwise!
Thanks so much for sticking with me through this! <3

~shadowsong
Part 3, Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As always, Anakin took the Waterfall on a roundabout route away from Tatooine. And, as always, he felt that weird mixture of relief and disappointment. Relief because--because the planet was what it was, and his memories were what they were, and it was still hard, being here.

But, at the same time, disappointment because, at least for now, he had to leave Leia behind. When she was a little older, ready for training, things would be different. But for now, she was safer staying with Owen and Beru, and he came to visit as often as he could. Which was not often enough by a long shot, but...

He shook his head, and focused on flying instead. Hopefully, by the time he and Rex got to the rendezvous with Obi-Wan, all of that would have faded. As much as it ever did.

Rex wasn’t in the cockpit with him; he’d set up a punching bag down in the hold to try and work out some of his own tension that way. It didn’t seem to be helping all that much, but at least it was keeping him busy. Sometimes, that was all anyone could do, when faced with what felt like impending doom.

Anakin had, of course, told him what Obi-Wan had said, that everything would be fine, but it probably wouldn’t make much difference until the actual meeting. Just like it had taken Leia to really drive home to Rex that Anakin had meant it, and he’d forgiven him in person from the start. Obi-Wan’s came secondhand, which made it that much harder.

But all of that would be straightened out soon enough, travel time aside. Along with whatever that meeting Obi-Wan had taken had been about. He’d sent two messages on the subject--first a request to stand by, then, a couple days later, a brief, “all clear, details when we meet.”

The two days in question had been awful-- because, sure, Obi-Wan had gone dark for missions before (Anakin never liked it, but grudgingly admitted that it sometimes had to happen), but the fact that this had come up suddenly and was for a couple days had just made it worse. Fortunately, he’d had Leia (and a few projects Owen had asked him to work on) to keep him busy, or he might have actually gone crazy, waiting on that second message. As it was, if he’d had any idea where the meeting was, he probably would’ve flat ignored his orders and gone to help right away.

Which, come to think of it, was probably at least part of why Obi-Wan hadn’t told him. That, and they could never be 100% sure how secure their conversations were, so they tried to avoid details like that except in person. There would have been a preset distress call, of course--probably on a timer that Obi-Wan had to restart at frequent intervals; that was how he usually did it--with all of that information. It wasn’t a perfect system, but it had worked so far.

We should work out something better, he thought, before the delay in getting the message to me gets him killed.

He’d bring it up, after they’d covered everything else. He had several hours in hyperspace to try and brainstorm some ideas. Maybe Rex would have some suggestions, too. They’d figure something out, anyway. Just like they always did.
The trip itself was quiet and uneventful, even if it was still sort of tense. Obi-Wan had beaten them to the rendezvous, which meant that his meeting had been closer than Tatooine. Which didn’t actually tell Anakin all that much about the content or who he was meeting with, but it was still something.

He’d brought the Waterfall in for a landing under a moss-covered rock overhang at the edge of the swamp. It was a tight fit, and maybe a silver lining to meetings on this particular planet was that it took some actual skill for him to approach it safely.

It was nice, when he got to accomplish things. Concrete things. Especially after a string of days mostly spent waiting.

They were halfway down the boarding ramp when Rex paused, once again working himself into a tightly coiled spring of anxiety.

*Is he going to bolt again?*

Anakin didn’t think he would but, just in case, he paused as well, ready to intercept if he did.

“Maybe…” Rex said. “Sir, maybe I should stay here. With the ship. Not...not rush things.”

“It’ll be okay,” he said. “I told you. Everything’ll be okay. Trust me on that, all right?”

Rex took a deep breath, then steeled himself and nodded. “All right. I trust you, sir.”

“Good,” Anakin said, smiling briefly at him. “Come on, follow me. And be careful--the mud gets up to your hips a couple places on the path. Oh, and watch out for snakes.”

“...good to know, sir,” Rex said, then fell into step behind him.

On a normal planet, it would have taken about a half-hour for the two of them to get from the overhang to the small patch of relatively dry, solid ground where Obi-Wan was waiting for them. But because this planet was *not* normal, it took half the afternoon.

Still, they made it, without getting stuck too badly or bitten by any of the snakes (just a few hundred insects). Obi-Wan, of course, was perfectly composed, having already settled himself in and started making tea.

“Oh, wonderful, you made it,” he said, standing up and brushing himself off lightly. He had clearly been there for a while; he was mostly dry.

“No thanks to all the kriffing mud,” Anakin muttered, offering Rex a hand up onto solid ground.

“Well, if it bothers you that much, we *could* have our next meeting on Jakku.”

He paused, contemplating *that* horror for a second. Another karking desert planet, without Leia there to make it worth tolerating…

“Have I mentioned how much I *love* mud, Master?”

Obi-Wan grinned at him, then looked past him to Rex, eyes growing quiet and serious again.

Behind Anakin, Rex tensed, and he fought the urge to do the same.
You said this was okay, I need this to be okay, please--

“It’s good to have you back on board, Captain,” Obi-Wan finally said softly.

“It’s...it’s good to be back, sir,” Rex said.

And...that was that.

Well, that’s not exactly fair, Anakin thought. Rex was mine, why did Obi-Wan have so much less trouble convincing him he was forgiven?

And then he realized how horrible that thought was and it took a few seconds to drag his focus back to the present moment and out of his ever-present guilt.

“Anakin?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Sorry,” he said.

Don’t be jealous, don’t be jealous, it’s probably because you broke the ice, that’s all. He found a spot to sit down. “So, what was this meeting about?”

“Ah,” he said, and sat back down as well. “I met with Senator Organa.”

With--

An emergency meeting with--

No. No, no, no, no, no, nononononono this can’t be happening this can’t what no--

“Sir?” Rex put a hand on his arm, which at least jerked him out of that particular moment of utter frozen terror.

Which had been ridiculous, anyway. If something had happened to--if something had happened, he would have known. He would have felt it. He would have known.

Would you? Would you really?

He buried that deep, the only way he really knew how--and it was like he was out of his own head for a second, seeing him drop back into old patterns, patterns he was trying so hard to break, he’d been trying so hard for two kripping years but--

“You didn’t tell me,” he snapped. He’d gotten to his feet at some point; he couldn’t remember doing that; that was bad, right?

But it was easy, it was so easy, it was too easy to lash out instead of taking a breath and thinking this through. Some part of him knew that, some part of him was begging the rest to stop for a minute, to wait, but it was swallowed up by the roar of his heartbeat in his ears.

“No, I didn’t,” Obi-Wan said. He had stayed where he was, seated on the ground. “There wasn’t time, and I didn’t want you to panic until we knew there was reason.”

“Didn’t want me to--” Behind him, Rex was backing away, stop this, stop this, you’re supposed to be better than this, why aren’t you better than this. “What the--what happened to no more secrets, Obi-Wan?”

Which wasn’t fair. It wasn’t like he was telling Obi-Wan everything--though things that were technically from before they’d made that promise didn’t count; and the nightmares were just--Obi-Wan needed him to be okay, he didn’t need to know about the guilt or the sleepless nights or the
constant echo of you broke the world, you were supposed to save everyone and just look where you are now--

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan said. “Look at me. Look at me.”

He was shaking now. The initial--it was over, the moment was over, the guilt had killed it (for now, at least--never thought I’d be grateful for my karking guilt), and he was shaking. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to--”

“I know,” he said. “And you’re right, we did promise. But there wasn’t time, and…” He shook his head. “I had my reasons. And I am telling you now, at the first opportunity.”

“I know,” Anakin echoed. “I know, I know.” Do better. Be better. You have to stop this.

“Sit down. Breathe.”

Wordless, he obeyed. It was easier to obey right now, to not think.

“That’s better, right?”

He nodded, and it almost wasn’t a lie.

“You’re doing better, you know,” Obi-Wan said, after a moment where they just sat there, the tension slowly, slowly, slowly bleeding out of the air.

He blinked, and looked up, uncertain.

“Not so long ago, you would have held on to that--you would have stormed off, gone and done something reckless, refused to speak to me for days,” he said. “But you caught yourself. You calmed down on your own--or, mostly, at least. You’re doing better.”

He...he hadn’t thought about it that way. Huh.

“Oh,” he finally said.

Obi-Wan smiled a little at him. “All right?”

“Yeah,” he said. He took a breath, held it for five counts, and let it out slowly. His heartrate had almost returned to normal now. “Yeah, all right.”

But--

Rex, he thought, with another wild stab of guilt. “I’m sorry, Rex,” he said. “I didn’t--I’m sorry.” He wanted to say ‘it won’t happen again,’ but he’d thought that as recently as this morning, and obviously he was wrong. And he didn’t want to lie.

“It’s all right, sir,” he said, quietly. “Really, it is. Like General Kenobi said.” And he wasn’t--he wasn’t lying, or minimizing to make Anakin feel better. Or if he was, he was hiding it really well.

He had been wary, but it had faded along with Anakin’s...with Anakin’s rage.

I don’t deserve you. Either of you.

He closed his eyes, and tried to release that thought, or shut it down, or something. Letting the guilt spiral out of control wouldn’t really help with anything, either. ...I’m going to have to meditate later, aren’t I. For hours.
But that was later. And, okay, Obi-Wan maybe had a point about why he hadn’t told him, and there
was a difference between Secrets and holding back operational details when there was no secure
way to share them.

On the other hand, this had still been an emergency meeting with Bail Organa, and--

“Is...are...?” He stuttered a little. He couldn’t get the question out; couldn’t say their names; didn’t
trust himself not to break down again if he did.

“They’re fine,” Obi-Wan assured him. “Padme and Luke are fine. Or they were when Senator
Organa saw them last, anyway. That’s not why he wanted to meet.”

He slumped a little, boneless with relief.

Rex blinked, and looked like he was about to ask a question, then thought better of it.

*I’ll tell you later,* he promised silently. *When I’m not so--when I’ve had a chance to calm down all
the way.*

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, okay.” Another deep breath. “What *did* he want, then?”

“To show me this.” Obi-Wan’s face went grim, and he pulled out a datapad, calling up a grainy
holovid of--

*Oh.*

It was a ten-second clip, but it only took him half that long to figure out what he was looking at.

*So,* he thought. *So, this is...this is my replacement.*

He thought he might throw up.

Because *that could have been him.* He hadn’t told anyone--not even Obi-Wan--how close it had
been, but he knew. *He knew.* And now there was someone else, some tall unknown being snapping
necks in dark alleys, who was doing the Chancellor’s dirty work.

Who had taken that shot for him.

*How can you look at it like that, how could you, selfish-- this is a sentient being, a person who was
ruined because of you. Because you couldn’t see what Palpatine was. Because even when you
finally did, you couldn’t bring yourself to end him. Because you failed at everything you were
supposed to be.*

*Because.*

*Of.*

*You.*

It took him--he wasn’t sure how long, after the vid finally ended, to wrestle the guilt back into its
box where it belonged.

*A lot of meditation later.*

“So,” he finally said. It came out hoarse and painful, and he cleared his throat. “So, what do we do?
Do we go after them?”
Obi-Wan studied him for a moment.

“Please?” Anakin said, and it had nothing to do with his original question. He just--couldn’t.

Rex had moved closer again, a silent wall of support at his back, and he didn’t have words for how grateful he was. To both of them, just for being there.

“All right,” Obi-Wan finally said. “But later, we should talk. When it’s not so raw.”

Anakin nodded. “Okay.”

“And I’m not so sure we should,” he said, after another moment. “Go after them directly. At least not yet.”

“Why not?” he asked. Tactics. *I can do tactics*. “The longer we leave them running around…”

“I know,” he said, and sighed. “That is a problem.”

“And--sorry, sirs,” Rex said. “But wouldn’t there be an advantage to going after him? To picking the ground? I mean, he’s gonna come after you two someday. Probably.”

“You’re right,” Obi-Wan said. “But I’m not sure we can focus on them exclusively. We have other work that needs to be done. I have contacts I need to cultivate, there are some more targets for the two of you to deal with, a few things we should investigate…”

And there were only two of them--because Rex could not take this being on; it would have to be him or Obi-Wan.

“So...what, then?” Anakin asked. “We just keep doing our work, pretend we don’t know they’re out there?”

“Not exactly,” Obi-Wan said. “We watch, and wait, and see what we can learn about this being. Obviously, if we see an opportunity, we take it. But we don’t go looking for trouble.”

He sighed. On the one hand, they really didn’t have the time or resources to go looking. On the other--this new...candidate...couldn’t be very experienced. Not right now, at least. But the longer they waited to take them down, the harder it would be. “I guess that’s the best we can do, for now,” he finally said.

“And, when we get a chance,” Obi-Wan said, “I think we should go to Dagobah.”

...*yeah. I think that’s a good idea*. Master Yoda might not tell them to do any different, but this was something all three surviving Jedi should probably weigh in on. *And maybe he can help me sort through some of--everything. He hasn’t really helped me much in the past, but things were all right on Polis Massa, and he doesn’t need me to be okay like Obi-Wan does. It’s worth a shot.*

“I agree,” he said.

“Then we’ll plan on that,” Obi-Wan said. “But in the meantime…”

“Yeah,” he said. They had other work to do. Important work. *Distracting* work. The kind that helped him get by. The kind he was good at. It didn’t to much to ease his guilt, other than it kept him from thinking about it for a little while, but…it was useful, and he was doing things.

And, just like it had been his entire adult life, it was always there. When everything else was falling apart around him, he could at least count on *that.*
It would have to be enough.

Chapter End Notes

Wow. Uh. So, this ended up a lot longer--and a lot darker--than I'd planned it to be. Uh. Anakin's head is not a happy place to be. I think I mentioned a while back, that he is getting better/doing better, but it's not a straight line, and he's got a long way to go still. But he's trying. And he's better than he was. And he recognizes that he's got some problems, and is really trying to fix things, you know?

Anyway. Uh. Thank you all for reading and sticking with me this far <3

~shadowsong
Part 3, Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Padme’s trip to Vydrax IX had, in the end, been somewhat anticlimactic. Despite her and her handmaidens’ fears, there was no dire news from Coruscant while she was away, and the closest she had come to personal, physical danger had been a genuine accident—a platform that was less stable than the mine foreman had thought gave way beneath her. She’d dislocated her shoulder when Dorme caught her, but that was it.

And, up until then, apart from the raw fact that Anakin had been involved (he hadn’t shown up, which was—probably for the best, as much as she needed to see him), it had been a fairly standard disaster relief effort. She had tried to find a balance between being too interested in the dissidents behind the explosion, and not interested enough. As far as she could tell, she’d done all right—she hadn’t raised any local eyebrows, at least—but if she hadn’t…

There was nothing she could do about it now. Palpatine might well sit on his analysis of her behavior for years. Focusing on how well she had or hadn’t done until then would just make her paranoid. And, like Elle had said, that would make her more likely to make a mistake.

In any case, at least in terms of quantifiable problems, the worst of it had been when the head of the local mining concern tried to enlist her support in a dispute he was having with the system’s civilian governor, who, naturally, was also engaged in an elaborate pissing contest with the local military commander. Padme was, of course, smart enough not to actually get involved, but juggling the three men (and their egos) so they didn’t keep her from doing her job had been incredibly annoying. And it had made just about everything take twice as long as it should have, and probably contributed to the miscommunication about the platform and her accident.

Not that she was particularly upset about that. It wasn’t like a dislocated shoulder hurt, or meant she couldn’t pick up her son properly when she saw him again, or anything.

But, at long last, after a little over two weeks, things had progressed reasonably and gained some momentum of their own. The situation was as stable as she could hope to make it. She’d stayed an extra couple days, just to be sure, then politely—and with great relief—started back to Coruscant.

And then, when she was about halfway there, she’d received a message from home. Not any kind of disaster there, thank every known deity in the universe, but Queen Velida, elected to succeed Apailana four months before, was requesting her advice and assistance with some internal issues.

As much as she worried about the Queen using her fame and stature as a shortcut around a complex problem, Padme could hardly refuse the request.

At least this will probably taper off after another couple months, she’d thought, as Sabe relayed the new course instructions to the pilot. Hopefully, anyway. I made sure I stayed term-limited for a reason.

But she was more or less resigned to the idea—the only Queen who hadn’t sought her advice like this, at least in the early days, had been her immediate successor, Idayane, who had seemed to want to prove she could live up to expectations just fine on her own. Padme had always gotten the impression that Idayane had resented her a little bit, or at least having to follow immediately after her. And she couldn’t really blame her—while she didn’t think she was any more competent or
talented than any of the young women who had followed her in the Palace, the circumstances of her reign had made her a hard act to follow. And she knew it. And Idayane, in particular, had felt it. Their relationship had improved significantly since Idayane had left the palace, but Padme doubted they’d ever be friends, the way she was with the others--Neeyutnee and Jamillia in particular.

So, she had sent in her final reports on Vydrex IX--the official one, to Palpatine, and a second, very carefully-worded one to Bail and Mon--and headed home. Which, to be fair, wasn’t entirely a bad thing. She got to see her parents, and Sola and the girls, and spend a little more uninterrupted time with Luke than was sometimes possible in the Capital. They’d even managed to slip off to Varykino for a couple of days.

She’d spent some time at Leia’s false grave, too--without Luke; she had no idea whether or not he’d be able to tell it was empty, and didn’t want to risk it either way. When he was old enough, she would tell him everything, of course. But for now, it would only upset him, or risk exposing him, or both.

But, eventually, both her business on-planet and her brief retreat had concluded. And now, over a month after she’d left, she was finally back on Coruscant, with her son and her handmaidens, settling back into her usual routine.

Well, that had been the plan.

Until, halfway up to the apartment, the lift stopped, and quietly slid open.

Luke pressed tight against her side, clinging to her leg; if he got any closer, he’d practically be inside her. She heard him whimper faintly, and she couldn’t blame her.

Because, standing there quietly, perfectly framed in the doorway, was the shadow from Bail’s security tape.

The assassin.

Padme fought down the urge to scream, to pick up her son--shoulder or no shoulder--and run. It wouldn’t do any good anyway; the assassin was blocking the only exit.

She shut down that part of her brain as hard as she could, resting a hand on Luke’s head, and tried to take in as much detail as she could.

He was tall; about Ani’s height, give or take a few centimeters. He wasn’t human--there was a little too much height to his hood. Cerean, maybe; or a horned species like a Gotal or a Devaronian. She couldn’t see his face, and he wore gloves, so she couldn’t narrow down his species that way. He shifted ever so slightly; the outer layer of his robes swirled around him, revealing a pair of lightsabers clipped to his belt.

A not-so-subtle threat.

Her handmaidens went still, and pressed a little closer around her.

She steeled herself, and looked right at him. I stared down Count Dooku. Whoever you are, you are not Dooku.

(And it wasn’t the same, because her son was here, but it was enough for her to stay strong, to protect him, to get the all off this damn lift without anyone dying.)

“Good afternoon,” she said, coolly.
“Senator Amidala,” he replied. His voice was—not what she expected. Lighter, softer—*young*. “I am Darth Specter.”

Which meant—

*Don’t think about it now.*

“Is there a reason you’ve stopped us?” she asked, keeping any reaction to the name—or the *title*—off her face.

“You were investigating the bombing on Vydrex IX, correct?” he asked. He leaned forward a little, and she caught another flash of his lightsabers.

*I could reach out and take them. He’s so close, and if I disarm him—*

*Don’t be an idiot,* she cut herself off, harshly. *Don’t pick a fight with him. Not now. Luke is right here. If you try to disarm him, it’ll get messy, and he’s faster than you are, and there’s no cover in a damn lift. Besides, he can kill you just as dead with his bare hands. Probably.*

“I wasn’t investigating,” she corrected him. “I was overseeing relief efforts for the affected population.”

“Right,” he said. “But you were there. You must have asked some questions.”

*This is a trap,* she realized It was almost a relief. He was trying to *bait* her, into saying more than she should. Palpatine must have sent him, to catch her off guard. *This,* she could handle.

“A few,” she said, putting a hint of caution into her voice.

“Of course, you were curious,” he said.

“That’s not the word I would’ve used.”

“Tell me,” he said, taking a half step closer. “Did any of your *questions* tell you what kind of ship he left in? Senator,” he added, almost as an afterthought.

And *that* set of a different kind of alarm bell in her head. His voice had gotten tense, eager—*almost hungry.*

*He’s after Anakin,* she realized. *Whether or not this is a test for me, for him, it’s—well, good luck, Specter, I am not giving you my husband.*

“Like I said,” she said, making her voice as icy as possible, “I wasn’t *investigating*. No one even told me the bomber was male.” Which was technically true—Palpatine hadn’t *told* her, just shown her the kriffing video.

Besides, she didn’t know how much *Specter* knew. Palpatine didn’t seem the type to keep his minions any more in the loop than he had to. Two could play the testing game.

And, like she’d half-expected—like she’d hoped—Specter let out a sort of growl of frustration, and backed off. “Fine,” he said. “Fine. I’ll see you again. Senator.”

He turned, black cloak swirling around him, and left them there. The lift doors slid shut, and her handmaidens all relaxed.

And Luke burst into tears.
“Shh, shh, sweet boy, it’s okay,” Padme said, kneeling and holding him as close as she could with only one arm. “It’s okay, it’s okay, he’s gone now.” The lift lurched into motion around them, and she kept whispering soothing things, while her mind whirled, processing everything she knew.

Which was a lot more than she’d thought she ever would.

He’s young--and not someone who’s dealt with Senators or other people with any kind of rank before. He’s also kept at arm’s length, or at least doesn’t know that I already knew who was behind the attack on the mine. Which means he probably doesn’t know Anakin and I are married, either. And he didn’t--

She paused for a beat, looking down at her son as the elevator reached her floor.

He didn’t even look at Luke. Not once.

She hardly dared to believe it, but--Specter saw nothing in him, other than a frightened toddler.

All of that added up to--young, inexperienced, probably easy to goad into a trap.

If only that trap didn’t probably mean--

Not your call to make, she reminded herself. Okay. First thing, I have to let Bail and Mon know what I found out. From there, Bail would pass the intel on to the people responsible for using it, and the three of them would watch and see how Specter affected the political situation, and if they could manipulate that at all.

Then she was going to just find a quiet place and cling to her son and not deal with any politics or overblown egos or Sith Lords for an hour or two.

“Lulu, sweetheart,” she said, trying to disentangle him from her legs. “Mommy has to go make a quick call, okay? I’ll be right back, I promise.”

“Noooooo,” he said.

“I promise,” she said again. “Aunt Sabe will keep you safe until then. And the bad man isn’t coming back.” Not any time soon, at least. I think. I hope.


Which meant Bail would probably be speaking with Breha and Winter. Padme had no intention of interrupting his time with his family unless she had no other choice.

She nodded. “Sorry,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”


“Shh, little one,” Sabe tried. “Mommy will be right back.”

Before she could lose her resolve, Padme went into her study and closed the door behind her. She called Senator Mothma’s office, only to be told she had left for a few hours, but fortunately, her staff had standing instructions to at least attempt to transfer any calls from Bail or Padme immediately. She waited a few minutes, with the silence and the ticking chrono making her tense all over again. She anxiously fidgeted with her earrings, then drummed her fingers on her desk, then just started pacing.
Calm down. Calm down. The call might be monitored, we never know--you have to look normal. So you don’t put her in danger. Focus on the positives--we know a lot more about Specter than we used to. And knowledge is power. Maybe it’s enough to do something about him.

She took a deep breath, gripped the edge of her desk, and let it out slowly while she was transferred to Mon’s private line at home.

Finally, she answered; and having something to focus on helped Padme get a little more self-control.

She sank down into her desk chair, and smiled, hoping it didn’t seem too forced. “Hello, Mon.”

“Hello, Padme,” she replied, with a warm, if slightly strained, smile. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I hope I didn’t catch you at a bad time…”

“No, not at all. What do you need?”

To tell you and Bail about Specter. And hope that Bail’s heard back from Obi-Wan by now.

She took a breath. Steady. “I know it’s short notice,” she said, apologetically, “but I was just checking and the fiscal deadline for the park fund we were discussing before I left is at the end of the week.”

A flicker of understanding passed through Mon’s eyes. While Padme and Bail had been friends for years, and so had plenty of reasons to visit one another, her relationship with Mon had been friendly, but much more professional before this all started. So they had a series of charity projects they worked on together now, as reasonable excuses to meet frequently. The one she’d picked—which did have a filing deadline coming up; she wouldn’t risk lying about that--involved Bail as well, making things much simpler.

“Damn. Of course it is.” She sighed.

“I know I had a few more details I wanted to go over,” Padme said. “Do you have an hour or so later this evening where we could meet?” Which was a hint that, while sooner would obviously be better, they didn’t need to drop everything and plunge into the new problem.

I hope I’m right about that.

“Uh, just a moment.” Mon turned away from her comm, partially disappearing from view for about thirty seconds, then came back. “I have a dinner with Senator Organa and a few others. He and I can stop by your apartment after, if you’d like? I know you just got in, and you’re probably tired…”

“That sounds perfect,” she said. “I’ll be up, I can sleep a little this afternoon. What time should I expect the two of you?”

“It’ll be fairly late,” she said. “Ten or eleven.”

“All right,” she said, making a note of it. “I’ll have everything together when you arrive.”

“Wonderful. See you tonight, then.”

“See you tonight.” She pushed the button on her desk to sign off, and slumped a little, leaning forward on her good hand.
Progress. The only progress I can make right now. But the others will know what I know in a few hours, and Bail will get it to the Jedi, and…it’ll be okay. They’ll take care of him. Obi-Wan and Ani--they’ll handle this. I trust them. It’ll all be okay.

If only she could forget that hunger.

“Mommy?” Luke’s voice from the door pulled her out of her thoughts.

He must have escaped Sabe. Or Sabe had figured out she was off the phone and sent him over.

She took a deep breath, made herself smile, and went to let him in.

He was standing there, scuffing his foot in the carpet. As soon as the door was out of his way, he beelined for her legs again, clinging tight. “Don’ like the lift man,” he mumbled.

“I know, sweet boy,” she said. She wanted to pick him up but--damn shoulder. So, instead, she sat down on the floor and pulled him into her lap. “Mommy’s not going to let him hurt you, okay, Lulu? Never ever.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, and nestled closer.

She stroked his hair lightly. “You were very brave. I know he’s very scary.”

Luke shrugged one shoulder and stuck his thumb in his mouth.

“Want me to read you a story?” She had one of his favorites on her desk. If he would let her up, she could grab it easily enough.

He shook his head. Clearly, he didn’t want either of them to move right now. And, frankly, she was perfectly fine with that. As long as he was with her--as long as she was holding him like this--she knew her son was safe.

So she held him, just like that, stroking his hair and humming a little under her breath, until he finally fell asleep.

He didn’t even look at Luke, she reminded herself. Specter didn’t even look at him.

It didn’t mean all that much, maybe, but it was better than nothing. She’d take what she could get, for now.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo let’s talk about the timeline of the Naboo monarchy for a second.

I know timelining anything in Star Wars is not the easiest of tasks (even without going into the messes that are the internal timelines of ROTS and ESB), but the Queens of Naboo are a pretty special case of weird. I know there’s a source somewhere (I don’t know what level of canon it was, even in Legends), that said four year terms/Padme served eight years as Queen and then went into the Senate. Jamillia succeeded her, ruled until about two years into the Clone Wars, did not get re-elected, and then we have Apailana at Padme’s canon funeral. Fine and dandy, yay, this makes total sense.
Except…then came the TV show. And Neeyutnee. And the timeline crashed and burned.

Wookiepedia, which I tend to use as a reference a lot, cites her reign as being 21 – 20 BBY. Which…given the timing of her first and last appearances (the whole thing with the plague, and then the Rako Hardeen arc) doesn’t make a whole lot of sense to me? I mean, fitting everything that happens in the TV series into three years (or, given that there’s a bit of a break on either end, closer to two and a half, probably) is a pain in the butt anyway, but this just makes it worse. I mean, it basically implies she resigned/was assassinated (but why didn’t we hear about that? Was there going to be a later Clone Wars arc about Neeyutnee’s death? There were supposed to be two more seasons, I think…) or impeached or something, and then Apailana succeeded her (what is the succession on Naboo, anyway? What is the equivalent of the VP?).

…anyway, roundabout way of saying: four-year terms, given the timeline as it now stands, insofar as any SW timeline can be accurately parsed, don’t make much sense. Also, I wanted to do a little—world/character building thing here, with Padme and her relationship with/how she is perceived by her successors. So, for the purposes of this fic, as there’s no strict canon (anymore, that I’m aware of) on the length of the Naboo Monarch’s terms, I’ve gone with two-year terms instead of four.

I’ll try not to do this sort of thing (completely ignore accepted Legends holdovers/interpolations) too often, I promise. <3 Thanks so much for putting up with me, and hope you’re enjoying yourselves! Next week should bring a close to Captain, and then we’ll start Part 4: Commander, which will bring in a couple people I’m super-excited for :)

See you guys next week!

~shadowsong
Part 3, Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Quick note--this chapter takes place a couple months after the last one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sure you want me to leave you here, Kenobi?” Hondo asked, staring down at the planet’s icy landscape from the boarding ramp of his ship.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said. Not that he particularly blamed Hondo for the reaction—Ordo Plutonia was just as uninviting now as it had been on his first visit years ago, early in the war. But that meant that the Imperial presence was minimal, and, since he and Anakin had managed to maintain decent relations with the Talz, despite everything, it was as good a place as any to use as a waystation. “I’m meeting someone here.”

“Hmm...anyone I know?” he asked, stroking his ever-present pet thoughtfully.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Come, now. You know better.”

“Well, you can’t blame me for trying,” Hondo said, waving a hand and grinning at him.

No, not really, he admitted, at least internally. He and the pirate had cobbled together a perfectly functional working relationship in the two years since Hondo had first very courteously not seen him in his rival’s safehouse. It was mostly built on trading information back and forth—Hondo provided Obi-Wan with intelligence about trends in the black market and, in exchange, Obi-Wan helpfully pointed him towards Imperial military stockpiles that wouldn’t be too risky to raid, and various locations where he could be guaranteed buyers for just about anything he acquired along the way. Some of those were resistance cells that Obi-Wan couldn’t arm or otherwise supply in any other way. Some of them were simply out-of-the-way places, off the major trading routes, with the hope that Hondo’s people could fill that niche before the Hutts or Black Sun or the like decided to expand.

Their arrangement benefited them both. Obi-Wan had more pieces of the general puzzle of galactic trade that might help him anticipate some of Palpatine’s future maneuvers, or figure out what that massive infrastructure project he knew was being built somewhere really was. Hondo, in exchange, had a fairly steady moderate-risk, moderate-reward income that could hold his crew together when his more typical piracy efforts were less than fruitful. His prices, where Obi-Wan sent him, were always... tolerable, if not quite reasonable. Presumably, Hondo knew that if he pushed that line too far, he’d stop receiving tips at all.

Still, as stable as their working relationship was, Obi-Wan knew better than to trust Hondo too far. There were certain cells, no matter how much they’d benefit from the system, Obi-Wan would never share; certain people and places he kept strictly off-limits to the pirate. And Anakin was one of them, because, while Obi-Wan was nearly certain that Hondo wouldn’t hand him over to the Empire without a fairly literal blaster pointed at his head, he wasn’t certain how much of that was a practical assessment of the Empire’s “gratitude” and how much was the personal fondness Hondo seemed to have for him. If it was too much of the latter, he couldn’t trust that protection would extend to Anakin.
He wouldn’t have brought Hondo this close, even, but the ship he had until recently been using had had an unfortunate accident with a sentry tower on his last mission, and he hadn’t had a chance to acquire another one yet. And, as he and Anakin finally both had a few days to slip off to Dagobah together--three months after they’d first learned that the Emperor had taken a new apprentice, and six weeks after Padme had discovered his name--time was rather a factor.

So, when Hondo had turned up, Obi-Wan had naturally bargained with him for a ride.

“Well, what’s it to me?” Hondo said. “You’re always doing crazy things in strange places, Kenobi. The day you make sense is the day I worry, yes?” He sighed theatrically and shook his head. “Well! I will leave you to your wasteland, my friend. And hope to see you soon?”

“Always,” Obi-Wan said, and bowed. “Thank you for the ride. Until next time.” He leapt off the ramp without waiting for a response, landing knee-deep in the snow, and then darted off to get out of range of the backdraft of the saucer’s engines as Hondo took off.

He watched until the ship was completely out of his range of vision, then closed his eyes to get his bearings and started off east towards the rendezvous point.

Anakin and the Waterfall were waiting precisely where Obi-Wan had expected them to be, about four kilometers from the armistice point Senator Chuchi had established. The boarding ramp was down, and Anakin was sitting cross-legged on it, fiddling with what looked like the power module for a laser cannon and swearing softly. Judging by the content of his sullen muttering, the balance between retaining sufficient manual dexterity for delicate work and not losing his remaining hand to frostbite was not currently in his favor.

“I do hope that’s not something we’ll need,” he said, when Anakin failed to greet him.

He shook his head. “Replacement,” he said. “Guns work okay, but I’m making them better.” He finished his immediate task, then carefully replaced the panel over the wiring so it wouldn’t get damaged or electrocute anyone.

“Fair enough,” Obi-Wan said, smiling a little to himself. Some things never change.

His fond amusement quickly gave way to a brief flash of concern; Anakin stood with a little more care than usual, briefly putting a hand on his side.

“Everything all right?”

“I’m fine,” Anakin said, then, catching the look on Obi-Wan’s face, somewhat grudgingly admitted, “I cracked a couple ribs on my last mission. Beru taped them up to me.”

“I see,” he said. Anakin probably wasn’t understating his situation too much--their last conversation had been very brief, checking in and advising that their respective latest missions had gone well and confirming the coordinates on Ordo Plutonia--but he hadn’t seemed to be in too much pain. Even he could only hide so much.

I can confirm with Rex once we get underway, he decided. Better to be sure--Anakin had somehow managed to only get less careful of his own safety since the Clone War had ended and this new one had begun.

“Rex isn’t here,” Anakin said--probably not actually responding to Obi-Wan’s thoughts; even as close as their bond was, it still took actual, noticeable effort to project or read true words like that. “He decided to stay at the farm and sit this meeting out.”
Which was not particularly surprising, now that he thought about it. Obi-Wan and Anakin had sent Master Yoda a message regarding Rex, of course (and he had agreed with them on how to handle the situation), but that likely didn’t make an actual encounter any less daunting. Besides which, the topic of the meeting was pretty exclusively Jedi business. The two of them could brief Rex afterwards if anything in their plans for Darth Specter had changed.

It was also something of a relief. Not because of any potential tension, but because Rex had, since rejoining them, become almost as fiercely protective of Anakin as Anakin was of everyone else. If Rex had allowed Anakin to go off alone, even on a trip as unlikely to see danger as consulting Master Yoda on Dagobah, his injuries had to be relatively minor.

“All right,” he said, and followed Anakin into his ship, hitting the button to seal the ramp behind them. “Everyone there is doing well?”

“Yes,” he said. “Leia misses you, she kept asking when she’ll get to see you again.”

“I’ll go back with you when you pick up Rex,” he said. It had been entirely too long since he’d seen her.

“Sounds good,” Anakin said. “All right, strap in.”

“With you driving?” Obi-Wan said, already settled into the copilot’s seat. “Always.”

It took a little over a day for them to reach Dagobah, with all the backtracking and rerouting Anakin now did as a matter of course to avoid potential pursuit. Anakin spent most of the time he wasn’t actively engaged in piloting continuing to work on his power module. Obi-Wan worked on updating their target and allies map, ran a few saber drills (and talked Anakin out of sparring with no little difficulty--but cracked ribs were still cracked ribs, and healed enough to travel or handle an emergency was not license to push without necessity), and played a few rounds of dejarik with Artoo.

They talked, too, of course; about general strategy for the coming months, about when they should start training Leia in earnest, beyond the basic control exercises disguised as creche games. And a little bit about Specter, too. Anakin’s crushing waves of guilt seemed to be somewhat lesser as time went on, at least. There certainly hadn’t been a repetition of that first incident in the swamp all those weeks ago. But he still clearly found it difficult to put his thoughts into words. They both did.

Still, it seemed to help. Or, at least for Obi-Wan, it got a little easier each time. And it was certainly immense progress from how they would have handled this--how they had handled similar discussions--three years ago.

But finally, they dropped out of hyperspace for the last time. Anakin set about scanning for a solid place to set down, while Obi-Wan used one of his back doors into the HoloNet to see if there were any new atrocities from Specter, or any other information they should discuss with Master Yoda while they were here.

He flipped through a series of press releases from Coruscant--all propaganda and only rarely true, of course, but knowing what Palpatine was saying was almost as useful, in its own way, as knowing what he was doing.
And then one of them caught his eye.

He paused, an scrolled back up to reread it more carefully.

It said the exact same thing the second time.

The Emperor, it seemed, was expecting a child.

*That...*that can’t be right.*

A third read-through changed nothing. *A child.* The mere thought was--

“Master?”

He looked up to see Anakin watch him, worry writ plain on his face. They had landed, while he’d been staring at his ‘pad, and he hadn’t even noticed.

“What’s wrong?” Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan hesitated half a second, then said, “Something we should discuss as a group.” Because if I *brought it up here, with just the two of us, we’d never get off this ship to meet with Master Yoda.* He knew there was no possible way Anakin would take the revelation well, and the longer it took him to storm off and do something stupid to try and fix it, the better chance Obi-Wan had of talking him down.

Anakin stared at him for a long moment. “That bad,” he said, quietly.

“Yes.”

He paused a second. “It’s not--you’d tell me if…”

“It’s nothing to do with Luke or Padme,” he assured him. *Not...directly, anyway. “We should go.”*

“Right.” Anakin shook his head, and stood up. “Artoo, you coming, or you want to stay with the ship?”

The droid beeped something disparaging--Obi-Wan still didn’t really understand binary, but he thought he caught the words ‘swamp’ and ‘crazy’ in there somewhere.

“So, staying with the ship, then,” Anakin replied, without missing a beat. “Comm if you change your mind.”

With that, the two Jedi exited the ship, and found Master Yoda waiting for them at the base of the ramp. Beside him, he felt Anakin relax just a hair, which was another thing that was different--and vastly improved--from the past. He still didn’t know exactly what the two of them had said to one another, back on Polis Massa, or at any time since, but it had had a strong, positive impact on his friend.

“Good to see you, it is,” Yoda said, bowing for them, which they returned as one. “This way, my home is. Come, and discuss this Darth Specter we will.”

“There’s not all that much to say,” Obi-Wan said, falling into step behind him. “Neither of us has actually run across him yet. We thought it best to watch and wait--there’s so much else for us to do.”

“And few enough, we are,” Yoda said. He was pensive, closed-off. “Disagree with your
assessment, I do not. But delay too long, we should not, either. To allow Sith evil to grow unchecked is unwise.”

They came through another stand of trees to a small, cozy-looking hut at the base of one of the trees. Yoda pushed open the door and led them inside, gesturing them to a pair of chairs by the fire.

Anakin managed not to hit his head on the ceiling, but it was a very near miss. “That’s what I was thinking, Master,” he said. “I just—I’m not sure when we make the call to bait him ourselves.”

The datapad with its alarming headline weighed heavy in Obi-Wan’s hands. Especially with that on the horizon…he couldn’t predict how it might affect Specter and his situation, let alone any attempts of theirs to bait the new Sith Lord into attacking them before he was ready.

“A thought, you have, Obi-Wan?” Master Yoda prompted.

“No directly related,” he admitted. “But there’s an additional complication.” He pulled out the pad and called up the relevant file. He passed it first to Yoda, who skimmed it before handing it to Anakin and sitting back, mind once again opaque.

Anakin’s, as Obi-Wan predicted, was not. It was whirling, horrified, and—with that same sick undertone of guilt he felt whenever they spoke about Specter.

“We can’t—we can’t let him do this,” Anakin said after a minute. “We can’t. He’ll—this is a child, we can’t leave a child with him.” His thoughts whirled again, now focused on Leia. There weren’t any words that Obi-Wan could detect, he wasn’t projecting enough for that, but he couldn’t hide his feelings where his daughter was concerned, couldn’t quite mask the horrifying image of a child just like her in—a nightmare.

Obi-Wan’s were a little different, on his own near-catastrophic failure. We can’t leave a child with him, not again. He should never have allowed Palpatine to cultivate any sort of relationship with Anakin. He knew that now. But he’d been—grieving, and unsettled, and overwhelmed, and it…

What Palpatine had nearly done wasn’t his fault. No more than what he actually had done. But at the same time, his action (or inaction) had caused a great deal of pain. And now there was another child, and all he could think was, how much will this child be hurt, if we allow this? Especially since this child would be in the Emperor’s hands from a much younger age, and with fewer lifelines to help them cope. And what lifelines they did have would probably have limited access, so there wasn’t—there might not be much they could do.

“So, to Coruscant you would go, hmm?” Yoda said. The disapproval was clear in his voice. “Break into the Emperor’s palace, steal his child?”

“Yes,” Anakin said, immediately.

“How?”

A short pause. He took a breath. “I don’t know yet,” Anakin admitted. His voice was taut and shaking a little. “I don’t—but there’s a few months to plan that. Right? We can find a way. We can figure this out.” He looked at Obi-Wan, pleadingly.

“It’s risky,” he said, cautiously. Because it was. It was bordering on insane to contemplate. But he was already starting to put together the basics of a plan. For the first time, he was almost grateful Palpatine had built his palace on the ruins of the Temple. It meant Obi-Wan knew the lay of the land, so to speak. At least to a point.
“And if another, he has?” Yoda asked. “What then?”

And Obi-Wan saw where the whole thing unravelled.

*If he wants this--if Palpatine truly wants this--he won’t stop until he has it.*

“I’ll go back for that one, too,” Anakin said, defiantly, just shy of snapping.

“And succeed you might, a second time,” Yoda said. “But if a third he has? Or another? Fail you would, eventually, to be killed--or worse.”

“That doesn’t mean we can *leave* her there!”

“Nothing, did I see, that said a girl the child was,” he said, much sharper this time. “Overinvolved in this, you risk becoming.”

Anakin’s hands clenched a little, and Obi-Wan caught his left wrist, to try and steady him before he broke down again. “Our friends on Coruscant will--do what they can,” he said. And he knew it was a hollow thing, such a hollow thing. And the three of them hadn’t even touched on what was likely to happen to the child’s poor *mother*, whoever she was.

Anakin jerked away, and said nothing. He was trying to lock down his shields, with minimal success. He was still seething inside, because--some part of him knew Yoda was right. And it was not an easy thing to admit.

“Too few of us, there are,” Yoda said, his voice softening again. “And too much other work there is to do. For one child, sacrifice all, we cannot. Save everyone, we cannot.”

“But we could save this one,” Anakin said. “If you’d just let me *try*, I could...I could *save* this one. I could get this one right.”

The words hung in the air between them for a minute.

“I’m sorry, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said quietly. “I don’t...disagree with you. But…” *Master Yoda’s right. Sooner or later, the odds will catch up with us.*

“On Darth Specter, on the larger war, we must focus,” Yoda said. “To the Senators, this child we must leave.”

After a long, tense moment, Anakin finally nodded. “Fine. I guess. You’re right. We don’t have--I get it,” he said, with no little bitterness. “But whatever happens to this kid--whatever he does to her, at least a part of it’s on us. Because we *chose* not to save her.”

Which stung, more than a little. Obi-Wan knew Anakin would vehemently deny it if he tried to make a similar claim for their own, more direct history with Palpatine, but…well, it was what it was.

Although, it wasn’t *entirely* fair of Anakin to say either way. As Yoda had stressed when this all began, they were not to blame for what Darth Sidious chose to do.

*No, just for setting up the situations that make it easy for him to succeed.*

He buried those thoughts as deep as he could. There were other, more immediate issues to be addressed there, quickly, before this discussion got derailed any further. Behind Anakin’s head, he shot Yoda a half-pleading look-- *I will talk with him later, about projecting his own experiences*
onto this child and getting overinvested. Please don’t make the argument worse right now. I will get him through this later. Please.

Yoda nodded once, and, fortunately, let it slide. “More blame, you attach to us, than we have earned,” he said instead.

“I don’t--” Anakin took a deep breath, then made a face and rested a hand on his side again. “Fine. That’s--fine.” He still didn’t believe it; Obi-Wan saw it clear as day before his shields slammed back into place.

Yoda stared at them both for a long moment, then sighed, his ears drooping. “Meditate, I think we should. Calm ourselves, then return to our other discussion.”

“I agree,” Obi-Wan said, touching Anakin’s arm lightly. This time, at least, he didn’t pull away. We’re not going to be very productive, on Specter or any other issue, the way things stand right now.

Anakin nodded. “I’m going to go back to the Waterfall, then,” he said. “I need--space, I think. I’ll come back in a couple hours.” He stood up as best he could, with the low ceiling. Obi-Wan felt a flicker of physical pain, followed by a faint jolt of annoyance--twisting to fit under the ceiling was probably doing his ribs no favors.

“Why don’t you call us when you’re ready, instead?” Obi-Wan said. “We’ll join you.”

“Sure,” he said, some of the relief bleeding into his voice. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“May the Force be with you,” Yoda said.

“And with you, Masters,” Anakin said, bowing as best he could and then slipping out, leaving them to their own private contemplations.

Chapter End Notes

And, with this behemoth of a chapter, Part 3 ends. Sorry for the late update this week, hopefully it was worth it <3

Next week starts Part 4: Commander, which picks up after about a three-year timejump in story. Sadly, I do not have a teaser sentence prepared for you guys, but I have some fun things planned.

Thank you so much for sticking with me this far!

~shadowsong
Luke had *never* liked Empire Day. The whole Founding Week was full of long, boring speeches he had to sit still and listen to, and just about everyone was pretending to be a lot happier than they really were. Uncle Bail and Queen Velida were always really tense, Aunt Sabe usually wanted to stab things even more than usual, and Mamma got really sad. The only people who seemed like they *actually* liked it were mean ones, like Governor Tarkin. Even Lord Specter, who was the second-scariest person Luke had ever met, was more mad than anything else. Like he just wanted it to be over. Probably so he could go back to doing scary stuff.

About the only thing that *wasn’t* awful about the holiday was that there were usually starfighters doing tricks on at least one of the days, and Luke could pretend he was up there with them. Even his birthday couldn’t make it better, ’cause he basically had to share it with the whole Empire and he never got to see any of his friends. Not even Winter.

Last year had been *sort of* okay, at least. Mamma had managed to set it up so they could spend the week in Theed, instead of Imperial Center. The speeches were still *boring*, and Mamma was still unhappy, but at least the decorations were pretty flowers instead of army banners that tried to make him feel small. And he’d been able to play with Pooja and Ryoo, which was always nice even if his cousins were almost grown up and a lot older than all his other friends.

This year...this year was going to be different. For one thing, Mamma and Uncle Bail had had a *lot* of quiet, unhappy calls that he wasn’t supposed to listen to in the last few days, which probably meant Something Important was about to happen. Or maybe had *just* happened and they were dealing with it. And they were going to spend the whole holiday in the capital this year--they were on their way back now. *And* Aunt Sabe wouldn’t be with them like she usually was--there was going to be a new Queen next year, Mamma had said, and it was Aunt Sabe’s job to teach her handmaidens how to be really cool, like all of Luke’s aunts were.

So this year, Founding Week was going to be *especially* not okay.

Except…

If that was all, it wouldn’t have been--well, it *would* have been very sad, because he’d miss his cousins and *two* of his aunts and probably have to see Governor Tarkin and Lord Specter and maybe even (he shivered a little) the Emperor, but...but…

There was something *else*. Something that made this year *extra* different. He wasn’t sure what it was, but he knew it was there. The way he sometimes just *knew* things. Like when there had been that really bad storm at the lake house last winter, and everything had flooded and they’d had to stay an extra three days.

(When he’d told her what he knew, Mamma had gotten all tight with worry and made him *promise* not to talk about things like that with anyone except her or one of his aunts. She hadn’t cut their trip short to get away from the storm like he’d sort of thought she would, even though she’d had to miss a really important vote ’cause she was late getting back, but she’d made sure they’d be safe and have enough extra supplies even when the power went out.)

And this was *sort of* like that, only he didn’t know it was going to be a flood. He didn’t know what
it was going to be. Just that Founding Week this year was going to be really, really important.

Luke wanted to believe that it might be the good kind of important—that something would change and make life better, and make Empire Day less sad for Mamma, and less tense for Uncle Bail. Maybe he’d meet a lot of new people who hadn’t been to the parades before, and they’d be important lifelong friends. Maybe it would even be something that made Lord Specter less scary, somehow.

Except everything else that he’d noticed made it look like the bad kind of important. The kind where maybe Mamma would have to go someplace where she might get hurt, and he’d have to go stay with Aunt Sola for a while, with Aunt Elle and Aunt Motee taking turns to sleep so one of them was always, always watching.

All in all, even though it really felt more like home than Naboo half the time, Luke was dreading getting back to Imperial Center. He’d rather spend Empire Day anywhere else. The lake house would be best, of course, or Theed, with Aunt Sola and Gramma and Grandpa and the Queen, or maybe that place he dreamed about sometimes, where there was no pretend happiness, no Emperor, no Specter—nothing but a warm wind in his hair and a sky that never seemed to end…

He felt like a part of him was out there, wherever ‘there’ was. Maybe someday, if he was lucky, he’d get to see it for real one day.

He just had to get through Empire Day first.

Scowling a little with concentration, Leia wriggled into the narrow storage space above Daddy’s bunk on the Waterfall. There was just enough room for her to fit, with all the spare parts and half-finished projects he kept in there. She pulled the panel shut behind her, then squirmed around in the dark until she found the position with the fewest things poking her that also didn’t make her arms and legs twist up all funny.

Once she was settled, she closed her eyes and breathed, thinking quiet, quiet thoughts. She’d never tried it exactly like this before, but she was the best at hide and seek. Biggs and Tank and everyone always had to give up when it was her turn to hide. And she didn’t even have to stay up here that long. Just until the ship went into hyperspace.

She’d been waiting maybe about five minutes when she heard footsteps approaching. Not Uncle Rex; his were heavier than this. And Aunt Beru’s were a little slower, and Uncle Owen never came on the Waterfall, which meant--

The panel lifted open, and Daddy raised an eyebrow at her. “Come on, princess. We talked about this.”

She sighed, and uncurled to sit on the edge of the shelf, her legs swinging back and forth. “I wanna go with you.”

“No. It’s too dangerous.”

“But I can help.”

“No,” he said again. “Not this time. You’re not old enough.”
“I’m almost six!” she protested, hating the way it whistled through where she’d lost a tooth. It made it really, really hard to talk people into doing what she wanted them to when she couldn’t even sound like a grownup.

Besides, Daddy was racing when he was her age. That was pretty dangerous--Aunt Beru wouldn’t even let her watch, it was that dangerous.

“I know,” he said. “You still can’t come. Not this time.”

She pondered for a minute. “When, then?”

“What?”

“When can I come?” she asked.

“Uh…” He glanced off to one side, thinking. “In a few years, we can talk about it.”

A few years meant three. She’d be nine then, or almost--that’s how old he was when he’d left to be a Jedi. She decided she could accept that. For now. “And then I can go hit the bad guys with you?”

He made a face. “We can talk about it,” he repeated.

She scowled again. “That means you won’t let me.”

“No, it means we’ll talk about it.”

“But I wanna help,” she said. Because Daddy and Uncle Rex and Uncle Obi-Wan were always off doing Important Things, and there was a whole entire galaxy out there--like the silver planet she dreamed about sometimes, with all the towers--and she knew she could make it better. But all she was doing was waiting around on the farm, helping Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen and playing hide and seek with her friends. She could be doing more. And that meant she should be doing more.

(She’d asked Daddy about the silver planet once. He’d gotten very quiet, and then asked her if it had been a bad dream. When she’d said it wasn’t, he’d looked very relieved and told her not to worry about it. She’d borrowed Aunt Beru’s datapad later and found pictures of a place called Coruscant that looked almost like her dream, but that was all she knew. It was very, very annoying, not knowing things.)

“I know you do,” Daddy said, running a hand over her hair. “But the best way you can help me right now, princess, is to stay here, with Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, where it’s safe. So I don’t have to worry about you.”

She made a face. “That’s not helping,” she muttered. Not like she meant, anyway.

“It is,” he said softly. “More than you know.”

And he meant it. She knew he did--she could always tell when people were lying to her, and anyway Daddy was really bad at it--but it still didn’t feel like enough. “Okay,” she said anyway, because there wasn’t a lot else she could say. Not until she was grown up.

Three years, she thought. That felt like a long, long time away.

“Ohay,” he said, and kissed her cheek and lifted her down from the shelf. “I won’t be gone too long this time,” he added. “It’s your birthday next week. You didn’t think I’d forgotten, did you?”

“No,” she said. And that wasn’t the problem at all, but it did make her a little less unhappy. She
liked that he made sure her birthday was always special, no matter what else was going on. Sometimes, he was gone for days and days and \textit{days}, but he \textit{always} came back on her birthday. “Is Uncle Obi-Wan gonna come with you?” He \textit{usually} did, but he was a lot less predictable than Daddy.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I’ll find out when I see him. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said again. She wrapped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight. “You \textit{sure} I can’t come?” she tried one last time, turning her biggest, most beseeching eyes up at him.

It \textit{did} work \textit{sometimes}.

Sadly, this was not one of those times.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he said. “Come on, let’s get you back in the house, okay? The sooner Rex and I get going, the sooner we’ll be back.”

She wrinkled her nose. “I know.”

He gently peeled her off and, keeping hold of her hand, led the way out of the ship. Aunt Beru was already halfway up the ramp when they reached it, and Leia \textit{did} feel a little bad when she saw how worried she’d probably been.

“Sorry, Beru,” Daddy said. “We just wanted one last goodbye.” He winked down at Leia, who rolled her eyes. 

\textit{She’s not} stupid, \textit{Daddy}.

Aunt Beru just \textit{sighed}, but she played along. “A little warning next time, Ani?”

“Of course,” he said, then bent down and kissed the top of Leia’s head. “Go on inside, princess. Be good. I’ll see you next week.”

Leia nodded and hugged him one more time. “See you next week,” she echoed, then jumped down off the ramp like she’d seen Daddy do a million times.

Aunt Beru \textit{sighed} again, but Daddy laughed. She grinned up at him, and he waved before disappearing back into the ship.

The two of them backed up towards the house, so they wouldn’t get blown over when Daddy took off, and watched until the \textit{Waterfall} disappeared into the sky.

“All right, sweetheart,” Beru said. “I need your help in the kitchen, come on.”

“Coming,” she said, scuffing her shoes a little as she did. It wasn’t that she didn’t \textit{like} helping Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen, too, it just...felt so \textit{small}, next to what Daddy did. Next to the silver planet in her dreams.

\textit{Three years,} she reminded herself. \textit{The galaxy will still be there to save.}

If only it wasn’t such a long, \textit{long} time away.
Lol, what even are children: Part 3.

The twins will be viewpoint characters from now on! I can't promise how often we'll hear from them, but from time to time. :D

Hope you enjoyed, and see you next week!

~shadowsong
Obi-Wan very rarely planned or staged operations this close to Empire Day.

Part of the reason was practical--security was usually tighter just about everywhere worth hitting, and the value in risking it anyway was more symbolic than substantive. Not that symbolic gestures didn’t have their place. For a resistance movement, in particular, they could be vital. But the fact of the matter was he didn’t have the resources to spare for a grand statement, and nothing less would be worth the risk. A *loss* during Founding Week would be as devastating to his network’s morale as a victory would be beneficial.

Or perhaps it was better to say *another* loss.

It was...a difficult week for him, to say the least. Which was the other, entirely personal, reason he kept himself on the sidelines this time of year. Obi-Wan preferred to take the day--as much of the week as he could, really--and retreat somewhere for quiet contemplation, and to ensure that his motives remained what they should be. Revenge, after all, was not the Jedi way, and he worried that taking direct action at such a time might well push him to cross a line.

Either that, or he might somehow shut down, which would be an entirely different disaster.

Anakin, he knew, had a different approach. Apart from Leia’s birthday, which was sacrosanct, he preferred to keep busy, not allow himself to brood or fixate on all that had happened six years ago. Rex seemed to favor the same strategy. And there was almost always *something* he could find for the two of them to do. Despite the practical concerns. This year, he had set them to a task similar to Anakin’s first field mission under the new system--they were to use the cover of the...celebration...to acquire a set of code keys. It would hopefully be sufficient to keep them occupied until it was time for them to return to the farm.

For his own part, he had one more--hopefully quick--operation to run, then he would go somewhere nice and quiet, out of the way. He hadn’t yet decided where he would go. Somewhere close to Tatooine, perhaps, so he could easily meet the others at the farm for Leia’s birthday.

That, however, was a decision for another day. Today’s problem were significantly less emotionally taxing--making contact with a rebel cell who had requested his aid and experience, and helping them plan and execute their operation on a very tight timeframe.

He had worked with this particular cell before, on two occasions. They were ten, largely human with two Nautolan compatriots. Internal tensions existed, but not to the extent he’d seen in other groups. They knew he was a Jedi, but not his specific identity. He was, of course, rather more famous than he had *ever* liked, but a hood and mask seemed to have handled that potential concern. They knew him as Ben, and he knew them as a set of code names. Safer that way, for all of them.

(Although, he had to admit, it gave rise to a touch of bittersweet nostalgia--their aliases were often all too similar to the names the clones had chosen for themselves.)

The planet was a sparsely-populated one, with areas of dense woodland that were extremely useful for concealing--well, probably several things, including some he’d really rather not contemplate. For a ten-member rebel cell, three of whom had been born and raised here, melting in and out of
the cover the trees provided was child’s play.

They had moved their base since his last visit, but he was meeting with one of their number—a short, slender young man who had been introduced to him as Reckoning—who would guide him in.

As planned, Reckoning was waiting for him at the same rendezvous point they’d used previously, sitting on a rock with no visible weapons—should any patrol come through this area, unlikely thought that was, he was simply a local youth out for a walk on a charming afternoon.

Obi-Wan, alas, was a little more conspicuous. Best they got moving quickly.

Reckoning scrambled up when he saw him, and gave a slightly awkward salute. “Good to see you, Ben. Any problems coming in?”

He shook his head. “No. Anything I should be aware of before we get there?”

Cleaver, the group’s nominal leader—they made all important decisions as a collective, but someone had to oversee the details once said decisions had been made—had given Obi-Wan a somewhat sketchy briefing when he’d reached out a few days earlier. There was a sizeable stockpile of the components used to make blaster power packs currently being guarded by the local garrison. Its exact provenance, let alone its final destination, was—well, if Cleaver had known, he hadn’t shared those details with Obi-Wan. But it was there, and they had reliable information that it would not be after Empire Day.

The plan was, of course, to retrieve the half-made ammunition and redirect as much of it as possible to someone who would put it to better use. But Cleaver and his cell had never hit anything quite so large as this garrison, not with so little time to plan.

And so, Obi-Wan was here. One last, quick mission before his yearly retreat.

“No,” Reckoning was saying. “Cleaver’s got a scale model of the base worked up for you to plan from. We’re still finalizing the patrol schedule, but we should have enough to go on real soon.”

“Right,” he said, following half a pace behind Reckoning, deeper into the woods. He could certainly work with that.

The trek wasn’t very long—only about a quarter of an hour or so; the base was what looked like an abandoned forester or ranger’s hut, the sort used to keep an eye out for lost hikers or forest fires. Reckoning tapped in a complicated pattern that Obi-Wan absently memorized—not that it would do him any good, as it would likely be changed before he returned, even if the cell hadn’t moved again.

Cleaver himself opened the door. He was a large, solidly built man, half a head taller even than Anakin. He nodded. “Good to see you, Ben. Glad you could get here so quick.”

“As am I,” Obi-Wan said, with a brief bow, then followed the two of them in.

Almost the entire cell was gathered inside. The only one missing was Moonshot, the female Nautolan of the group—probably, given what Reckoning had said, mapping patrols. She was what passed for the cell’s scout and intelligence officer.

And the promised model of the base was waiting for him, on a less-than-sturdy looking table in the center of the small room.

“Stationary guards are marked with red exes,” the male Nautolan, whose handle Obi-Wan couldn’t
“Right.” He studied the base for a moment, noting the exes and extrapolating a rough estimate of the other troops that would be inside based on their number and dispersal. “East is that way?” he asked, pointing to the wall on the right, as one approached the model from the door.

“Yes,” he replied--Lucky, that was his name; Obi-Wan remembered it now.

He nodded again and fell silent, tallying up the numbers and weapons they had at their disposal. “And the stockpile is there?” He pointed at a room in the southeast corner of the complex, backed up against a mountain. It’s where most people would store something so valuable--next to impossible to approach unseen, with a solid natural defense to add to what he could build.

“Yes,” Lucky said again.

“Right, then,” he said. “I would suggest we split into two teams.” He outlined the basic sketch of his plan--he would take Moonshot and Reckoning and approach from due east, with the sunrise at their backs hopefully distorting their movements at least a little. Cleaver would lead the rest around from another direction, creating a diversion while the three of them managed the actual theft.

It was straightforward enough, at least in theory. He doubted that would last very long; it rarely did. But Reckoning thought fast on his feet, and Moonshot knew the base best of anyone in the cell. Any additional maneuvering he would have to do once they were in play would work better with the two of them.

“Any questions?” he asked, when he was done. There were a few--and Cleaver had a few suggestions of his own; one of the reasons he liked working with this group, they could think for themselves, and weren’t shy about pointing out when their knowledge of the environment would outweigh his field experience.

They had almost finalized everything--at least, insofar as they could while waiting for the last few pieces of intel--when another, slightly different, complex knock came at the door.

“Ah, that would be our scout, I presume.”

And, sure enough, Moonshot stepped through the door and joined them at last. She was carrying a datapad, where she had noted down the patrol patterns. She tossed it to Obi-Wan, who skimmed through it, making a few minor adjustments to their overall plan as they went.

“Any problems?” Cleaver asked her, while she grabbed a canteen from Lucky and took a swig.

“Possibly,” she said. “I didn’t get caught or anything, but there may be an additional complication.”

Cleaver swore under his breath. “Yeah?”

“Navy ship just jumped into the system.”

The group went still for a split second, and Obi-Wan looked up from the datapad, frowning. That could be...very, very bad.

“Cause of us?” Reckoning asked.

“Doubtful,” Obi-Wan said, before that particular thread of paranoia could spiral out of control. And it was--while the cell was known to be active in the system, their plans shouldn’t have leaked.
It had come together too quickly for that. Still, “Do you have their position?” he asked Moonshot. Because it couldn’t hurt to check, anyway.

She nodded, and he passed the datapad back to her so she could call up the coordinates.

He studied the readout over her shoulder for a minute, and then at last shook his head. “Looks like a routine stop or patrol,” he said. “Unfortunate timing, but it’s unlikely we’ve been compromised.”

The others, almost as one, let out a breath of relief. “Still,” Cleaver pointed out, “them being here means the base could call for reinforcements. Air support, faster than they can scramble their squadron.”

“Do we abort, then?” Moonshot asked, looking from Cleaver to Obi-Wan and back again.

And Cleaver looked at him. Nominal leader of the cell or not, he had asked for Ben’s help on this one for a reason.

Obi-Wan considered for a moment, keeping his hands still—quite apart from the mask being rather in the way, stroking his beard might be an identifiable enough tic that he tried not to do it under these circumstances. A difficult habit to break. “Do we have an ID on that ship?” he asked.

Moonshot nodded. “It’s the *Thunder Wasp.* I think they’re mostly assigned to chasing down pirates and such.”

Not one he was familiar with, so no help there. Unfortunate—often, knowing the personalities of who he was dealing with made all the difference. *What I wouldn’t give to have a proper intelligence network again.*

“It’s your call,” he finally said. “It will be more difficult, certainly. And I won’t lie to you—if we proceed under these circumstances, our chances of getting out clean drop significantly. But we *can* do it, and I doubt there will be another opportunity like this one.” He wished, briefly, that Anakin were here, instead of on his own mission—long odds like these were something of a speciality for his erstwhile apprentice.

But Anakin was not, and he could make this work with the resources he and his team had.

Cleaver nodded, and turned to the group. “Show of hands, then. Abort?”

Lucky and one other voted; the rest stayed still.

“All right,” Cleaver said. “Well, the rest of us are going forward. You two can decide for yourselves. Ben, will that work?”

Obi-Wan made a few quick calculations in his head—he would prefer not to drag anyone unwilling into a situation like this, anyway. Dropping their numbers from eleven to nine decreased their chances, but—not by enough to change his opinion. “Yes, we’ll manage.”

Lucky shook his head. “Not leaving you all to do something this stupid without me. Blueline?”

She nodded. “Yeah. What he said.”

“All right, then,” Cleaver said.

Well, if they volunteered anyway, he would take it. He studied the map one more time, considering the angles the *Thunder Wasp* was likeliest to use on its way down, should it come to that. “Slight
modification, then. Cleaver, you take your team around to this approach, from the south-west. The rest of us will go ahead as planned. Same timeframe, ideally. Any further questions?"

A general shaking of heads served for an answer.

“Good,” he said, then checked the time. “We’ve got some time to get in position. Moonshot, you’re with me and Reckoning. I’d like to head out in two hours.” That should give them enough time to deploy themselves under cover of darkness, without having to wait there and risk being stumbled upon by a sentry of any kind.

She nodded. “Sounds good, boss.”

He paused for a moment, then added, “Reckoning can brief you on the details. Cleaver, I’d like to review what weapons you have. Anything new since I was here last?”

“Few things,” he said, and Obi-Wan could hear the smile in his voice. “Nice Weequay smuggler came through here a couple months back.”

_Hondo, Obi-Wan thought. Always turning up at either the best or the worst possible time. Never the middle ground with you. “Show me?” he asked.

He nodded. “Right this way.”

It was probably unnecessary--and it certainly shouldn’t change the plan too much, but one never knew. There might even be something he could use, if Cleaver was willing to lend it. And it was a productive use of his time before they got moving.

_Thunder Wasp_ or not, things were going well, for now. In all likelihood, this would wrap up within a local rotation, and he would be on his way before the base even pieced together that a Jedi had been involved.

He had a nagging feeling, though, that this mission was somehow going to get very complicated, very fast. And while fixating on that feeling would probably do more harm than good, he could hardly ignore it.

Besides. It couldn’t hurt to be prepared. Just in case.

Chapter End Notes

So, uh, it is not super easy to write someone who is Very Smart and an expert in things which hopelessly confuse you. ...which is to say, any tactical errors in this chapter/Obi-Wan's portion of this arc are mine, not his. Apologies for them, and here's hoping they're not too bad. <3

~shadowsong
Part 4, Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

As with last week’s update, any tactical/action/military/combat errors are mine, not our narrator’s.

Also, as a quick note: this arc is a slightly different structure/timeline than the last couple. In-universe, at least, everything moves fairly quickly. The next couple chapters are going to be more or less simultaneous with this one; all taking place over several hours/maybe two days on the outside. The arc as a whole takes place entirely during Founding Week, six years after ROTS. So, a little closer to Aftermath, in terms of how to think that through? I’ll do my best to make the order of events, in the different threads in different parts of the galaxy, as clear as possible, but just wanted to let y’all know.

Anyway, thanks for stopping by, and I hope you’re still enjoying the ride!

~shadowsong

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mission had, at least so far, gone remarkably smoothly. Rex and his General had encountered minimal resistance breaking into the base; the code keys were right where they were supposed to be; and General Skywalker had had no trouble at all in spoofing the security systems on their way in. They had, it seemed, reset since then, but that wasn’t much of a problem. And apart from that, it had been like clockwork, every step of the way.

Rex didn’t trust the quiet. Not one bit.

And maybe that was just paranoia--it was hard not to fall into that pattern as a guerilla soldier working side by side with two of the most wanted men in the galaxy, up against a juggernaut war machine with practically nonexistent support of their own. Or maybe it was just this karking week- - Empire Day --getting under his skin like it always did.

Well, all in his head or not, things were going entirely too damn well, and every instinct Rex had was screaming, “Trap!”

Relax, he told himself, holding as still as he could while the General hotwired yet another inconveniently reactivated security grid blocking their exit route. We’re not clear yet. There’s still plenty of time for something to go wrong.

“Got it,” The General finally said, shoving the wires haphazardly back into the wall and picking up his lightsaber. “Come on, quickly; it’ll start up again in a minute or so.”

Rex nodded and fell in behind him, careful to step only where he stepped--the floor was unlikely to be further trapped, not now that the main sensors had been cut off, but better safe than sorry.

“They’re getting smarter,” he said, when he heard the faint hum of the system re-engaging behind him.
“It was bound to happen sometime,” he agreed. He paused for a split second at an intersection, then took the right hand path.

That turn, and the next several, went contrary to what the map Rex had memorized earlier would have suggested, but he trusted his General to lead them out the right way. Far more than he trusted the map.

The quiet was still getting to him, that was all.

After an increasingly tense--kriff, had it really only been a minute?--the General paused at a blank space in the wall. “D’you hear that?”

Rex cocked his head, listening--blaster fire, up ahead. A familiar sound; he felt some of the tension drain out of his shoulders. *Well, that explains why we had so little trouble. Garrison’s busy shooting someone else.* “Huh,” he said. “Looks like someone crashed our party.”

“Yep.” He grinned a little, slightly feral. “What do you say we return the favor?”

So, clearly, Rex wasn’t the only one bothered by how easy this had all been. Plus, this week--General Skywalker was always spoiling for a fight. Every kriffing year, he went looking for one. Something simple, something he could win, something that just might keep him from thinking too much.

“Well, sir,” he said. “Seems only fair. You want to go in quiet?” Which wasn’t the best word for it--nothing Rex’s General did was ever quiet--but it was the easiest shorthand for ‘do you want to be an Obvious Jedi or am I lending you a gun?’

He considered a moment. “To start, at least.”

He nodded, and passed him a pistol, before making sure their stolen keys were still secure.

General Skywalker gave him another quick grin and a brief salute, then started off down the hallway again, picking up speed as he went; Rex was, as always, half a step behind.

They reached the main entrance of the base and found the source of the disturbance outside. It turned out to be what looked like an offworld team--professional, but not very well organized; likely assembled for this specific job (whatever it was; it didn’t much matter to Rex at the moment) and intending to scatter after they finished it and got paid. They had probably had the same idea he and the General were operating under; taking advantage of the numerous distractions the anniversary provided to make their move.

Under normal circumstances, Rex and his General would probably have left well enough alone at that point; they would have retreated, using the cover the mercenaries were providing to complete their own mission and get away clean. Most of the time, they couldn’t risk getting involved--not when it was just the two of them, and too damn much to lose. And, barring immediate and obvious evidence of misconduct, they couldn’t afford the luxury of confirming that an unknown third party shooting at stormtroopers was an actual ally, and not an underworld opportunist or a Shadow Collective affiliate or the like.

But today--today, there was a crew of what looked like civilian maintenance contractors, locals, cut off and pinned against the opposite wall by the firefight. They’d found themselves some cover, at least for now, and no one was shooting directly at them, but there way no way to know how long that would last.

Besides. It was too damn close to Empire Day. And the General wasn’t the only one spoiling for a
General Skywalker wasted no time, firing off a shot at the nearest stormtrooper, dropping him and drawing the attention of the rest of the garrison and their attackers.

Rex was right there with him, letting off a few bursts of suppression fire and looking for the clearest path to reach and extract the trapped workers.

And then the General grabbed him and yanked him back, a split second before the ground where he’d been standing erupted in a burst of rock dust. Caused by, he quickly noted, a blast from one of the turret cannons on the wall behind them.

“Well,” Rex said, “looks like we got their attention.” Cannon’s a bit much, though. On the other hand, the fact that we came from inside the base probably made that gunner extra twitchy.

“No kidding,” he said. He sounded pleased. Somehow, Rex wasn’t all that surprised. “So, options?”

Cautiously, Rex poked his head out and fired off a couple shots, in case anyone got any bright ideas about approaching them, and took a quick look around. “We can probably get across--especially if we stick close to this wall, unlikely they’ll risk trashing their own base. Problem is, once we get to the workers, only thing we could do from there is blast through the wall and make a run for it.”

“Which would put us right back in range of the cannon, with a lot less cover,” General Skywalker finished for him. “Kriff. Was hoping you’d see something I hadn’t.”

“Sorry,” he said. He shrugged, and fired off a couple more shots of his own. “It is what it is.”

He nodded. “So, we’re taking out the cannon, then?”

“We are taking out the cannon,” he agreed. “You got a couple charges on you, I’m guessing?”

“Couple being the operative word,” he admitted. There was always a balance, especially now that their team was so small, between stealth and armament. And, the goal for today’s mission being what it was, he had leaned more towards the former today. Three or four extra charges would’ve been nice right about now, but there was no real help for it at this point.

“We’ll make it work.” He frowned down at the pistol in his hand. “...eh, screw it.” He tossed the gun back at Rex and pulled his lightsaber out.

Saw that coming, Rex thought. Going in quiet, even metaphorically, never lasted.

“Right,” General Skywalker went on. “Best approach would be...” He trailed off, tilting his head; brow furrowing a little in concentration.

“Sir?” Rex prompted after half a second. He picked off a stormtrooper who was trying to circle around and flank them. Idiot, he thought. Don’t they teach their shinies how to move quiet in armor anymore?

“I...sense something,” he said slowly, eyes drifting half shuts. “Something I haven’t felt since--”

Abruptly, he cut himself off and, grinning like the madman he was, vaulted out from behind the
cover they’d found, right into the hail of blasterfire.

Rex swore and tried to catch him and pull him back, half a second too late. He missed. By a very wide margin.

“I hate it when he does that,” he announced to the uncaring sky.

But there was nothing for it but to follow, as he always did. He checked first, to get an idea of where he was heading and how hard it would be to catch up--particularly given that it was a little harder for him to just vault out from under cover without promptly getting himself killed.

With the ease of long practice, he immediately picked out the lightsaber in the--

Wait.

No.

He picked out the *lightsabers*. Plural.

There was his General’s blue blade, gliding through the smoky air with brutal efficiency, and…

The other two were white; the colors were wrong, but the patterns--he knew those patterns.

Commander Tano was alive.

Commander Tano was *here*.

He dropped back out of sight again, heart pounding. It wasn’t...it wasn’t panic this time, not like that market years ago, when he’d first reconnected with the General, but it was--it was *something*. More like the swamp, where he’d met General Kenobi again, maybe. He wasn’t sure if that was because--six years ago, it had only been *his* General, not the others; and the Commander had left before that anyway. She’d been *safe*. Or she should have been.

Or maybe it was just time and repetition that made this...less difficult.

Or maybe he just didn’t have the adrenaline to spare for anything other than the fight spread around him.

*Focus*, he told himself sharply. There would be time enough to unravel all of that later. Right now, the Jedi-- *his* Jedi, *both* of his Jedi--were in the thick of things. Drawing all kinds of unfriendly attention. He had to pull himself together and go back them up, like he was supposed to. Like he had promised his General--and himself--he would.

On the other hand…

They *were* drawing all kinds of attention. Which left *him* a clear shot at the damn cannon.

That was a better plan. Especially given he wasn’t sure how the Commander would react to seeing him, and pushing that button in an active combat situation was a *bad* idea.

So, that decided--and not wanting to lose the opportunity--he struck out; staying low to the ground and close to the wall.

He traded a couple shots back and forth along the way, with the few stormtroopers who seemed to have noticed what he was up to, but made it to the corner directly under the cannon turret intact.
Scaling it was actually less of a challenge—the angle where the walls met gave him about a half-meter space where he wasn’t a particularly easy target for anyone on the ground.

So, he reached the top without dying—always a plus—shot the trooper who was manning the turret, then hauled himself up and placed his charges. Strategically. With any luck, they would do the job.

That done, he turned to jump back down off the wall, only to be met by a sentry, and greeted with a sidearm in his face.

Rather than drawing his own weapon, he reached for the stormtrooper’s, knocking the muzzle away from his face before the shot went off. Idiot. Blasters are distance weapons. What are they teaching you?

After that, it only took a few seconds of grappling to drive the other off the wall, but that ate up his time to get clear the way he’d wanted. He dropped flat, covering his head and neck as best he could as the cannon exploded behind him.

It wasn’t as bad as he’d thought. The relatively small explosion probably helped there, minimizing the shrapnel. A few small pieces of hot metal landed on his arms and back. Enough to sting in the moment, and probably hurt like hell later, but not to do serious damage.

Ears ringing, he pushed himself back up and gave a quick salute to the General on the ground, letting him know he was all right.

Skywalker nodded, and—the Commander caught his eye, too. She flashed him a familiar, bright, pointed grin before diving back into the fray, and Rex felt an enormous weight lifted from his shoulders.

Because the message there was clear—she didn’t hate him, either.

And that was a boost that he needed, especially this week, as he got back to work himself.

From that point, it was clockwork again—and, this time, it didn’t feel like the calm before the storm. It felt like—it felt like coming home.

Of course, what else could it have been, but clockwork? Against the three of them, especially with the mercenaries thrown into the mix and throwing them further off their game, a provincial garrison like this one didn’t stand a chance.

Rex stayed up on the wall for the rest of the skirmish, covering his Jedi from above. Would’ve worked better if he’d had a rifle, instead of his pistols, but he did all right. For their part, the Jedi got to the workers, and cut through the wall, and extracted every last one of them alive.

It had turned out to be a good day. A very good day.

Rex caught up with them as the extracted workers were scattering, probably (not unwisely) unwilling to be caught with a pair of Jedi, no matter the gratitude they owed.

But there wasn’t time for a proper reunion yet. The three of them kept moving; better to put as much distance as possible, as quickly as possible, between them and the base. And then, finally, the
General slowed, and stopped, still a few klicks away from the Waterfall.

Once he did, the Commander didn’t hesitate, but flung her arms around her former Master, holding him tight.

She was almost exactly as tall as he was now, Rex noticed. A reminder, one less painful than most, of how much time had passed. Of how much everything had changed.

The General clung just as tight.

“You’re alive,” she breathed. “You’re alive, I didn’t–I wasn’t–I didn’t know if it was real or…”

“Wishful thinking?” he finished for her.

She nodded, and drew back—only to pull Rex in for a rib-crushing hug, too. “I missed you,” she said. “All of you. So much.”

After a startled, awkward half-second, he hugged her back. “Missed you, too, Commander.”

Rex got the distinct impression that the only way General Skywalker could have been happier would be if General Kenobi and Leia and the Senator were here, too. The General positioned himself between the two of them, putting an arm around each of their shoulders. And, for a moment, they stood there like that, unmoving, and that was enough. Better than enough, in some ways. Anything else would be...overwhelming.

Eventually, the General broke the silence. “I’m sorry I didn’t--look for you,” he said. “We decided...back at the beginning, there was some discussion, and we figured it was safer not to.”

She nodded. “I didn’t even know where to start looking,” she said. “And I...I wasn’t sure if--” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, I’ve--I’ve done all right. But it’s been...lonely, a little.”

“Not anymore,” General Skywalker said, firmly. Then paused. “If--I mean, if that’s what--”

“Don’t be stupid,” she said. “Of course it’s what I want. I just...there’s something I need to wrap up first.”

“What?” he asked. “...wait, you weren’t with those people attacking the base, were you?”

“They?” She shook her head. “No. I’ve been--I mostly work by myself. Or I have, until now, anyway. I was meeting a contact of mine, when I heard the shooting and went to investigate.” She paused, then winced a little. “My, uh, contact here is a forger. I was picking up something he made for--well, I’d bring you with me to the dropoff, but…”

“No, I get it,” he said. He seemed more than a little disappointed. Or resigned, maybe. That was a better word. “We’ve been...pretty scattered, too. Safer that way.”

“Yeah, exactly,” she said. “But it won’t take me long, I promise.”

“So, we’ll meet you after,” Rex said, softly. “Not here, we made a little too much noise, I think.”

“Nice to know some things haven’t changed,” she said, grinning. Then her smile slipped a little. “Is...is it just the two of you, or...? I mean, is Obi-Wan...?”

“He’s alive,” General Skywalker said, quickly.

“Oh, good,” she said, leaning against him a little, slumping in relief. “And he’s all right?”
“Yeah, last I saw him,” he assured her. “Which was four days ago. He’s not here with us, he had his own mission. A contact of his asked for help with—a weapons shipment, I think?” He looked to Rex for confirmation, who nodded. “I’ll contact him. He can meet us when he’s done. All of us.”

“Yeah!”

“Tell him the Cinna rendezvous,” Rex suggested. “It’s a decent midpoint between here and where General Kenobi’s working, and not far from the farm.”

The Commander blinked. “The farm? What farm?”

Anakin grinned at her. “That’s where my daughter stays, while I’m in the field.”

“You—have a daughter?” she said.

He nodded. “Her name’s Leia. She’s almost six, and she’s perfect. I don’t—uh, I don’t have a picture on me, in case I get captured, but back on my ship—or, I guess, at Cinna...”

“Right, sure, but—I get to actually meet her, right?” she interrupted. “Your daughter? I can’t believe you have a daughter. I mean, I can, but—I do get to meet her?”

“What? Oh, obviously,” he said. “We’ll go to the farm, all of us together. After you finish your drop and we meet up with Obi-Wan.” He smiled again, a softer smile. “It’ll be...wonderful.”

“It will,” she said. “...um, where’s Cinna, exactly? I don’t think I know that system.”

“That’s ‘cause it’s not a system,” Rex said.

“It’s more like an inside joke,” the General said, with a slightly sheepish smile. If Rex remembered right, this particular one involved a bar fight, a Quarren accountant, and fourteen and a half shuura fruits. “That’s the safest way for me and Obi-Wan to set meetings when we run separate missions. References no one else can understand. I’ll give you the coordinates.” He had a pen—a physical pen, with physical ink—on him. He always did, for the letters he wrote to the Senator. Also seemed to be useful for situations like this. He took her hand and scrawled the numbers on it.

She was, apparently, still able to parse his terrible handwriting, because she studied her hand for only a few seconds before nodding. “Okay, got it,” she said. “Give me a day or so?”

“It’ll take us at least that long, anyway,” he said. “I backtrack a lot, unless there’s an emergency and I need to get somewhere on a tight deadline. I like to be sure no one’s following.”

“Besides, we don’t know how long it’ll take General Kenobi to finish his mission,” Rex said.

“So, I guess—if I don’t see you there in two days, I should worry?” she asked.

“Sound about right,” the General agreed.

She hugged them each one more time, hard. “I’d better go, then. The sooner I drop this off, the sooner I can get to Cinna.”

“Yeah,” he said, then repeated, a little softer, “Yeah. Hey, Snips?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s—good to see you again,” he said.
She nodded. “Yeah. May the Force be with you, Master.”

He bowed silently, and she returned the gesture, before slipping off, heading to her ship and the end of her mission.

As she disappeared from sight, Rex thought he heard the General murmur, “Right at this moment, it is.”

---

Darth Specter had, for his entire life, known the value of patience. He was a thief, and a hunter, and a Sith Lord, after all.

And, ever since he had first learned that Anakin Skywalker was alive, he had spent every free moment studying and tracking every halfway-credible rumor, every known move the Jedi made. Watching. Waiting. Cultivating that patience as he stalked his ultimate prey.

Humans, he knew, were creatures of habit. More importantly, humans were fond of patterns. And it had taken months of research, tracing, connecting the tiniest of threads, but Specter had finally, only six weeks ago, put together a model for how Skywalker navigated. How often he dropped out of hyperspace on trips to reorient and backtrack, by what degree he changed his vectors—it wasn’t Skywalker’s home base, but it was the next best thing.

All Specter needed was a starting point, and an initial hyperspace vector, within an hour of when his prey began to move, and he could intercept him on the first or second redirect.

And now? He had it.

There had been a convergence of assaults on an Outer Rim base mere hours ago. Skywalker, bold as brass, had been involved. Had drawn his saber. Had allowed himself to be caught on camera again.

And, twenty minutes ago, his ship had left the system. And Specter knew the direction he had gone.

He could not let this opportunity pass him by. It might be years again before he had another.

True, it was Empire Day, and he technically had tasks to complete here on Imperial Center, but what did that matter? It was a waste of his talents, and everyone’s attention would be on the little girl, anyway. And initiative, when successful, had been rewarded in the past.

Besides. When he returned in triumph, to lay Skywalker’s head and saber at his Master’s feet, all would be forgiven.

More than forgiven. His Master would finally be pleased with him. Proud of him.

Specter grinned to himself, as he darted out of the palace towards his personal ship, one shadow among many.

He knew Skywalker’s migration patterns now. He knew exactly where to intercept him. It was only a matter of time.

_I have you now._
Victory was within his grasp.

*And through victory, my chains are broken.*

Chapter End Notes

.... :D

(Like I was really gonna leave her out)
Part 4, Chapter 4

Founding Week parties on Coruscant, Luke found, were just as boring than the ones at home on Naboo.

The only real difference there was the people. They were a lot more...he didn’t exactly know the word for it, but it wasn’t just that they were pretending they really liked what was going on, but they all wanted things from each other, and they were not very nice about getting it. Even if they pretended to be.

Plus, at least today, there were red guards everywhere, not just the regular ones, which meant the Emperor was probably here somewhere. Which definitely made Luke a little scared, but--well, the Emperor wasn’t all that hard to hide from, at least on public days like this. Luke always, always, always knew when he was coming.

Not like Lord Specter, who snuck up on him sometimes, and then disappeared just as quick, leaving Luke feeling a little bit like that one time when he’d climbed up on the balcony railing in the apartment just to see if he could; only not at all exciting like that had been, and without the comfort of home behind him, only the long, long fall through traffic all the way down to ground he couldn’t see.

But Lord Specter wasn’t here. Which was weird. Luke was pretty sure he was supposed to be. Partly because he usually was, and partly ’cause Mamma and Aunt Mon and Uncle Bail had been whispering about it, the way grownups always did when they didn’t want Luke to know what was going on.

He didn’t know where Uncle Bail and Aunt Mon were right now, except they were somewhere in the room. He was standing next to Mamma, like he was supposed to, while she talked about boring things with a Senator he didn’t know. It was all he could do not to sigh, or start fidgeting and maybe make Senator Stranger ask him questions. Which was always really, really awkward because he could tell they didn’t actually care about his lessons, or any of the other things grownups asked him when they were trying to fill time waiting for Mamma or trying to make her like them by pretending to be nice to him.

And he knew he wasn’t supposed to, but Mamma probably wouldn’t even notice for a few minutes, and he was really, really tired of standing still and pretending to smile at people who ignored him.

So he backed up a few steps and, when Mamma didn’t catch him, snuck off to the edge of the room, out of the press of the crowd and started wandering around aimlessly, trying not to catch anyone’s eye.

He ducked behind a column to avoid Grand Moff Tarkin—who, luckily, usually didn’t even pretend to be interested in him, but was mean; Luke didn’t want to have to talk to him at all. Besides, Grand Moff Tarkin might try to walk him back to Mamma if he saw him by himself, which would probably mean talking, and not be good.

He waited until he was sure he’d been missed, then he breathed out slow, relieved. That was close. He was turning to wander back into the crowd—he probably should go back to Mamma; he didn’t want her to worry—when he spotted the little girl. Who was probably the only kid here except him. Or, at least, she was the only one he’d seen, or had a chance to talk to.
Obviously, that meant he should go say hello. Even if she was littler than him.

She was perched on the edge of a bench, totally still; not even swinging her legs or *anything*, like Luke probably would have been if he’d been left by himself like it looked like she was. She had red hair that was just long enough to braid, and was wearing a white dress. Except--not a nice, friendly white, like Aunt Mon always wore. It was harder, more like stormtroopers.

It looked sort of...wrong, on a kid. And it made her look even more small and sad and lonely.

By the time he’d noticed all that, he’d reached her bench, and she’d noticed him, too. She tilted her head, like she was wondering what he was doing there.

“Hi,” he said, and smiled.

She blinked at him, twice. “Hi,” she echoed.

“I’m Luke,” he said. “Naberrie.” He bowed a little, like Aunt Sabe had showed him, for when you know someone’s Important but you’re don’t exactly know *how much*.

“Lavinia,” she said, pronouncing it really careful, like she had a little trouble with it sometimes and wanted to be sure to get it right the first try. She didn’t add her last name, but she might be little enough that she didn’t know it.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said. “Can I sit on your bench?”

“Oh,” she said, and scooted over a little bit to give him room.

“Thanks,” he said. “Did you get bored, too?”

He nodded. “Yeah.” This *was* bigger than any of the stupid parties on Naboo got. “...we could probably go outside. I think there’s a balcony…”

She shook her head. “Not s’posed to.”

He nodded, and started looking at the crowd. “There! In the corner, with the gold necklace, talking to Senator Taa.”

She leaned forward a little, frowning. “See it!” she finally said, and smiled a little uncertainly at
him. “You pick.”

“Okay,” he said. “Red. And guards don’t count,” he added, quickly, realizing after he said it that it had been a stupid choice.

“Oh,” she said, and studied the crowd. “There,” she said, pointing. “With the kitty hat.”

It took Luke a minute to find who she was pointing at. “Right! That’s really good, Lani, I didn’t see her.” Then he paused. “Uh. Is Lani okay?” It was easier than Lavinia, probably especially for her, and it felt--right. Like she should have something little and private, like Mamma was Padme Naberrie with him and his aunts and his cousins and Uncle Bail, but Senator Amidala with other people, when she had to do important things.

“Um.” She frowned, thinking it over. “Okay. Lani’s okay.”

“There you are.”

Luke jumped a little, and turned to see Mamma coming around the corner, looking like she was a little bit mad at him for sneaking off, but mostly happy to see him there and okay.

And, just like he’d guessed, “Lulu, sweetheart, please don’t wander off like that.”

“Sorry,” he said, ducking his head a little because he was.

“It’s all right,” she said, ruffling his hair. And then glancing over at Lani, like she was seeing her for the first time.

“This is my friend, Lavinia,” he said. “Lani, this is my mamma, Senator Amidala.” Because when you introduce someone, you’re supposed to use their public name, not the private one. At least not at Court.

Mamma tensed just a little bit next to them, and said real nicely, “It’s lovely to meet you, Your Highness.”


Except...she wasn’t really all that much like Winter, and Mamma didn’t think she was, either. And there was a red guard right there, which maybe meant…

He didn’t like to think about that.

“Hi,” Lani said, then, just as careful as when she’d said her name, like she’d practiced a million million times, she added, “Nice to meet you.”

Mamma smiled again, and it felt a little less tense. Maybe. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m really sorry, but I need to take Luke back now. Is that all right?”

Lani nodded, her eyes flicking over to him. She smiled a little, uncertainly.

He smiled back, letting Mamma take his hand and pull him up off the bench in the meantime. “I’ll find you later, okay?” he said.

“Okay.”

Mamma hesitated a second before drawing him away, glancing over at the red guard for a minute. “Is there someone looking after you?” she asked.
“Uh-huh,” she said, and nodded at the guard. “Him.”


“So, he said automatically, then hesitated half a second before asking, “Can I give you a hug?”

Lani blinked, and then looked uncertainly at her guard before nodding. “Okay.”

So he did, quick, because she seemed sort of confused by the whole thing, and he didn’t want to make her unhappy. Hugs weren’t supposed to upset people.

And something about the way Lani reacted--but he didn’t know what--made Mamma a little mad, and really, really sad. Which was *not* good.


“Bye,” he said again. “See you later!” And he *would*, somehow, even if “Highness” plus a red guard watching her probably meant a *lot* more times when he’d maybe have to be close to the Emperor. But Lani really, *really* needed a friend.

Even if Mamma did *not* seem happy about any of this.

She nodded, and he let Mamma pull him away, back into the crowd to talk to boring grownups instead.

---

The event had not gone the way it was supposed to. Yes, Padme had planned to use this opportunity make contact with the Emperor’s daughter, try to begin establishing a rapport with her. It was the child’s first public appearance; their first *chance* to try and do something to help her.

But it was supposed to be *her*, or Bail, who did it. (Mon had begged off, with the reasonable--and not entirely inaccurate--excuse that she wasn’t all that good with kids.) It certainly wasn’t supposed to be *Luke*.

Except she and Bail had gotten distracted by Darth Specter’s conspicuous absence, trying to figure out what it might mean and how much trouble their movement might be in as a result, and Luke had wandered off, and…

Padme had spent the last six years very carefully keeping Luke on the periphery; present but in a position to be more or less ignored. Or, at least, not *attract* any attention.

But Luke had wandered off, and come across a lonely little girl, and she couldn’t fault him for reaching out. She wasn’t even all that surprised; Luke had a seemingly endless capacity for making friends with people. She hadn’t even told him that Princess Lavinia was supposed to be at the event, concerned that he might *actively* try to find her if she did.

*Maybe I should have left him back at the apartment.* She’d seriously considered it, but she had always brought Luke to Founding Week events on Naboo, unless they were restricted or too late in the evening. This one wasn’t either, and she’d been worried that breaking pattern would draw too much attention.
There was no help for it now. Luke had made contact. She would just have to adjust her plans--and the layers of protection she had tried to give him--accordingly.

Somehow.

This also meant that they had to have a serious talk, one she’d hoped to avoid for at least another couple of years. She knew--she’d always known--that someday she’d have no choice but to involve her son in her illicit activities, but she’d wanted his--he should have been able to hold on to his innocent ignorance for longer than six years.

Both of them were very quiet on the ride back to the apartment, after the event was finally over. Luke was fidgeting a little in his seat, off and on, but he waited until they were home and she led him into the sitting room.

“Are you mad at me, Mamma?” he burst out, before she could say anything.

“What?” He must have realized how upset I was. Damn it. She could never tell him much he picked up from her, and how much of that was dangerous, and how much was just children being way more perceptive than adults gave them credit for. “No. No, sweetheart, of course I’m not mad at you.”

He nodded. “I know I’m not s’posed to wander off an’ talk to people you don’t know, only--only she needs someone to be her friend,” he said, all in a rush, “and--and--”

She hugged him close. “I know,” she said, as soothingly as she could. “I know. I would never tell you not to be her friend.” As complicated as it made their lives--as dangerous as it was for him… That had been the plan. And that poor child did need someone. It just…wasn’t supposed to be Luke.

He nodded against her shoulder, clinging tight.

She just held him for a minute, thinking through exactly what she was going to say next. “But I want you to be careful,” she said at least, pulling back to look him in the eyes.

He nodded again, little face very serious. “‘Cause she’s the princess?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And ‘cause of…’cause of what you and Uncle Bail whisper about?”

She went still for a second. Speaking of children picking up more than we give them credit for--I hope that’s all this is.

“I won’t tell anyone,” he said, quickly. “I promise.”

“I know you won’t,” she said. “That’s not why we whisper in front of you.” She paused, considering the best way to phrase it, then very carefully added, “Lulu, there are things I can’t tell you. Things Uncle Bail and I are doing, and you might get in trouble if you know about them. With some very scary people.”

“Like Lord Specter?”

Who was still missing, and that bothered her. “Like Lord Specter, yes. We’re trying to make it so no one has to be scared of people like him anymore. But right now, that’s hard, and we have to be
He nodded. “Okay.” He hesitated for a minute. “Does me being friends with Lani make that harder?”

A little. “We’re going to be watched even more,” she said. She wasn’t going to lie to Luke. Not about something this important. “At least for a while. But I think you’re right, and she needs someone to be her friend right now. And I think that, someday, that’s going to help us all. Even if it gets scarier first.”

He pondered that for a long minute, then took a deep breath, set his jaw in a familiar, mulishly stubborn angle, and nodded. “Okay. But I can still be her friend?”

Oh, my brave, sweet boy. She wasn’t sure whether she was more grateful or upset that he seemed to grasp the seriousness of the situation. She did know that she was proud, very proud, that he was still willing to help, that he still wanted to reach out and make friends, anyway. She just hoped that, whatever happened with Lavinia in the long run, this didn’t burn that open sweetness out of her son.

So Padme smiled, and kissed his forehead. “I won’t tell you no,” she said. “But I can’t promise that the Emperor will let you.”

“Oh.” Another thoughtful silence. The kind that, if this were her, or Ani, she’d be worried he was considering doing something dangerous to get around that problem.

“Be careful,” she reminded him.

Luke nodded, and hugged her again. “I’ll be good.”

“I know you will,” she said, holding him close. But that’s not the same as careful.

It wasn’t how she would have chosen this to happen--any of this; reaching out to Lavinia, or starting to bring Luke into her work. But what was done was done, and Luke had all the right instincts, now that he was in play.

So she took comfort in his promise anyway, and resolved to be careful for him if she had to. That would have to be enough.
Obi-Wan slipped through the trees behind Moonshot and Reckoning, moving into their final positions just as the planet’s single, reddish sun began to rise. They should appear, to any observers, as nothing but three more forest creatures drifting ever closer to the base along curls of early morning mist; moving silently through the faint, uncertain light.

He’d gone quiet for this mission, of course; leaving behind all communication devices save one, short-range, that worked only in burst-code, not holos or even voice. Reckoning had a similar one; brought along in case they needed to get in touch with Cleaver’s team. Certainly he had nothing on him that could send or receive from off planet, not even his emergency distress beacon; not with the Thunder Wasp hovering in the system, substantially increasing the danger of interception.

He could only hope that he wasn’t missing anything important. But the relative risk to his mission and this cell was the greater one. Or so he kept telling himself, despite his lingering unease.

The short-range receiver buzzed once, paused, then twice more, pulling him out of his thoughts and returning his focus where it belonged. Cleaver and the others were in position. Obi-Wan, Reckoning, and Moonshot’s window to act was officially open--but it wouldn’t be for long.

The timing, at least, was on track so far; they had only just reached the end of the cover the trees provided. The Empire was not foolish enough, particularly on a planet with active insurgency, to allow anyone to slip in too close due to the environment. They needed a distraction before they could proceed; but the longer Cleaver and his team were out there, the likelier it became that they would see significant casualties.

That was something Obi-Wan would very much like to avoid, if at all possible. Especially this week.

Reckoning sent back their confirmation and the three of them held there for several seconds, waiting for--

Ah, there it is.

A not-too-distant explosion shook the air, and a plume of smoke lazily drifted up from a sharp rise at the foot of the mountain range, on the opposite side of the base.

Beside him, Moonshot let out a breath and started to push forward, but he caught her sleeve.

“Not yet,” he murmured, then let his eyes drift half-closed, sinking into the Force and listening for the right moment.

The currents of the immediate conflict swirled around him; there were Clover and the others; there, the garrison scrambling to respond; and there, looming above, the Thunder Wasp, the unknown. He resisted the broader tides of the wider war, concentrating on those three nearby ripples.

“Now,” he said at last, letting go the Nautolan’s sleeve and starting for the base himself at a quick, steady pace. His lightsaber was out and ready to deflect the first barrage of blaster bolts from the few guards still watching this direction, angling them back at their source. Reckoning, who was the better shot of his two companions, added a return volley of his own.
There was no second burst from the wall.

Still, it was a tense and entirely too exposed two minutes to get them across to the base entrance.

Moonshot and her datapad made quick, quiet work of slicing through the lock. Obi-Wan stretched ahead with his senses briefly. “We’re clear,” he said.

She nodded and pressed the final keys; the door slid open noiselessly at her request. Reckoning went through first; then Obi-Wan signaled Moonshot to go ahead—it was generally better for him to either take point or rear in situations like this one. Point by his preference, but Reckoning had beat him to it.

The door slid shut behind him, and he felt the lock engage again.

From there, it was Moonshot’s turn to take the lead, guiding them along corridors that were—still—all too familiar for Obi-Wan. But there had been some design modifications in the last six years, so her map and recent scouting were far more reliable than his memories.

Reckoning covered them in the traditional way, while Obi-Wan focused on exuding a general sense of “nothing-to-see-here;” a sort of broad-range, much weaker mind trick. This technique, in his experience, had only about a fifty-fifty chance of actually working, but on a mission with as little margin for error as this one, anything helped. Besides, it was easy enough to abandon the effort, should his focus become necessary elsewhere.

Today, fortunately, seemed to fall on the positive half of that divide. They were nearly two thirds of the way to their target before they saw any trouble; a single stormtrooper on watch. Reckoning took him out before he could do more than just barely register them through Obi-Wan’s interference.

And then the Force rippled again; like a mechanical scream echoing through atmosphere.

Oh, not good.

“Ben?” Moonshot asked, when he paused.

“I think we have some new friends coming in,” he said. “Cleaver certainly got their attention.”

She swore. “They’re calling in Navy reinforcements?”

“I believe so, yes.” True, he wasn’t entirely certain whether that sound, that illusory TIE fighter in flight, was a five-minute warning or a more immediate alarm, but he was sure that contact with the Thunder Wasp had been made.

And it may not affect his team and their half of the operation very much, but if his alert was ahead of the Navy’s arrival, it might make all the difference for Cleaver and the others.

He sent a brief message, just in case. The short-range comlink buzzed once in acknowledgement.

“So, what now?” Reckoning asked softly.

“We stick to the plan,” Obi-Wan said. There was little else they could do from where they were.

“We could try to get to the comm center,” he suggested. “Cut them off, at least from coordinating properly.”

Wouldn’t do much good at this point, and it would eat up precious time and resources.
Moonshot beat him to it, shaking her head. “We’re on the wrong side of the base. Ben’s right, we stick to the plan. And the sooner we finish, the sooner Cleaver and the others can get clear.”

Reckoning nodded, and the three of them got moving once more, continuing their infiltration with a renewed sense of urgency.

When they reached the storeroom, they at last encountered serious, direct resistance. The four men left to guard the magazine were not taken in by Obi-Wan’s Force manipulation. At all.

Moonshot and Reckoning immediately moved out of the line of fire; a brief, bright splash of pain blossomed from the young man—he’d been hit, but it wasn’t serious. Obi-Wan focused on drawing and deflecting the guards’ fire so the others had room to respond.

A squeal of feedback burst out of all four helmets, and the blasterfire let up for just a moment.

Moonshot had jammed their comms. With extreme prejudice.

Excellently done. Obi-Wan smoothly stepped into his temporary advantage, clearing their way.

...could I have done better than that? he thought a half-second later as Reckoning and Moonshot cautiously came out from under cover. Did I have to kill them all?

Perhaps he did—any other day, he might even say ‘probably;’ Moonshot’s trick wouldn’t have lasted more than a precious second or so, and he had two companions to protect, one of them injured, besides himself.

Or perhaps it was this week, and those helmets—which were different, yes, but not nearly different enough—and his response had been excessive.

This was why he avoided combat during Founding Week. Because he did not know how far he could trust himself. And, whether or not it was merited, that doubt toxic. He could not do what he needed to do, act how he needed to act, be who he needed to be, when struggling with those kinds of thoughts.

I cannot worry about that now, he decided as Moonshot pushed past him to slice through the storeroom’s lock. I can do my best to work through it when we get out of here, and I find somewhere quiet to wait out the rest of the anniversary.

Especially as Reckoning was a little worse off than he had initially thought; not putting any weight on his left leg at all, which nudged something deep in the back of Obi-Wan’s head—but not clearly enough for him to respond to right then and there.

So, instead, he extinguished his lightsaber and slid under Reckoning’s arm to help him stay upright. “How bad is it?” he asked in an undertone.

“Might slow our escape,” he said, voice a little tight with pain. “Sorry.”

“We’ll make it work,” Moonshot cut in, as the lock clicked and the door slid open in front of her.

Obi-Wan and Reckoning were almost through when the day rather spectacularly turned completely against them.

A half-dozen stormtroopers, walking with purpose, rounded the corner to pin them down.

Time slowed for a split second, allowing Obi-Wan to consider the possibilities—one of the four
original guards must have raised the alarm before Moonshot jammed them; which meant there were quite possibly more adversaries on their way.

Even if that weren’t the case, and he simply brute-forced his way past those six, Reckoning was vulnerable, and the now-exposed ammunition in the storeroom behind him made starting a firefight...unwise.

Which meant there was only one direction they could go.

Time sped up again.

Obi-Wan dragged Reckoning back through the door, into the storeroom, then drew his blade again and, once the door was shut, slammed it through the lock.

Sealing them in.

For a long moment, they were silent, other than Reckoning’s heavy breathing. Obi-Wan took the time to send another coded message to Cleaver-- *Pull out. Don’t wait for us. Scatter.* --and could only hope that they weren’t now being jammed.

“What now?” Moonshot asked quietly, her wide, pupiless eyes glittering in the low light.

“We’ll think of something,” he said. He gently set Reckoning down, leaning against a stack of crates.

The situation was rather bleak--surrounded by half-built and highly volatile ammunition, trapped between a squad of stormtroopers at their front and a sheer mountain cliff at their back.

But they had time, and space, to formulate some sort of plan.

He closed his eyes, let out a breath, and opened them again. “All right. See if you can find anything resembling medical supplies in here.”

She nodded and disappeared among the shelves.

“You’ll be all right for a moment?” he asked Reckoning, who nodded. “All right. I’m going to see about finding an exit.”

“Good luck.”

Obi-Wan smiled at him, briefly. “In my experience,” he said wryly, “there’s no such thing as luck.”

*And if there were, I certainly wouldn’t depend on it today.*

He set off down another aisle, in the opposite direction than the one Moonshot had taken, and began to search the room for a way out.

“*You were right,*” the base Commandant said grudgingly. “*There was* a second team, going for the ammunition. They’ve now barricaded themselves in with it.”

Which just made an already terrible day that much worse. He did *not* like being shown up like this.
All he had karking asked for was a little extra aerial support, a little firepower, to deal with those thrice-damned guerilla rebels before they melted back into the woods again.

Well, he thought, at least the ammunition didn’t get stolen right out from under me, and at least those three aren’t melting away anytime soon. He just wished he didn’t have to share the credit like this. Especially when one of the captives was a karking Jedi.

On the other hand, while there was no way out of the storeroom, there wasn’t exactly a way into it, either. Not one that didn’t risk setting off the ammunition stockpile and blowing up the entire karking base. Or, at least, bringing a significant chunk of the mountain down on top of it.

Well, that was a silver lining, he supposed--having to share the credit also meant getting to share the blame if things did end up exploding. If the Jedi and the others had stolen the ammunition, he wouldn’t have had that benefit.

“So,” he said, as he leaned back in his chair, ruthlessly suppressing a self-satisfied smirk. “Ideally without blowing us all to hell, how would you suggest we get them out of there, Commander Thrawn?”

Chapter End Notes

Put together with reference to this timeline of the Thrawn novel (fudging a little bit for narrative convenience). There are spoilers in there, if you haven't read said novel.

Also, as a reminder, I haven't seen Rebels yet--most of what I know of Thrawn is from the old Legends canon, which I'm drawing from as it suits the story. I'm also deviating from canon backstory that wouldn't have necessarily shifted with my timeline breakpoint in a few other respects (most notably, I think, with Rex? And possibly Ahsoka, if I'm remembering her novel correctly), but in the interests of not rambling on for several paragraphs and/or inadvertently spoiling one of the books I have read for anyone who hasn't, I'd be happy to discuss further on my writing tumblr--feel free to send me an ask!

Thanks for reading!

~shadowsong
Chapter Notes

As a note, this chapter gets a little violent. It's also really long--I actually thought about splitting it in two, but I decided it was more effective as a single chapter.

One of these days, Anakin thought, I’m going to find the time to figure out how to build a hyperdrive that can course-correct at lightspeed.

He’d mentioned the idea to Artoo once, a couple years back. The droid had pointed out that physics didn’t work that way, because he was utterly lacking in imagination, and Anakin had said so. Artoo, of course, had insulted him right back before going back to his nav calculations.

Anyway, the limitations of physics and droid imaginations aside, until he did find the time, Anakin would have to put up with dropping out of hyperspace to adjust. It wasn’t like he could stop doing that, because the alternative was leading potential pursuit to a rendezvous point they’d then be unable to use; or to a safehouse, assuming he ever needed to go to ground or seek more medical attention than Beru could give him; or to Dagobah, or the farm...

But still, even though he and Rex and Artoo had the redirects down to two minutes or less, it bothered him. A little. Made him feel--exposed. Vulnerable.

And it was worse than usual today. Maybe it was just the time of year--he hoped it was just the time of year--but...

Another part of it was maybe--well, Ahsoka was back now, barring a few loose ends she needed to tie off. And that was of course the single best thing that had happened in his life for at least a year or two, but at the same time--she was one more person he had let down, when he failed at being the Chosen One (And earlier, when everything had gone to hell and she’d left, except maybe there were other people who shared the blame on that one. Maybe.) It had--brought a lot of buried memories closer to the surface than he liked. Plus, she was one more person he would put in actual, real danger if he screwed this up.

And it probably didn’t help that their reunion had been so quick, and then she’d had to run off again. Not that he didn’t understand why--of course he did; she wasn’t leaving again, she’d be back for good in a day or two--but it felt...unsettled. Unfinished. Like that split second, jumping off a wall, where you're weightless in a place you shouldn’t be before gravity takes over again.

He was still waiting for gravity to come back.

There had been a moment of that with Rex, too, of course--maybe even more intense--but then they’d had a few days, and a trip to the farm, to get used to one another again. To figure out how they related to one another, now that everything had changed.

But with Ahsoka, it had just been--noticing each other, then the whirlwind of combat (which was, of course, something they both excelled at, especially together; falling back into place there had been easy as breathing), then a five-minute discussion and a few quick promises, and then--separated. Again.
It had all happened so fast--she’d been there again and gone again so fast--that he might’ve questioned whether or not it was even real if Rex hadn’t been there and confirmed it.

Well, that part, at least, would probably get better when they all actually got to the Cinna rendezvous point, and could finish reconnecting. Probably. Hopefully.

_Or at least that corner of my brain might actually shut up for a minute or two_, he thought.

In any case, that went a long way towards explaining his extra tension, a few minutes out from his first redirect. Even if there was a (most likely positive) end to that particular stress in sight.

But then--there was _also_ the fact that Obi-Wan hadn’t responded to his message and confirmed the meet yet. Which-- _probably_ just meant he’d had to go quiet for his mission. Since he was raiding an ammunition stockpile on an active base, that made a lot of sense.

Besides, it hadn’t even been twelve hours since he’d sent the message--requesting an _immediate_ meeting, because that meant important but _positive_, while an _urgent_ meeting would’ve meant bad news. Still, it technically hadn’t been long enough to worry. Not yet. Unless otherwise discussed ahead of time, he wasn’t allowed to go try and rescue Obi-Wan until he’d been out of contact for at _least_ twenty-four hours.

(Technically, the rule was “don’t worry,” but even at the best of times, _that_ was a losing battle for both of them. So it had turned into “don’t dash off to rescue,” because that one they could sometimes pull off.)

And the rule _was_ there for a reason; to keep either of them (all right, mostly Anakin) from going off the rails. Still. It bothered him, to stand aside and do _nothing_. More than usual, today. Even if it was probably business as usual and he shouldn’t worry.

It was all of it together, really, he decided. The date, his half-finished reunion with his Padawan, his Master’s unscheduled silence…

_As long as we all get to the Cinna point, it’ll be okay_, he told himself, again. _And then we’ll go to the farm and see Leia, which always makes everything better_.

He closed his eyes, letting out a slow breath and trying to build a wall out of that thought; one that would at least mostly shut his anxieties out.

He hadn’t made much progress--not that he’d really expected to, to be fair--when Artoo beeped at him. It was time to drop out of hyperspace and actually make the redirect, the first of five he had planned for this trip. He sighed and opened his eyes and stretched, trying to at least _act_ casual and unconcerned, and pulled the lever to revert to realspace.

As soon as the stars solidified around him, that general creeping tension abruptly turned into a _siren_, blaring right in his ear.

He swore and banked left, _hard_. This was always a risk; that one of his redirect points would have someone unfriendly for him to blunder into. It had happened once or twice before, even, but this time--felt different.

“Get us out of here,” he snapped at Artoo, trying to track down the reason for that feeling, when--

A single needle-like starfighter shot across his viewscreen, a deeper shadow against the black of space; a vortex of raw darkness spiraling around it and out of it across Anakin’s senses.
And he knew.

The darkness swirling around it was not like Dooku, who had been all icy precision. This--this being felt hot, eager.

Darth Specter.

And then something clanked against the side of his ship, pulling his attention back to the more immediate problem. Artoo shrieked an alarm.

“Wh-- buzz droids?” Anakin yelped, banking again. “Seriously? Who the--who the hell uses kriffing buzz droids anymore?”

They were in deep, deep trouble now.

Because, one, for all the improvements he’d made to the Waterfall, buzz droids weren’t something he’d really prioritized defending against. Partly because there wasn’t all that much he could do without sacrificing too much speed and maneuverability, and partly because they were so damn rare these days. Even Anakin hadn’t come across any in at least three years, and more than half the insurgent cells he’d worked with relied on scavenged Clone Wars materiel.

And two, while it would take the damned things longer to do real damage to a light freighter than to a starfighter, he had a lot fewer tricks to shake them off than he would have.

Head for the planet, he decided. This redirect, fortunately, was right near one with human-compatible atmosphere. He could get there before they had decompression issues, make an emergency landing, take care of the kriffing pests, and then deal with the real--

“Sir?” Rex’s voice crackled over the intercom, interrupting his thoughts.

Right. “We’ve got company,” he replied. “Shoot back at that fighter if you can, but we’ll be making a hard landing real soon. Brace yourself.”

“Copy that, sir.”

Not that there was much chance Rex actually would blow Specter out of the sky, but it was worth trying.

He shook it off, got his focus back on track. He knew he was diving headlong into the Sith Lord’s trap--that Specter wanted to force him down to the planet and into a face-to-face confrontation--but there wasn’t much else he really could do, not in this ship, not without an outside partner to help clear off the buzz droids before the hull was breached.

Besides, he reminded himself as he nudged the Waterfall onto the right vector and opened the thrusters wide as he could. What do we do with traps? Spring them, of course.

He dropped down into the atmosphere before the decompression alarm could go off, then shut it down with a flicker of the Force before it could--the air was potentially still thin enough to trigger it at this altitude, and it would serve no purpose but to distract him. Especially since another alarm was already shrieking at him, which, yes, he was aware that stabilizer was loose and not doing its job anymore. He shut that one down, too, and focused on finding somewhere he could land without getting himself or Rex killed.

The terrain he’d come in over was at least solid, not a swamp or ocean. On the other hand, it was a steep, craggy mountain range--Specter probably wouldn’t have much trouble finding a ledge that
could hold his fighter, but the Waterfall needed a little more room.

There. A break in the peaks, as he lost another stabilizer and flicked off that alarm, too. There was a semicircular plateau that looked like it had been deliberately cut out of the side of one of the mountains for reasons of who-knifing-cared; it was big enough for him to land safely.

...for a given value of “safely,” anyway.

He winced internally as his lower starboard engine started to whine. “I know,” he said. “I know. Just hang on, we’re almost there.”

He cut both it and the lower port engine. He fed more power to the upper engines to control the deceleration and descent, but not too much--he needed to start that now anyway, if he didn’t want to end up as so much paste on the mountainside. He angled the ship into a tight spiral that would end on the inner curve of the plateau, with the true peak of the mountain rising at their backs.

_Hopefully, I have enough bits and pieces that Artoo and I can cobble together a patch job that will at least get us to the rendezvous, _he thought grimly, as he eased up his angle just a little bit. _After I deal with Specter, of course._

He hit the plateau with a grinding screech of metal on stone, gritting his teeth against the vibration, and came to a complete stop only a few meters off from where he’d wanted to be, without anything exploding or catching on fire.

_Go me._

As soon as the Waterfall stopped moving, he unstrapped himself and pelted for the boarding ramp. It took him about ten seconds to find the buzz droids--there were only three of the krifing things, but it didn’t really take much--and even less time to render them three piles of scrap.

He extinguished his lightsaber and made a quick visual inspection while he had the chance. The damage wasn’t as bad as it could have been, but they’d still need to spend some time patching holes before he’d be comfortable taking off again. Only the one engine was in really bad shape, at least--he could compensate, if they couldn’t fix it with what they had--but there were some raw edges and exposed wires a little too close to the fuel tank for comfort. Easy fix, yes, but important, if he didn’t want to die a fiery death.

Although, a little fire might actually have been welcome right then. This planet’s climate--at least up here in the mountains--was bitterly, bitingly cold. Almost, but not quite, cold enough to sear his every breath.

_Something to watch out for, _he thought, as he made his way back into the ship to check in with Rex. _Especially if Specter’s species has any kind of advantage in the cold. Also, the ground will probably be icy, at least in a few spots._

When he got back inside, both Rex and Artoo were waiting for him. Rex was leaning against the wall just a little bit, for support.

_Damn it._

Anakin frowned a little. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Be sore for a couple days, maybe, but nothing broke.”

“All right,” he said. “I found and got rid of three buzz droids. There shouldn’t be more, but double
check. Also, head’s up— it’s not quite sub-zero out there, but it is cold.”

“Good to know,” he said. “What exactly are we dealing with?”

Anakin knew that tone. That was the tone Rex used when he was pretty sure he knew, but really, really wanted to be wrong. And wouldn’t believe it unless confirmed either way.

“Darth Specter,” he said.

Rex swallowed a little, then nodded once. “Right,” he said. “I’m... guessing you want me to stay with the ship, then?”

“Yeah. Do what you can to help Artoo get started patching,” he said. “And--try and get ahold of Obi-Wan. Ahsoka, too. Let ‘em know we’ll be--delayed.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, but frowned. “We haven’t set up a secure line to the Commander yet.”

Which meant calling her might draw exactly the kind of attention he took these roundabout routes to avoid. But now that they’d established contact, he didn’t want to lose it again. Even if it was a risk. Because, as horribly selfish as it was, there were already too damn many people in his life he wasn’t allowed to talk to. And Ahsoka had been fine all these years, so probably-- probably she’d be okay. As long as Rex was careful with what he said, which he always was.

“I know,” he said, and sighed. “Just--try anyway.”

“I will,” Rex said. “How long do I wait before I go after you?”

*That won’t be necessary*, Anakin started to say. After all, he had legitimately defeated Dooku, *by himself*, before murdering him. And whatever Specter really was, he certainly wasn’t Dooku.

But that didn’t mean he should be underestimated.

On the other hand, Anakin *really* didn’t want Rex in range as an additional target.

Then again...

“I don’t know,” he finally conceded. “It depends on how long it takes me to find him.” Because that was another concern— even if everything else from here on went perfect, the longer he spent looking, the more danger he’d be in from exposure.

Rex nodded. “All right. Take your beacon, then.”

“Yeah.” That was a good compromise— he could activate it if he ran into trouble his Captain could help him with, without putting Rex in unnecessary danger.

He grabbed the beacon, but left everything else save his lightsaber and his cloak behind. “I’ll be back,” he promised, quietly.

Rex saluted him briefly. “Sir,” he replied, just as quiet.

Anakin pulled up his hood and strode down the boarding ramp again, to meet his replacement at last.
In the end, it didn’t actually take all that long for him to find the Sith Lord; Specter had probably been tracking his descent, and made sure to land somewhere close by.

After maybe a half hour of carefully picking his way down from the plateau, stopping on narrow ledges along the way to get his bearings, Anakin reached another major cut in the rock.

And, unlike the ones he’d passed along the way, this was not a natural ledge, any more than where he’d left the Waterfall had been. It was too clean, too smooth.

It was a different shape, something like a crescent rather than a semicircle; about two and a half meters across at the widest part; about ten times that in length. Anakin had landed about two meters from one end.

Darth Specter was waiting for him at the other.

He was tall--Anakin’s height, give or take a few centimeters--and not human. Proportions were all wrong, especially with his head. Gotal, maybe, or Devaronian. Something with horns.

“Anakin Skywalker,” he breathed, sliding his cloak off and letting it pool in an inky puddle behind him. He wore a full-face mask underneath; one that covered his entire head, including the actual shape of his horns and any other identifying features.

...interesting choice.

On the other hand, it left Specter as a near-seamless shadow against the rock. Not a bad look for an assassin.

“And you must be Specter,” he said, shrugging off his own cloak with a lot less grace than Obi-Wan usually managed.

“Darth Specter,” he corrected, with more than a hint of annoyance.

So, that matters to him--having reached that rank, having the power it implies acknowledged. Something he could play on, maybe. Act dismissive, like he didn’t consider him worth his time. Obi-Wan could’ve done it better--the whole taunting part of a duel was his skill--but Anakin would do what he could. Hopefully, it would be enough.

“My mistake,” he said, with a smile.

And there was that sense of twisted heat leaking through his shields again, and Anakin finally figured it all out--Specter was jealous.

He wanted Anakin dead, wanted him to suffer in dying, because he wanted to show that he was better. To prove that he was good enough. To earn the approval of his superiors.

Remind you of anyone? he asked himself.

Shut up, he replied inside his head.

Specter considered him silently for a moment, head tilted to one side. “I’ve been looking forward to this,” he finally said. “For a long time.”

At least taunting him was even likelier to work, given what Anakin now knew.
“Hm. Can’t say I’ve given it much thought myself,” he lied.

Specter hissed at him, and that hot, heavy, jealous rage spiked just a little bit.

_Not a Gotal, then, _Anakin said. _They don’t make noises like that._

But the young Sith Lord didn’t quite rise to the bait, like Anakin had hoped; didn’t rush him and start the duel by ceding ground. The way Anakin himself had, the first time he’d fought Specter’s predecessor.

But, no, all he did was pull out a pair of lightsabers and activate them both, settling into a modified Form IV opening stance.

Interesting again--his background was _not_ in this kind of combat; he was holding himself all wrong for that. No, he’d been self-taught at first; he’d learned how to fight bare-handed for survival, and then form and polish and a pair of lightsabers had been added on later.

Well, Anakin had that kind of background, too, though not as much. And he hadn’t spent years training Ahsoka without getting pretty damn good at fighting against jar’kai specialists.

_Yeah. He could handle Specter._

“You’ll regret your lack of preparation,” Specter said, and then launched himself across the platform.

Anakin stood his ground, met the flurry of rapid blows with a solid foundation, letting Specter dance around him and returning quick jabs with unstoppable force.

He had to admit, Ataru was a good choice for the Sith Lord. He was _fast_, like it demanded; striking from the shadows in what seemed like a dozen different direction. If he’d had more time to practice, to really hone his skills, he might have actually _won_.

But as it was, he was--not _sloppy_, exactly, but a little too much of his street fighting background crept in, in all the wrong ways. Because, sure, made him a bit unpredictable, but it also pointed his focus on a tangent from where it should have been; kept him from taking full advantage of his chosen style.

_Your focus, _Qui-Gon Jinn had told Anakin once, _determines your reality._ Specter’s not-quite-perfect fighting style certainly showed the truth in that.

And so, when Specter failed to gain the advantage he wanted quickly enough with his lightsabers, he fell back on hand-to-hand. He ducked inside the reach of Anakin’s blade, throwing an elbow at his face.

Anakin gave ground rather than trying to respond in kind, sidestepping and letting Specter come within a hair’s breadth of going over the edge. He followed up quickly and pressed his advantage hard, trying to box him into that corner, but Specter slipped past him, running up the wall and over his head.

_Not bad, _Anakin thought, turning and grinning at Specter, wide and slightly feral. Horrible thought--_really, _really_ horrible thought--but a part of him was actually starting to _enjoy_ this. Oh, he still sparred with Obi-Wan, every chance they got, but it wasn’t the same as a _real_ fight, with someone who knew what they were doing.

Anakin pushed forward before Specter could finish resetting, making his own attack and forcing
the Sith Lord to stay on the defensive.

That didn’t mean he won, not yet--Specter kept moving, like a dancer, always just out of reach; until they were near the opposite end of the platform. Then he ducked again, coming in close again and aiming a solid kick at Anakin’s right knee.

He dodged, of course--he’d seen it coming, and Specter came down a little harder on his landing than he’d probably meant, at an oblique angle to Anakin where neither of them was in a good position to make an effective strike with their blades.

But, as Specter had at least tried to demonstrate, that wasn’t the only way to win a fight.

Seizing the opportunity, Anakin reached out with his free hand to yank Specter’s hood off--the likely change in light quality would distract him, maybe disorient him for a split second. But a split second would be enough. If that happened, he could take control of the duel again and keep it; Ataru’s weakness was that it needed a quick victory or it got too draining. It was only a matter of time before Specter ran out of momentum and left Anakin an opening.

So he reached, and got a handful of fabric, and pulled, and--

He instantly, deeply regretted that choice.

*Are you--proud of me, Master?*

Specter wasn’t a Gotal. Or a Devaronian. Or any other species with true horns.

Specter was *Togruta*.

It was all too much. It all added up to too damn much, especially this week--too many pieces that were too similar to *him* and to someone he loved and for a split second, Anakin’s brain whited out at the edges and he barely even *remembered* Mortis so why--

*Are you* proud

*of me,*

*Master?*

A split second was enough.

A line of white-hot pain burst across Anakin’s left thigh, and his leg gave out entirely under him. He was too close to the edge of the platform; he lost his balance and pitched over the side.

Specter yelled something and dove after him; he landed on a natural ledge about a half-dozen meters down, which knocked the wind out of him and the impact felt wrong, off-kilter--

On instinct, or muscle memory, he brought his lightsaber to bear again and Specter--

Didn’t correct his angle in time to avoid it; he landed on the blade; impaling himself through the chest with a faint, choking gasp of surprise.

Anakin deactivated his lightsaber, and Specter collapsed on top of him; one of his own hilts disappearing down the mountain, the other slipping from his hand, clattering onto the stone at Anakin’s side as the blade itself disappeared.
It wouldn’t have worked, he thought numbly. He wouldn’t have been--he wouldn’t have given you what you wanted. Even if you had killed me. He finds what you want most and he promises it and he lies. And I’m--sorry. I’m sorry, it’s all my fault that he found you, that you’re here, that you ended this way. I’m so, so sorry.

The thirty seconds or so it took for Specter to finally, fully die were some of the longest in Anakin’s life.

And then--and then, what was left of Specter was crushing him; he couldn’t take the body’s weight anymore; he tried to shift, tried to shove it off him, but he couldn’t get the leverage he needed.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

He reached down with a shaking hand--he couldn’t see how bad the wound was, but if he could feel it, he could get a sense of--

Oh.

His knee was, very clearly, not where it was supposed to be anymore. In its place was--nothing.

And that was--that was the last straw. There was a limit to what he could take, and that was...that was it.

He had the presence of mind, just barely, to activate the tracking beacon Rex had insisted he take before he lost consciousness completely.
The buzz droids, fortunately, hadn’t done nearly as much damage as Rex had feared. Artoo had just finished running a full diagnostic and, according to the readout, not only did they have on hand everything they’d need—or, at least, a reasonable substitute—for a patch job that would hold them ’til a safer port and proper repairs, the three of them could get the work done and be underway in six to eight hours. Give or take.

“You’re sure about this?” he asked. It seemed too damn good to be true. But he needed the win; the General probably did, too.

The little droid beeped at him, smugly, which he took for a yes.

“Excellent,” he said. At least that part of things was going right.

He tried not to think too much about how things might be going down the mountain. There wasn’t a damned thing he could do about it from here. And if he’d followed, he’d’ve been a liability, in the way—potentially even a hostage, like that time with Asajj Ventress. There were some things, Rex knew, that were just out of his league. And a Sith Lord was one of them.

At least if I’m by myself.

Which was not a thought he wanted to have, especially not this week.

He cleared his throat, shaking it off as best he could. “I’ll, uh, I’ll update General Kenobi and Commander Tano, then get started.” The fiddly detail work he’d leave to General Skywalker, of course, but there was plenty he could do in the meantime.

Artoo beeped at him again, then trundled off to start on his own set of repairs, as Rex settled himself at the long-range comm station.

Reaching out to General Kenobi was no trouble at all—they had long since put together a limited number of code phrases for communication of rapid changes to plan like this; delays to making a set meeting were one of the situations they’d covered. Rex added a couple layers of more standard encryption—couldn’t be too careful—and had it sent off within a few seconds.

Simple enough, although it was a little disconcerting that General Kenobi hadn’t responded to any of the messages Rex and General Skywalker had sent since meeting up with the Commander. True, he had almost certainly just gone dark for his mission, but--

Well, Rex had spent far too much time around Jedi to believe in coincidence.

But he couldn’t do anything about that, either. And if he was going to function the way General Skywalker needed him to, he had to put it out of his mind; focus on the tasks he actually could accomplish.

Like contacting the Commander, though that was considerably more complicated. They hadn’t had time yet to develop a reference system with her, or even read her in on the basics of the one they already had. And he didn’t know what encryptions she used, so he couldn’t rely on that and hope no one was listening and able to decrypt the content while it was still relevant.
For the first message, Rex had settled on the same system the Generals used to identify their rendezvous points--referenced a similar event from their shared past, betting on the Commander remembering what they’d said about Cinna and piecing the rest together.

Safe bet, that; she was wicked smart. The real concern was that she simply wouldn’t *remember* the mission in question.

He was trying to come up with a similar translation for the update when the console vibrated; incoming transmission, long-range.

Commander Tano, at least, *was* in a position to return his message.

And, yeah, it was probably a risk to accept the call, but he’d have an easier time explaining things this way. As long as he was careful, and kept it short, they’d *probably* be fine.

She seemed to have a similar notion; got right down to business as soon as the connection solidified.

“Rex,” she said. “I got your message, and I *think* I’m reading it right? Is everything okay?”

“No much I can say on an open line, sir,” he hedged apologetically. “Suffice to say, we...ran into a little trouble, had to go to ground. But it looks like we’ll be on our way in eight standard hours or so.”

“Okay,” she said, looking more than a little relieved. “Sorry, I know I probably shouldn’t’ve risked calling, but I felt like I should...I don’t know, check in.”

Which--well, he didn’t *want* to think about the alarm bells that raised, but there was a Sith Lord involved, and Commander Tano had been concerned enough, lightyears away with no context, to risk an open call.

And then--and then Rex’s regular comm began beeping frantically at him. *No...*

“Rex?” Commander Tano asked. “Rex, what’s that--what’s wrong?”

Discipline of a lifetime kept it off his face. “General Skywalker just activated his distress beacon.”

And, on the one hand, that meant he was conscious at least long enough to do that. But on the other, if things were bad enough that he wasn’t trying to drag himself back here on his own, then--

Judging by the look on her face, the same thought was probably going through the Commander’s head.

“Where are you?” she asked--demanded, more like.

He didn’t hesitate. “Sending you the coordinates now.”

That was probably an incredibly *stupid* risk; the line wasn’t secure and someone could well be listening in--but, then again, chances were good Darth Specter was being tracked, and if--when--he was missed, they’d have company coming anyway. And with--depending on how bad the General was injured, speeding up their extraction carried a hell of a lot more weight than keeping their presence here quiet. And Commander Tano’s help would get them off this rock that much faster.

Plus, if more trouble *did* find them, Rex would need her help defending against it. Especially since
the General--probably couldn’t right now.

“Got it,” she said. “I’ll be there in two hours.”

“Sir,” he acknowledged, then her hologram dissipated as she ended the call.

Artoo had overheard some of that--or maybe just picked up the beacon himself. He’d come back to the cockpit, and crooned worriedly at Rex.

“Stay here,” Rex said. “Keep--keep working on the ship. Whatever happened down there, sooner we get out of here, the better.”

Artoo beeped again, which Rex decided meant “all right.”

Time to go.

The beacon’s signal was still coming through nice and clear, and hadn’t moved. He gathered up the supplies he was likely to need--medkit, climbing gear, extra harness, portable heat source (the General hadn’t been wrong about how cold it was out there)--and headed out, hoping like hell he wasn’t too late.

After about a half-hour’s descent, Rex found where the fight had started, on a crescent-shaped cutaway in the cliff. There were a pair of discarded cloaks, one on either end; and a series of gouges in the rock he recognized as coming from lightsabers.

No further sign of either the Sith or the Jedi.

But the beacon was still urging him along; all indicators were that he was close.

He made his way over to the edge of the cutaway and peered down, looking for the best route--

And there they were.

The Sith Lord was sprawled on a natural ledge about half a dozen meters down--Togruta; male, based on the shape and angle of his montrals; dead, based on the charred hole in his back.

Pinned under him was the General.

He wasn’t moving.

At this--at this distance, Rex couldn’t even tell if he was breathing.

He took a step back, squeezing his eyes shut and beating back the horror; the mental images of the blood-soaked Temple, the dead child in the Council room, his General tumbling backwards out the window.

*Never again*, he reminded himself, reaching up with a shaking hand to brush against the fading scar on his head. *I am my own man.*

It took--it took a few minutes for the moment to pass and his heartrate to mostly go back to normal.
He took a deep breath and steeled himself before looking down over the edge again.

He processed a little more detail this time--the General’s left leg had been cut off; somewhere above the knee, he thought, but it was hard to tell exactly where, with Darth Specter’s body in the way. Nevermind assessing for other injuries.

Getting down to the ledge, at least, wouldn’t be too big a problem--plenty of solid places to anchor his line, and no serious obstacles to trip him up on the way. But--

*Not a lot of room to work down there,* he thought. *Not sure how stable that ledge is, either.* The cutaways were fine, smooth and solid, possibly with additional supports built into the rock. But natural weathering processes weren’t nearly that careful.

He’d make it work, somehow. He *had* to.

He pushed that worry to the back of his mind, made sure his line--and the heater and medkit--were secure, then lowered himself down with care.

The ledge held. So far, so good.

He dragged the corpse off of his Jedi, and put a careful finger on the General’s neck, and--

There was a pulse. Rapid and thready, but *there.* And he could see it now; the slight rise and fall of General Skywalker’s chest.

He was breathing. He was *alive.*

It was all Rex could do to keep from shutting down again, this time in giddy relief.

But breathing or not-- *alive* or not--the General was still badly injured. Rex had to move if he wanted to *keep* him alive.

“Right. Okay.” He took a deep, shaky breath of his own, and got to work.

First thing first, he got the heater going, then unpacked the medkit. Rex wasn’t technically a medic, of course, but all the clones had received at least basic medical training. In case they got separated, or were otherwise unable to get real help. So, something like pull out bandaging, load it up with as much disinfectant as he could, and wrap it around the stump--that, he could do.

Next, he set up a scanner--the basic one in the kit wouldn’t tell him all that much, of course, but it would at least identify any spinal damage. Which would let Rex know if it was safe to move the general; whether or not he could do it without killing or paralyzing him.

And if he couldn’t?

The ledge was still holding stable. If Rex couldn’t move his General, he’d just do what he could to keep him warm and prevent further damage, and wait for the Commander to join them. *She* could lift General Skywalker back up to the ship safely.

After less than two minutes, the scanner beeped--more good news, sorely needed; no spinal fractures.

“Okay,” Rex said again. He’d done what he could down here--lightsabers cauterized, fortunately, so he didn’t have to worry about any bleeding on top of the rest. And everything else could wait ‘til they were off this damn ledge and back in the shelter the ship provided.
He went back up to the crescent to collect his General’s cloak--added warmth, once he had to shut the heater down, plus a little more padding between the harness and any other bruising the scanner hadn’t shown.

Then, back down to the ledge, to get the General strapped in securely and the two harnesses hooked together.

After that, it was only a matter of climbing back up the cliff.

“All right,” he muttered to his still-unconscious General. “Might be better for you to stay asleep for a little while longer, sir.” Because, as worrisome as his continued lack of consciousness was--and as heavy and awkward as he was to carry, limp like this--Rex was worried that he’d try to help. And that would just end up hurting him worse.

No answer, of course. Rex checked the straps one more time, then started up the cliff.

It took a little more than twice as long to get back to the Waterfall as it had to work his way down. Of course, considering that going up was always harder, to say nothing of the extra weight he was carrying, Rex thought he’d made pretty damn good time.

He hauled the General up onto the semicircular cutaway and paused for a minute to catch his breath.

And, right on cue, General Skywalker stirred a little, coming at least partway awake with a faint moan.

Oh, good, Rex thought. Finally. I was--if he hadn’t woken up soon...

“Easy, sir,” he said. “You’ve been pretty badly injured. Try not to move too much.”

“Rex…?” he asked, a little hoarse.

“Right here.” He paused for a second, then added, “Commander Tano’s on her way.” Probably be here any minute now, in fact.

“Good,” he said. “That’s--that’s good.” He drew in a slightly unsteady breath. “S’cold.”

“I know,” Rex said. Time to get moving again. “Hang on, it’ll be a little warmer in the ship. Just rest for a minute, I’ll get us there.”

“Right,” he said. “Okay.”

Rex set to work uncoupling the harnesses--good for getting up the cliff face, but put them at an awkward angle for moving across level ground. It took a few minutes; while they were designed to be quick-release, he’d been paranoid about accidentally dropping General Skywalker on the way up, so he’d made some on-the-fly improvements.

The General was quiet for a minute, probably sorting through everything that had happened as the post-fainting grogginess faded a little bit. “What…” He cleared his throat, shook his head. “What day’s it? Have I…?”
“Same day,” Rex assured him. “You went down after him a couple hours ago.”

“Okay.” he said. He sounded relieved. “That’s okay, then.” He paused. “‘Soka’s coming.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Real soon.”

He shook his head. “Now.” He waved vaguely at the sky. “Listen. Engines.”

He paused for a second, tilting his head, and--yeah, there it was. Or, at least, he heard engines.

And, as out of it as he still was, if General Skywalker said those belonged to Commander Tano, not one of Specter’s friends, Rex believed him.

He eyed the platform around them, trying to decide if they should stay put, or make for their ship, or maybe drop down to the next natural ledge.

Dependong on how big her ship is, she should have room to land here without any trouble, he decided. They probably shouldn’t try stumbling across to the Waterfall until she did, though. Didn’t want to be in her way.

As he was unhooking the last of the straps, the ship came into view through the cloud cover; nondescript, a little battered-looking, and disappointingly small.

So much for that, he thought, shifting to protect his General from any debris kicked up by the backdraft as she maneuvered into her landing. He hadn’t even really consciously considered the possibility until he’d seen it wouldn’t work, but--if the Commander’s ship had been just a little bigger, she could’ve evacuated General Skywalker herself, faster than he and Artoo could get the Waterfall functioning again.

The General muttered something Rex just barely caught over the noise; it sounded like something less than complimentary about the little ship’s landing gear, or the timing with which she’d deployed it.

...assuming, of course, we could talk him into it, he thought dryly. If he’s alert enough to critique the Commander’s landing, he’d probably put up a fight about leaving the Waterfall behind.

Amazing, how much that half-overheard and completely unwarranted complaint had improved his mood.

The engines were barely powered down when Commander Tano pushed open a hatch on top and leapt out, darting across the platform to join them.

“Hey, Snips,” the General said.

She took a shaky breath, but smiled, relief painted clear all over her face; when she spoke, her voice was steady. “Busy day?” she asked.

“Could say that,” he said.

“I left you guys--what, less than a day ago?” She shook her head in mostly-mock exasperation. “You couldn’t wait a day before getting into trouble?”

“You know me. I get bored easy.”

“The firefight earlier wasn’t enough?”

“What c’n I say?” he said, trying for airy unconcern, but the pain cut through it and ruined the effect. “F’I don’t find trouble, it finds me.”
She hugged him then, very, very carefully. “You look terrible,” she informed him.

He managed a smile at that. “Love you, too, Snips,” he murmured, then shivered.

_Not good._

“We should get inside,” Rex said.

“Yeah,” the Commander agreed, sliding under the General’s right arm.

Rex did the same on his other side; with her to help, he was a lot easier to carry.

“It’s okay, Skyguy,” she said. “We’ve got you. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Mm,” he agreed, but he was starting to fade out again. He’d been putting up a front, Rex realized; not wanting his apprentice to worry too much.

The two of them exchanged a glance over his head, and picked up the pace.

Not that she was wrong. Rex knew she wasn’t. He _would_ be okay, eventually--there wasn’t much could kill General Skywalker--but ‘eventually’ was still a long way away.

But they were headed that way, at least. Next steps--get him warm, get the ship repaired, get to a medic. As long as they kept moving in the right direction, they could manage the rest as it came.

As long as they _kept_ moving in the right direction, everything would be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Things I know very little about: a) mountain climbing; b) medicine. Um. Please forgive any errors.

I know I don't usually stay in the same thread, so to speak, two chapters in a row, but I felt like it would be a bad idea to leave Anakin hanging out on that cliff for too long, so here we are.

Thanks so much for reading, and see y'all next week!

~shadowsong

pun absolutely intended, btw. ba dum tish
They had made six years’ worth of slow, careful progress, of gradually building a network of sympathetic Senators and planetary leaders. The proof of it was there, if one knew where to look and made the effort; but sometimes it felt like they weren’t actually accomplishing anything, or gaining any ground.

Bail knew that wasn’t true--comparing where they were now, in terms of reach and allies, to where they were even a year ago proved that. But at the same time, Palpatine was still in power, and nothing in the near future seemed likely to change it. For all the progress they had made, most of their actual accomplishments were still mere potential; laying groundwork that wouldn’t pay off for years to come.

Today was supposed to be different. Their plan for today--making contact with the little princess--was supposed to be something that felt like a tangible gain, even if it wasn’t any more overt or immediately effective than anything else. But it was supposed to be a quantifiable good, one that he and Padme could hold on to on the (all too frequent) days when it felt like every step forward meant at least another step back.

But things had gone on a tangent that, in hindsight, they probably should have seen coming.

Bail had gotten sidetracked--trapped in a conversation with one of Wilhuff Tarkin’s proteges, then with the Grand Moff himself; and Padme had been similarly busy, with enemies and allies and people they were trying to win over. By the time they’d broken free, Luke had slipped away and it was too late to act as planned.

Still, contact had been made, and Princess Lavinia had, from everything Padme had told him, responded well to Luke. But, again--a step forward, a step back; because for as much potential gain as this could give them, there was also a serious potential risk.

And now the question Bail had to answer was, how much of an impact did this unexpected change of plans really have? And was it important enough to risk a message to the Jedi? If only to get an assessment for exactly how much risk this posed to the protections woven around Luke, the idea was...tempting.

On the other hand--well, it wasn’t enough for a face-to-face meeting. That much, at least, he was certain of. And it could probably wait until next week, when the tension from Empire Day had dissipated. Given that it wasn’t anything his friends could easily act on, that might be better anyway. Besides, Padme would absolutely include this in her next letter. Maybe that would be enough.

Then again, Bail was, technically, the interface between the Jedi and their Senate allies, since Padme was watched too closely and Mon hadn’t been there. If there was an official message or update to pass, which this might well be, it should come from him. Especially since, if he chose to use it, he had a more direct way to reach out than Padme did.

The problem was, each time he made contact presented a not-insignificant risk to all involved. And, since he was that interface, it was up to him to decide in each situation if the news was worth the risk.

He turned that over in his head for a moment, but still found himself unable to decide. He needed advice, and there was really only one person he could turn to. He checked the time, and ran a few
quick mental calculations—it was late in Aldera City, but Breha would still be up, even if Winter was long since asleep. And talking to his family, despite the fact that he couldn’t actually explain the problem, usually helped him gain some perspective when he was faced with decisions like this one.

As he’d hoped, Breha answered almost immediately. It looked like she was halfway through getting ready for bed; her hair was down and soft around her face.

He already felt himself relaxing, just seeing her.

“Hi.”

She smiled, and it lit her in a way that he could never describe other than—her smile could light the entire galaxy. “Bail, I’m so glad you called.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t check in earlier,” he said. He tried to call home at least once a day, but sometimes—well, things got hectic here. “But I figured you’d still be awake, and I wanted to hear your voice.”

She nodded. “Winter’s already asleep,” she said. “I just checked on her. She’ll be sorry she missed you.”

“I am, too,” he said. “But—I confirmed everything, and I’ll definitely be coming home sometime next week,” he said.

“Wonderful,” she said. “Winter will be happy to hear it. I am, too. We had the parade today, and she made sure to tell me how disappointed she was that Daddy wasn’t there.”

He laughed a little. “Oh, I have to go to one here tomorrow. It won’t be any fun without her, though.”

“I’ll tell her you said that,” Breha said, still smiling. But then she paused, her expression turning serious. “I...saw some of the released images from the event you attended earlier today. Doesn’t Lord Specter usually attend these things?”

Ah, yes. The other critical question; and another thing that had thrown him and Padme off track and left the opening Luke had all too innocently taken.

“He does,” Bail confirmed, uneasy all over again at the thought. He didn’t like not knowing where Specter was; that usually meant a bloodbath in the making. Which was probably why Breha was asking; for all her carefully-guarded plausible deniability, she knew more than enough about Darth Specter to follow news of him very closely. Bail had had his staff carefully combing official and unofficial press reports from areas with likely targets ever since he’d realized the Sith Lord had left the planet, either for individual assassinations or a wholesale slaughter. Nothing had come up yet.

Then again, he didn’t exactly expect them to find anything. Not in that direction. Not when there was every indication—or at least every one he knew how to read—that Specter’s trip was unofficial. Spontaneous. Possibly even unauthorized.

That, he knew, was something that did require a message to the Jedi, and he had in fact had one left at a dead drop when he’d checked a few hours ago to see if the code keys General Skywalker was acquiring this week had been delivered yet.

“Hm,” Breha said. She still looked troubled. “Well, I’m sure you’ll hear of him sooner than I will.”
“Probably,” Bail agreed, and sighed. “The Emperor’s daughter was at the event, though. Perhaps Specter simply didn’t want to be upstaged.” It wasn’t true, and they both knew it wasn’t true, but it would hopefully provide some cover with any eavesdroppers and was a decent segue into what he actually wanted to talk about.

“I saw,” Breha said. “I thought she did very well, considering how young she is.”

“She did,” he agreed. Better than Winter or even Luke would have handled an event like that at three years old, and both his daughter and Padme’s son were remarkably patient, well-behaved children.

When they wanted to be, anyway.

“Did you get a chance to speak with her?” Breha asked.

He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. Luke Naberrie managed to slip off and meet her, though. He seems to have decided to be her friend.”

Comprehension shone in his wife’s eyes, and she nodded once. She knew exactly who Luke was, and exactly why this was dangerous-- that part, she’d known right from the start. “He does have a habit of doing that,” she said carefully. She glanced off to one side, then leaned forward and lowered her voice. “Is this a good thing or a bad thing?”

And, if she was being that direct, it meant she was certain their call was untapped, clear of any danger other than someone physically listening in on one end or the other.

“I don’t know,” Bail admitted. Because, on the one hand, this put a lot more focus on Luke than Padme wanted, and there was the outside chance that that attention could lead their enemies to their other secrets--Polis Massa, Dagobah, Leia…

On the other hand, Luke approaching the princess came across as--much less suspicious. As something natural, even. In part because it was, of course; and in part because, however else they might have tried to explain it, Bail and Padme were professional politicians. Any attempts on their part to befriend the Emperor’s daughter would be assumed to have an ulterior motive.

Which, as much as he hated to admit it, wasn’t…entirely wrong. Yes, their primary goal was to protect her, to offer her an alternative, positive influence in her life. A way out, even, if she ever chose to take it. To save her, one way or another, from her father.

But Bail would be lying if he claimed that the possibility of cultivating a source with that level of…proximity, anyway, if not true access or influence, hadn’t at least occurred to them.

Not that they had been planning on anything overt, of course--it wasn’t fair to the child, and it was too dangerous for everyone involved. But once a relationship was there, then maybe…

Well. It was a moot point, anyway. Luke had made the approach, which would keep things altruistic. Or as altruistic as anything on Imperial Center ever was.

Of course, the risks with Luke were different, and in most ways greater, which brought him back to the central question.

“I’m leaning towards good,” he finally said. “But--I really don’t know, Breha.”

She nodded. “So we might need a contingency plan.” One to extract and hide Luke, and probably Padme, and--who knew who else might get caught up in that mess.
“Yes.” She probably had some portion of one put together already--plausible deniability or not, Breha knew enough to plan ahead.

“All right,” she said. “Keep me posted on this, please?”

“I will,” he promised. So her advice boiled down to watch and wait, and avoid overreacting.

Which was probably the best thing he could do. Treating this like something more than a warm-hearted, friendly little boy reaching out to another lonely child would only bring people to wonder why.

“Thank you,” she said, then leaned back again, controlling her expression and lightening her tone. “I should probably let you go,” she said, apologetically. “You have a parade to go to all by yourself tomorrow.”

“And I’m sure you have an early day,” he agreed. “I’ll call again tomorrow. Earlier, so I can say hello to Winter, too.”

“Good,” she said, and smiled. “And we’ll see you next week?”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll send the specific schedule once I finish ironing it out.”

She nodded. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he said. “Good night.”

“Good night.” She blew him a kiss, then leaned forward, shutting off her comm and leaving his office in shadow.

He sighed, and rubbed at his temples. He would hold off on contacting the Jedi about the potential situation with Luke and the princess, at least until next week, or if something else changed. And maybe it would all turn out all right. They couldn’t ask for a better positive influence in her life than Luke Naberrie, after all. And he and Padme would still be there, if a step removed, if she needed more protection than Luke could give her.

As for the situation with Specter…

There wasn’t much of anything he could do, other than what he was doing already. Leave messages where he could, and look for a trail, and do his best to help the survivors clean up afterwards.

It had been--another day of progress that didn’t really feel like progress. Two steps forward, maybe, but still at least a step back.

But he still believed--he had to believe--that, in the end, the steps forward would outnumber the steps back. In the end, the progress would add up to something real.

Even if it took another six years to see it.

__________________________________________________________

So. Specter was dead.
This was not precisely a surprise for Darth Sidious--his late apprentice was obedient and eager to please. Very little would have made him ignore his orders, abandon his post, and rush off without permission. The ripple through the Force when he actually expired was mere confirmation for what he had expected from the moment Specter had left the planet.

Well, the boy had served him adequately for a time. But Sidious was far better prepared for this eventuality than he had been the last time he’d found himself without an apprentice. He had a list of acceptable candidates at the ready. And his selection--an adult this time; seasoned and strengthened and embittered by over a decade of hard labor in the mines--was, by now, already on his way to a private location, where Sidious could tame him at his leisure.

Irritating, to have to spend a year or two without an active enforcer in the field, but not the near-disaster that Skywalker slipping through his fingers six years ago had presented.

And his daughter’s first public appearance had gone almost exactly to plan. Senator Amidala’s brat approaching her had been an unexpected bonus--providing him with a new conduit of information on the activities of dissidents in the Senate. Largely passive, at least until she was a little older, but a conduit nonetheless. A promising start, which augured the long-term success of that particular experiment.

Overall, it had hardly been an unproductive week. Yes, Specter’s death was an inconvenience, but apprentices could be replaced. In the end, all he had really lost was time.
Chapter Notes

As a note, this chapter references a significant Noodle Incident from the *Thrawn* novel, the timing/specifics of which I made up, and therefore may be contradicted by later canon.

Also, as before, tactical/strategic errors are mine, not our narrator's.

~shadowsong

Obi-Wan, Moonshot, and Reckoning had been pinned down in the magazine for nearly half of a standard hour, and nothing had exploded. Which, of course, meant every second made that eventuality that much likelier, but they had still had that time to regroup and try to figure out their next move.

Moonshot had had far more luck with her appointed task than Obi-Wan had with--not at all surprisingly, there was a medkit available, even easily accessible, securely bolted to the west wall of the storeroom. It wasn't particularly extensive at its best, and needed a few things restocked on top of that, but it was sufficient to tend to Reckoning’s injury, at least in the short term.

Finding an exit, unfortunately, was not nearly so simple.

Cutting through the back wall and then scaling the mountain behind the base was an option, but Reckoning would never make it. Besides, it would be a long, roundabout route to rendezvous with the rest of the cell, which increased the chances for getting recaptured.

Obi-Wan had checked the ventilation shafts as well, but they were too narrow for either him or Moonshot. Reckoning might manage, though; he held onto the thought in case splitting up proved the best option. He’d prefer not sending Reckoning off on his own, but if he had to, he would do it.

There was also, of course, the task of removing some of the ammunition if they could. Which had been their mission to start with; the entire reason they were trapped here now. The potential firepower would be a great asset to this cell or any others they could smuggle it to, and leaving it in Imperial hands, after putting this much effort into removing it in the first place-- especially this week--didn’t particularly appeal to Obi-Wan. Unfortunately, neither the cliff route nor the ventilation shafts were a good way to transport explosives. It was a far lesser priority then making sure the three of them got away as intact as possible, to be sure, but not something he was willing to abandon entirely until he had to.

Time, however, was a real concern--more so even than the risk of an errant spark setting off the half-assembled ammunition all around him. The Imperial forces boxing them in had a much better chance of entering the room safely than he and his companions did of exiting it.

So, he moved on to other options. He’d appropriated Moonshot’s datapad to check the viability of cutting down-- a lateral escape through the walls would get them caught very quickly, he was absolutely certain--and it was looking more and more like the floor might be their best option. Reckoning could manage it, with their help, which meant they could go together. There was even
an exit from the base proper within striking distance, though there was quite a bit of open ground between that and the woods surrounding them.

*One problem at a time.*

Still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was being *herded* in that direction. And while the best thing to do with a trap was, of course, to spring it on one’s own terms, their current circumstances made such an action seem...less than prudent.

More so than usual, even.

But it remained the best of several bad options. Unless Moonshot, who had been working on slicing into enemy communications since she’d finished tending to Reckoning, found actual evidence otherwise in the next few minutes, Obi-Wan would likely advise going through the floor.

That decided, he looked up, setting the datapad aside. Moonshot had apparently, while his attention had been occupied elsewhere, half-disassembled a wall comm unit which had, apparently, allowed her to successfully tap in. *Excellent. About time something went our way.*

“Anything?” he asked her quietly.

“Not really,” she said, listening intently. “Seems like the boys outside are still waiting on orders. It *was* the Navy commander who figured out we had two teams, though. Got that much.”

“Right.” Which meant that said Commander, and not the one actually in charge of the base, was the one to be wary of. Particularly when he left the planet itself.

*Getting ahead of ourselves again,* he thought. *Focus.*

Of course, even apart from that, it *was* useful information. The Navy commander sweeping in like that and redirecting ground forces meant a decent chance of chain of command confusion. Possibly even an outright conflict between him and the base Commandant, regarding overstepped boundaries and overreached authority. Assuming Obi-Wan ended up in a position to manipulate that tension, he certainly could gain quite a bit of traction there.

“Did they mention his name at all?” he asked. Every detail helped, and if this was someone he knew, who’d been reassigned to a ship he didn’t, it would make planning their exit significantly less difficult.

“Thrawn,” she said. “That mean anything to you?”

“No,” he said, a little disappointed. Not anyone he knew, either directly or by reputation, unfortunately.

Although on further thought, the name *was* vaguely familiar. He’d heard it at least once before, but--

Ah. Right. That mess Anakin had gotten into at the edge of the Unknown Regions, very early in the Clone War. Before Ahsoka had joined them, even; no more than a couple of weeks after Anakin had been Knighted. Obi-Wan couldn’t recall any further details off hand, so it wasn’t much help in the moment. Other than the knowledge that Thrawn was from outside the territory either the Republic or the Empire had ever tried to claim, and thus had a very different context and perspective, making him somewhat harder to predict. However, Obi-Wan had a feeling that this would *not* be the last time he encountered this particular commander, so he would be sure to ask Anakin about it when they--
Abruptly, a bright--if distant--shock of raw pain splashed across the Force.

Anakin!

All thoughts of Commander Thrawn--or even their escape--flew out of his mind. Because Anakin was in grave, immediate danger; Anakin was hurt, and he--

“Ben?”

He couldn’t do a damned thing about it.

The realization was like a second blow, almost worse than the initial shock had been. Anakin was far away, and Obi-Wan was trapped, with Moonshot and Reckoning depending on him to hold himself together and find them a way out.

He clenched his hands to still their shaking, took a breath, and tried--tried--to regain some sense of internal equilibrium, and lock his current--reaction down.

There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony.

He closed his eyes; instantly regretted it as his memory filled the space behind them with the Tantive’s medbay and Anakin’s ragged breathing.

That was six years ago, he told himself. Six years ago. Not here and now. And Anakin isn’t--this time he’s not--things are not that bleak.

The truth of that thought sang through the Force around him. It wasn’t--it wasn’t much, but it was enough to banish those memories back where they belonged.

For the moment.

There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos there is harmony.

“Ben, are you okay?” Reckoning asked, his voice at last penetrating as Obi-Wan regained a modicum of his self-control.

He opened his eyes. “Yes.” No.

The others exchanged a look.

“What...what happened?” Moonshot asked, rather than pushing the point.

“It was...far away,” he evaded. “It will not affect our situation here.” So long as I manage to keep it from affecting me too strongly, at least.

As he had six years ago, he set a tendril of his thoughts to passively monitor his bond with Anakin, just in case, and told himself sternly that that was enough.

And then--

Keep your concentration here and now, where it belongs. Just as Qui-Gon used to tell him. Frequently.

“We should get on,” he added, passing Moonshot back the datapad with hands that were once
again completely steady.

Even if his mind and heart were--well, in progress.

“All right,” she said. She didn’t sound entirely convinced, but she didn’t argue, either. She accepted his assurances; she trusted him--they both did--either as an individual or a Jedi. It didn’t particularly matter. It was certainly motivating; all the more reason to stay focused.

“Okay,” Reckoning agreed softly. “So...which way, then?”

Sideways was still out, down was still probably a trap, up was still a steep, exposed climb…

*Split up,* he decided. Two of them to go down and out with as much of the ammunition as they could; one to draw the defenders away and clear a path. Or--

He considered Reckoning for a moment. The brief rest and moderate painkiller had done the young man a great deal of good. And, especially with an unknown like this Commander Thrawn involved, the more confusion and misdirection Obi-Wan could apply to the situation, the better.

“Do you think you can make it through the vents?” he asked.

Reckoning blinked, then eyed the hole Obi-Wan had already cut in there, considering. “Probably? I’ll need a boost up there, but once I am--yeah, I think so.”

“What are you thinking?” Moonshot asked.

“We split up,” he said. He pulled out one of the timed charges he’d borrowed from the stockpile Cleaver had bought from Hondo, and tossed it to Reckoning. “What appears to be the quickest, safest route out is for me to cut through the floor, but there’s a very good chance that it’s a trap. Reckoning, I want you to take this charge and some of the ammunition, get a reasonable distance away, then set it off. I’ll do the same, going up the mountain. The will hopefully draw at least some portion of the troops off, leaving Moonshot a reasonably clear exit route, with as much of the remaining stockpile as she can safely handle.”

Moonshot nodded. “And even if I can’t bring all that much, we’ll at least have kept the Empire from using a good chunk of it, yeah?”

“Precisely,” Obi-Wan said.

“Got it,” Reckoning said. “Where do we meet, after?”

“Third backup rendezvous,” Moonshot answered. “Cleaver and the others will have steered clear of that one, no matter what else happened out there.”

“Don’t wait more than a half-hour,” Obi-Wan cautioned. “I’m sure you have protocols in place if we have to scatter. *Use* them. If I don’t meet you in time, wait for me to reach out before attempting to contact me again. Tell Cleaver, too.”

“We will,” she said. “You know where to find us?”

“Yes,” he said. He made a point to always, *always* study the ‘what to do when everything explodes the wrong way’ contingency when he started a mission. He had learned *that* years ago. The first thing he’d memorized, when they’d shown him the map of the complex, was the series of rally points.
“All right,” she said.

“We should probably move, then,” Reckoning said, pulling himself up with the aid of a nearby shelf and balancing carefully, almost all of his weight in his good leg. “Before the Imps bust in and ruin Ben’s plan.”

Moonshot nodded. “Good luck,” she said, clasping his hand briefly.

“You, too,” he said. “See you on the other side.”

Obi-Wan closed his eyes again--this time, miraculously, avoiding the onslaught of nightmarish memories--and lifted Reckoning up until the young man caught the edges of the vent and pulled himself in.

He waited another moment, then cut a hole in the floor for Moonshot, keeping the piece in place until he could lift it out and set it aside, then closed his eyes and found the exact right place to cut his own doorway.

A breath of chill air swept over his hair--odd; it was the wrong season, and they weren’t at nearly a high enough altitude for that to seriously impact the temperature.

He shook it off, and turned back to Moonshot. “Wait at least thirty seconds after you’ve heard an explosion before you move,” he advised her softly. “But you’ll probably be all right without waiting for the second.”

She nodded. “Are you sure you’re okay, Ben?”

Anakin was still alive; the danger hadn’t passed, but he was still alive. So, “Yes,” he said, and it was only an exaggeration, not a lie.

She studied him for a moment, then nodded. “All right. Good luck to you, too.”

He bowed slightly in acknowledgement. “May the Force be with you,” he said, then took a breath, stepped out onto the mountainside, and began to climb.
Between the two of them, even with Anakin fading in and out, Ahsoka and Rex were able to get him back onto the ship and without hurting him further. Artoo was hovering in the hold, waiting for them; he crooned worriedly and rolled closer when he saw them coming in. Ahsoka managed to flash a smile at him. “It’s okay, buddy,” she said. “We’ve got him.”

Artoo beeped and rocked back and forth a little, nudging her a little as she passed with what she’d learned was his version of affection. She would have patted him in response, just like she used to, but she had her hands full helping carrying Anakin.

Ahsoka was pretty sure Artoo understood. She’d missed him, too; she hadn’t realized quite how much until she saw him again.

“We’ll catch up later, okay?” she said.

He beeped and rolled back again, making sure he was well out of their way.

She and Rex maneuvered past him and got Anakin into his closet-sized personal space; there was a door for privacy, a few scattered piles of machine parts on the ground, a pair of cabinets taking over one wall, and a metal bunk on the one opposite, designed to fold up if he needed more floor space for whatever. He did rouse a little when they set him down, but was still having trouble focusing, through the pain and shock and cold.

The fact that he was still cold, actually, was what worried Ahsoka the most. Oh, he was definitely in bad shape, no mistake, but--well, Maridun had been...the damage Anakin had taken there was maybe not quite as awful, long-term--since at least it hadn’t been permanent. But, on the other hand, Anakin’s injuries back then had been a lot more likely to be immediately fatal. So this wasn’t the worst she’d seen. And he’d come out of Maridun just fine. There wasn’t much that could take her Master down.

Except it hadn’t been as cold, when she and Master Secura had had to leave him behind and go for help, and things like that made a difference. Ahsoka wasn’t sure exactly how long Anakin been lying unconscious out there before Rex found him, while the wind and the freezing rock of the mountain leached away his body heat, other than that it was too long.

“Blankets?” she asked Rex quietly, once they had Anakin settled on the bunk as best they could.

“Right hand cabinet,” he said, before disappearing back through the door again.

She felt Anakin’s eyes tracking her as she carefully stepped over a half-finished--she had no idea what that was supposed to be, actually. Which was very, very reassuring; a little hint that even though everything had changed, maybe some things hadn’t.

Just like he used to do back on the Twilight, she thought, with fond memories of almost tripping over him when he’d fallen asleep working on something. And slightly less fond memories of actually tripping a couple times, when he’d gotten distracted or called away suddenly and left his project behind. Remember where that is, for when you’re walking around at 04h30 and haven’t had any caf yet.

The cabinet opened easily, and, just like she’d figured, there was a probably excessive pile of extra blankets inside. She grabbed as many as she could easily hold, and turned back to find that Anakin had managed to push himself partway up, propped up on one elbow.
“Lie back down,” she said softly, piling the extra blankets on top of him, careful to avoid jostling the stump as much as she possibly could. “Stay here for a while, try to get warm, okay?”

“Mm,” he said, and sank back. He frowned a little. “...Rex was here a minute ago, right? Or...?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“Sorry. I wasn’t...wasn’t sure how long I was...” He shook his head, shivered again and curled tighter under the blankets.

“It’s okay,” she said.

And, speaking of; Rex came back, with a canteen and a capsule that Ahsoka figured was probably a heavy-duty painblocker. Good. She was already picking up on Anakin’s pain, and if the cold was numbing him at all, it would only get worse as he warmed up. Better to take care of it before that happened.

She stepped aside to let Rex in--there wasn’t a lot of space in here, especially not right near the bunk.

“Here,” him said, holding the canteen and capsule out for Anakin to take.

He blinked at Rex for a few seconds, processing, then frowned. “Ship’s still damaged.” He took a breath and started to push himself up again. “I should--”

“Rex and Artoo and I can handle it,” Ahsoka said.

Rex nodded, and put a hand on Anakin’s shoulder. “We’ll manage, sir. Take it, please. Just rest for a bit.”

He hesitated for another moment, then sighed and nodded, accepting the pill and then dropping back again. After that, it only took a few minutes for him to start drifting; and not much longer for him to fade out completely.

Only sleeping, though. Which was for the best--unless Rex was hiding something truly miraculous, which he probably would’ve brought out instead of the painblocker if he did, all they could really do for Anakin here was get him warm and keep him from hurting himself even more until they could get him to an actual doctor. Above and beyond the fact that resting was just a generally good idea when injured, getting Anakin to sleep for a while would go a long way to help with those two goals. And, sure, the drug was probably a big part of how they’d made that happen, but it was still not the same as him actually blacking out again. Or any of the other dozens of nightmare scenarios she’d tried not to think about on her way here.

Although--given the crisp, clean edges to Anakin’s wound, and given the oily, slightly nauseating hum that still lingered in the Force, in the air, dancing across her montrals…

“What happened?” she asked Rex. She already knew, but--hey, maybe she was wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time she’d misinterpreted something that had seemed so obvious at first.

Probably not, but it was a nice thought, anyway.

“We were ambushed,” he said, grimly. “The General--when he can, he backtracks, loops around on his path, to confuse anyone pursuing him. This was supposed to be our first change on the way to Cinna and--we were ambushed. By Darth Specter.”
Yeah.

Ahsoka had heard that name, once or twice—the Emperor’s new assassin, someone like Ventress only less chatty; more like a thief in the night.

“Where is he now?” she asked. Anakin was still alive and uncaptured, despite how bad he’d been hurt, and Rex had seemingly been able to extract him without any problems, and that hum of darkness was faint and fading, not an active threat. Which probably meant Specter had come off even worse in the duel, but she didn’t want to assume.

“Dead,” Rex assured her. “Saw the body myself.”

She blew out a relieved sigh. Well, that’s one less problem to solve. Which was, probably, a really awful way to think about it; because Specter was like Ventress, sort of, and Ventress had turned out okay in the end. ...sort of. She’d stopped being outright evil, anyway. And Ahsoka would never forget the way Ventress had helped her when she’d desperately needed it. If Ventress hadn’t gotten her second chance, Ashoka might not be here right now.

But, on the other hand, just how often did that kind of change happen? And what kind of pressure had to be applied to make it happen? Maybe everyone—or, everyone except the Emperor, at least—deserved a second chance, but at some point, you had to act on the situation at hand, and not hold back in hopes of a better ending. And the situation at hand was pretty damn clear: Specter was a Sith Lord, who had spent the last four years murdering his way across the galaxy on the Emperor’s orders. And he’d damn near killed her Master right after she’d found him alive again.

So, all things considered, she felt perfectly justified in honing in on that victory, on that silver lining. Even if it wasn’t fair. Even if it, maybe, wasn’t right.

“What about the ship?” she asked, setting that aside and moving on to the problem they did still have to solve. “I didn’t get a good look while we were outside.” She wasn’t quite as good as Anakin, but he’d taught her pretty damn well, and she’d been on her own for six years. As long as there were parts, or a reasonable substitute, she could get the ship flying again. Eventually.

The problem was, especially with Anakin badly hurt and semi-sedated, “eventually” could be a really, really long time.

“Not as bad as it could be, especially since Specter had kriffing buzz droids to throw at us.”

She hissed. Oh, she remembered buzz droids. “Great,” she muttered. That meant hours of work ahead of them. If they were lucky, the pests hadn’t ripped anything vital out and thrown it away, and it was just patchwork. But still...

“It’s all on here.” He tossed her a datapad, with Artoo’s diagnostic readout called up.

She studied it for a moment, and felt her shoulders unknotting. Oh, good. There must not have been many of the damn things, and Anakin must have landed and cleared them off fast. It would still take a few hours to clean up after them, but--

Silver lining again.

“Okay,” she said. “Let’s get started.”

Rex nodded, and smiled briefly—weary, but genuine. “Sir,” he acknowledged.

It had been years since she was a Commander of any kind, but it still sounded warm and right. Like
slipping into a pair of old, comfortable boots, worn so often that they’d molded to the shape of her feet. Everything fit. She had Anakin and Rex back again, and it finally felt real.

It felt like she’d come home.

She had missed them all so much.

Ahsoka grinned back, and went looking for the hidden compartment where Anakin would have hidden his spare tools.

Of course, that brief burst of optimism was maybe a little premature. Because Ahsoka had been right; it had taken hours to get the Waterfall even vaguely ready for flight. She and Artoo and Rex worked steadily; other than taking it in turns to check in on Anakin every so often. He was in and out--mostly out--and feverish by the fourth hour.

(Rex had been the one to check on him that time; he’d come back grim and hard-eyed. “Any way we can speed this up?” he’d asked. She’d had some ideas. A handful of them had worked.)

And maybe they should’ve been monitoring him continuously, but then they’d’ve had one less pair of hands to work on the repairs, and it would have taken that much longer to get him some actual help. It was the better of two bad choices. But now, six hours on, the ship was finally patched enough that it would hold up for a quick trip, at least.

Of course, there was still a pretty damn big problem with that.

“Where do we take him?” she asked. They’d avoided that question, in part because they’d needed to focus on the task at hand, and take things one step at a time. But also because Anakin was--well, the only word she could think of was notorious. The fact was, there probably weren’t a lot of safe ports of call for him these days. Especially when he was hurt.

Although, on second thought, she did know a place they might be able to go--a doctor with a small clinic who was willing to look the other way and not ask questions about patients who were clearly Not Friends of the Empire. But even with that--and the fact that he’d told her he owed her a favor after the mess she’d helped him out of two years before--this would be asking a lot of her contact, and there were a lot of other points of exposure that put them all at risk. To say nothing of any other patients that happened to be there, who would be right in the crossfire if Anakin was seen and recognized.

Or who might sell him out themselves.

“I don’t know,” Rex admitted. “We’ve got a safehouse not too far from here. We set it up a couple years ago--it’s got a pretty good cache of supplies, at least, and access to a med droid that works okay. Plan was, if it’s something too much for us to handle on our own, either here or at the farm, we go there. But…” He sighed.

But that might not be enough. Especially if they hadn’t checked on the cache in a while. It might have been raided, the supplies might have gotten damaged some other way…

So probably Ahsoka’s contact was the best play, after all. Despite the risks involved. “I might know a guy,” she said. “Not sure he has the equipment to make and fit a prosthetic, but…”
“It’s better than improvising at the safehouse,” Rex said. “At least if your contact’s doing the improvising, it’ll be someone who knows what the hell they’re doing. You sure it’ll be safe?”

“Yeah,” she said, then corrected herself. “Well, I mean, he’s safe, but I can’t guarantee that you won’t be seen or recognized by someone else there. I wasn’t, but...”

Rex sighed again. “Yeah, but that’s a risk we’re probably gonna have to take, wherever we end up going.”

True. It still worried her, though. “Maybe Obi-Wan will have some ideas?” she suggested.

“Maybe,” he said. There was a level of doubt in his voice, though, which immediately set off alarm bells.

“...what?”

Rex ran a hand over his head. “General Kenobi’s been...out of contact for a while now. Raiding an Imperial ammunition storehouse, so he’s probably just gone quiet, but...he hasn’t responded to my messages. Or to the one General Skywalker sent right after we all split up, setting the meeting at Cinna.”

The timing was not good. “Kriff. Is that normal?” Because it didn’t feel right, but she’d been...

It had been years since she’d seen Obi-Wan. And everything had changed, so maybe she was missing something, some kind of context, that made that somehow not a sign that Something Was Very Wrong.

Or less of a sign, at least.

“It’s...well, it has happened before,” Rex said, uncertainly. “Just usually not this long without prearrangement, and with everything else going on...” He ran a hand over his head again. “I don’t know. I don’t like it. But the three of us agreed to wait twenty-four hours before anyone tried to do something stupid.”

She frowned. So, maybe it was just the worst timing in the history of ever. But Ahsoka didn’t really believe in coincidence, and Rex didn’t seem to think it was just anything, either. And she trusted Rex’s instincts. “Well, I didn’t promise anything like that,” she pointed out. “I can go see what’s going on, after I’ve called in my favor at the clinic.”

He brightened a little at that. “You could,” he agreed.

She thought fast. Good thing we didn’t have to cannibalize my ship for parts, she thought. Probably the best plan would be for them to take both ships and meet at the clinic so she could talk them through the door. That way, Anakin and Rex wouldn’t be stranded when she left to bail Obi-Wan out of whatever trouble he’d stumbled into. Just in case something went wrong, or they were seen, and they had to make a quick exit of their own.

She ran that by Rex, who nodded. “Right,” he confirmed. “Sounds like that’s the best option we’ve got. I wanna have Artoo run one more diagnostic before we go, just in case.”

“Good call,” she agreed. “I’ll get the coordinates for you while you do that.” And then they could be on their way, and then she would get Obi-Wan, and this whole messed up day would be behind them soon.

It had started so well, too--a successful mission, finding Anakin alive, finding out Obi-Wan was
alive, too, finding Rex alive and safe, in all possible senses of the word…

Well. If she couldn’t bring them back to this morning, they had taken control of the situation; they had a plan now to make things better from where they were, as much as they possibly could.

Silver lining, again. She’d take what she could get.

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Doctor Vils Naar did not consider himself any kind of revolutionary. What he was, first and foremost, was a doctor, and he took that very seriously, indeed. No one who came to his door was ever turned away, and no one who came to his door was ever turned over to their enemies. Whether they were a soldier, a freedom fighter, or something else entirely.

Of course, he didn’t precisely advertise this fact. While most of the anti-government types at least grudgingly accepted it (most, but not all; he’d once been held at gunpoint and informed that this policy made him an accomplice to any number of horrific abuses of power), Imperial officials tended to take an exceedingly dim view of such things.

Still, his reputation for competence, professionalism, and an ironclad adherence to the ethics of confidentiality had spread by word of mouth. And every so often, he had an outlaw turn up in need of care.

Or, sometimes, for less worthy reasons.

That had been the case when he’d first met the Togruta ex-Jedi (she hadn’t given her name and he hadn’t asked; safer for them both) two years ago. Medicine was nearly as valuable on the black market as purely recreational drugs, and a local small-time crime syndicate looking to expand had decided his clinic would be a good source of startup cash for their new enterprise. After all, he frequently harbored fugitives and traitors. It stood to reason he wouldn’t risk going to the authorities.

And maybe they were right about that--Vils certainly would have spent quite a while weighing the repercussions either way--but they clearly hadn’t been prepared for him to have other assistance available to him.

The ex-Jedi had come to him to get a broken wrist set, and he had just finished doing so when the thieves had arrived. She had calmly shoved Vils under cover and handled the threat, without any further damage to herself, or to his supplies, or the one other patient in the clinic at the time--a local teenager, not a soldier or freedom fighter, and luckily sedated for unrelated reasons.

So, he owed the young lady quite a bit--whatever he might have decided to do about the theft in the long run, if she had not intervened and saved him, his clinic would have had to shut down for a few weeks, at least, while he resupplied.

Of course, he hadn’t been sure she would ever come back or try to claim that debt; that she would be near enough and have need enough to do so. And, while he certainly hadn’t forgotten, the matter had slipped to the back of his mind. There were other patients, other problems, other crises that required more attention.

So, when a soft, vaguely familiar voice called his name from the shadows, just as he was locking up from the night, he was more than a little surprised.
“Dr. Naar,” she repeated. “We need your help.”

We? he wondered, with a slight sense of foreboding.

But he recovered quickly. “Of course,” he said, and unlocked the door again. After all, with or without involving his debt, no one was turned away.

The ex-Jedi and her companions stepped into the light; she and an adult Human man were, between them, supporting the patient; another Human, semiconscious, with his left leg amputated above the knee.

He stood aside to let them pass, catching a better look at the patient as they did, and--

Oh.

No one who was cognizant enough to watch the news during the War could have failed to recognize this man. Who had once been the greatest hero the galaxy had ever known, but now…

For a brief, frozen moment, Dr. Naar hesitated.

It wasn’t that Vils hadn’t admired him--didn’t still admire him, for the bits and pieces of real information that filtered through the propaganda. And it certainly wasn’t that he didn’t question that propaganda, at least in the privacy of his own mind.

But the risk involved, to him and to the work he did--if he was caught with this man in his clinic, harboring this fugitive…

“Please,” she said, blue eyes full of worry and a hint of desperation meeting his. “Please.”

The moment passed, and acid shame filled the space where raw terror had been.

No one gets turned away, he reminded himself. And no one gets turned over. What the hell kind of doctor would you be if you let that change?

He took a deep breath, and nodded. “Put him on the table,” he instructed. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Because Doctor Vils Naar wasn’t a stupid man. He knew the Empire lied about a great many things. And, sure, the Republic’s propaganda had probably stretched the truth as well, but to someone who knew how to read between the lines, that version was probably closer to reality than the new one. He would bet good money on that fact, at least where a man like Anakin Skywalker was concerned.

Besides, he had an ethical obligation here. He had a rule. No one got turned away.

...all right, so maybe he was a little bit of a revolutionary after all.
Obi-Wan had long since missed his rendezvous with Moonshot and Reckoning.

Not that he’d particularly expected otherwise. The upper route was the longest, and the most exposed. And he was--distracted. Still.

(Anakin remained a faint pulse in the back of his mind; alive but not *safe* and in pain.)

At least he’d managed to draw enemy fire away from the others. He hadn’t seen or sensed much commotion from down in the valley, even along Moonshot’s likely route. Chances were relatively good that at least *one* of them had made it out all right.

As for himself…

Well, he was still alive; still intact. He’d thus far managed to stay ahead of the ground troops deployed after him, and the air support he’d been worried about hadn’t been nearly as aggressive as it could have been. Either because someone in charge wanted him caught alive, or they were concerned about their troops getting caught in the crossfire, or there was some compound in these rocks that made a general strafing run unwise, or some other threat had jumped into the system and the fighters were needed elsewhere, or the fighters were spread out to help hunt down the rest of the team as well and only so many could be spared for him…

That last, he thought, was the likeliest explanation, though any of the others could have played a role as well. Especially if Cleaver and the others had done any significant damage during the earlier skirmish. *He had seen* at least one shoulder-mounted anti-aircraft gun in the stockpile Cleaver had bought from Hondo. If they’d thought to bring it along…

Still, that speculation didn’t particularly help him right now, as he was not really in a position to take advantage of any options to interfere with the pilots. Besides, these moderately favorable circumstances were unlikely to last much longer. He didn’t have *quite* enough of a lead to set up decent traps along his trail (though he had successfully bought himself *some* time that way); the local garrison knew the area in a way he didn’t; and it was getting dark.

So, it was time to change the game.

Hopefully, the hours spent leading his pursuers on a wild chase around the mountain had lulled them into complacency--patterns often did; particularly patterns that were seemingly to one’s own advantage, even if the adversary was setting them. If so, he would have just a little bit of an edge when he suddenly switched tactics and lured them into an open fight.

There was a rock formation, a set of column-like stones set close enough to form almost a crevice or ravine in the mountainside, about half a klick back. He could use those to reasonably decent effect--*he* would be at an advantage in close quarters, as he could tangle the troopers up with each other, force them into a bottleneck. The problem was, it wasn’t particularly covered from *above*, leaving him more vulnerable to the TIE fighters than he liked.

On the other hand, it was the best ground he’d seen for dealing with the troops on foot, and the longer he delayed his stand, the likelier they’d regroup and summon reinforcements, or any TIEs scattered to deal with the others would be recalled and sent to focus on the target they *could* find. And further delays made it likelier his--distraction--or fatigue would start to significantly hinder his performance.
So, the question then became--what was the best way to double back and get into position?

*Up and over, I think,* he decided. A maneuver like that would not go unnoticed long enough for him to get back to his ship, of course, or he would have tried it already. It *might* have been enough to get back to Cleaver’s base, but in addition to being unwilling to risk compromising it by heading there, he needed to get off planet and back in touch with Anakin and Rex as quickly as possible. Even without his commlink, he could collect and respond to any messages they’d sent from the unit in his cockpit.

Regardless, it should fool them long enough for him to set himself for the standoff. Particularly if he provided a bit of a distraction first.

He turned his lightsaber on and off twice in rapid succession; the flickering shone through the dim twilight and drew their eyes and their fire; most of which went wide, though he smelled scorched wool as one bolt caught the hem of his cloak.

He moved aside, in the opposite direction of his actual goal, and gave them another glimpse just over a minute later. The burst of fire in response came closer this time--one bolt nearly connected with his hip, but he twisted out of the way with about a centimeter to spare.

Once more, to cement the pattern, and then he changed course, using the Force to still any tell-tale movement of his cloak or the vegetation he passed through, darting in a wide arc up the mountainside that would end at his rock shelter. He estimated that it would take the troops roughly twice as long as he’d left between flashes to realize he’d shifted, and perhaps a third such period for them to figure out which way he’d turned.

Plenty of time.

His estimate, as it turned out, was a touch over-generous. It was closer to two and a half minutes later that he sensed them back on his trail.

*Damn.* Well, he could make it work. He was nothing if not adaptable.

He skidded into the quasi-shelter of the rocks, found the most defensible position in easy range, reactivated his lightsaber, and closed his eyes to center himself and wait.

It didn’t take long for the troops to catch up. To their credit, they seemed to grasp fairly quickly that he was making a stand, and actually took a moment to study the ground he’d chosen before taking the bait.

The first attempt had them holding their distance and firing at range, rather than coming closer and risking getting caught up by the rocks and each other. Obi-Wan sank into the Force and deflected the volley smoothly, removing three of his attackers with their own reflected shots.

Hopefully, they would adjust their tactics soon. While he *could* pick them all off this way, it would lengthen the engagement significantly and that would likewise increase the risk posed by the fighters in the air.

No sooner had he thought that when the Force shouted a warning in his ear, accompanied by the scream of one of the TIEs above cutting through the atmosphere. Obi-Wan launched himself to one side just as the rock he’d been standing on exploded. He landed badly; felt his left shoulder jolt out of its socket.

*Not good.* Shoulder throbbing and ears still ringing from the blast, he switched to a one-handed grip and got to his feet just in time to deflect the next hail of blaster bolts from the troops on the
ground. Considerably less gracefully than the first one; and he gained no further advantage from the reflections.

He heard the fighter coming around for another pass and braced himself to--

The TIE fighter exploded, lighting up the area nearly clear as day, and sending a shower of molten metal fragments down over Obi-Wan and the stormtroopers; parts of the grass even began to smolder.

Startled, he looked up to see a snub-nosed little ship of unfamiliar make shoot through the wreckage and squeeze off a handful of shots at the stormtroopers, killing two and driving the rest back just a bit, towards the rising smoke.

Obi-Wan felt himself relaxing at the sight and, despite the disasters of the day and the dangers of the moment, he smiled.

Because, while he might not have recognized the ship, the bright, spiky presence at the controls was very familiar, indeed.

He lifted his saber in a brief salute, and Ahsoka dipped her wing slightly in response before wheeling to deal with the TIE fighter’s wingmates, leaving the stormtroopers to him.

From there--well, it was brutal, inelegant work, but essentially a foregone conclusion, once Obi-Wan had air support of his own.

When the stormtroopers were all dead, he took a moment to brace himself against the rock and pop his shoulder back into place. Then he signaled Ahsoka again, leading the way back to where he’d left his ship.

He didn’t wait for her to land; lost no time climbing into his cockpit and activating his comm unit. There was a brief message from Anakin, requesting an immediate meeting at the Cinna rendezvous point. A followup, from Rex, that there had been a delay. Another, also from Rex, clarifying the length of the delay. A third--upgrading the requested meeting to urgent status, because Anakin was hurt. And a fourth, requesting contact for an updated rendezvous, which meant it was not the prepared safehouse.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, let out a slow breath. There is no emotion, there is peace.

One last message, from Bail. He decoded it as quickly as he could. Specter has left Coruscant. Unscheduled.

Obi-Wan went cold. Because, yes, Specter was a neophyte, nothing compared to the adversaries he and Anakin had faced before, but still a Sith Lord. Still something that should not be faced alone.

And Anakin had done exactly that. And he had been--

He had to fight, for a moment, to avoid being overcome by bitter memories.

There is no emotion, there is peace.

He put the messages aside. Whatever had happened had already happened. There was nothing--
nothing he could do about it now. What he needed to do now was focus, speak with Ahsoka—who was here, who was alive, despite all that had happened—and plan what to do next.

Calm and centered again—or as close to it as he was likely to get without extensive meditation—he stood up and made his way back outside, to where Ahsoka was waiting, hovering next to her little ship.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m--oof!” She had taken that as permission and slammed into his right side, wrapping her arms around him and clinging tight. After half a startled heartbeat, he put his good arm around her shoulders, hugging her back. Neither of them said anything more—they didn’t need to; the Force around them hummed with muted, weary joy.

Obi-Wan had never expected to see her again. And just because he’d long ago accepted what had appeared to be reality didn’t mean he wasn’t quietly thrilled to be proved wrong.

“It’s so weird,” she said after a moment, finally pulling back. “Being taller than you.”

She wasn’t wrong; it was decidedly odd to look up at her. It was also not an entirely unfamiliar sensation. He still remembered when he’d realized Anakin had gotten taller than he was—and, despite not having a six-year separation to make the change more obvious and jarring, it had still surprised him.

“Well, it was bound to happen sometime,” he said. Togruta were taller, on average, than Humans, after all.

“Fair enough,” she said, with a brief, pointed grin before her face turned serious again. “You sure you’re okay? You went down pretty hard back there.”

“Dislocated shoulder,” he said, refraining from touching it. That would only hurt, and to no purpose. “I already set it, and it seems to be holding. I’ll live.”

She nodded. “All right. Let me know if you want me to take a look, too.”

“I will.” He smiled briefly. “And...thank you, for earlier. I’m very glad you were able to help,” he said. “But how did you find me?” If he’d somehow left more of a trail than he should have—well, someone decidedly less welcome might have found it, too; and it wasn’t just his own safety at risk if he’d been compromised.

“Rex told me,” she said.

Ah, of course. “Rex,” he said, with a faint sigh, “is supposed to wait twenty-four hours.” But he relaxed anyway—no chance of compromise after all; more importantly, if she’d seen Rex, she’d seen Anakin. Which meant she could tell him what the hell had happened.

“Notice how Rex isn’t here,” she pointed out.

A fair point, and a loophole that had almost certainly saved his life earlier. So he let it pass. “And Anakin?” he asked quietly.

“I didn’t--I don’t know all the details, I got there after,” she said, then took a breath. “Rex told me they were ambushed, by Specter.”

Confirming what Bail’s message had already told him. There is no emotion, there is peace.
“How bad?” he asked.

“Bad,” she said. “Specter cut off Anakin’s leg.”

Which called up a different set of unpleasant memories; of the first battle of Geonosis, and Anakin’s arm, of seeing him in pain and adrift in the aftermath—but this time, they didn’t have the resources of the Temple and its healers behind them to help put him back together.

Oh, Anakin… Obi-Wan closed his eyes. The Sith keep taking pieces of him away, and I can’t—we will manage this time, we will find a way, but I don’t know…I don’t know how much harder it will be.

“He’s safe now,” she went on, putting a reassuring hand on Obi-Wan’s arm. “Rex and I got him to a doctor I know. Dr. Naar’s good people, he’s helped me out before.” She paused. “He said—there’s an infection, and he said that he couldn’t fit a prosthetic ‘til he cleared that up, or it might mess up the neural mapping.”

Which was—not good. But Anakin is alive, he’s in good hands, and he’s—he’s survived worse than this. Which was a poor choice, so far as train of thought went; Geonosis and the Temple faded and he once again pictured Anakin on the Tantive, unnaturally still but for his labored breathing.

Concentrate on the here and now, he reminded himself sternly. And there was a set of immediate, concrete problems that he needed to solve. Focusing on those would help him pull himself together in the short term. He could worry about the long term once he’d actually seen his brother again.

“Right,” he said, clearing his throat briefly. “How long to get back there, roughly?”

“A couple hours,” she said. “But we might want to delay a little, approach the clinic after dark. Less chance we’ll draw attention.”

A good point. Still, they could hardly wait here. “We’ll get to the planet and lie low for a few hours,” he said.

“Got it.” She frowned. “Any ideas for getting past that Navy ship? I slipped past before, but they’ll recognize me after what I did to their fighters. I don’t know if they know what your ship looks like, but…”

He grimaced. “They’ll be looking for suspicious departures. Possibly stopping any non-official traffic as it leaves.” It’s what he would have done, searching for a fugitive back when he’d had an extensive military apparatus backing him up.

But Anakin had planned for this particular problem. It was simply that the solution was—extremely unpleasant.

“What?” Ahsoka asked.

“There’s a modification on my ship’s hyperdrive,” he said. “Allowing it to enter hyperspace from within a gravity well. It can cause significant seismic and meteorological backlash as gravity compensates, and it’s…disconcerting, from inside the ship.”

“I’ll bet,” she said. “So they’ll still see us going, but they won’t be able to stop us.”

“Yes,” he said. Though that could be a problem, too. If the Navy was watching closely enough, they might well pick up on his departure vector, which could lead them to Ahsoka’s medic.
Unless…

“…how do you feel about using your ship as a decoy?” he asked. They’d have to leave it behind, anyway, to avoid her getting arrested, but there was a difference between the two.

She blinked, then smiled slowly. “Well, I can always get another. I’ve only had this one for about three months, anyway.”

Right. For as much as she’d picked up Anakin’s habit of working with engines when stressed or bored, she didn’t have quite the same tendency to cling to them.

“Get the autopilot set,” he said. “We’ll send it off against the Thunder Wasp, then take off once it clears the atmosphere.”

“Sounds good,” she said, then grinned and hugged him one more time. “It’s good to be back.”

He smiled back at her again. “Yes,” he said, softly. “It is.”

Commander Thrawn watched the starfighter pierce through the atmosphere, on a collision course with the Thunder Wasp. It matched the markings of the one that had come to the Jedi’s aid earlier that evening, destroying several TIE fighters in the process.

But based on what he’d observed today, it was likely a decoy—his opponent shown had a preference for sleight of hand and building layers of misdirection into his plans. Observing its flight pattern only confirmed the suspicion. While it had been programmed fairly well, its reactions to the Wasp’s guns were not the reflexes of a sentient being. Certainly not the type of acrobatic flying the pilot had shown during the skirmish.

It was on autopilot.

Which meant that the real departure—or departures; Thrawn couldn’t yet rule out the Jedi and his ally leaving the planet separately—would be in a different direction. One camouflaged, in some way, by the decoy’s vector. Probably not the exact opposite direction. That would be too obvious. An angle, then, moving through one of the Thunder Wasp’s few blind spots.

He had his remaining TIE fighters split between the two likeliest paths for the actual ship, with orders to harry it within range of the tractor beam if at all possible. The decoy, he left to be destroyed by the Thunder Wasp’s guns.

But then there was a sudden burst of atmospheric disturbance, from near where the decoy had taken off. Not another launch. Not anything Thrawn had seen before.

A storm blew up out of nothing, and sensors indicated a sudden, sharp, gravitational shift, resulting in a minor earthquake as the planet tried to compensate.

It was theoretically possible, according to research Thrawn had done in the past, for a ship to enter hyperspace from within a gravity well. And projections indicated consequences similar to what he was observing now.
He left his TIE fighters in place for a few minutes more, just in case, but did not expect them to find anything. The Jedi was gone; his insurgent allies, while only stealing a small fraction of the ammunition, had also gotten away, other than one casualty on the larger team; a Nautolan male who had not yet been conclusively identified.

The overall engagement had ended in a draw.

At least the image reconstruction and identification program he’d been running had at last turned up a result, by the time he ordered his fighters to stand down. The mystery Jedi proved to be Obi-Wan Kenobi; a name Thrawn recognized. General Skywalker had spoken extensively of him years ago, when they’d met. And, based on Kenobi’s quick reactions and strategies when working with extremely limited resources, the praise Skywalker had given was certainly merited.

Thrawn made a mental note to acquire as much of Kenobi’s record as he could. Carefully; without drawing too much attention to that or his other semi-legal research. The majority of it would be heavily redacted, of course, and it might take several months or years before he got his hands on what was left, but there would be something.

And, after an introduction like that one, he highly doubted this was the last time his path and Kenobi’s would cross. It wouldn’t do to be unprepared when they met again.

Besides, he was a survivor, and an extremely clever man. Both of which made him a dangerous adversary to face. That next engagement, when it came, would certainly be one to remember.

Thrawn was already looking forward to it.
It really was remarkable how much the situation--and with it, Rex’s overall mood--had improved in just a few hours.

Dr. Naar was, so far as Rex was concerned, a kriffing miracle worker. It had taken a few hours, and a couple of different kinds of medication, but he’d gotten the General stabilized, and his fever under control, if not completely broken yet. He’d, of course, done a much better and more thorough job of cleaning and dressing the stump than Rex had managed, as well as taking care of all the more minor, incidental injuries from the fight and falling down the mountain. There was, Naar had determined, no serious or lasting specific damage from exposure, which was even better news. On the other hand, the hypothermia, along with the delay in treatment, had exacerbated and complicated everything else. And stable didn’t mean completely out of the woods just yet.

Still, the General already looked worlds better, and was resting at least somewhat comfortably on a pallet they’d set up in one of the clinic’s storerooms. Dr. Naar had assured Rex that, because of the value of some of the equipment and medicines he kept in there, access was tightly controlled, minimizing the chance that another patient would see and expose them when the clinic opened for its normal working hours.

There was only one door--good and bad, for their current safety; but necessary for the room’s regular use--but there was a back way out of the clinic itself, just in case. Rex had taken the time to go over the route in detail after Dr. Naar had shown it to him. He figured, even carrying the General, he could make it in about thirty seconds. If he had to. Which, at least in this brief, badly-needed moment of optimism, seemed unlikely, but it was better to be prepared.

In short, things were going well for the moment; enough so that Rex had been able to relax a little, drifting into a shallow doze while he watched the door. Not quite sleep, of course; not in unfamiliar territory with no real backup and someone to protect, but rest of a kind.

Time dripped by like that for half a local morning. Dr. Naar checked in on them twice, between other patients--each time tapping on the door in a simple pattern the two of them had developed the night before, and waiting for Rex to respond before actually coming in.

And then, maybe two standard hours before local noon, Rex’s comlink beeped, pulling him instantly to full awareness. The message, to his profound relief, proved to be from General Kenobi, at last--the Commander had made contact, and they were on their way.

“Good news?” General Skywalker asked softly, from the other corner of the little room.

Rex jerked a little in surprise and looked up. “Sorry, sir,” he said. “Didn’t realize you were awake.” Which was--well, probably a good thing at the moment, actually; an indication that, for once, the General was behaving himself when sidelined after an injury.

“Mm.” He took a breath, then started to push himself up.

“Sir--” Rex started to object, then paused, reconsidering. The General was doing better, and there wasn’t anything he was likely to damage more if he sat against the wall instead of lying on the floor. Especially if he decided he wanted water, or something of the kind. Pick your battles. This
He shook his head. “No, I got it.” With care, and with visible effort, he managed to sit up and
resettle, leaning against one of the shelves. “What…” He paused, cleared his throat briefly.
“What’s the message?”

Yeah. Good call. Rex passed him a canteen, which he accepted with a nod of thanks. “Commander
Tano found General Kenobi. They’re on their way here now.” Though they’d probably wait to
actually approach until dark. Safer for all concerned.

The General brightened; and actually managed a genuine, if rather brief, smile. “Very good news,”
he said, then paused again. “...where is here, exactly?”

“Clinic,” he said. “Commander knows the doctor. It’s safe.”

“All right,” he said, then carefully set the canteen down. His hands were steady; good. “How
long’ve I been out?”

“Since yesterday.”

He nodded, then frowned, thinking for a minute; then his eyes widened briefly and he sat up a little
straighter. “We need to go.”

“What?” Rex said, automatically reaching for his pistol. “Is--why? What happened?” If the clinic
was compromised, or if--

“No, nothing--not that,” he said hastily. “Sorry, sorry. But we have to--I have to get back. To the
farm.”

“Wh--” And then Rex did the same mental math, caught on to what had his General so upset.

Leia’s birthday.

“Oh,” he breathed, then shook his head. “Sir, you’re still--you need to stay here. Look, give me a
couple hours, I can set up a secure frequency, and--”

“No,” he cut him off. “I have to be there. I promised.”

“Given the circumstances, I’m sure she’ll understand,” he said. Not that they would probably tell
her the full circumstances--that would only upset her--but she’d fill in the blanks. She was a smart
kid.

The General glowered at him. “She’s six,” he said. “All she’ll understand is that Daddy wasn’t
there when he said he would be. I’m not--I’m not doing that to her. I miss too much already, I
won’t--I can’t miss this.”

Rex thought General Skywalker wasn’t giving her nearly enough credit. Then again, he wasn’t
exactly an expert on kids. He and his brothers had been--different. The General might actually be
right here.

“You’re still hurt,” he tried instead. “You can’t stand.”

“I’ll manage,” he said, through gritted teeth.

“You have a fever.” Rex was guessing on that, but the General’s eyes were still glassy, and he was
still a little flushed.
“I don’t care.”

Yeah. He should’ve known that wasn’t going to work. Once General Skywalker was this set on something, especially where Leia was concerned, he couldn’t be persuaded out of it. Not by Rex, anyway; or at least not for reasons of his own health or safety. And Rex couldn’t think of any other argument that had even half a chance of working.

Which left him with two options. Option one, he could drug him—or, rather, have Dr. Naar drug him, since he had no idea what meds he’d already been given, and that was not a risk he could take.

That was the smart play. Objectively speaking, it was probably the best thing Rex could do right now. It would keep him safe, within range of medical attention if some unexpected new complication came up. And it would, at least temporarily, keep General Skywalker from actively doing something incredibly stupid and dangerous.

But that was assuming that they could keep him under until General Kenobi got here and talked some sense into him, which wasn’t guaranteed. And if he did wake up, he’d just try again, this time slipping past Rex rather than letting him help. General Skywalker was an extremely resourceful man when he put his mind to it. He’d find a way.

And he would never trust Rex again.

I will never betray you or let you fall again. I promise.

Which led to option two--Rex could go along with this mad scheme, try to control the situation and keep his General from hurting himself worse along the way, and then get him back here as quick as possible.

And deal with an extremely unhappy General Kenobi once he did.

“All right,” he said, taking the lesser of two terrible options. “All right. But if we do this, we do this my way, all right?”

“Fine,” he said. “As long as we go.”

“We’re going,” he said, reluctantly. Just as soon as he figured out the best way to do it without getting caught.

Getting out of the clinic wouldn’t be too hard, at least. They could use the route he’d already mapped out. Getting through the town to the ship, though--that might be harder. Even if they hid the General’s face, they couldn’t well hide his condition, and hauling an obviously sick and wounded man through the streets would draw attention (as it should; but the alternative was even riskier in the long run). And it was too early in the day to pretend he was just drunk.

There was an alternate path they could take; the clinic was close enough to the edge of town that it was possible to avoid the issue, skirting along the edges to get back to the ship. Problem was, that route was indirect, and significantly longer, and a long route meant more exposure, more stress, more danger of another kind.

In the end, he decided it was better to take the route that had less chance of either of them getting arrested, and maybe bringing trouble down on Dr. Naar and his clinic. The patch job on the Waterfall would hold up well enough, so he didn’t need to worry about that, at least. He and the Commander had done a damn good job, given the constraints they’d been working under. For a moment, he almost wished they hadn’t, and he could honestly tell the General that they couldn’t
go. But, on the other hand, that would mean that if their presence here was somehow compromised, they wouldn’t have a way off-planet.

Still, the ship wasn’t entirely repaired; not yet. Maybe he’ll be sidetracked wanting to finish fixing it, and that’ll delay him ’til the others get back. Rex didn’t think it was all that likely, not when anything involving Leia was at stake, but there was always a chance.

“All right,” he finally said again, then stood up. “I’m going to check if we’re clear, then help you up.”

The General nodded and leaned back against the shelf again.

Rex very carefully opened the door a crack, more than half-hoping that Dr. Naar would be right there to derail this mad escape plan.

But, of course, he wasn’t that lucky. The doctor was busy in the other room, and not in position to see and stop them.

He took a deep breath, and tried one last time. “Sir, is there anything I could say that would talk you out of this?”

Behind him, the General sighed but, tired and in pain though he was, he didn’t snap this time. “No,” he said softly. “I miss too much. This is--this is what I have. What she has. I can’t...this is what we have.”

Well, it was worth a shot. So much for the situation improving.

He nodded. “Okay,” he said. He turned back from the door to find that the General, while not trying to stand on his own, had already unhooked most of the various monitors Dr. Naar had set up and pulled his IV. Rex found some gauze on one of the shelves and taped it over the sluggishly-bleeding insertion point.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Yeah.” He carefully crouched down, positioning himself under the General’s arm, ready to help him get vertical. “Tell me if it gets to be too much, and we’ll stop.” He paused, watching General Skywalker’s eyes for a minute, then added, “Also, I’m driving.”

The General looked like he might argue for a moment, then nodded. “Ahsoka’s doctor gave me too damn many painkillers. You’re driving.”

Well. At least that was one argument they didn’t have to have.

“Ready?” he said, once he was sure he had a decent grip on his General.

He nodded. “Ready.”

“Brace yourself,” Rex said, then slowly stood up.

The General came with him, grabbing onto the shelf for support. He paled a little, but remained conscious. “I’m good,” he said, voice tight with pain but clear and lucid. “Let’s go.”

Rex nodded once, then eased him towards the door, checked again to see if anyone was coming, and began picking their careful way out of the clinic and back towards the Waterfall, praying to every deity he’d ever heard of that he wasn’t making a terrible mistake.
Anakin, stop making poor life choices. ::sigh:: On the other hand, we'll get to see Leia again very soon?

We're getting close to wrapping up this arc, I think! Maybe two or three more chapters. I did not expect it to go on this long, wow...

Anyway, thanks for sticking with me, and I'll see y'all next week! <3

~shadowsong
Bail had come over to join them for dinner, and for once, they weren’t actually conspiring. 

...well, all right, Motee was helping Luke write a formal request to visit Princess Lavinia, and that was sort of conspiracy-adjacent, but that was all.

Which wasn’t to say that Padme and Bail weren’t getting any work done. After all, the more they worked together on above-board projects, the more cover they had for their illicit activities. The Senate was mostly a formality these days, but they found plenty of perfectly legitimate reasons to collaborate, on aid projects, on what little official Senate business they had left…

They’d had this dinner planned for a while, ever since they’d both confirmed they’d be on Coruscant for Founding Week. In part for their cover, in part for the task at hand, and in part because they knew they’d both probably need the escape.

It was an escape, to a simple, dreamy world where double meanings to their actions were an occasional, unfortunate necessity, rather than the rule. It made her feel almost nostalgic, which was probably a little ridiculous. Because, looking back, there had never been a time where things were simple. Not really. Maybe before the Clone War started, but even then…

Then again, maybe everything that had happened since was tainting her memories of those times. She did remember feeling this way—or she thought she did, anyway—but now she knew that most of Palpatine’s plans had probably been in motion even then, and it rang false in her mind. She didn’t miss her naivete, exactly, but…

It was nice, to at least partially recapture that feeling, even if only for an evening.

“What are you thinking?” Bail asked.

“Hm? Sorry, I got distracted for a moment.” She shook her head, set her wineglass down on the table next to the datapad he’d brought, returning her attention to the actual discussion. “I still think the mobile option is better--what’s the point of getting the equipment down to that district if no one can actually access it?”

He nodded, and sighed. “Whichever option we go with is going to be a half-measure, unless we get more funding.”

“And I’m all out of favors I can call in on this one.” At least if she wanted to keep a few in the bank for their next project.

“Likewise,” he said. “I still think having the resources to cope with a larger emergency would be--”

He stopped abruptly, one hand going to his vest pocket.

“Bail?” Padme asked. “What’s wrong?”

Luke, over in his corner, looked up as well, breaking off in the middle of some question he was asking Motee.
Bail glanced briefly over at Dorme, who nodded, set down the book she was reading, and silently went over to the security station.

Which meant—possibly—that he had the emergency comlink on him, the one that connected them and their operations to the others. It made sense, especially with Specter’s sudden disappearance, but if some message had come through…

“Sorry,” he continued after a second. “I thought I’d come up with an additional funding scheme that would patch some of these holes, but the logistics wouldn’t work. Not unless we want to wait another year to get this off the ground.”

Motee put a hand on Luke’s shoulder, but his focus on his letter was completely gone. He shook her off and crossed the room, climbing onto the couch to burrow into Padme’s side. He’d been clingy like that all day, after having had a bad dream the night before. She knew she should probably gently detach him and send him back to her handmaidens, so he wouldn’t see or overhear some detail he shouldn’t, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to do it. He needed this right now. And, really, she did, too.

So, instead, Padme gave him a reassuring smile and kissed the top of his head. With the ease of long practice, she kept her voice light as she answered Bail. “No, I think even a half-measure now is better than waiting. And I think either way, emergencies are going to be a problem. So I think we should err on the side of covering as many non-crisis-level problems as possible.”

“Hm.” He considered for a minute, then nodded. “All right, you’ve convinced me. Mobile it is.”

“Clear,” Dorme cut in.

Luke tightened his hold on Padme’s waist, and she turned his head so he wouldn’t see as Bail pulled out the comlink and called up the message. That would have to be enough.

Text only, she saw immediately. Good, less likely for Luke to see what it contained and get more upset than he already was. She held her breath while Bail ran the necessary decryption protocol, then his eyes widened.

“What is it?” she asked.

He turned to show her the screen.

*Specter is dead. May need additional resources for aftermath. Will be in touch.*

She read it twice, to be sure she understood. Between that and Luke’s nightmare…

“Who…?” she asked.

He glanced down at Luke. She covered his ears.

“Ben sent the message,” he said.

Padme closed her eyes. On the subject of—memories; this was too...too much like it had been six years ago, waiting and waiting and *waiting* with only the knowledge that something terrible had happened, and Bail as her trusted go-between, her only reliable source of information. Who might be silent again for hours—*days*.

She did *not* tighten her hold on Luke, because that might be tight enough to hurt. But it was
tempting.

“You’ll--as soon as you hear more…”

“You’ll be the first to know,” he promised.

“Update me…” She opened her eyes. “Update me at least every couple hours, please? Even if it’s just to say no news yet.”

He nodded. “I understand,” he said.

“Thank you.” She ran her hand over Luke’s hair again, and forced herself to breathe normally. As awful as waiting was, the odds were good that trying to do anything else right now would just make the situation worse. At least until she had more information to go on.

And they should probably have Dorme shut down the active countersurveillance before it was noticed, get back to their earlier discussion, close it out and send Bail on his way and put Luke to bed, but she couldn’t--

She needed another moment first. To lock those memories away again, for just a little while longer.

This was not actually the first time a patient had vanished on Dr. Naar before they were ready to be released--an unfortunate habit of people who didn’t want to be found, but needed help enough to come to him anyway. It wasn’t even the first time a (theoretically) immobile patient had done it. It was the first time this had happened in broad daylight, but he supposed that really didn’t matter much.

And, based on what he knew of the Jedi’s reputation, he’d fully expected Skywalker to be one of those patients; unwilling to take the time he needed to heal properly before diving back into his work, either because prolonged idleness drove him mad or he considered his work that important. Or both. So, while opening the storeroom door to find the Jedi and his companion gone was certainly... alarming, it wasn’t exactly shocking, once he’d gotten a moment to think about it.

Still, alarmed or not, shocked or not, he was definitely worried. For one thing, while he had gotten Skywalker stabilized the night before, the young man was by no means well enough to be up and about. He would probably end up, at minimum, undoing a good chunk of the work Dr. Naar had done, if not making things worse for himself.

And then there was the creeping fear that, rather than just garden-variety hero-complex idiocy, something had actually spooked Skywalker, made him want to go to ground somewhere with fewer potential witnesses.

Or less collateral damage.

After all, one would think it would take at least a full day of consciousness for Skywalker to reach a breaking point, particularly with a companion to keep an eye on him and rein him in while Dr. Naar tended to other patients.

But as the day went by and the only soldier who came to his door was one who’d had an
unfortunate encounter with a dreek-thorn bush, that worry gradually faded. Not entirely—that kind of anxiety would probably never completely go away, not as long as Dr. Naar continued to associate with and treat Jedi fugitives—but enough that he could put it out of his mind. Enough that he was able to focus on the patients who were here, and spend his spare moments on the slightly-more-productive worry for the way Skywalker was probably derailing his recovery, and what might be done to reverse that when he came back.

If he came back.

And then, about a half-hour after full dark, the Togruta ex-Jedi returned. At this point, Dr. Naar was almost positive she was Skywalker’s former apprentice, but he couldn’t recall her name; she hadn’t made the news nearly as frequently, or recently, as he had.

And, once again, she wasn’t alone.

Here, again, was a very familiar face, and a completely unsurprising one. Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker had come as a set for so long that Dr. Naar probably would have wondered where Kenobi was, if he hadn’t had his hands full with other concerns.

He was a little shorter than Dr. Naar had expected, but legends often were; reddish hair starting to go grey; leaning on the wall with one arm pressed tight to his side. Broken or dislocated shoulder, probably.

He was pulled out of his thoughts when the Togruta—what was her name; it was hovering just out of reach—stopped halfway into the clinic, tilting her head. “He’s not here,” she said, frowning.

“No,” he said. “They left hours ago. I’m sorry, I had other patients—”

“It’s not your fault,” she assured him quickly, flashing a brief, if tight, smile to show she meant what she said. “How long ago, exactly?”

“At least nine hours,” he said. The last time he’d checked on them had been about three hours before noon; he’d come back just over two hours later to find the room empty. “I...I didn’t have any way to contact you.” Not that he’d actually thought of it until this moment, but if he’d had the option, maybe he would have. It didn’t really much of a difference at this point, of course, but he felt like it should be said.

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about it,” she said, then glanced over at Kenobi.

“We’ll find them, Ahsoka,” he said.

Ah, that’s her name. He fixed it in his memory as best he could.

“Yeah,” she said. “We shouldn’t lose any more time, then.”

He nodded, pushing himself up from the wall. “Thank you for your time, Doctor.”

“Wait a minute,” Dr. Naar said, holding up a hand to stop them. “I can at least take a look at your arm before you go.”

Kenobi considered for a minute, then nodded again. “Thank you,” he said. Dr. Naar pointed him to a seat and he took it with a faint, weary sigh.

Dr. Naar got his scanner and checked the setting on the shoulder. It was a simple dislocation, and everything had been lined up correctly. Not all that much for him to do here at this point, other
than a shot he could give that would ease the pain and swelling and speed up the healing process. And provide a sling, of course—sped up didn’t mean instantaneous.

Kenobi relaxed a little when the shot kicked in, but simply held the sling in his lap for a moment, rather than putting it on. “How much damage has he done, running off like this?”

Of course. The key question; he supposed it was inevitable once he’d stopped them rushing out the door quite so fast. Unfortunately, “Hard to say,” he said, shaking his head. “It depends on where he’s going, how smooth and easy the trip is...significant, I can say that much. Especially if his fever spikes again, which it probably will.”

He nodded. “Right, of course.” He paused a minute. “When we’ve caught up with him, may we bring him back here? I understand if you’re unwilling to take the risk again.”

“He still needs care,” he said immediately. *And no one gets turned away.* “Even if *he* doesn’t seem to think so.” He paused. “I’m sorry, that was…”

“True,” Ahsoka said, wryly.

“He can be...difficult sometimes,” Kenobi added. “I’ll speak to him. *This* won’t happen again.”

“Let’s just say I know the type,” he said dryly. “But—my point was, he still needs care. That’s all that matters to me. Besides, I’m...apparently not exactly immune to doing something reckless, either. As far as the risk goes, I’m not sure you’ll find anyone else fool enough to take it.” Which was...unfortunate, and all the more reason for *him* to do it.

“Most likely not,” he agreed softly. “Thank you. Thank you. We’ll have him back—” He frowned. “I don’t know that we’ll be able to make the round trip before sunrise, but tomorrow night, if at all possible.”

“All right.” Not exactly ideal, but *ideal* of course would have been Skywalker never leaving in the first place. This was the next-best thing. “You know where he’s gone, then?”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “I know *exactly* where he’s gone.”

But *Ahsoka* hadn’t, based on the quick but intense flash flash of relief Dr. Naar caught on her face before she covered it up.

“All right,” he said. “The sooner the better, but I understand you need to take precautions.”

Kenobi nodded, then stood and bowed. “We should go. Thank you again, Doctor. For...for everything.”

“Of course,” he said. Then pointedly added, “You should wear the sling for at least three days.”

“...ah. Right.” He had the grace to look a little sheepish, and put it on, adjusting his cloak so it was more or less hidden; one sleeve lying empty for the moment.

Ahsoka waited until he was settled, then bowed briefly. “We’ll see you tomorrow, Doctor,” she said.

“Tomorrow,” he agreed, and showed them out the back way. He watched until they disappeared into the cool darkness, then retreated to lock up. Just as if it were any other night.

Because, at least until tomorrow, that was the best he could do for Skywalker and all of his other
Leia was *not* hiding from her aunt and uncle on the roof. Not at all. Only little kids did that, and she wasn’t *ever* going to convince Daddy she was old enough to go with him if she kept doing little kid stuff.

Besides, if she *was* hiding, she’d’ve picked a *lot* better place than up here where all Aunt Beru or Uncle Owen had to do was walk outside to see her. She wasn’t *dumb*.

She just--wanted to be alone for a bit, that was all. It was probably better that way, ‘cause all day she’d felt weird and jumpy, like everything anyone said to her was something broken and sharp trying to burrow under her skin until she wanted to scream. Ever since the dream she’d had last night, the one that had started on the silver planet but then all of a sudden jumped to a place she’d never seen before, one that was black and white and *cold*.

It had been *scary*, and Leia really, *really* did not like being scared.

So she’d climbed up here, where all of that could stop for a little bit, and it was just her and the sand and the suns, counting the minutes until Daddy got home for her birthday. Things would be better once he got here. They almost always were.

She’d lost track of time, but the suns were still no more than halfway to the horizon when she heard the speeder coming up, and she knew that was Daddy and Uncle Rex.

Except--that didn’t make any *sense*. They always got *eopies*, ‘cause they were quieter and lasted longer in the sand. But she *knew* it was them, the way she sometimes just...knew things.

*Not good.*

She stood up and shaded her eyes, trying to get a look for the speck on the horizon where they were coming from.

*Mos Eisley? But that’s where they came in last time and Daddy always switches*…

For a minute, she was back in her dream, even though that cold, dark place couldn’t be farther from midafternoon on Tatooine if it *tried*.

She scowled and shook her head until she *stopped* feeling like that, then slid down the side of the dome to meet them.

It didn’t take all *that* long for them to pull up, even if the two or three minutes *felt* like forever. As soon as they were close enough, Leia didn’t even wait for the speeder to come to a full stop before she darted over to it. Uncle Rex was driving, and Daddy was--

Daddy was *hurt*.

And, yeah, okay, it wasn’t the first time. He’d come home bruised and stiff and achy before, even if he always pretended he wasn’t where she could see, but this--this--this--not like *this*.

His eyes drifted open and he smiled at her, a little sideways. “Hey, princess,” he said, ruffling her
hair and his hand was shaking a bit. “Missed you lots.”

“Missed you, too,” she said, automatically, then climbed up onto the speeder and flung her arms around him--real careful, ‘cause she didn’t know exactly where he was hurt--and buried her face in his shoulder. He was hot, too hot, even for driving hours in the suns-- fever hot. She blinked back tears.

“Hey…” he said again, hugging her close. “Hey, it’s okay, princess. It’s okay, I’m here.”

She just nodded, and didn’t let go, until she felt Uncle Rex’s hand land on her shoulder.

“C’mon, ad’ika,” he said. “We should get inside.”

Right. ‘Cause Daddy was hurt, and he had a fever, so he needed to lie down. Reluctantly, she detached herself and climbed down off the speeder, hovering just out of the way while Uncle Rex helped Daddy out and--

Daddy’s leg was gone.

It was just-- gone.

A big, choking lump built up at the back of her throat and her eyes started prickling because Daddy. And part of her wanted to go cling to him again so he wouldn’t--so she would know he wasn’t getting hurt any more, and part of her wanted to go find whoever did that to him and put scorpions in their bed, and part of her wanted to run inside for Aunt Beru who would probably know what to do to make him feel better, and part of her whispered, if he’d just let me come this never would have happened. Except she knew that was dumb, just like she knew that scorpions in the bad guy’s bed wouldn’t fix this, and that running to cling to Daddy would probably just make him fall over which would make things worse.

“I--I-I’m gonna get Aunt Beru,” she said. Because then at least she’d be doing something.

“Good idea,” Uncle Rex said. “We’ll be right behind you.”

Daddy didn’t say anything. Daddy was maybe just focusing on standing right now.

And that was all it took for her to start actually crying. But she had a job to do, so she tried to blink back the tears and make them stop; just for a little while, just until Daddy was inside and okay.

When that didn’t work after a few seconds, she gave up and just took a shaky breath to steady herself before turning and running inside for help.

Chapter End Notes

And we are officially past 100k words, wow.

Uh, so I'll do some sort of bonus to mark the milestone on my writing tumblr--I'll probably post something about that sometime in the next couple days. Feel free to message me if there's anything you want to see!

And thank you all so much for staying with me for this long <3
~shadowsong
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

By the time Anakin and Rex got to Tatooine, the painkillers had mostly worn off, which meant every move he made sent shooting pain up his thigh, bad enough that his vision greyed out at the edges a couple times. So he wasn’t all that inclined to argue when Rex insisted on a speeder instead of eopies, or when he refused to let him drive. The heat wasn’t helping, making him even dizzier and lending a disconcerting haze to everything he saw; when the light from the suns wasn’t trying to dig its way past his skull, adding to the pounding headache the drugs had left behind. Between all of that and the way the horizon kept tilting dangerously, it was a lot easier to just close his eyes, rely on Rex to find their way, and focus on not passing out.

_You can do this_, he told himself. _Come on, remember why you’re here. Keep it together. For Leia._

They got to the farm—a whole hell of a lot quicker than they should have. Or maybe he’d fallen asleep for a while; despite having apparently done not much else for the last day or so, he was still bone-deep tired.

But then Leia’s presence emerged like a third sun on the horizon—which meant they were practically on top of their destination; he and Obi-Wan had taught her basic shielding as soon as they could so no one would find her that way—and he came more or less fully awake in response.

He opened his eyes when the faint whine of the engines cut off, and Leia was standing right there, wide-eyed and tense, a spiky tendril of alarm twining through her.

He squelched a stab of guilt as best he could and smiled. “Hey, princess,” he said, ruffling her hair. “Missed you lots.”

“Missed you, too,” she said, then the next thing he knew she was perched on the speeder itself, clinging tight. Her breath came shaky in his ear and he thought he heard her sniff a little bit.

“Hey…” he said again, hugging her close. “Hey, it’s okay, princess. It’s okay, I’m here.” He did his best to project calm and reassurance at her—see, Daddy’s fine, I’m here, I made it, just like I promised, don’t cry, everything’s gonna be fine—but he wasn’t all that sure it was working.

He was vaguely aware of Rex coming up behind Leia and murmuring something he couldn’t quite catch, and then Leia let go and jumped down off the speeder.

“We should get inside, sir,” Rex said, quietly, once she was clear.

“Yeah.” He got an arm around Rex’s shoulder and braced himself to move and it was awful. For a split second, the pain was almost overwhelming and then he was vertical, clinging to Rex with his eyes squeezed shut against the swirling sky.

Still conscious, at least. That was a plus.

Although he must have been closer to the edge than he thought; he barely registered what was happening when someone—Beru; that was definitely Beru—slipped under his other arm a moment later, helping Rex support him, other than a fresh burst of pain and vertigo as his weight shifted. He bit back a faint moan—Leia was right there, and she was already upset, scared, which was not why he was here. As soon as he got inside and stopped moving and the horizon settled a little bit,
he could reassure her, and then--

He probably blacked out for a minute then, because the next thing he knew, he was settled on one of the sleeping platforms inside, under what was probably the softest blanket they had.

Cautiously, he opened his eyes--everything was still fuzzy on the edges, which was a little discouraging, but at least it wasn’t as bright in here. Which helped with the headache, a little bit. Kept it from getting worse, anyway.

His leg, though, was still burning, even when he was trying not to move. And, yeah, it wasn’t as bad as--

Automatically, he shied away from that comparison; latched onto another, slightly less devastating.

It was worse than when Dooku had taken his arm. Which was not a good sign, but probably not because Specter had done any more damage himself, but back then he’d gotten treated a lot faster, which—he wasn’t stupid. He knew that made a difference, he knew this time would have been worse than before, even with all the resources of the Temple to help, and without that—just, he knew things were pretty bad right now. For all Obi-Wan liked to lecture him about being reckless and ignoring medics when he got himself blown up (which, really, like he could talk, Anakin remembered what had happened at the Second Battle of Geonosis, okay)—but he...there were things that were important, things that he had to do, and anyway he could take the pain, so--

“Daddy?” Leia’s voice cut through his thoughts, bringing his attention back where it belonged, to the most important thing in his life right now. She was hovering at his side, watching over him; had probably sensed him starting to wake up.

She sounded--she sounded like she’d been crying.

Damn it. He mustered as much energy as he could and half sat up, gritting his teeth against the wave of dizziness and propping himself up on one arm. “Hey, princess,” he said, dredging up a smile for her that hopefully didn’t look too forced.

A burst of relief shone out of her—not quite enough to totally overcome her worry, but better than nothing--matched by a brilliant smile of her own in response.

“Hi, Daddy. Here,” she said, pressing a cup into his free hand.

“Thanks,” he said. He pressed it against his forehead briefly before drinking it, but it wasn’t quite cold enough to help with the headache, or that fever Rex had pointed out when trying to talk him out of coming here. Though, on second thought, that was maybe for the best--he vaguely remembered Rex mentioning to--someone; he was having trouble sorting through much of anything after his duel with Specter with any kind of clarity, at least up until the point where he’d woken up in that clinic, mostly lucid except for the drugs. And the fever. Which was--maybe higher now? Or maybe that was just from the heat outside; how long had he been out?

The point was, he thought Rex had mentioned hypothermia, and it made sense, since he’d been left exposed on the icy mountain for a while. Which wasn’t Rex’s fault, of course, since he’d had to climb down to where Anakin had fallen and then figure out how to carry him safely back up the sheer cliff, it was just--a thing, that had happened, making everything worse. But, anyway, probably the last thing he needed right now was another temperature-related shock, so it was good the water wasn’t too cold. Or--something.

Focus. He pulled his scattered thoughts together as best he could, and handed Leia back the empty
cup. He noticed that it wasn’t exactly steady, but he wasn’t totally sure if he was shaking or if that was just the way the room was spinning.

Say something. “Sorry about earlier,” he said. Because Leia would probably be upset if he let himself drift and talking helped him stay alert. “I didn’t, uh, I shouldn’t have faded out like that.”

She shook her head. “You’re sick.” She gripped the cup a little tighter, and her lower lip trembled just a little bit.

“Hey--” he said, holding out his hand. “C’mere, it’s okay.”

She hesitated half a heartbeat, then scrambled up onto the platform next to him, careful to skirt around his injured leg. Which didn’t stop the pallet under them from shifting, putting different pressure points on the wound. He saw stars for a few seconds, but at least he didn’t pass out again.

“Daddy?”

“S’all right,” he said, blinking rapidly to clear his vision. “I’m all right.”

She didn’t look at all convinced, but she nodded anyway and nestled close, putting her head on his shoulder.

“It’s really gonna be okay, princess,” he promised her. “I’m gonna be fine.”

“Okay,” she said, then took a slightly shaky breath. “Only--only you wouldn’t wake up, and you’ve got a really bad fever, a-and--”

“I’m awake now,” he said. “And--look, I’ve been hurt worse than this before, okay? And I got--I got better then, so I’ll get better now.”

But that was--that was--that was a bad thought to have, because the First Battle of Geonosis hadn’t been worse than this and so he tried to route his brain to Maridun instead which sort of had, with mixed success. Probably because it was--it was the anniversary, and his grip on sort of everything was sort of tenuous right now, and anyway bringing it up didn’t actually seem to comfort her at all, so why was he stupid enough to--

He needed to shake off those ghosts, fast, before they took over completely. Not easy at the best of times, and the stupid kriffing fever wasn’t exactly helping.

Good thing Leia was here, because her presence was helping. Just like always. And he wasn’t about to lose a good chunk of her birthday to--memories. Especially not when he’d already spent way too much of it unconscious.

He took a breath and started to drag himself further upright. “You know, I’m here now, and I’m awake, and--and it’s your birthday, so why don’t we--”

“Daddy!” She pushed down on his shoulders, and--okay, yeah, it probably wasn’t a good sign that his tiny six-year-old barely had to put any pressure on him at all before he collapsed back. “You’re sick. You’re s’posed to stay in bed ‘til your fever goes away. Aunt Beru said.”

And some combination of that tone she used, the one she had right from the beginning, when she picked up on him wallowing in self-pity or thought he was being an idiot; and the way she was glaring at him, and looked so much like--so much like her mother in that moment--

He gave in.
Especially because—well, now that she felt like she was *doing* something, that seemed to cut through her anxieties more than anything else he’d tried. Which made perfect sense to him. Feeling *helpless* was—as long as he was *doing* something, as long as there was something to do, as long as he felt like he was fighting back against whatever was going wrong, it wasn’t that bad. Leia was like him that way.

And he was here for her. So there it was. He’d stay in bed and let her boss him around for a while, if that would make her less upset.

Plus, the room was still sort of wobbly, and *everything* hurt, and he was starting to get a little nauseous thanks to one or the other.

“All right,” he said. “All right. Uh.” He tried to think of something else to suggest, something to keep his mind from spiraling into a dark place where he *could not* let her follow, and then remembered—he *should* have it in his pocket, and...yes, there it was. Leia’s present; he could give it to her now.

Normally, they did this outside—they had a whole ritual about it, where he’d take her out a little bit into the desert, until it was only the two of them and the sands and the sky, and he’d tell her its story. Because he got her the same thing every year, ish—he kept an eye out for wood or stone with interesting patterns on his missions, and then spent his spare moments carving it into a shape that would appeal to her. It helped him feel close to her, when he was away so much, and he thought—he *hoped*—it helped her feel less disconnected from him.

This year, about six months ago, he’d been on a planet with dark pink crystalline forests, the trees stretching up hundreds of meters until he couldn’t see the canopy above them. The branches’ cross-sections were pentagonal, so he’d cut off a piece of one that had fallen to the ground, and spent hours smoothing and polishing it, so the corners weren’t so sharp and the imperfections where the heat from his ‘saber had warped it looked decorative, rather than defective.

“All right,” he said again, pulling it out of his pocket while moving as little as possible. “I know this isn’t how we normally do this, princess, but if you won’t let me get up...”

She shot him a look.

He smiled, took her hand, and carefully placed the crystal in it; it was almost as big as her palm. “Happy birthday, princess.”

She blinked, then really looked at the stone in her hand, and then brightened a little. “Wow,” she said. “It’s *really* pretty, Daddy.” She snuggled against him again.

“I thought so,” he said, and kissed the top of her head. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Where’s it from?”

“A long, long way away from here,” he said. “Uncle Rex, Uncle Obi-Wan, and I got very, very lost in a forest, while we were looking for...” He trailed off, frowning, the thread of the story slipping out of his grasp, which was ridiculous—he’d had the whole story planned out and rehearsed for weeks.

*We were looking for—what were we looking for when we got lost? Okay, think. I remember the way rain sounded like chimes, and the look on Obi-Wan’s face when he fell into that creek right before the shooting started...* 

He hadn’t quite gotten it back when the door opened; Beru interrupting them.
“Leia, sweetheart, Uncle Owen needs your help outside.”

Leia looked up at Anakin, then over at Beru, her jaw taking on a very familiar stubborn set.

“Go,” he said, before she could actually start arguing. He didn’t really want to fight with Owen right now. He ran a hand through her hair—it was definitely shaking now; not good. He let it drop back down onto the bed, clenching his fist to make it stop. “I’ll be here; tell you the rest then.”

She looked back at him, now a little conflicted. “Promise?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She very carefully climbed down again. “Don’t move,” she added severely, when the pain faded and he could focus again. “I’ll be right back.”

He nodded, which just made his head spin again. He closed his eyes and waited for it to pass; which it did, after a few seconds, leaving a wave of utter exhaustion behind. Keeping up appearances for Leia must have taken more out of him than he’d thought.

The door opened and shut again, and then he heard Beru approach before feeling her hand resting cool on his forehead. It felt nice, for a moment, before she took it away.

“You feel up to eating something?” she asked softly. “You should probably try.”

That idea did not appeal at all. “Maybe later,” he managed. Because she wasn’t wrong—fever burned up a lot of energy, and it would probably help with the dizziness. Assuming he could keep it down, which was not—not a sure thing right now.

“All right,” she said. “Water, though. And this.” She held up a pill bottle to show him. “Fever reducer. Might help with the pain, too, but I don’t think I have anything strong enough to do you any real good there.”

“Yeah,” he said. She handed him the pill, then helped him sit up to drink it down, which hurt—noticeably less than when he’d tried it by himself, at least. He still hissed a little at the movement; had to pause for a second and wait for the room to steady before accepting the water.

“Sorry,” she breathed, and eased him back again.

“S’fine,” he said. A cold trickle of sweat was starting to work its way down his spine; that would hopefully stop once the pill kicked in.

She nodded and sat down next to the bed. “Ani, what are you doing here?” she asked. “You’re supposed to be in a hospital. You need to be in a hospital.”

He—probably should have expected that. He sighed. “I need to be here,” he said. “For Leia. I promised her I would never miss—”

“She’d’ve been upset either way,” Beru pointed out, and he winced a little. Because, yeah, Leia had been very upset; he probably wouldn’t have needed the Force to see how worried she was about him, which wasn’t exactly the plan, he was just—just dizzier than he’d thought he would be, that was all. “So you didn’t have to pick the risky, stupid option,” she went on. “I don’t know if it’s better or worse for her right now, and we’ll probably never figure that out, but for you—”

“I’m not—” he interrupted, then caught the look on her face. “I can—I can handle it. I couldn’t—I needed to—be here.”
She sighed. “Because you needed to see her as much as you thought she needed to see you.”

He flinched; that hit—that hit a little too close to the mark, even though he hadn’t seen it until she’d said it. But once she did, it was—inescapable. Because he had needed this—seeing Leia made everything better, seeing her always had, and especially this week—if he focused on his daughter, he couldn’t fixate on everything he’d lost, and that was on a normal year; with everything—with everything about Specter thrown in, too, with the stark, harsh reminder of all the things he’d done and failed to do, of how much more could have been lost—

Selfish, echoed alongside his too-rapid heartbeat. All of this is your fault anyway, everything that happened to the Order, the way the Chancellor ruined that kid, it’s all on you, because you let him in, because you couldn’t bring him down when you had the chance, you are a terrible Jedi, failed Chosen One, and you lean on your six-year-old child for comfort what the hell kind of father are you—

Beru’s hand landed on his and squeezed very gently. “Anakin,” she said, like she’d said it four or five times already. “I didn’t mean that—I wasn’t trying to—I get it, okay? I know I haven’t been through a fraction of the horrible things you have, but when something awful happens, I have the same impulse. Hell, even when it doesn’t happen to me, or Owen, or you, or—when it’s just something I’ve read about. Especially if there are kids involved. To reassure myself that there are still good things in this world, or just that—just that she’s still there and okay. That’s normal, Ani.”

He blinked at her, hazily. “But—” he said. “But—but I don’t want—”

“Believe me, if I ever think you’re leaning on her too much, I’ll tell you,” Beru said firmly. “Because that’s not healthy for either of you. Okay?”

And Beru wouldn’t lie to him. Not about that. She loved Leia too much for that. So even if it wasn’t enough to totally kill the guilt—not that anything ever was—and even if his pulse was still racing uncomfortably under his skin, it was enough perspective to slam that kriffing voice back where it belonged.

“Okay,” he said.

“Good,” she said, and squeezed his hand again. “But—look, just because I get why you did it, doesn’t change the fact that this was a stupid thing to do, Ani. You could have called.”

“S’not the same,” he said. And it probably sounded weak, and it kind of was a terrible excuse, but it wasn’t the same, and he didn’t think he could explain that to someone—to someone who didn’t have the Force, who couldn’t feel the things he felt. Besides, he might have been more able to hide how he felt over comms, but that was no guarantee that Leia wouldn’t see through him anyway. So what was the point of only calling?

Besides, he’d promised, and that still mattered. If he was going to upset her either way, at least he hadn’t betrayed her trust, too.

“All right,” she said. “Then she could’ve come to you. You could’ve just sent Rex to pick her up.”

No. No, no, no, he could not have done that. Because, for all Leia’s insistence that she was—that she could help, she was still too little, and there were so many risks, so many people who could see her, could make the connection, maybe even track back to Luke and Padme, too, and—

He shook his head rapidly and regretted it when the room kept moving long after his head had stopped. “S’not—not safe,” he forced out through gritted teeth, gripping the blanket so tight he
heard his metal hand creaking at the strain, waiting for the vertigo to subside.

“And this was?” she asked.

“For Leia.”

“And how, exactly, does risking your health and safety like this protect her?” she shot back.

“I--it’s--I…”

She let that hang in the air for a minute, then softly said, “Look--she did need to see you. Does need to see you. She was watching the horizon all day, waiting for you to come home. I’m not about to pretend that she didn’t. But, Ani, she’s going to need to see you next year, too. And the year after that. And for a long time. So you have to take better care of yourself, okay?”

Which--he wasn’t dying; his fever would be a lot higher if he were actually--actually septic or something and…

And Leia had been scared.

He looked up at the ceiling, which was wavering in a completely different way now.

She sighed, and reached out to brush his forehead again. “Get some rest, all right? I’ll be close by if you need anything.”

“Okay,” he whispered.

She squeezed his hand one more time, and he shut his eyes, listening to her quietly slip out of the room, leaving him alone.

For a moment, the silence weighed on him and he tried to keep it from swallowing him up, from leaving him with nothing but that murmur of guilt, keeping time with his heartbeat. But with no one to talk to, nothing to distract him, it was--hard.

Until the meds Beru had given him finally kicked in, taking just enough of the edge off that he couldn’t even focus on that anymore; fever and exhaustion winning out and dragging him down into dim, uneasy dreams.

Chapter End Notes

As I’ve mentioned, I know very little about medicine, so please look kindly on any mistakes made there.

So sorry for the late update; this chapter took longer (and is longer) than I thought it would. <3

See you guys next week! (Which will finally involve Obi-Wan and Ahsoka joining them, I promise!)

~shadowsong
It was well after local nightfall before Obi-Wan and Ahsoka got to the farm. The house, too, was mostly dark and quiet, but for a dim light flickering out of the kitchen window.

Good--that meant a decent chance nothing else had gone wrong in the past few hours. They were expected, at least; he had made contact with Beru shortly after leaving Dr. Naar’s clinic, to confirm that Anakin and Rex had arrived safely, and she’d said she’d wait up.

He tapped twice on the door, and leaned a little against the wall while they waited for Beru to answer. Ahsoka, beside him, bounced a little on the balls of her feet.

“I like this place,” she said after a moment. “It’s...nice. Restful.”

“A haven,” he agreed softly. One he wished he could visit more often. And already, it was starting to work on him, letting him relax a little. Despite that lingering pulse of Anakin-is-hurting-Anakin-is-not-safe at the back of his mind.

But Anakin was close, at least, and not doing anything else he shouldn’t at the moment; Obi-Wan could sense that much. And of all the places he’d run off to and foolish things he had done or tried to do when deciding to ignore reasonable medical restrictions, this was far from the worst.

Six years ago, as with so many other things, still held that particular title.

And then Beru came to the door, forestalling any further conversation or maudlin thoughts. “Oh, good,” she said. “I was starting to get a little worried. Come in.”

“Thank you,” he said, and slipped inside, followed by Ahsoka. Once the door had shut behind them, he added, “Beru, this is Ahsoka Tano. Ahsoka, Anakin’s sister-in-law, Beru.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ahsoka said, with a brief bow.

“You, too,” Beru said, and smiled warmly. “Ani’s told us a lot about you. Sit down, you both look exhausted.” She busied herself about pouring milk for the three of them--quietly, so as not to wake the rest of the house--while Obi-Wan and Ahsoka found seats at the table.

“How is he?” Ahsoka asked, once Beru had joined them; her hands wrapped tight around her cup.

Beru sighed, and set her cup down. “Not great,” she said frankly. “He’s fever’s been pretty steady, at least, since we got him out of the suns, but it’s pretty high. And he’s...hazy, having trouble staying focused. He’s been really dizzy, too, and nauseous, I think, but he hasn’t said anything specific about that. I know he’s--he’s in a lot of pain. I don’t have anything strong enough to help much, but I’ve done what I can. For that and the fever, and everything else.”

“Which has probably at least kept things from getting worse,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

“Fair enough,” she said. She picked up her cup again, fidgeting with it for a moment. “I tried to talk some sense into him, a few hours ago. When he was awake and a little less out of it. I think I managed to get through to him, at least enough for him to realize just how bad an idea coming here like this was.”
“I’m guessing he’s gonna hear that from all of us, over the next couple of days,” Ahsoka said. “Enough repetition might get the point across.”

‘Might’ being the operative word there, as Obi-Wan knew all too well.

“Hopefully,” Beru said.

“Yes,” he agreed, then set his glass down. “I should—he’s in his usual room?” Not that he necessarily planned to start on that immediately --it depended on what he saw when he got in there--but...

“Yeah,” she said. “Leia’s in there with him. They were both asleep, last time I checked. About a half-hour ago.”

Good. “Is Rex in there with them?”

She shook her head. “He was camped out outside the room most of the afternoon. Trying to give the two of them private time together, I think, but stay close just in case. I convinced him to go get some sleep himself a couple hours ago.”

Obi-Wan and Ahsoka exchanged a look--not quite as seamless as it would have been if he and Anakin were silently deciding who went where, but fitting back together nicely just the same. Because one or both of them should talk to Rex, too; make sure he knew that no one blamed him for this mess.

“I’ll go look in on him,” Ahsoka said, after a beat. Obi-Wan gave her a brief, grateful smile, which she returned before glancing over at Beru. “If that’s all right. See how he’s holding up.”

“Sure,” Beru said. “I’ll show you the way.”

She nodded and smiled again, taking care to hide her pointier teeth. Which, as Obi-Wan remembered well, could be rather alarming when one wasn’t used to them. “Thanks,” she said, standing up and stretching.

Obi-Wan rose as well, and Beru followed suit.

“Through the door on the left,” she told Ahsoka. “I’ll be right behind you. Just want to finish cleaning up in here.”

“Right.” She headed that way.

Obi-Wan started in the other direction, but Beru put a hand on his wrist briefly.

“How are you holding up?” she asked softly. Before we forget to ask, echoed in her thoughts after.

He considered dodging the question for a moment--there were so many other things to worry about that took precedence--but Beru’s hand was, while gentle, utterly unyielding; matched only by the determination in her eyes as they met his.

He sighed, and looked away. “It’s...been a difficult couple of days,” he said. “But…” He closed his eyes. Anakin’s presence was muted but there; making it easier to shake off the nightmare scenarios he’d been pondering on the way here. And the ghosts of the Tantive, and Polis Massa, six years ago, when he hadn’t even--in those first few hours, he’d barely even had that.

In this warm, lived-in kitchen, this haven, with all the love and kindness a family could build up
over the years soaked into the very walls, it all seemed as far away as it ever did. Despite the dire circumstances, and the time of year.

“I’m all right,” he finished. “In the moment, at least.”

“All right,” she said, and squeezed his hand briefly before heading off after Ahsoka.

He waited until she was gone, to give himself a moment to recenter and brace for what he might find, then headed through the other door and slipped noiselessly down the hall, straight for Anakin’s room.

Just as Beru had said, Leia was fast asleep in a chair at the foot of the bed. Or she had been, anyway; she stirred a little when the door slid open, blinking blearily up at Obi-Wan.

He held a finger to his lips, and she glanced over at the bed and nodded, before uncurling enough to hold out her arms for a hug. Which, of course, he was more than happy to provide.

“Glad you’re here,” she mumbled, half-asleep again already.

“Me, too,” he murmured back, then kissed the top of her head and let go. “Back to sleep now, little one.”

She nodded and yawned, settling back into the chair. He smiled softly and pulled off his cloak to drape over her--more for emotional comfort than anything else. She snuggled into it and, moments later, was completely out.

He adjusted the fall of the cloak over her shoulder, then turned to check on her father.

Anakin was sleeping, too, if nowhere near as peaceful as Leia was; caught up in shallow, fitful fever-dreams. Perhaps not quite bad enough to be called true nightmares, but certainly unpleasant; the Force was unsettled around him in response to his distress. He was very pale, face pinched with pain even in sleep. His hands were twisted up in the blankets, and there was a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Obi-Wan reached out and rested a hand on Anakin’s forehead for a moment, frowning a little internally at how warm he was. True, he wasn’t sure how high it had been before, and Beru had said it had been high but consistent, not spiking. Still, that was something Dr. Naar had specifically said to look out for.

So, better not to wake him just yet. Right now, he clearly needed the rest more than a lecture on his failure to consider the consequences of his actions, not to mention his utter lack of a sense of self-preservation. Oh, it would have to happen before they were actually on their way back to Dr. Naar, of course, but there were a few hours yet before they were to leave.

With that in mind, he closed his eyes briefly, sending what strength he could along their bond; to at least dampen the pain a little; ease the stress it put on Anakin’s body and help him fight the infection off. Not quite a Force-backed suggestion to stay asleep, just making him a little less uncomfortable so he would sleep better on his own. And, while healing had never been Obi-Wan’s greatest strength, it did seem to help somewhat; the pulsing waves of discomfort in the Force around them had quieted, though not entirely stilled.

It was a technique he could perform even when half-asleep or more, easing Anakin’s physical pain or nightmares; one he’d unfortunately developed as well as he ever could back during the war.

He sighed faintly, withdrawing his hand, pulled another chair up to the side of the bed with a
gesture, and sank into it.

*Oh, Anakin,* he thought. *I wish this all wasn’t so familiar. I wish you wouldn’t…*

He wasn’t entirely sure how best to complete the thought; but, as if in some kind of response to it, the pattern to Anakin’s breathing shifted, and his eyelids fluttered a little bit.

“M-master?” he said, a little hoarsely.

“Shh, shh, easy; it’s all right,” he said, putting a restraining hand on Anakin’s shoulder before he could even *think* to try and get up. “Yes, I’m here. Go back to sleep.”

“No, m’awake now,” he said, his eyes opening all the way; a little glassy. He blinked a few times, then frowned. “What--what happened to your arm?”

Of *course* that would be the first thing he noticed; despite his own, *far* more serious injury. “Dislocated shoulder, that’s all,” he said. “Nothing to worry about. How are you feeling?”

Anakin didn’t answer right away. After a moment, he sighed faintly and admitted, “I’ve--I’ve had better days.”

“I can imagine,” he said, then paused, and added, “You left the clinic.” There was no sense in putting it off, since Anakin was awake anyway.

He nodded, and closed his eyes. “I--I know it wasn’t...wasn’t the brightest move I’ve ever made.”

Well. That was--better, less defensive, than he’d expected. A pleasant surprise; Beru must have gotten through to Anakin after all.

“But I *needed* to.”

Ah. Perhaps not. Still, this was a step or two better than usual.

Obi-Wan sighed. “You and I,” he said, “have a very *different idea* of what constitutes necessity, my friend.”

Because he would absolutely admit that there *were* times when medical advice and common sense had to be set aside, but those circumstances generally involved someone shooting at him or someone under his protection, or other actual, imminent *danger.* Such had been the case at Geonosis, the second time, which Anakin *always* brought up. Besides, Obi-Wan had been unable to evacuate and seek care, and had *stayed put* and done everything he feasibly could to avoid damaging himself further until the droids were on top of them and it was either that or get shot and killed anyway.

“I know. And...and yours is...but I just…” Anakin glanced over at Leia, then sighed and drew the blanket a little tighter around his shoulders. “I *needed* to. Even if--even if it was a bad idea.”

“I know how important she is to you, Anakin,” he said quietly. “And that--and that our mission keeps you away far more than either of you deserve. But you *cannot* do this again. Forgetting, for the moment, the fact that being so far away from appropriate medical care and supervision has substantially increased the risk of complications, let alone the impact of the ones you were already experiencing. And leaving aside the potential damage stopping and starting treatment like this could cause, and the fact you *should* have been resting, and not spending energy you badly needed for healing on--on flight instead…all of that aside, you could have--”
He broke off and closed his eyes, trying to think of which of the endless stream of nightmare scenarios he’d considered was least likely to send Anakin into a paralyzing spiral of guilt. He was, Obi-Wan believed, close to the edge of one as it was.

“What if you had—if one of the patches on the Waterfall had failed, or something else had gone wrong, and you’d ended up stranded?” he finally asked. What if you had gotten separated from Rex somehow, and collapsed along the way with no one to help you? “I don’t know how long it would…it would take me to find you, if that happened.”

“I’m sorry,” Anakin said, after a long moment. “I didn’t—didn’t mean to make you worry like that.” He was hunched over, curled in on himself, and trembling a little bit.

He sighed. “I know you didn’t,” he said. And yet.

But it was late, and Anakin was ill. Obi-Wan had made his point, or at least the beginnings of it.

“Will you at least promise me to behave until the doctor clears you? Which means listening to him and staying there, barring the clinic actually being attacked or similar immediate danger?”

Of course, that wouldn’t solve the problem completely. And perhaps Obi-Wan was backing down sooner than he should, but—Anakin was alive, and at least stable, which was such a profound relief, in the wake of the heightened tension of the past few hours, that a part of him was inclined to just…be relieved, and didn’t particularly want to push the point anymore.

Besides, he didn’t want to wake Leia, which might well happen if they continued their discussion then and there.

“I’ll be good,” Anakin said. “Promise.”

“All right.” And, having secured that promise, he told himself that was enough for now. Especially since they were both tired and stressed; and while the dull ache in Obi-Wan’s shoulder was nothing compared to the pain still leaking out from behind Anakin’s shields…it would just become something far uglier than it needed to be. They could revisit the subject when Anakin was a little less drained, and when Obi-Wan had a little more confidence that the probable shouting match wouldn’t stress his brother to the point where it might do actual damage, and impede his recovery even further.

Which was probably nothing but paranoia on his part, but between how much physical distress he was picking up from Anakin, and Dr. Naar’s warnings, still fresh in the back of his mind, he would rather not take the risk.

“All right,” Anakin echoed, and closed his eyes again. For a moment, they sat there in a somewhat drained but mostly-comfortable silence, Leia’s quiet breathing from her corner the only sound in the room, then Anakin cleared his throat and asked, “When—when are we leaving?”

“In a few hours,” he said. “Around first dawn.” They couldn’t approach the clinic until after its local dark anyway, and this was a safer place to wait out the extra hours outside of travel time. Besides, early morning, before it got too hot, was probably the best and safest time to move Anakin.

“Mm,” he said. “We…we got the keys. Rex and me. Did I--did anyone mention that yet?”

The--oh, right. Obi-Wan had nearly forgotten the mission that Anakin and Rex had been on before Specter had--
“No, you hadn’t,” he said. “I’ll pass them along.” He paused, then added, “I’ve--reached out to Senator Organa already. We haven’t spoken directly yet and I didn’t give him too many details; I wanted to see you first.”

Anakin blinked, confused for a moment, then drew in a quick, sharp breath as comprehension dawned. “...oh,” he said, staring down at his right hand and flexing it slowly. “S’probably faster than me building one, I guess.”

“Yes,” he said. If only because maintaining his arm was entirely different from building a new leg from scratch, which would require much more detailed knowledge of how to smoothly and safely integrate the machine parts with organic neurons. As such interfaces were one of the few related areas where Anakin lacked the needed expertise, that process would probably involve a fair amount of experimentation and trial and error. Once they’d managed to source some of the more delicate, specialized parts, which would be potentially even more difficult than the entire thing. And a new prosthetic was not something Obi-Wan would be willing to risk improvised substitutions in, and he doubted Anakin would be, either.

True, in the long run, the end result of Anakin’s invention might well be better, but in the meantime...at best, it would be a long and frustrating process, and Anakin would be sidelined--well, he would be sidelined as long as he needed to be to heal properly, regardless, but it would be longer, with a correspondingly greater loss of momentum and opportunities in their fight against the Empire.

At worst, he might actually hurt himself if one of his attempts went particularly wrong when he tried to attach it. Better to go through their friends on Coruscant, and try to get a prosthetic already expertly made.

And if Bail couldn’t help them find one--Hondo might be an option, though Obi-Wan didn’t entirely trust his sources. Dr. Naar hadn’t appeared to have what they needed on hand, but maybe he knew reputable suppliers. Although, that might draw unwanted attention, to both the clinic and to Anakin himself, so perhaps not.

Well, Bail would most likely come through, anyway. They could make it work if not, but none of the alternatives were very good ones.

Anakin was quiet for a long moment, then said, “It’s...it’s really gone, isn’t it.” Like it had all come crashing down on him and finally felt real in that moment.

“Yes,” he said again; because what else could he say? “I’m so sorry.”

He drew in a deep, shaky breath, and held his trembling left hand a few inches over the stump for a moment, not quite touching, before letting it fall to one side and closing his eyes.

“I’m gonna run out eventually,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Maybe--maybe before the Chancellor runs out of apprentices.”

Obi-Wan’s heart sank. Anakin sounded equal parts resigned, despairing, and worried; almost as if--as if that was one more way he might, as he saw it, fail in his duty; as if it were the price he had to pay. A required exchange, for...

“Oh, Anakin...” he said. “It--” *It doesn’t work like that*, was what he meant to say.
Anakin’s eyes snapped open. “Did—did I say that—I’m sorry,” he blurted, before Obi-Wan could finish. “Sorry, don’t—it’s—forget I said anything.”

“No, Anakin,” he said gently, taking his hand. Partly to offer comfort, partly to take it himself; partly to monitor Anakin’s too-rapid pulse a little more closely.

He flinched a little, curling in on himself again, but didn’t pull away.

“Anakin, look at me, all right?” he said. “I can’t—I can’t promise something like that won’t happen.” Because, as much as the idea horrified him, there was an outside that Anakin would be...would be seriously injured by the next apprentice. Not to mention the far greater danger when they finally faced Palpatine himself. “But I find it highly unlikely. You are strong and wise and remarkably skilled, and two incidents, no matter how profound, are not enough to make a pattern. Certainly not one set in stone. Besides, consider all the times you faced Dooku—or even Ventress—without being so...so badly hurt.”

Anakin was quiet for a long moment, thinking that over. “I guess,” he said. Not entirely convinced, clearly, but his pulse and breathing were a little more even now.

“And if it...if it does...” He closed his eyes against the mental image of Anakin in that much pain, with half of him hacked away. “If it does, we will deal with it. I will help you, in any way I can. I promise.”

“Okay,” he said, and gave Obi-Wan’s hand a flickering squeeze. “Okay. Thank you.”

He definitely seemed calmer now, at least; but he was trembling again—almost like...

Obi-Wan frowned, extracted his free hand from its sling with care, and brushed Anakin’s forehead.

“You’re warmer,” he said, phantom worries of Anakin with even fewer limbs immediately replaced by worries about his very real and present infection.

“Sorry,” he said.

“Shh, it’s all right.” He pulled back and let go of Anakin’s hand.

Anakin caught his wrist as he stood. “Don’t—I don’t— I don’t want to be alone?”

“I’ll be right back,” he said. “We’ve got to keep your fever down. I’m just going to check with Beru about what to give you.”

“But—” Anakin hesitated for a moment, and Obi-Wan took the opportunity to gently pry his hand off and set it down on the bed.

“Why don’t you keep an eye on Leia, until I get back?” he suggested. She hadn’t moved or shown any signs of waking again since he’d given her his cloak, but that would keep Anakin occupied for a little while anyway, and remind him that he wasn’t alone while Obi-Wan was gone, when pointing it out directly would have come across as dismissive.

“...okay,” he said.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll be right back.” He headed out the door before Anakin could marshall another protest, following the faint thread of Beru’s presence back to the kitchen. Hopefully, it wasn’t too soon for another dose of whatever she’d been giving him; if not, it should help. It would help. It probably had been so far.
And in a few hours, they would be on their way back to Dr. Naar, and Anakin would get the full treatment he actually needed.

_He’ll be all right_, Obi-Wan told himself. _He’s not doing anywhere near as badly as I thought he would be already. And in a matter of hours, everything will be back on track._

It probably wouldn’t make the next few hours any less stressful, but that light at the end of the scenario, the dim positive end to this detour, would sustain him along the way.

As long as it did the same for Anakin, he could make it through.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is a chapter that’s been building for a long while. Hopefully it doesn’t disappoint <3

Also, the bonus I mentioned a couple weeks ago is up on my writing tumblr, if you want to check it out!

~shadowsong
It was still dark out when Leia woke all the way up. She’d sort of woke up a couple times before that, maybe--or, at least, she kind of remembered when Uncle Obi-Wan came in, and she still had his cloak so that had probably happened; and she kind of remembered Aunt Beru coming in and getting Daddy to sit up and swallow something a little bit after that.

Other than that, she’d mostly been dreaming about the silver planet again. In her dreams, she’d been worried about--something, she couldn’t tell what. And she’d been planning something, maybe, but it was all slipping away now that she was awake and she couldn’t remember.

It had been important, too, she was pretty sure. She’d been trying to--to go somewhere, to help someone, only…

Nope. It was all gone, like sand slipping through her fingers. Which was really, really annoying.

Well. Like it or not, she was all the way awake now, and the silver planet dream wasn’t coming back. If it really was that important, she’d probably have the dream again and then she’d go help whoever it was. She couldn’t do anything else about it right now, so she might as well just get up and find something she could do right here.

She made a face and wriggled out from under Uncle Obi-Wan’s cloak. He was still there, slouched and sleeping in the other chair next to Daddy’s bed. She collected the cloak from the chair, bunching it up careful so she wouldn’t trip over it, and tiptoed across the room to give it back without waking either of them up.

Daddy did move a little bit when she got close, face crinkling like he was hurting or maybe having a bad dream. She went very still and held her breath for a minute, but he settled after a couple seconds.

Once she was sure he was all the way back asleep, she crept out of the room, heading for the kitchen. Probably Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru were still asleep, but she could at least get herself some milk and then figure out what she should do next. When she got a little closer, she could hear soft voices drifting down the hall. One was Uncle Rex, who sounded a lot less sad and scared than he had been last night (good). The other--

She didn’t recognize the other. A woman’s voice, but not Aunt Beru.

Leia paused for a second. Uncle Rex wasn’t upset, and the stranger lady sounded--nice. Dangerous, but the good kind of dangerous, like Daddy and Uncle Obi-Wan. Dangerous that was hers, on her side.

So, this wasn’t a bad thing. Just surprised her a little, ‘cause it was kind of weird. Strange people didn’t come over much, and when they did, they didn’t usually sit and talk with one of her uncles at the kitchen table before dawn.

She shook her head and kept going, still moving quiet so she wouldn’t wake anyone else up.

The two of them stopped talking when Leia came into the kitchen. She sighed inside her head. She really, really didn’t like it when grown ups did that. But she’d learned a long, long time ago there wasn’t really a lot she could do about it, other than get mad at them and maybe go sulk for a while. And she did that sometimes, ‘cause sometimes it made her feel better, but it was a bad idea right now. It was way too early and fighting might wake Uncle Owen or Aunt Beru—or Daddy.
Plus, if she got mad and sulked, she wouldn’t find out who this new person is, or why Uncle Obi-Wan trusted her enough to bring her here. Leia figured she’d probably gotten here with him, since she hadn’t been with Daddy and Uncle Rex and no one else had come last night.

The stranger turned out to be a tall, pretty alien lady with orange skin. She had headtails, sort of like a Twi’lek, but not exactly. Plus, Twi’lek didn’t have cones on top of their heads like she did. Leia was pretty sure she was a Togruta, but she’d never met one in person before.

More important, though, the stranger had lightsabers, like Daddy and Uncle Obi-Wan, only she had two of them. Which meant she was probably--

“Morning, ad’ika,” Uncle Rex said softly, interrupting Leia’s thoughts.

“Hi,” she said, weaving past him and dragging a chair over to the counter so she could reach it and get her milk.

Uncle Rex watched her, ready to help if she needed it or catch her if she fell off, but let her pour for herself. Once he was satisfied she had everything under control, he glanced over at the stranger, and said, “I’m not sure you two met last night.”

Leia shook her head.

“I think you were already asleep when Obi-Wan and I got in,” she said. “I’m Ahsoka Tano, I’m an old friend of your dad’s. And you’re Leia, right?”

Just like she’d guessed, which made her happy. Leia liked being right. Plus, it made sense, ‘cause who else would Uncle Obi-Wan bring here?

She nodded. “Hi,” she said. “Daddy talks about you lots.”

“Oh, yeah?” she said, and grinned, showing pointy teeth. “Only the good parts, I hope. The ones that make me look cool.”

Leia rolled her eyes, but she kind of thought he did. Because Daddy mostly told stories about Miss Ahsoka when he was happy and wanted to stay that way. It was especially fun when Uncle Obi-Wan was there and he’d get that look on his face, and interrupt to say Daddy was wrong about something, or exaggerating, and then they’d start arguing about how it had really happened.

She sort of wondered how Miss Ahsoka would talk about some of their adventures. If she’d think Daddy was right, or Uncle Obi-Wan. Or if they were both wrong.

“I bet you could tell me lots of stories about him,” she offered. “And Uncle Obi-Wan.”

Miss Ahsoka laughed. “Yep. All kinds of stories.”

And, based on the look on her face, they were really really good ones, too.

She smiled back and climbed down off the chair, joining Miss Ahsoka and Uncle Rex at the table instead. “Like what?”

Uncle Rex nudged Miss Ahsoka a little. “Remember that she’s six, Commander,” he said.

Which meant cutting out all the really scary parts, probably. Daddy did that, too; he would stop in the middle of a sentence, like he just realized it, and awkwardly skip ahead. She’d be mad about it if he didn’t add those bits back in when he told her the stories again sometimes. Little by little.
“Yeah, I know,” Miss Ahsoka said. “I’ll be good.” She pondered for a minute. “...I could tell you about Christophsis, where we all first met—” She paused, glancing briefly up at the chrono on the wall, and frowned. “Except that one’s kind of long. Have you heard it before?”

“No.” Daddy actually had told her that story, but she still wanted to hear Miss Ahsoka’s version. “We probably have time?” Because they might get interrupted when other people came in, but that didn’t really matter. Did it? ...what exactly did Daddy leave out?

Miss Ahsoka shook her head. “I think we’re heading out pretty soon. Once Obi-Wan’s up. But I’ll make it up to you soon, I promise. I’ll be around a lot from now on. We’ll have plenty of time for me to tell you all those stories.”

Well, that last part was good, at least—even if Leia mostly only knew Miss Ahsoka from Daddy’s stories and about five minutes this morning, she was really cool. Leia had already decided she liked her.

But they just got here. And Uncle Obi-Wan wouldn’t leave Daddy when he was hurt like this, especially not that quick. So maybe it was just Uncle Rex and Miss Ahsoka going somewhere, and they wanted to say goodbye to him first, but…

“Where are you going?” she asked.

Uncle Rex and Miss Ahsoka exchanged a quick look, and then he answered for her. “We’re going to take your dad to the doctor.”

“Oh,” Leia said. That made sense. And she was extra glad she’d decided to be nice and not get mad or sulk about them getting all quiet around her and keeping secrets, ‘cause she was pretty sure she was gonna have to argue really hard now to make them take her with them. It would be a lot easier if they thought she was acting like a grownup and weren’t mad at her. “Okay. Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru will prob’ly be up soon, so I can tell ’em so they won’t worry.”

The two grownups exchanged another long, long look. Miss Ahsoka shrugged a little, and Uncle Rex sighed.

“We’ll...have to check with General Kenobi about that, ad’ika,” he said.

*Be smart,* she told herself. *You can do this.* “Why?” she asked. “I won’t be in the way. The doctor’s way, I mean. And I can help keep Daddy busy so he doesn’t do anything dumb or try to get up again.”

Miss Ahsoka choked a little on her caf. Uncle Rex looked a little pained.

“I’m sure you could,” he said. “But it’s safer for you here.”

“Except you’re not going to go shoot at bad guys this time,” she said. “You’re not going someplace scary.” ‘Cause Daddy was hurt bad, and he had a fever, and he didn’t have--he didn’t have a leg, so they couldn’t go somewhere not safe with him.

“No,” he admitted. “But they’re more likely to find us there, or on the way there, or on the way back, than here. And right now, they don’t know anything about you, or how to find you. But once we start taking you with us, they might find out. And I think your dad doesn’t want that to happen for another couple of years.”

Which she’d heard a million times before. Because she was too little, and she couldn’t help them fight yet, and the bad guys might want to hurt her if they found her, ’cause that was a good way to
hurt Daddy.

But she didn’t care about that right now. “But--” she started, then took a deep breath so she wouldn’t sound whiny and make them say no. “But this time I can help. And I’m really good at hiding. I’ll be real careful, I promise. And--and if you really thought it was gonna be bad like that, you wouldn’t take Daddy there.” That was her real issue, because it was true. They’d figure out a way to bring the doctor here, or someplace else that was safe, instead.

Rex and Miss Ahsoka looked at one another again.

“You’re not totally wrong,” Miss Ahsoka said, after a minute. “It’s not a big risk.” Leia brightened and started to answer, but she held up a hand to stop her. “But-- it is still a risk, enough that I don’t think your dad will want us to take it. Because something bad could happen. You staying here isn’t the only way to prevent it, but it is the easiest, and the most sure. Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” she said. Uncle Owen had said something like that before, that sometimes you plan for the worst thing that could happen; for the harvest not coming in or the farm getting attacked or something. Even if it probably won’t happen, ‘cause if it does, and you are ready, then you don’t lose everything. And most of the time, you don’t lose anything except time by Being Ready.

Except…except this time she did lose something.

“But…” she tried, “but if it’s not a big risk…I wanna come. I wanna help. And…” And I wanna be sure Daddy’s okay.

“I know,” she said, and glanced over at Uncle Rex and shrugged again. Leia got the feeling that she, at least, was more on Leia’s side, but didn’t think it was her choice to really make.

“We can ask General Kenobi, see what he says,” he said, after a moment.

“Ask me what?”

Leia blinked and turned--she hadn’t heard Uncle Obi-Wan getting up. “Hi,” she said.

He smiled briefly at her. “Good morning, little one.” He ruffled her hair as he passed, on his way across the room to get some caf from Miss Ahsoka.

“Leia wants to come with us,” she said, passing him a cup.

“Ah.” He considered for a moment. “I’m sure Ahsoka and Rex have already told you all the reasons why it’s a bad idea.”

Which could mean anything. She couldn’t tell at all what he was thinking, so she just nodded. “I’ll be good. I’ll do exactly what you say, I’ll hide, I’ll run. Please?”

He was quiet for another moment, thinking. Leia held her breath and crossed her fingers. He hadn’t said no right away, so maybe…

“All right. I will run it by your father, and see how he reacts. If he agrees, you can come.”

She could hardly believe it, but she could feel herself brightening already anyway. “Really?”

“If your father agrees,” he reminded her. “And he might not. Not because he doesn’t want you there, but…”

“Because he thinks it’s too dangerous,” she said.
“Exactly. And if he says no, that’s the end of it, all right?”

“Okay.” Because it wasn’t a good idea to upset him if they didn’t have to right now. Until he was feeling better.

“All right. Good.” He looked down into his cup, frowning a little, then sighed. “We should wake him before we move, anyway. So he knows what’s going on and doesn’t get any more...disoriented. I’ll ask him then. How are we looking for time?”

“We’re in the window,” Miss Ahsoka said.

He nodded and stood up. “Right. Leia, I’ll come get you once I get an answer from him, all right?”

So she could either get her things and tell Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru she was going or...or say goodbye. “Yeah.” She hesitated a minute. “And...if Daddy says no, you’ll come back soon, right?”

“Yes,” he said. “I promise. As soon as the doctor releases him, I will make sure he comes right back here.”

“Okay,” she said again, and hopped down off her chair to hug him, tight.

He hugged her back briefly. “Why don’t you go get dressed, and see if Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru are up? And make sure they agree to you coming along as well.”

“I will,” she said, and let go. That part wouldn’t be hard, at least. Well, Uncle Owen probably wouldn’t be happy about it, but she sort of thought Aunt Beru would expect something like that. And if Aunt Beru was on her side, Uncle Owen would say yes, too. And then she’d be doing something. She’d be helping. And she could make it up to Uncle Owen once Daddy was okay and she came home.

So as long as Uncle Obi-Wan got Daddy to agree, everything was gonna be okay.

Anakin came back to consciousness slowly, dragging himself up out of red-tinged, shadowy dreams of caves and crevices, of being off-balance and in pain. It took a minute for him to realize he was actually awake; but Obi-Wan’s hand was resting on his, warm and solid and there, even if his brain and the room were still fuzzy and indistinct.

“Mmm...?”

“Good morning,” Obi-Wan said quietly. “Feeling any better?”

“Sure,” he said. “Time’s it?”

“Almost dawn. We’re leaving soon, that’ll put us back at Dr. Naar’s after local dark.”

“Okay.” He blinked a couple times to try and push aside the grogginess. Didn’t much help, but he was tracking the conversation a little better. “Is...s’Leia up? I wanna say goodbye.”

“She is.” He paused. “She wants to come with us.”

He felt his heartbeat jerk faster, and the world around him became much sharper and clearer.
Adrenaline did a nice job of pushing away that fog. “No. Not safe.”

Beru had suggested the same thing, he remembered. As a better option than him coming to the farm like he had, sure, but she’d still said. He hadn’t liked it then, either, and--

“It should be,” he said. “Or, not significantly less safe than her staying here, I don’t think. Otherwise, we wouldn’t risk moving you right now, either. And I think being left waiting, not knowing anything, would upset her. She...she needs to be sure you’re all right.”

He wasn’t sure he could argue with that. Especially since--Beru had been right, turning up on Leia’s doorstep like this had been...had been selfish, had only upset her.

He squeezed his eyes shut to squelch the guilt again. This might fix that, except--except it was dangerous.

“I don’t--I don’t know,” he said. “It’s...what if...she could be seen, she could…”

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan said. “And it is your decision. But I think we can keep the risk to an acceptable level, and it will do both of you good to stay together right now.”

He wasn’t sure about that. But the idea was coming from Obi-Wan this time, and he had a better idea of the risks than Beru did. And he would never risk Leia’s safety if he didn’t have to. And--okay, Anakin knew wasn’t exactly at his sharpest right now--the disorientation from the fever came and went in waves, but he was foggy even when it was at its lowest--so Obi-Wan’s judgment was probably better than his right now.

To be fair, it almost always is, anyway.

“I…” He pulled the blanket closer. For comfort--he wasn’t cold; which was good, because the only way that would happen here would be if his fever was spiking again. And he did feel better when Leia was around, and Obi-Wan was probably right that being kept out of the loop would be awful for her. But...maybe that was being selfish again, just like coming here. And actually risking her safety this time.

Or maybe he was being paranoid. And he knew all too well where that road led.

But if he wasn’t, if he was wrong…

But Obi-Wan thought this was a good idea. Or at least not a terrible one. And he trusted Obi-Wan. Always.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay, she can--she can come. But...but if things do go wrong, you get her out first. Okay?”

“We’ll keep her safe,” Obi-Wan promised.

“Okay,” he said, and then frowned. “Wait--wait, how long...?” Because if she was coming, if she disappeared from her home for too long...

“You will be there long as you need to be,” he said firmly. “Unless something goes terribly wrong and we have to move you. But we’ll probably send Leia home after a couple of days, either way.”

Right. Because by then, she’d have calmed down, hopefully. She’d be less--less worried about him. Maybe. He hoped. “Okay,” he said again, and sank back, letting his eyes slide closed.
Obi-Wan put a hand on his shoulder. “We’re going to get moving in a few minutes. Do you want me to try to put you under, or do you want to stay awake?”

Which meant a sleep suggestion, which at least didn’t leave him feeling weird like chemical sedatives did, but he still didn’t like not being able to wake up on his own. And, sure, there was a chance he’d pass out anyway—a pretty good chance, given the way his leg was burning and the room was spinning even when he was lying still—but he didn’t want to lose that control. Or miss any more time with Leia if he could avoid it. Especially since they were only bringing her so she could see that he was okay.

“Stay...stay awake,” he decided.

“All right,” he said. “Get some rest, gather your strength. Rex and Ahsoka will come and get you when everything else is ready.”

“Yeah,” he said. Obi-Wan’s hand withdrew and he heard him leave the room.

_I’m making the right call_, he told himself. _This isn’t--this isn’t stupid, or reckless, or selfish, or Obi-Wan wouldn’t have suggested it. And Leia will--Leia will be fine._

And then, after the fourth or fifth time he repeated it to himself, a sudden moment of clarity struck him. Leia was _very much_ his daughter, and she had tried to sneak along and follow him off-planet before, with a _lot_ less reason than she had today. And if he’d been in her position right now…

_I’m definitely making the right call_, he thought. _Because if Obi-Wan and Rex and Ahsoka are focused on--are focused on me, they might not notice her following them. Better for us to know where she is._

Now reassured on that, he felt himself relaxing, and fell into a shallow doze while he waited for the others to come.

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About two hours after dark, somewhat later than expected, the Jedi turned up at Dr. Naar’s back door.

“Come in,” he said, quietly; glad he’d decided to wait a little bit longer before figuring they’d been delayed and going home for the night.

“Thank you,” Ahsoka said, just as softly. With the help of their other human companion, she eased Skywalker in through the door. Kenobi was half a step behind, still wearing his sling as he was supposed to, and leading along--

Naar blinked. The little girl was entirely unexpected.

“She isn’t here,” Kenobi said softly.

..._I’m fairly sure I don’t want to know._

“All right,” he said. “Keep her out here while I examine him?” Because small children should, if at all possible, _not_ have to look at badly infected wounds.

“Of course,” he said, squeezing the girl’s hand to cut off any protest on her end.
Naar nodded, and went after the others.

Skywalker was settled back on the pallet they’d set up the first time, in the back storeroom. He was actually mostly conscious, if not particularly alert. Trembling with fever and fatigue, his breathing coming too rapid and shallow--his pulse would almost certainly match.

But not quite as bad as he’d feared.

At least on the surface. We’ll know better when we look a little closer.

He arched an eyebrow at Ahsoka and her friend.

She nodded, and touched his arm. “C’mon, Rex.”

“I’ll let you know when I’ve finished here,” Naar told them.

“Thanks,” she said, and the two of them slipped out, leaving him alone with his patient.

Naar considered for a moment, but decided not to lecture Skywalker on how stupid he’d been. He’d probably been getting that from all sides, and more of it was likely to just make him belligerent and defensive. Not exactly conducive to healing.

He sighed. “Your friends told me you’re going to stay put this time,” he said instead.

“Yeah,” Skywalker said. “Unless they think I have to run.”

Which was probably the best he could hope for. He had his doubts as to how well Skywalker would hold to that once he had made significant progress towards recovery, but it would keep him where he belonged for a while, probably. At least until the fever broke, he guessed, maybe a little longer.

He nodded. “I’ll trust that, until you give me a reason not to,” he said. “But I will sedate you if I have to.”

Skywalker sighed, and closed his eyes. “Fine.”

“All right, then,” he said, and turned to gather his gloves and his tools, then set to carefully unraveling the dressing on Skywalker’s stump to see how much damage had been done.
After that first, explosive message, Bail had heard nothing from Obi-Wan or anyone else for nearly a full standard day. He had restrained himself from sending more than two follow up questions—one immediately after, and another twelve hours later—because the more often they used their secure channel, the likelier it was to be compromised.

The response, when it finally came, was not particularly detailed. Still, it at least confirmed that both Jedi were alive and, for the moment, as safe as they ever were these days, but that Anakin had been badly hurt. It failed to specify exactly how—probably, or so Bail assumed, for the same reason he’d kept his requests for clarification to the bare minimum. More details meant more data, which meant a greater risk to their encryptions.

And Bail understood that, of course. From a practical, security standpoint, Obi-Wan was making the best decision he could. He knew that. But that didn’t make all of the unanswered questions any easier to live with. Even for him. He kept...remembering...the wet thunk when Anakin had landed in his speeder outside the burning Temple; kept remembering listening to that awful, unsteady breathing; kept remembering the fear, all the way to the spaceport and off of Coruscant itself, that it would stop.

And if it was that hard for him...

Bail was absolutely convinced that, if Padme had had any idea where her husband was right now, she would be gone. As it was, she had recalled Sabe from Naboo, for additional comfort or protection or both, and was keeping to her apartment as much as possible, sending Dorme in her place anywhere she couldn’t make an excuse or simply not turn up. Nothing—yet—had appeared on her schedule that absolutely needed her, and not a decoy, but the longer this went on...

And then there was another day of anxious silence after that confirmation before they heard from Obi-Wan again.

Bail checked the emergency comm constantly over that day, whenever he thought he wouldn’t be seen doing so, and monitored the dead drops as closely as he could, in case further details came in that way, but--nothing.

But now, finally, finally, he’d gotten another message on the secure line, asking if they could meet, leaving the time and place up to him.

Fortunately, he was ready right away with an answer. He’d tried to always have a contingency plan for this sort of thing in place, ever since he’d had to scramble on short notice when Specter had first appeared. And, given the limitations of Obi-Wan’s messages, he’d made all but the absolute final arrangements for one of them within hours of the first one, half-expecting a request like that would come eventually.

They would have a much smaller window this time—the project he had available only required his actual presence for a day, and he wanted to be back in the capital if at all possible when news of Specter’s death officially broke. (He was delaying his planned trip home for the same reason; but Breha understood, and he’d make it up to Winter when he finally did get there.)
Still, it would be time enough for him to meet with Obi-Wan, to find out exactly what had happened to Anakin; possibly even discuss the situation with Luke and Princess Lavinia, but that was a much lower priority, as he’d already decided.

He sent a response with the location and timeframe, and got a brief confirmation almost immediately.

That done, he left the final arrangements to his staff and went to update Padme.

She didn’t seem surprised, either; mostly relieved that things were finally moving forward, but still anxious, clutching her skirt tight in her fists. “So, we’ll know soon.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll tell you everything he tells me as soon as I get back. I promise.”

She nodded. “I’ve been trying to make it work,” she told him, glancing down at her hands; she frowned, forced them to relax. “So I could--so I could come with you. I kept thinking, I could probably blend in with your staff, Dorme could keep covering for me…”

He winced internally. He’d been afraid of that, in the back of his mind, ever since he’d started laying his own plans. And he wasn’t sure he could talk her out of it this time, the way he had--the way he had when she’d wanted to run into the burning Temple, six years ago. The risks were much more nebulous now, after all.

Still, the way she’d said it was a relief. As if she--or, possibly, Sabe--had managed to talk herself out of it.

“But?” he prompted, as gently as he could.

She sighed. “But if an emergency happened, something my handmaidens couldn’t handle, something requiring prolonged contact with someone who’d figure us out, I’d have to...to abruptly fall ill, or something, and that…”

“Would draw attention,” he finished for her. And, though neither of them was quite willing to say it out loud, they both knew--depending on how much Palpatine knew about what had happened to Specter, it was entirely possible he’d stage something. Just to test for that very thing.

Or, equally possible, he might not stage something, in the hopes that she would run off like she desperately wanted to, leading the Empire to their Jedi friends.

She nodded miserably.

“I’m sorry,” he said. What else could he say?

“And I know it’s not--I won’t even--it’s not like he’ll be there, or…”

And if there was even the slightest chance he would...

Risks aside, six years was a long time to not see the man she loved.

“Probably not,” he agreed.

“As it is, I’d at least--I’d at least be able to see Ben again,” she said. “Which would be-- that would be wonderful, too. It’s been too damn long. And it’s...it’s hard to walk away from that. That’s part of why it took me this long to give in. Sabe and the others and I argued for hours, right up until this morning. That and--and it won’t be much faster, for me to hear, but...but it would be enough.”
He nodded, and squeezed her hand briefly “I’ll update you as fast as I can. I promise.”

“I know you will,” she said.

“Will you be all right until then?” he asked.

She nodded, and gave him a ghost of a smile. “Don’t worry. I have people to keep me from doing anything stupid, and I’ll...I’ll find something to do, so I stop brooding. But…” She paused, her smile fading. “Come back soon, all right?”

“As soon as I can,” he promised, then squeezed her hand one last time and headed out the door.

Everything went smoothly, getting to the designated planet and then splitting off from his staff to meet with the Jedi. Bail would have almost been suspicious, if he hadn’t had this planned, at least broadly, for as long as he had.

Just like last time, Obi-Wan had beaten him to the rendezvous; probably by no more than an hour, though. Four years hadn’t changed him much, other than putting a little more silver in his hair. He did seem tired, stressed, in a way he hadn’t been the last time they’d met in person, but Bail figured that probably had more to do with the immediate crisis than anything else.

He did dredge up a smile when Bail approached. “Bail,” he said, rising and bowing briefly once Bail had cut the bike’s engine. “Thank you, for arranging this so quickly.”

“Oh course,” he said, climbing off and going to join the Jedi. “It’s good to see you again. I just wish it could be under better circumstances.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Someday,” he said softly.

“Someday,” Bail echoed. He paused for a moment, then asked, “How...how are you doing?”

“All right,” he said, after a moment’s thought. “Or--I will be, soon, I think. Better than the past couple of days, certainly. It’s been...trying.”

He nodded. “What happened?”

Obi-Wan was quiet for a long moment, gathering his thoughts. “Specter tracked Anakin down. They fought, Anakin killed him, but…” He closed his eyes briefly, took a breath. “He lost his leg.”

Bail sucked in a breath. “That’s--I’m sorry.” Because it wasn’t as bad, not nearly as bad, as his nightmares had made him think, but at the same time…

_That poor kid; and he’d already lost his arm, too._

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said softly.

“How--” He paused. “How’s he doing? Is he…?”

“He’s stable,” he said. “And safe, for the time being. In good hands. But there were...complications, delays in getting him care.”
Which was bad; even with a lightsaber (or, at least, Bail assumed it had been Specter’s lightsaber) to cauterize the wound and keep Anakin from bleeding to death…

“What can I do?” he asked. That first message had mentioned additional resources which, under the circumstances, could mean any number of things.

“As I said, he’s in good hands now. We were able to find a doctor, and he is extremely capable, but he can’t source a--a prosthetic without drawing too much attention,” Obi-Wan said. “Can you help us?”

“Yes,” he said, immediately. “But it might take me some time.” Actually finding what they needed shouldn’t be a problem--enough of his various charity projects involved donated medical supplies that he knew exactly who to contact. Besides, he could bury this specific item in all the rest; the risk of compromise was minimal on that end.

On the other hand, figuring out a way to get it to the Jedi that couldn’t be traced back to him, while also making sure it didn’t get lost or stolen in transit...that would take some work.

“Of course,” Obi-Wan said. “I understand. And it will...it will be awhile before he’s ready for it.”

Damn. Serious complications, then. “How’s he handling that?” Bail asked.

He sighed. “Right at this moment? I’m not sure,” he admitted. “He’s still--he’s been somewhat disoriented, the past few days. But it’s different, than...than before. With his arm, I mean. Everything happened very quickly then; I don’t think he’d really grasped that it was gone before he had the new one. Hard to say which is worse.” He paused. “The prolonged inactivity will be difficult for him, though.”

Bail nodded. “I’ll work as quickly as I can, then, and let you know as soon as I have everything in place,” he said. “I’ll leave a message at one of the dead drops for you.”

“Good,” Obi-Wan said. “Thank you.”

“Of course,” he said. “What...what can I tell Padme, in the meantime?” It wasn’t necessarily fair to ask Obi-Wan to go over all of the messy details, but she would want to know. She would need to know.

But, of course, Obi-Wan had anticipated the question. “Give her this.” He pulled a datacard out of his pocket. “The file on it has everything, as of when I left. It’ll erase itself ninety minutes after she opens it, but that should be enough time.”

“Right,” he said, and accepted the card.

“And I have this, as well.” A letter; handwritten on flimsi like all the others. Shorter than the last few he’d seen, only about a page, but still. Anakin had at least been well enough to write. That was a good sign.

Assuming it’s reasonably coherent, that will go a long way towards reassuring her. Bail took that as well, and put both away for safekeeping. “I’ll pass these along.”

Obi-Wan nodded, then paused again. “There is something...unrelated I wanted to ask you about, as long as we’re both here.”

“Yes?”
“I encountered a Naval commander not long ago; I was told his name is Thrawn,” he said. “Do you know anything about him?”

The name was vaguely familiar, but that was all Bail could say. Bel Iblis was the one who kept track of the military officials a few steps below High Command, as potential future threats.


“He’s very good,” Obi-Wan said. “Better than most I’ve dealt with. I’d rather not be unprepared when I meet him again.”

He nodded. “I’ll see what I can find, and get back to you.”

And now it was his turn to hesitate. He had been planning to wait, but as long as they were discussing unrelated, non-emergent business...

“What is it?” Obi-Wan asked.

He sighed. “Low priority. We think. Or—at least not crisis-level.”

“All right.”

“But...we were planning to make contact with Princess Lavinia this week.”

“What went wrong?”

“Luke beat us to it,” he said. “He wandered away at a reception. Which he knows he’s not supposed to do, but—”

“Children have minds of their own,” Obi-Wan said dryly. He was frowning a little, but didn’t look too concerned.

That’s encouraging. “Yes. So far as Padme can tell, he had no idea who she was at first, just...saw a little girl sitting by herself and decided to make friends.”

“I see,” he said, then was quiet for a moment. “Did it go badly?”

He shook his head. “Padme told me they seemed to be getting along when she found them. They were playing a game.”

He considered. “It’s not ideal,” he said. “Nothing that draws more attention to Luke is ideal right now. But there’s a chance this would have happened anyway, even if you had managed to control the initial contact. I would advise--monitor the situation closely, but for now, don’t try to interfere.”

Bail nodded. “That’s...more or less what we decided, but I wanted to let you know. And I’m glad you agree.”

“Right.” He seemed about to say something else, when Bail’s commlink buzzed in his pocket. Obi-Wan sighed. “Time?”

“Time,” he agreed. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he assured him. “You’ve been more than helpful, on extremely short notice. I don’t know what we’d do without you.”
“I’m just glad I could help,” he said. “We’ll be in touch?”

“Yes, soon,” he said. “May the Force be with you, my friend.”

“And you,” Bail said softly, before getting on his bike again and returning to his official task.

Luke had been dreaming again; not exactly about the wide-open planet with the blue, blue skies, but it had felt the same, almost. It made him think about it, anyway, even though the place where he’d been was dim and foggy instead.

In the dream, he’d been sad and a little bit scared, but at the same time not, or maybe not anymore. Like something had happened, something bad; he thought maybe someone important had gotten hurt. But, now, there was—he felt like the worst was over. Like things were starting to get better, even if it wasn’t good yet.

He sort of thought that maybe it had something to do with the other dream he’d had, a few nights before, where it was cold and dark and he was falling, falling, falling under blinking red lights.

At least tonight’s dream hadn’t been scary, like that one.

But it was still enough to wake him up, and keep him awake, even though it was really, really late, so late it was early. And he wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t the dream, exactly—the dream had been settled. Like taking a breath and finally sitting down after a really, really busy day.

Maybe it was because he wasn’t exactly feeling like that outside of the dream. Mostly, he thought, ‘cause Mamma had been all edges inside ever since Uncle Bail had gotten that message, when he’d come over for dinner a few nights ago, and Luke couldn’t figure out how to help her. But also, he was still trying to get to see Lani—even if the Emperor said no, ‘cause he wasn’t going to leave her alone without any friends. But he couldn’t figure out how to do that, either.

At least his other self, the one from the empty-planet dreams, was doing better than he was.

After a few minutes, ‘cause it was something to do and better than staring at the ceiling and watching the traffic lights dance, Luke crawled out of bed and crept over to the door. It slid open without making noise; once it did, he could hear soft voices in the living room. Mamma and Uncle Bail, and she sounded...sad, and tired. Still really upset, but not tense and worried like she had been the past couple days.

Almost like in my dream, except not—not as sure. Not as hopeful.

He frowned and edged closer, moving as quiet as he could.

“It feels...it feels real now,” Mamma was saying. “Not that...I mean, you know how it’s been, since—not knowing has been unbearable. And knowing is better, even as bad as it is. But...”

“But now that that’s not the immediate concern?” Uncle Bail prompted, after a few seconds.

“The...the worst case scenario...it’s not abstract anymore,” she said, and sighed. “I think maybe I haven’t let myself think about it before. Not really. It was too—too awful to contemplate. But now...it’s not just...it’s not just something that might happen now. It’s no longer something I can
ignore. Hells, Bail, he came so close.”

“He did,” he said quietly. “But he’s safe now. And he’s--he will be all right. Even if he isn’t just yet.”

“I know. I know, I know, and I keep telling myself that. I keep reminding myself it wasn’t as bad as it could have been,” she said. “I know it wasn’t, and I’m--I’m so grateful for that, believe me, and I’m trying to stay focused on that but…”

“But,” he echoed.

“And what if...what if next time, it’s worse? Bail, what if next time, he does--” Her breath caught in the back of her throat, and when she kept going, her voice was shaky, like she was trying really hard not to cry. “What if I--what if I never see him again? What if Luke never even gets to meet him?”

Luke blinked. Meet who?

“Four years,” Uncle Bail said quietly. “That’s what you agreed on, wasn’t it? At the latest, four more years, and then...”

“Yes,” she said. “And I know it’s not safe to do anything else right now. But so much can happen in four years. Look how much happened in four days.”

“I know,” he said. “I know, I know.”

A hand landed on Luke’s shoulder. He jumped a little, guilty, and looked up to see Aunt Sabe. She put a finger to her lips to silence him. Her other hand moved from his shoulder to take his, and she pulled him back into his room and shut the door. “You, my young lord, should not be eavesdropping,” she said.

He flushed and looked down at the floor. “I know,” he said. “But I couldn’t sleep, and Mamma was upset.”

Aunt Sabe sighed.

He peeked up at her. “Who were they talking about?”

She shook her head. “You needn’t concern yourself with that just now.”

“But--” He hesitated. “But Mamma was really upset. She was talking about...about never seeing him again.” And she said what if I don’t get to meet him, and if he’s that important, how come I don’t get to know who he is?

She was quiet for a moment, then sighed again. “They were talking about...a very dear friend of your mother’s,” she said, slowly. “Someone she hasn’t seen since before you were brought to Varykino to live with her. And that is all I will say. I shouldn’t even have been the one to tell you that much.”

But at least it was something. “And he’s in trouble?” he pushed.

She stared at him for a moment.

He stared right back.
“He’s been very badly hurt,” Aunt Sabe said finally said. “And your mamma can’t help him, or even go see him, because it’s not safe. For either of them.”

“Oh,” he said. Which explained why Mamma was so upset, even if it still didn’t say who he was, or why it was so important to Mamma that Luke got to meet him someday. *In four years? Isn’t that what Uncle Bail said? Why four years?*

But Aunt Sabe had flat-out said she wouldn’t tell him any more, even if he asked. And once Aunt Sabe said something like that, only Mamma could change her mind, and even *she* sometimes couldn’t.

But there were other things Luke could find out. Even if they weren’t *exactly* about Mamma’s mysterious friend. It was all about asking the right questions. “Is that why you came back early?” he asked.

“Partly,” she said, then paused. “You may be coming back home to Naboo with me, when I go.”

He blinked, surprised enough by this news to, at least for a minute, forget about his original question. “But...but the holiday’s over. Mamma has to be back at the Senate now.”

“Yes, she does. It’ll just be you. And probably Aunt Elle.”

“But--but what about *Lani*?” Because he still hadn’t heard when he could go see her again, and if he left…

Maybe she’d *forget* him (she was still really little), or not want to be his friend anymore, or he might miss his chance and have to do something dangerous instead of getting permission and Mamma would be mad at him.

“Listen to me, Luke,” Aunt Sabe said, very serious. “Things are probably going to get very, very dangerous here on Imperial Center, over the next few weeks. I very much doubt you’ll be allowed to see the princess until things settle again anyway, and your mamma will want you somewhere safer until then as well. Probably most of the other Senators and court officials who have their children with them will be doing the same.”

Something sort of tickled in the back of his mind. Just like it had at the beginning of Founding Week, while they were on their way back to Imperial Center.

This year was *important.*

This year, things were *changing.*

And something fell into place, and he got a horrible, horrible feeling.

“Did…” He hesitated. “Lord Specter isn’t here.”

“No,” Aunt Sabe said.

“Something...something happened to him.”

She eyed him for a moment. “That...is a dangerous question, Luke. Think very, very carefully about what it might mean to know a thing like that before it’s made public.”

He swallowed.

*I thought--maybe I might meet someone who would be an important friend. And then I met Lani,*
and that got--she is my friend, and she needs friends, and that’s important, but it’s all messy anyway, because being her friend means being watched.

And I thought maybe something would happen so Lord Specter wouldn’t be so scary anymore, and Lord Specter isn’t here. But those were s’posed to be good things, and instead...

“Is that how Mamma’s friend got hurt?” he asked, after a moment.

She glanced at the door. “Yes,” she said. “It is.”

“I wish…” He started, then stopped. “I wish he hadn’t been.”

“I know you do,” she said, and hugged him close.

He clung back, just as tight, and didn’t say anything else for a long time.

Just like he’d thought, what felt like forever and ever ago: this year, this Empire Day, everything had changed.

If only he knew what it all meant.

Chapter End Notes

Poor, poor, chronically underinformed Luke...

So sorry for the late update, guys <3

And this brings Part 4: Commander to a close. It has been a long and wild ride, and all kinds of new patterns have been established, new connections have been made, and old ones have been disrupted.

Next update will start Part 5: Lessons, which will be mostly focused on the kids, and also properly introduce Darth Infernalis.

Thank you all for sticking with me so long! <333333

~shadowsong
It was a lot harder, Leia had learned, to stop something in motion than it was to get it started.

Which was probably part of the point of this lesson, actually. Other than just the specific skill involved, which was important by itself, anyway. What Uncle Obi-Wan liked to call the “broader application.” And if she’d been getting this lesson from him, she’d’ve guessed it was the main point. But she was working with Daddy, which meant that took second place.

(She hadn’t exactly figured out where Aunt ‘Soka would put it. Somewhere in the middle, she was pretty sure, but she hadn’t been getting lessons from Aunt ‘Soka for anywhere near as long.)

For her newest lesson today, Daddy had brought her out to the canyon, where they usually practiced--far enough out that no one could sneak up on them, but not so far out that if something went wrong, they couldn’t get help. And after they’d finished the usual basic warm-up lessons, he’d brought out a little round table, about the same size as a dejarik board only not as thick, ’cause it didn’t have any of the projectors or anything in it. That was balanced on a skinny pole about half a meter tall and only a couple centimeters wide, so it would wobble back and forth, tilting in all different directions whenever Daddy pushed it. Then he’d set a bright-red ball on top--the goal of the exercise was the keep the ball as close to the grey circle on the center of the table as possible, while everything was moving.

It was not as easy as she’d thought it would be, when he’d first explained it. After all, she’d been moving things around with the Force, playing games like this one--well, simpler games, but still with the same goal of teaching her some new skill--with Daddy and Uncle Obi-Wan for as long as she could remember. And with Aunt ‘Soka, too, of course, since she’d found them. And sometimes they had her do things blindfolded, or through mazes, or in a whole other room. Keeping a small ball in a specific place, while she was looking right at it and only half a meter away, should not have been so hard.

But it turned out there were a lot of little details to keep track of when something was moving around. Maybe it would be easier if it was moving in one direction, or even in patterns that made sense, but Daddy kept the table moving fast, shifting angles and directions all over the place, faster than she could track without concentrating really, really hard.

And then, just when she’d finally gotten the hang of it, scowling at the ball which had been actually in the grey center target for almost a whole ten seconds--

Plink.

It was such a tiny little noise, for something so full of doom.

Without any warning, or any drop in the table’s speed, Daddy dropped a second ball, this one green, onto the table; smaller than the first but made out of something heavier, and throwing everything off.

She shifted her attention, scrambling to catch it before it fell all the way off--and lost her grip on the first ball in the process.

Come on, come on…
She tried to compensate, and *missed* --the first ball rolled off the edge of the table. But she was only a split second behind it; it stopped in midair a few centimeters above Daddy’s left knee. Which was at least better than letting it hit the sand--that would have meant she’d *really* messed up. And the second, heavier ball, *was* still on the table.

Barely.

“Good job, princess,” he said, steadying the table and collecting the balls with a wave of his hand. She sighed, and slumped forward a little bit. “I still dropped it,” she said.

“Yeah, but then you caught it,” he said. “Before it hit the ground, even. Besides, you lasted a *lot* longer than I did, the first time I tried this.”

“Really?”

“Really really,” he said, and reached over to ruffle her hair. “Relax, all right? This was only your first try. You’ll get better with practice.”

That *was* true. It had been with every other game they’d played, too. Even all the new ones--there had been a *lot* of new ones, getting more and more complicated, over the past few months.

They’d started picking up the pace in her lessons after Daddy got hurt last year. He’d had time to start showing her how to do things in a lot more detail, while he was out of the field and healing. And he’d let her watch him practice with his saber, after his new leg got attached, while he was figuring out how to balance and everything again. He’d even, after a couple days of that, put together a pair of dragon bone practice blades and walked her through some basic forms.

“We don’t have a real training saber for you,” he’d said, when he took her out to the canyon and pressed the smaller one into her hands. “But these’ll work at least to get you started. We can figure something else out later.”

And saber work, even just running forms, had quickly become one of her favorite things in the *world* to do. That first practice had turned into one of the best days *ever*.

Not that--of *course* she was upset that Daddy had been hurt so bad that he *couldn’t* do his job and help people, and she knew that was the main reason her lessons had gotten so much *more* right when they did; earlier than Daddy and Uncle Obi-Wan had wanted, she was pretty sure. But, at the same time...

She almost *never* got to spend that much time with Daddy all at once. It was usually only a week, sometimes just a couple of *days*, before he was off on his next mission. And even if he usually *wasn’t* gone much longer than that, either, that many weeks all in a row had been--

It was *amazing*. Plus, she’d learned a *lot*, and could keep practicing with her bone practice sword, which got her that much closer to actually going with him to help fight.

She just wished it could’ve happened *without* him getting hurt.

Swords were not today’s lesson, sadly. They hadn’t done swords at *all* this visit. Not yet, anyway. Just little stuff, like the new table game. Which she *would* get perfect eventually, but right now it was hard.

“All right, princess,” he said. “Let’s take a break, and try some targeting for a while, okay?”
“Okay,” she said, standing up and grabbing the bag of smooth rocks they usually used for this off of the eopie’s saddle, patting her neck a couple times before coming back. “What am I throwing at?”

“Me,” he said. “And you’re gonna be blindfolded, all right?”

She’d pretty much expected that—otherwise, it wouldn’t be a challenge at all. “Okay,” she said.

“I want you to pay attention to what I do when I stop the rocks, all right?” he said, tying a scarf around her head and making sure it was tight enough. “It’ll help with the table game.”

She nodded, then frowned, waiting for her senses to adjust to the blindfold while Daddy moved a meter or so away and turned over into a handstand.

Not that she knew why he wanted to do this upside down. Maybe he wanted to practice something, too.

“Whenever you’re ready, princess.”

“Okay,” she said, and picked up the first rock to start throwing.

The first one went wide, but the next few were a lot closer. After four or five, Leia was able to do the other part of what Daddy had asked, and try to keep track of what he was doing to stop them. Aunt ’Soka had shown her a couple of focus-splitting tricks last time she’d visited that helped a lot.

Okay. Okay, I think I get it. I’ll have to try on the table later, but I can probably do that, too.

“You know, this is actually easier than the table game, at least for me,” Daddy said, as another rock stopped in midair right in front of his face. She thought. Maybe it was closer to his shoulder? Definitely in range of where she was supposed to aim, at least.

“Yeah?” she asked, tilting her head towards his voice and picking up the next rock.

“Yep,” he said. “Because they’re coming at me, instead of just rolling around at random. Makes ’em a threat, easier to track.”

Leia stopped, the rock heavy in her hand, and frowned dubiously. “They’re just little rocks.” They weren’t sharp or anything, and even with the Force to help her aim and stuff, even if he missed one, they wouldn’t hit him nearly hard enough to actually hurt.

Right?

“I dunno, princess,” he said, trying to sound serious, but she could hear him smiling. “You throw ’em pretty hard.”

Which either meant she wasn’t actually throwing them hard enough, or he was just being silly. She rolled her eyes behind her blindfold and, to prove him wrong, threw the next one as hard as she could.

It went wide. She could tell it was going to go wide as soon as it left her hand, and she wasn’t fast enough to get it back on track.

“Hmm,” he said, catching it easily even almost half a meter to his left. “Your aim could use a little work, though. Stay focused, princess.”

Right. She shouldn’t let him do that. She wasn’t supposed to let him do that. Uncle Obi-Wan
played this game, too (better than Daddy did); teasing gently to mess with her concentration.

She took a breath, let it out slow, and flung the last rock with a little more care.

“Good!” Daddy said. “Right between the eyes.”

She grinned, and lifted up her blindfold. “Most of ‘em got pretty close, right?”

“After the first three, yes,” he said, dropping back onto his feet. “So, next time I’m here, I think we’ll work on switching focus a little faster.”

She nodded. But that meant he was probably heading back out soon, otherwise he’d take a day or so and come up with a new game for this trip. He hadn’t said yet, which probably meant that Uncle Obi-Wan had just found something and called him right before they’d come out here, and he hadn’t wanted her to be distracted by all that during the lesson.

“When are you leaving?” she asked.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Not til after noon, though, so we can practice some more in the morning, if you want.”

“Okay,” she said. “Can I come with you?”

“Nope,” Daddy said, right away. “Not this time, princess.”

Well, she’d known what the answer was gonna be, but she still asked every time. After all, eventually the answer would change. She just had to keep asking, ‘cause if she stopped, how would she know when it did? “Okay,” she said, trying not to sound too disappointed. “Can we do swords for a while now?”

He considered for a minute. “One more time with the table game,” he said, sitting down next to it and setting both balls back in place. “With two from the start this time. Then we can do swords.”

She sighed, and sat back down herself. Well, it would be better for her to try copying what Daddy had just showed her real quick. Easier for her to remember that way. And balancing two balls probably wouldn’t be as hard if she had both from the beginning, like him dropping the second on her halfway through had been. That was something.

It still didn’t sound like much fun.

“Or, if you don’t want to do two,” he said, “you could put the blindfold back on and try it that way with only one.”

She made a face. “Two’s good,” she said quickly. It always went better when she could see what she was doing. Which was why Daddy (and Aunt ‘Soka, and especially Uncle Obi-Wan) made her do stuff blindfolded all the time, ‘cause she needed to get better at that. And she knew that, and most of the time she didn’t mind. Sometimes, it even went pretty well--like today, throwing rocks at Daddy.

But she wanted to end the lesson getting it right, and it was hard enough when she could see.

“All right,” Daddy said. “Next time, though.”

“Next time,” she agreed, and settled in to concentrate.
Soooo, I have been posting this story for almost a whole entire year now! I started as of October 12, 2016. It has been quite a ride, and thank you all so much for sticking with me through it! <3

I'll probably put up a bonus fic on my writing tumblr, because I feel like that seems appropriate. Feel free to shoot me an ask over there if there's anything in particular you'd like to see from such a thing. I'll probably post about it there sometime in the next couple days, too, as a reminder.

Because I'm having a lot of fun with this, and the fact that you guys are, too, almost a year later, means a lot. <333 Sooo yeah. :D Bonus content of some kind forthcoming, hurray!

~shadowsong
Part 5, Chapter 2

Even after more than a year of coming to see Lani, Luke still hadn’t gotten used to the Imperial Palace. Not exactly ‘cause of the Emperor--he actually hadn’t seen him any more often than before--but because the whole place felt--cold. And wrong. Not exactly scary, either (except that a lot of the people there were), but…

Sad, almost; but that wasn’t really it, either. He wasn’t sure he knew the word for how the Palace felt.

And even when he got past all the more public parts and made it to Lani’s room, it wasn’t much better. Probably not at all better, really, if he stopped to think about it; except he had something else to focus on besides the way the walls hurt. But it was definitely, definitely always much nicer when her guard took her out to the park and they could play there. And of course he wished that she could come to his apartment sometimes, but he was almost positive the Emperor would never let that happen.

Even the park almost never happened. And it was raining today, anyway, and this was the first time he’d been allowed to see her in almost a whole month. Long enough that he’d actually thought about trying to sneak in. Except she’d get in trouble if he got caught, and probably Mamma would, too. Plus, he was trying to be good, and careful, like he’d promised after he’d first met Lani and decided he needed to be her friend. Sneaking past the guards probably wasn’t either careful or good.

But he’d been worried about her, and it had been a huge relief this morning when he’d finally gotten a message, just like before, telling him when he could come and see his friend. So he was okay with going through the Palace for that, especially since she had to live there all the time. He had no idea how she managed.

Except--well, on the other hand, the Palace didn’t seem to bother Aunt Motee or anyone else the way it bothered him. Sure, she was tense and doing that careful watching-not-watching thing she and his other aunts did with her eyes whenever they were in Bodyguard Mode. But not really all that much more than she did anywhere else she decided wasn’t totally safe. Like when they were too close to the crowds on festival days, or when Mamma went on one of her disaster relief trips.

So maybe that was just something weird about him, like his dreams.

They had a guard walking with them on the way to Lani’s room, of course; even though he still remembered the way, and so did Aunt Motee, the guard was there to watch them more than anything else. He was used to it, and he didn’t mind too much. And when they got there, there was a red guard on the door like always. It was hard, sometimes, but Luke could usually tell Lani’s four bodyguards apart, and he was pretty sure this was the second one he’d met; not the one who’d been on watch at the Empire Day party last year. It would be easier if he could see their faces, or if he knew their names, but he wasn’t allowed to ask.

Guard Number Two (Probably) stood still for a couple seconds, probably running Luke and Aunt Motee through whatever scanners were in his helmet. It didn’t take long, and then the door beside him slid open.

Luke made sure to Behave, and not dart in past the guard even though he really really wanted to, mostly because there was usually another one inside the room watching her who might think he was attacking or something. And, sure enough, Number Three was standing just inside the door,
his armor gleaming red in the shadows, standing exactly still--but Luke knew that was not something anyone smart would take for granted.

The rest of the room was just like how he remembered it, too; tucked away in a corner of the palace with colorless walls and a window that wouldn’t open. Lani had a desk in one corner that was too big for her, so she didn’t sit there unless she had to. A door on the right-hand wall led to her bedroom, which wasn’t much nicer; there was a rug on the floor that was exactly as gloomy as the walls, but was actually pretty soft and nice to sit on.

Lani was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the rug, staring intently down at a datapad. She was a little bit of color, at least, and nicer than Number Three; red hair in a braid like always, and her dress today was dark blue. She frowned a little at her screen, pushed one last button, then set it aside with a sigh and stood up. “Hi,” she said.

“Hi!” He grinned at her. “Can I give you a hug?” It was important to ask, especially with Lani, since sometimes she didn’t like to be touched.

She nodded, and smiled back.

He hugged her, very lightly; she didn’t hug back, exactly--they were working on that--but she relaxed a little.

“Missed you,” she said.

“Yeah,” he said. “You’ve been really busy, though?”

She blinked, then nodded. “Yeah. Lessons an’ stuff.” She sat back down on the floor, tugging on his hand so he would join her.

He nudged the ‘pad out of the way so he could. “Were you playing a game?” he asked.

She shook her head. “More lessons. There’s a picture of a room, and I only see it for a little bit. Then I have to ‘member where all the furniture went and put it back together.”

“Did you get it right?” He thought she probably had--her memory wasn’t exactly as good as Winter’s but nobody’s memory was exactly as good as Winter’s. Lani’s was definitely better than his, though.

“Yeah,” she said, but she didn’t seem all that pleased. “Except I’m not fast enough.”

“You’ll get better,” he said. “Probably just takes practice.”

She did cheer up a little bit when he said that, which was good. “Yeah,” she said, and smiled again. “Thanks.”

“‘Course,” he said.

“What about you?” she asked.

“Lessons and stuff,” he said, and grinned when she rolled her eyes a little. “Plus, Mamma brought me to her office a couple times. Just sorting stuff.”

She nodded. “But it’s helping?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And I like helping Mamma.”
“I’m glad,” she said, toying with the hem of her skirt a little bit, then changed the subject. “Wish we could go on the balcony. I’m ‘llowed to have flowers out there now, and they’re really pretty.”

“Maybe next time,” he said. Her balcony was on one of the Palace’s inner courtyards, so sometimes her guards let them out there. Unless there was a specific security threat or something, which he didn’t think there was right now. Rain was a better reason to not be allowed outside.

“Yeah,” she said, and let go of her skirt, smoothing it back in place. “What do you wanna do instead?”

“I picked last time,” he said. Which he had. They’d spent most of that afternoon playing hide and seek, as much as they could in her room. “Your turn.”

“Okay.” She pondered for a minute. “I think I ‘member the card game you showed me last time,” Lani said. “We could play, since we can’t go outside?”

“Sure,” he said. He’d figured she’d pick either that or coloring, since her lessons all afternoon had been puzzles.

She nodded again, then picked up her datapad and got up and went over to her desk, climbing up onto the chair to carefully set the ‘pad on top and open one of the drawers. He couldn’t see what was in there other than the cards, but that was probably where she kept all her fun things. Or, at least, he hoped she had enough fun things to fill a drawer.

He wondered about that, for a minute--he’d given her a stuffed shaak a couple months ago, ‘cause he was getting too big for it and she needed something soft, but he hadn’t seen it since then. He wasn’t sure exactly where it went, and really hoped it was only hidden away somewhere, and she hadn’t had it taken away. Probably not in the drawer, actually, since looking closer told him it wasn’t tall enough, but he didn’t know what other hiding places she might have.

He didn’t ask, though. Guard Number Three was still watching, and he did not want Lani to get in trouble for hiding things.

“We each get seven, right?” she said, sitting back on the rug next to him and handing him the deck.

“Yep,” he said, mixing up the cards and dealing them out. “And you want the color or the number to match, and eights can change it.”

She nodded. “Thought so. You go first.”

“‘Kay.” She usually had him do that--he’d figured out a while ago she really didn’t like not knowing what she was supposed to do. She learned really quick, though, so watching him once or sometimes twice was usually all she needed.

They played quietly for a couple minutes--he was winning, probably ‘cause he’d just gotten lucky and had the numbers and colors he needed to not have to draw too many, at least at first.

But when they’d gone through maybe half the deck…

“Luke?” Lani asked, studying her hand with her head tilted, like she had a couple options and wasn’t sure which one she should play.

“Uh-huh?”

“Do you ‘member Lord Specter?”
He tensed a little. “Yeah,” he said. “I didn’t know you did.” *Oops. Maybe I shouldn’t’ve said that...*

“I only saw him a couple times,” she admitted. “I was too little, ‘cause he’s been gone since we met.” She finally put another card down on the pile. “Your turn.”

“Right. Okay,” he bit his lip a little. “Um. Why are you asking about Lord Specter?”

“There’s another one,” she said.

Luke almost dropped his cards. He looked up at Guard Number Three, uncertain.

But the guard didn’t move. Not yet, at least. Luke couldn’t exactly tell if--

“His name’s Infernalis,” she went on, careful to pronounce it right; just like she had been with her name when they’d first met. “He’s...big.”

He sort of got the feeling she didn’t just mean on the outside. But he didn’t want her to get in trouble for telling him about the new Specter, so he didn’t want to ask.

“Your turn,” she said again, nudging his foot a little.

“Right. Sorry. Um.” He played a card without paying that much attention to it other than it was a card he could play. “Thanks, for letting me know. Um. I guess...I guess I’ll probably meet him sometime.”

“Yeah,” she said, frowning at her cards again. “I just...didn’t want you to be surprised. When you do.”

“I know,” he said, then scrambled to change the subject. “Um. What kind of flowers are you growing?”

Lani blinked at him, then nodded and followed his lead.

And, when Number Three didn’t do anything, and nothing else bad happened, Luke started to relax a little. By the time he and Lani finished their third game and moved on to coloring, he’d almost forgotten to be worried about it.

__________

Of course, that was *with* Lani, while they were playing and she was as close to happy as he ever saw her. After walking all the way back to the speeder, through the unhappy Palace with Aunt Motee…

Whether or not *Lani* would be in trouble for telling him, he remembered what Aunt Sabe had said after Lord Specter died--

*Think very, very carefully about what it might mean to know a thing like that before it’s made public.*

Except...Lani was right about one thing; another Lord Specter would be an awful, *awful* surprise. And now he knew ahead of time, which meant he could tell Mamma, and she would know what to do. If there was anything they *could* do.
Okay. Whether or not he would’ve wanted to know before Lani told him--because there were reasons he did and reasons he didn’t--he knew now. And he couldn’t not tell, even if it was maybe dangerous, like Aunt Sabe had said.

So, once he and Aunt Motee were safely in the speeder on their way back to the apartment, he took a deep breath.

She glanced across the seat at him, looking up from her datapad. “Something wrong, Luke?”

“Um,” he said. “Lani told me something, and I think it’s important. But I don’t want her to get in trouble for telling me.”

Aunt Motee frowned a little. “Well, I can promise you she won’t be in trouble with us, even if she wasn’t supposed to tell you. But if you think whatever she said is that important…”

Which wasn’t what he was worried about, but he even his aunts couldn’t promise more than that, and he knew it.

He sighed. “It is,” he said. “And I don’t…I dunno if she wasn’t supposed to tell me or not. The guard didn’t get mad or anything, but…”

She nodded. “What is it? What happened?”

“She said...she said there’s another Lord Specter,” he told her, all in a rush. “And his name’s Infernalis, and he’s big, but that’s all she said because I changed the subject since I didn’t want her to get in trouble.”

Aunt Motee blinked but stayed calm, and reached over and squeezed his hand briefly. Then she was quiet for a really, really long time while she thought it through. “The princess told you all on her own?” she finally asked. “You didn’t ask her anything?”

He shook his head. “Uh-uh.”

“All right,” she said, and smiled at him. “I think you handled this exactly the way you should have. Thank you for telling me right away.”

He nodded. “What if...what if Lani does get in trouble?”

“If we can help her, we will,” Aunt Motee promised, and squeezed his hand again.

Luke relaxed. He knew it wasn’t much, but it still made him feel better, that his aunts and Mamma would at least try. Especially since he believed they could do anything. “Okay.” He thought for a minute, then asked, “So...what are we gonna do now?”

“You’re not going to do anything different than usual just now,” she said. “Except maybe tell Mamma what you told me yourself, if she asks.”

“Okay,” he said again. But that probably meant that they had things to do. Important things. “Are you sure? Maybe I can help?”

“You already have,” she told him. “We know he’s coming, and we know his name. We can do a lot with that. Let us handle it from here.”

He nodded, then hesitated for half a second. They wouldn’t let him help more, and he didn’t really expect them to, and he couldn’t do much for Lani ‘til they knew more, but maybe...maybe there
was something else he could do.

He hadn’t tried to ask about—about Mamma’s mysterious friend, the one who’d gotten hurt when Lord Specter died. Not since then, because it was supposed to be a secret. Maybe Aunt Motee would tell him more than Aunt Sabe, since he’d caught her in a really, really good mood, and he’d helped…

Worth a try, anyway.

“Unless there’s something else you know?” Aunt Motee prompted.

“No...not exactly. Um. When Lord Specter died...” he started, then just plowed through before he could change his mind. “People got hurt. Someone important got hurt. I heard Mamma and Uncle Bail talking about it.”

“I know,” Aunt Motee said, then smiled. “Aunt Sabe and I do talk, you know.”

“Oh.” He flushed. “Is...is that gonna happen again?”

“We hope not,” Aunt Motee said. “But you’re not supposed to worry about him.”

“I know,” he said. “But I can’t help it.”

She smiled. “It’s always hard to stop thinking about a mystery, isn’t it.”

He nodded. “Who is he?”

“Your mamma will tell you when she’s ready,” Aunt Motee said.

Which was not at all the answer he’d been hoping for.

She smiled again and ruffled his hair. “I promise you, you’ll understand someday.”

He sighed, and slouched in his seat. At least he’d done really good earlier, she’d said. Found out something important, and handled it exactly, exactly right.

But there was a new Lord Specter running around now, and maybe Lani was in trouble for telling him, and ‘someday’ felt like a really, really long time away.

*Today started so good, too,* he thought, staring out the window and trying not to sulk. *I just wish it could’ve stayed that way.*
Part 5, Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were certain things that Leia simply could not learn on Tatooine, no matter how creative Rex and the Jedi got with her lessons. Not that there wasn’t time to teach her, of course. She was still a long, long way away from any kind of active field work, after all. Something like six years was their plan right now; that would put her at thirteen, or nearly, which was the age when Padawans could start going on active duty missions under the old system.

But when they hadn’t had any problems after bringing her to Doctor Naar’s when the General was hurt, they had started cautiously taking her on occasional offplanet trips to fill in some of those gaps. Six years would pass quickly enough, and it was far better for her to learn these things too early than for them to miss something that might be vital.

These trips were still rare, of course. They had their long, slow war to fight, and couldn’t afford to lose what little momentum they had by stepping back too often. Even to train Leia. Besides, they didn’t want to establish any kind of pattern or cause noticeably long absences where Leia’s friends or other locals might question where she’d gone. And any exposure was still a risk. But the value of, for example, wilderness and survival skills in non-desert environments was becoming more and more of a factor. Enough to outweigh the downsides, at least from time to time.

This particular trip was under Rex’s supervision. He had borrowed the ship General Kenobi was currently using and brought Leia to a nameless moon in a system about two dozen parsecs away from Tatooine. It was largely uninhabited, with red-gold forests under wide, faintly purple skies, and a series of small, crystal-clear lakes on its eastern hemisphere where he could teach her how to swim. Which was, as General Skywalker pointed out, a baseline skill for survival in most non-desert environments.

It was just the two of them this time. The three Jedi had gone to Dagobah, to meet with Master Yoda. It was, to Rex’s knowledge, the first time the three of them had gone there together since Commander Tano had found them. She’d gone once by herself, he was pretty sure, once she’d known where to go; and he knew General Skywalker had gone as well, as soon as he was healed enough to travel by himself. He wasn’t sure they were planning on discussing anything specific— maybe the news just received from Senator Amidala, that the Emperor already had a new apprentice, or maybe just touching base directly for the first time in years.

But it didn’t really matter to him anyway; if anything came up he needed to know about, they would tell him when they got back. And Leia needed these lessons, and the General had asked him to teach her. He couldn’t have refused even if he’d wanted to, and he he didn’t; he loved the kid, and loved spending time with her.

“Besides,” Commander Tano had said, when they’d made their plans, “you come from a water world. Always ask the expert, right?”

And, well, she wasn’t wrong there.

So, he and Leia had left Tatooine a few hours after the Jedi did, and now here they were. They’d landed around midmorning, local, and at first all Leia had wanted to do was run around and marvel at the colors and the textures of the tree trunks and grasses. Different from Tatooine, or Doctor Naar’s planet, or either of the two others they’d spirited her off to in the past few months.
Rex let her do it for a half-hour or so, because she seemed so happy and he liked seeing her that way. Plus, it gave him a chance to scout around for any kind of potential trouble. As far as he and the others had been able to tell—and they’d done extensive research before bringing Leia here, of course—this moon was really only used as a supply cache for certain smugglers who were not unfriendly to their cause. Not Captain Ohnaka’s group, but one connected with the people who had brought General Skywalker his new leg. And most of that activity was in a network of mountain caves on the opposite side of the moon, anyway.

But there were no signs of anyone approaching, and no evidence of any large predators in or near the lake, and they were here for more than just to play. Time to get to work.

“All right, *ad’ika,*” he said. “Come on, into the water.”

She’d been halfway up one of the trees when he called. “Okay,” she said, and jumped down, looking only a little bit disappointed. “Can I climb up again later?”

“Sure,” he said. “After we’re done.”

She nodded, and trotted over to join him on the muddy lakeshore, then stopped, eyeing the clear, peaceful-looking lake with what could only be described as profound suspicion.

“All right?” he asked her. This wasn’t the first body of water she’d seen, but it was bigger and deeper than the narrow creek where they’d camped when the Generals were teaching her how to identify which unfamiliar plants might be toxic, or cause an unpleasant reaction when touched. Jedi techniques, and ones Rex deeply, deeply envied. Not that he’d actually ever been caught without rations long enough to risk the local flora, but it only took one extremely itchy and unpleasant experience to learn some serious caution about avoiding skin contact with anything he didn’t know damn well was safe.

She took a deep breath. “Yeah,” she said, straightening up and glaring at the lake, as if daring it to swallow her up.

“I’ll be right with you, all right?” he told her. “Until you’re really comfortable swimming on your own.”

She nodded, and hugged him very quickly. “Okay. So, I just...get in the water, then?”

“Yes,” he said. “It drops off pretty quick a couple feet out, so stay close, okay?”

She nodded again, grabbing his hand and holding tight as he led her into the water. “It’s cold,” she said.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said. “Especially once we get moving.”

“Okay,” she said, and took another deep breath.

They stayed at the edge for a few minutes, where the water was less than a meter deep, while he showed her how to drift along on her back. She got comfortable with that pretty quick, once she realized she actually would float. It probably helped, he thought, that she was with someone she’d known and trusted for years, who was clearly more than comfortable in the water with her.

And then, leaving her floating on her back, he started to gently ease them out deeper.

“I like it here,” she said, after a minute. They were still only about as deep as his waist, but she’d be almost completely underwater if she tried standing. He wasn’t sure she realized it; he decided
not to point it out. “On this moon.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s like the green place, sort of,” she said. She was putting a brave face on things, but still nervy, clinging tight to his wrists. But talking seemed to help distract her from being nervous, as they got farther from the shore.

“The green place?”

“Uh-huh. I dream about it sometimes. Not all the time, like the silver planet, but sometimes.”

...oh. The green place. With that clarification, Rex had a pretty good idea of what she meant by that, especially since there was only one silver planet he could think of that Leia might dream about.

Unfortunately, he was completely out of his depth on this particular issue, and had no idea what he was supposed to say. However much time he spent with his Jedi, there were some things he just wasn’t qualified to talk about. “Does your dad know about them?” he asked, when he couldn’t think of anything else. Beside, if he doesn’t, I should probably tell him. Could be important.

She nodded. “I don’t tell him all the time, ‘cause he gets sad. But sometimes he asks if I still have ‘em, and if they’re good dreams or not.”

Well, that was good, at least.

Knowing the General, he probably asks when he hasn’t gotten any letters for a while, Rex thought. To convince himself that it’s just the normal delays, not something that’s gone wrong. And talk himself out of doing something stupid.

“Are they?” he asked.

“Mostly,” she said. “Not always. It’s like this whole other life inside my head, and life isn’t always good dreams. Sometimes there’s storms and stuff.”

“True.” She seemed a lot more comfortable in the water now, and he was concerned about saying the wrong thing. Best to change the subject now, get back on task. “All right, ad’ika. Ready to try moving?”

She blinked, then nodded grimly. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

In the end, they spent about an hour in the water, and given that it was her first time, and only her second even seeing this much natural water all collected in one place, Leia did a damn fine job. Rex wasn’t sure if that had anything to do with him as a teacher, or if it was all her--she was a quick learner, either a Jedi trait, or because she was always so determined to get things right. But by the end of the hour, not only was she willing to let go of him and able keep her head above water without his help, she’d managed to swim back and forth between a couple of distinctive rocks all by herself.

After that, though--well, the water was somewhat cold, and she was tiny. Best to dry off and warm
up and bask in their accomplishment on the shore. Besides, he’d promised her she could climb up the trees for a while, and daylight on this moon didn’t last very long.

Of course, contrary child that she was, she was almost as reluctant to get out of the water, now she’d found her way, as she had been to get in in the first place.

But he did get her out eventually, and settled on the lakeshore in dry clothes while he tried to brush out and rebraid her hair, which had somehow come undone and worked itself into a tangled mess while they were in the water.

(He wasn’t very good at this, even after several years of trying. Commander Tano was better at it than he was, he suspected; despite having a lot less experience and no hair of her own.)

“Was it like this where you grew up?” Leia asked after a few minutes, fidgeting a little but trying to hold her head still for him. “Uncle Obi-Wan says there’s lots of water on your planet.”

“There is,” he said, pausing in his task to look out over the clear, near-still lake, which was really nothing at all like the oceans of Kamino. “But not like this. Where I grew up...it’s pretty much the exact opposite of Tatooine, actually. Even more than here.”

She turned her head to look up at him, and he gently pushed it back.

“Try not to move, ad’ika, I’ll mess up again.”

“Sorry,” she said. “But...this place is already about as different as I can think.”

“My home planet is basically entirely covered by ocean.”

He was certainly no Jedi, and she didn’t turn her head to look at him this time so he couldn’t actually see her face, but he could clearly feel the disbelief radiating off of her all the same. “That’s not possible,” she said.

“Hey, have I ever lied to you before?”

“No,” she admitted. “The whole planet?”

“Yes,” he said. “We had a lot of domes, too.” For much the same reason, he suspected--architecture like that held up better against high winds. “Except, instead of building most things partly underground to stay cool, everything was up on stilts, so it wouldn’t flood too badly.”

She pondered that for a minute, while he finished the braid as best he could and tied it off.

“There, how’s that?”

She tossed her head back and forth. “I think it’ll stay,” she said, then turned around. “Tell me more? About where you grew up. Was it at least pretty, like here?”

“Well, it stormed, almost all the time,” he said. “The clouds would break...eh, maybe once every few months.” He smiled a little, at the memory of those rare moments when the sky lightened and they got dazzling streaks of rainbows as the sun broke through. “I loved those days. Me and my brothers, when we were kids, we’d go climb out onto the roofs and chase each other around, trying to keep our balance. It got real slippery, even without the wind and the rain making it harder.”

“Did you fall?” she asked.

He laughed. “Oh, yeah. Loads of times.” And one of those, back when he’d been around Leia’s
stage of growth, had been the only time he’d ever actually *met* his--well, he still wasn’t entirely sure how to refer to Jango Fett. Progenitor, he supposed, was the closest. He’d been counting the seconds and trying to angle his body so the impact when he hit the water would hurt least, when he’d suddenly stopped falling, and looked up to see…

His future. Sort of.

And, all right, *technically* it wasn’t the first or only time something like that had happened; but seeing Fett at a distance, or in a group setting--sometimes, he’d run a weapons class or something for the cadets when he was on planet--wasn’t quite the same.

“I bet your brothers laughed,” she said.

“Sure,” he said. “But not ‘til after they caught me. Usually. And, of course, *they* fell just as often--so whoever had slipped would be teased for a while, and do better next time.”

She nodded, then sighed and flopped back, staring up at the sky. “I wish I had a brother.”

He--wasn’t actually surprised by what she’d said; drifting towards the edge of the secrets they kept from her. Especially after their earlier discussion, about the green planet. So he didn’t blink--much--and she probably couldn’t tell how careful he was with his answer.

“You’ve got your friends,” he pointed out. “And, trust me, biology is not the only thing that makes a family.” Something *he* knew better than just about anyone. Because, even apart from the fact that--well, in a family of millions, your closest brothers became something special, Rex had...lost...his biological family years ago; and now he had--well. Now, he had something different.

“I know,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have Aunt ‘Soka.”

*Or any of the rest of us, technically,* he thought. Even Owen Lars was related to her by marriage, rather than biology. But Commander Tano *was* the most obvious.

“Still…” She trailed off.

And he understood what she meant. Because...however happy he was with the new life he’d managed to find, he *missed* his brothers. Or the ones he’d been closest to, at least. There was something about having people *like him* around. And--well, Jedi; he didn’t know how much she *knew,* somewhere deep and instinctual, about the things they didn’t tell her. He had no idea if she felt what he did, sometimes; that deep ache in the pit of his heart, the knowledge that there was something *missing*. No matter how full and happy life was with what they actually had.

But, of course, even if he ignored all the reasons General Skywalker had for keeping this secret from his daughter, it was in no way Rex’s place to say.

So, much as he wanted to properly commiserate with her, he contented himself with, “Yeah, I know,” and offered her a brief hug.

She accepted it and curled close for a moment, wrapping her arms around him in turn. “Thanks, Uncle Rex,” she whispered, then kissed his cheek and pulled back. “Can I go climb the trees now?”

“Sure,” he said. “Stay where I can see you, and remember what General Kenobi taught you last time.”

“I will,” she promised, then bounced up and darted for the treeline.
Her braid, of course, started coming undone before she was even halfway there.

He sighed and shook his head.

At least they’d accomplished what they’d come here to accomplish. Progress, moving forward—all good things. And for all he missed, he was happy with what he had now. Happier than he would have thought possible even two years ago; watching his General’s daughter, who considered him one of her uncles, scramble up the closest tree like some kind of monkey.

Whatever he’d lost along the way, however much he missed the life he’d used to know...he had a family now. Just like he’d told Leia. And so he would keep moving forward, just like today; just like he had been for over half a decade now; protecting them and supporting them with everything he had, in every way he could.

Because that’s what family was for.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo, as I mentioned previously, this fic is now officially a year old! And I'd like to do a bonus fic, as with previous milestones. Feel free to swing by my writing tumblr and let me know if there's anything specific you'd like to see!

And, once again, thank you all so much for staying with me for this long <3

~shadowsong
Darth Infernalis was under no illusions as to his place in the grand scheme of things. He knew exactly what Sidious wanted him to be—an enforcer; an attack dog; someone to deploy when mere soldiers wouldn’t make the necessary point. Someone to take all the active risks in combat, allowing Sidious his veneer of plausible deniability, so he could conceal his actual identity as a Sith Lord, and freeing him to explore the more mystical aspects of the Dark Side.

In short, Infernalis knew damn well he was being used to do the Emperor’s dirty work. But, quite frankly, he didn’t care.

For one thing, while he had always enjoyed violence, and even had a certain flair for it, until Sidious had found him in the mines, he had lacked the tools to really excel. And, he was unashamed to admit, he hadn’t had the skill, control, charisma, or friends in high places necessary to avoid getting caught, either. Which was what had landed him in the mines in the first place—a stupid mistake, and the inability to murder or talk his way out of trouble.

For another, that’s what all sentients did, in the long run. They used one another. No matter how many altruistic souls tried to claim otherwise. Besides, it wasn’t like he wasn’t using his master in turn—for an escape from the penal colony mines, for all of the skills and knowledge he was gaining, for the general broadening of his horizons, for the sheer destructive power he was now capable of wielding.

And, above all, for all those wonderful and increasingly frequent opportunities to actually use it.

Because Infernalis was one of those rare beings with the incredible luck of not only knowing what he was good at and being able to do it, but also enjoying it; not feeling compelled to do or be anything else. And, on top of that, he now had a mentor who was willing to help him reach his full potential. Taking a subordinate position and striking only where he was told was a small price to pay for what he’d already gained. Let alone what he stood to gain in the long run.

And so, he was content. At least for now. True, sooner or later, in all likelihood, he’d start to chafe at the bit and want more than the scraps Sidious was willing to share. But that was, according to the texts he’d been ordered to read, the tradition among the Sith anyway. And it was, according to Infernalis’ own life experience, the way of things everywhere. Eventually, this arrangement would no longer be mutually beneficial, and one of them would try to kill the other, and either succeed or be killed in his turn.

But that day was several years off. Until then, Infernalis would learn, and obey, even when he didn’t particularly want to. All in anticipation of those times when he was given his head.

Today, sadly, was not one of those times.
“Control, apprentice,” his master reminded him. As he had done, multiple times, since pulling Infernalis from the mines. And it was probably his imagination, but Infernalis would swear that his fingers were still twitching from the last reminder.

And now Sidious had had to repeat himself again.

Things were not really going Infernalis’ way today.

His assigned task was simple enough--there was a maze, deep under the Palace, full of twists and turns, false walls and deadly traps. Somewhere in that maze was Sidious’ four-year-old daughter. Infernalis’ mission was to find the kid and bring her back to her father, alive. Hers, he had been told, was to evade Infernalis and find her own way out.

It was, of course, also designed to pit the two of them against one another, make sure they viewed each other as rivals, rather than risking them allying against Sidious. Not that Infernalis really considered a four-year-old Human a serious rival or a viable ally, but--well, who could say where things would stand in a decade or so, for the two of them and their mutual lord?

Infernalis had won the game, of course. He’d spent the last decade finding his way around narrow mine tunnels, and while the hazards there were very different than the ones his master had constructed, he damn well knew how to handle a deadly maze. And, while they technically had about the same amount of experience with the Force and with this kind of exercise, there was simply no real contest between an canny adult and a little girl.

Still, the kid had actually managed to evade him for the better part of an hour. It turned out, especially given her age, Princess Lavinia was very clever at keeping track of the traps, and at least vaguely aware of where he was. Enough that she’d almost maneuvered him into one. Twice.

So, naturally, when he’d caught up with her, he’d been frustrated, lashing out as soon as he had his target in view. And then--

“Howling, apprentice.”

Infernalis blinked, halfway through completing his damned objective at last. And, at first, annoyed at the interruption, but--well, no matter how quietly his master spoke, that voice could cut through anything and grab his attention in an instant. Infernalis had learned early on that Sidious was never, ever ignored.

What is he--ah. Right.

It seemed that he’d gotten a little...overzealous. Damn near put the kid through the wall. Not exactly helpful for bringing a target in alive, as instructed. Her neck wasn’t broken, at least, so he hadn’t failed entirely.

He dropped her, and she remained in a little heap on the floor for a second, breathing hard.

“Up, child,” Sidious ordered from behind her.

She shivered a little, and pushed herself to her feet. She wobbled, and grabbed onto the wall for support, but didn’t fall over.

Infernalis flexed his maybe-twitching hand, waiting for lightning or any of the other tricks Sidious used when he was displeased with his protege.

But nothing came. Instead, there was a long moment of tense silence, broken only by the kid’s
slightly shuddery breaths.

“That’s enough for today,” Sidious finally said. “You may go, child. We will discuss your performance later. Infernalis, stay.”

Tiny thing couldn’t keep the relief off her face, as she sketched a wobbly bow in her father’s general direction and stumbled off, leaving the two Sith Lords alone.

And then Sidious was silent for a moment more, studying him, which just ratcheted up the tension in the air. Infernalis clenched his fists and remained still, feeling the anticipation build inside him—worse, in its way, than the inevitable punishment itself.

“I don’t need to tell you why you failed,” Sidious finally said.

_I didn’t_, Infernalis wanted to snap back, already frustrated by being left twisting in the wind for so long. _I caught your brat, didn’t I? Sure, I went farther than you wanted, but I didn’t kill her, and I would have reined myself in without you._

But—hell, even without his more recent lessons, he’d been in prison for a decade. It took a lot less time than that, in the mines, to learn when it was and wasn’t worth mouthing off at the guards.

And in a year and more spent learning from Darth Sidious, Infernalis had yet to find a time where it was. Besides, there was a lesson here, and he got the point—_patience_. Don’t rise to the bait. Let the frustration and anger _grow_ in moments like this, but always and only under _his_ control.

_Use your anger. Do not be used by it._

“No, Master,” he said, instead, pleased with how even his voice managed to stay.

One clawlike hand snaked out from the shadows, resting on Infernalis’ head. Sparking—threatening—but not unleashing the lightning. Not yet.

“There are times, apprentice, when I will need a hammer,” Sidious said. “And there are times when I will need a blade. Do not confuse the two again.”

“No, Master,” he repeated, clenching his hand again to keep it from twitching.

Another beat of silence, and then, “I have a task for you,” Sidious said.

This didn’t mean the reprimand was over—almost certainly not; his master had a way of bringing up old lessons at the worst possible time, just to make _sure_ they’d stuck. Still, a new task meant _that_ was a problem for another day. _And_ today was starting to look up, too. At the very least, it probably wouldn’t involve any more chasing little girls through booby-trapped mazes.

Sidious’ hand tightened, nails digging in just a little, drawing Infernalis’ attention back where it belonged.

“Yes, Master.”

“Two classified shipments have been interrupted,” he said. “Find those responsible and destroy them.”

Infernalis bit back a grin. _Time to be the hammer then, I suppose._ “I am the extension of your will, Master.”

Sidious’ mouth tightened under his hood in a sort of smile. “Yes,” he said softly. “You are.”
A thin shiver of sparks spilled down Infernalis’ spine. He jerked a little at the pain, but didn’t scream. It wasn’t... wasn’t the worst he’d ever gotten. Not by a long shot. Just—a taste this time. A reminder.

When it faded after a moment or three, Sidious and his hand and the lightning were gone, leaving Infernalis alone in the deserted maze; waiting for his thoughts to catch up so he could think through his new mission. His new opportunity.

He waited a moment more, then stood and stretched, still feeling tight and all out of joint in the wake of that burst of lightning. Details would be waiting for him by the time he got back to his room—where exactly these interruptions had taken place, any intelligence that already existed on the people responsible. Probably not what those shipments had contained. Not that it really mattered to him at this point. Someday, perhaps, it would. When he was ready to turn and bite the hand that fed him.

But for now, like the trained attack dog he was, Infernalis would hunt them down and tear them to pieces, and afterwards be bask in the glory of pure destruction, of a job well executed. A display of strength, power—a victory.

Just like that mantra he’d memorized, in his first weeks of training—Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.

He popped his aching jaw back into place, and smiled.

Bail had gotten home in the late afternoon—several hours after he’d planned. He was supposed to have arrived fairly early that morning, before Breha got tied up in her usual meetings, but he’d been delayed getting off Coruscant and there were only so much time that could be made up in hyperspace.

Still, late afternoon meant that Winter would have finished with her lessons for the day, and he could spend an hour or two, uninterrupted, with his daughter. He headed straight for her room as soon as he got back to the Palace.

It wasn’t often that he got the chance to surprise his family, coming home unexpectedly—almost all of his travel was very public and scheduled far in advance, and what wasn’t usually had to do with fighting the Empire. So when he tapped on her door, and Winter turned around, and he saw the way her face lit up—

“Papa!”

I need to do this more often, he thought, as she barrelled into him and he crouched down to sweep her up in a proper hug. “Hello, precious,” he said, and kissed her cheek. “Oh, I missed you.”

“Missed you, too,” she said, still clinging tight. “I thought you weren’t coming ’til tomorrow, ’cause you weren’t here at breakfast.”

“Nope, I’m just a little bit late,” he said. “Was your mamma worried?”

“Nuh-uh,” Winter said, finally relaxing her grip a little. “She was kinda mad, though, ’cause she had those cakes you really like made special for breakfast, and they don’t keep very well.”
He laughed a little at that. “Hmm. Well, I *am* sorry I missed that, but somehow I think they got eaten anyway.”

Winter flushed. “One or two,” she said. They were *her* favorite, too.

“I’ll find a way to make it up to your mother, either way,” he promised her. “And to you, for being so late.”

She shook her head. “You’re home now,” she told him. “For a while, right? That’s what Mamma said.”

“That’s the plan,” he confirmed. “And…”

“What?” she asked. “What, Papa?”

“Well, your mamma and I were talking, before I left to come home,” he said. “What do you think about coming with me when I go back this time?”

He and Breha had actually been discussing that for a while, off and on. Winter wouldn’t actually be in danger there, not any more than any other Senator’s child, and it would be good for her to see a little more of the galaxy. Even the parts he had always wanted to shelter her from. However she and her eventual consort ended up splitting their responsibilities, these were things she would need to know.

Besides, he had perfectly selfish reasons for it, in that he wanted her with him as much as possible. Which wasn’t nearly often enough.

“Really?” Winter said, eyes going wide. “I can really come?”

“Yes,” he said, and hugged her again.

She threw her arms around him again. “Luke told me *so* many cool stories and I wanna see where you work and your apartment and--”

“One thing at a time,” he said, kissing the top of her head.

“Okay,” she said, bouncing a little. Clearly, that hadn’t really done much to dampen her enthusiasm. Not that he’d really expected it to--he remembered being eight years old and promised a trip somewhere new and exciting.

“We’ll talk to Mamma tonight at dinner, all right?” he said. “Work out all the details. And I’ll be home for a whole week first.”

“Even *better,*” she proclaimed, grinning brightly up at him.

And he couldn’t help but smile back, because he absolutely agreed--he was a little bit late, but he’d made it home, and he had a few days with both her and Breha, and nothing had exploded this week. Not yet, anyway; and he refused to borrow trouble if he didn’t have to.

*When this is all over,* he promised himself, as he had so many times before, *moments like this will be the norm, rather than the bright spots I look forward to. Even if I can’t quite leave the Senate yet, if Mon and Padme still need me there; even if I’m still not home as much as I’d like--*

“Papa?”

“Nothing, darling,” he said, and hugged her one more time. “So, tell me. How have your lessons
been going? Anything new and exciting this week?"

And then she was off, chattering about the history lesson she’d finished up just before he came in, exactly as he’d hoped she would. In far more detail than he remembered--but, then again, that was Winter’s special gift, even if it hadn’t been fresh in her mind.

He settled on the floor; she collected the datapad from her desk and nestled against him, calling up the map that had been the focus of her lesson. He held her close and let her voice wash over him as she explained it all.

This was what he wanted--all he wanted--for the rest of his life. For his family, for Padme and hers, for everyone. And even if, for now, it only came in moments, he would cherish them and make them last as long as he could.

*And, as soon as this is over, as soon as Palpatine is gone…*

In the end, what else was he fighting for, but this?

Chapter End Notes

...yeah, I figured the chapter needed a nice unicorn chaser to make up for the first half ^-^; So, some light fluff with Bail that has very little to do with the plot seemed in order.

Thanks so much for stopping by! Next week's chapter as a whole shouldn't be this harsh, I hope...

~shadowsong
Padme had felt a weight lift off her shoulders as soon as they’d landed in Theed. All of the low-level tension, the constant worry that she might be overheard by exactly the wrong person at the worst possible time, was gone. It had been too long—a couple of months—since her last visit. But, while she resolved to visit more often every time she came here, somehow it never quite worked out.

Partly because, unlike Bail, who had two extremely compelling reasons to go back to Alderaan as often as possible, Padme’s son was with her. Not that she didn’t love and miss her parents and sister and nieces, of course, but...it was different. Less of a perfectly reasonable excuse, and more like a selfish one. Like ducking out of her less pleasant duties. Staying on Imperial Center to keep working, as much as she could, felt more important.

Even this trip, technically, was for work—the Queen wanted her to introduce some specific legislation into the Senate, and had summoned her back to Naboo to go over the details. Still, she was home, and that feeling of relief when she stepped off her ship and breathed in the familiar air was just as powerful as always.

Someday, she promised herself, as she always did, when all of this is over, I’ll make the time to visit more often.

She’d still brought Luke with her, of course, and made arrangements to visit with her family between meetings. There probably wouldn’t be time to slip off to Varykino, unfortunately, since this wasn’t a real vacation and she needed to be back on Imperial Center before too long; the plan was to leave tomorrow, or the next day at the latest.

But she’d be visiting again early next month, anyway, she reasoned. Pooja was turning fourteen, and barring a crisis or Palpatine himself intervening and sending her elsewhere, she had every intention of taking at least two weeks—one in Theed with her family, and one at Varykino for some quiet time with only her handmaidens and her son. Away from the spotlight. Especially since she had a packet of letters to hide, ones she’d received from Ani since her last trip to the lake (she knew she should burn them instead, but how could she destroy the only pieces of him she had?), and of course she wanted to take a moment to visit the grave.

That was next month, though. She really should focus on this trip, at least until everything duty required of her had been handled.

They arrived at the spaceport midmorning, and after she took a moment to savor the feeling, she and her handmaidens split up—Sabe and Dorme went with her to the Palace, while Motee and Elle took Luke to visit his grandparents, where they would all meet for dinner that night.

The working day was productive, if over far too quickly—she and the Queen had a decent draft of the bill she planned to introduce, and she’d met with a few other important local politicians, each of them with their own opinions on how she should vote on several upcoming matters. Then, dinner with her parents, which ended with her and Sola out in the garden with a bottle of wine to unwind.

And even that conversation turned—professional, in a slightly unexpected way.

“Pooja’s planning to ask you for an internship,” Sola said. “Maybe tonight, maybe for a birthday
present next month.”

“Really? Huh.” Thinking about it, though, Padme wasn’t actually all that surprised. She might not have guessed without prompting, since she hadn’t spent as much time with either of her nieces as she might have liked. But she had spent enough to look back and see that this idea wasn’t coming out of nowhere.

“She’s planning out her whole argument now, probably,” Sola said, with a faint smile. “Or, rehearsing it, maybe. She’s been thinking about this for a while, I think, even if she only mentioned it to me after we got your message last week. Anyway, I thought I should give you a head’s up before she cornered you. So you could plan ahead how you were going to respond. And...and let her down gently if you wanted to say no.”

Padme blinked, and sat up a little straighter. “Why would I…?”

Well, in all honesty, she hadn’t ever actually thought about bringing in any intern before--mostly because she didn’t really need one; while not technically in her handmaidens’ job description, between the four of them and Threepio and Padme herself, the things that tended to be assigned to interns in other Senators’ offices already got done.

But that didn’t mean she objected to the idea, necessarily. And if she had thought about it, Pooja would have been a serious contender if she’d applied. She was bright and talented, and genuinely interested in public service, unlike Ryoo, who had completed her mandated years and moved on as quickly as she could. Did Sola think Padme hadn’t noticed Pooja’s talents, because she spent so much of her time away?

No, that couldn’t be it, or Sola would have been making her own arguments in her daughter’s favor, not explicitly giving Padme a way out.

Pooja was younger than most Senate interns, but that probably wasn’t the problem, either--Padme herself had only been a few months older when she’d taken the throne, let alone been elected; and she’d held other offices for two years before that. Even if Sola had private objections on that score, she would know better than to think Padme would.

Was it the potential for accusations of nepotism that worried Sola, maybe? That was a concern, sure; but Padme could sponsor a second intern to make up for that. Either at the same time, or after Pooja’s turn ended and she moved on. Besides, handling any such accusations in the press wouldn’t be difficult, if she even got any. And Sola probably knew that, too.

So maybe--

Padme frowned. Is she...is she worried for Pooja’s safety, working for me?

True, Imperial Center was dangerous these days. But not exactly in the way that—that wasn’t why Padme hadn’t brought in an intern before now. At least not consciously. If things had been that unstable, after all, she wouldn’t risk keeping Luke with her. Even though an intern would be more visible than her son, her security was certainly up to the task of protecting one. Especially since that would actually be one of the most normal, unsuspicious things Padme had done since the Republic had fallen.

Not that she would have put anyone, let alone a young child or teenager, at risk just for cover, of course, but...well, the thought occurred, now that the concept had come up.

Though, she thought with a faint stab of guilt, she really should have thought of it sooner. She had
a duty to the future of her world and the galaxy as a whole, and part of that was advising and providing experience and opportunities to the next generation of politicians. And it wouldn’t be too hard to keep even a particularly bright young mind away from her...less legal activities...

Which Sola shouldn’t know about, anyway. But the general background danger--she might. Especially if she thought Padme hadn’t hired someone already because of that.

But that was only a guess. The likeliest of everything she’d come up with, maybe, but not a sure thing.

“Do you...do you want me to tell her no?” she asked, very carefully, instead of trying to counter that problem. Just in case she was wrong, and it was one of the others. Or something else that she hadn’t thought of. Or even it was just that Sola interpreted the fact that she hadn’t hired anyone before to mean that she really didn’t want an intern at all.

Sola didn’t answer right away, staring pensively into her wine glass before sighing and setting it aside. “I thought about that,” she admitted. “About asking you to turn her down. But...Pooja really wants this. She looks up to you, more than you know, and I think even if she didn’t have the legendary Queen Amidala in her family, she’d want to spend her life in public service. But either way, she doesn’t want local politics, she wants diplomacy, and this is the best way for her to learn that. And you...well, Luke is safe, has been all these years, and...”

So, safety was Sola’s primary worry. “Of course he has been,” Padme said. “And Pooja will be--would be--safe with me. As safe as anyone on Imperial Center is.” An unfortunate but necessary qualifier. Padme tried, very hard, not to make promises she couldn’t keep. Especially not to Sola and her parents, since she lied to them so much in other ways.

“I know,” Sola said. “I trust you with my daughter, of course I do, I know you would never--would never put her at unnecessary risk, but...”

“But...?”

There was a long moment of silence. “I don’t want her involved, Padme,” Sola said quietly.

Padme took a minute to let that sink in. And all it implied.

She knows. She knows.

A hundred questions, at varying levels of paranoia, spun through Padme’s brain.

And then the guilt. Oh, the guilt.

She had tried so hard to keep her family out of danger--they’d already had more than enough of that, in the detention camps during the Trade Federation occupation--which meant keeping them in the dark about what she was doing now. What she never told them, she reasoned, they could never be arrested and tortured, or otherwise--blackmailed, coerced, forced to divulge.

Maybe that’s part of why I don’t come home very often, too. For all the good it’s apparently done.

She swallowed, and pushed the guilt down as best she could.

“How...” she finally said, then cleared her throat. “How much do you--”

She nodded, and opened her mouth to answer, or maybe to apologize—*for the danger, and the lies; I will not, cannot apologize for the work itself*—but her sister cut her off.

“And it’s not that I don’t—I understand why you do it. I do. And I know—I only met him once or twice, while you were still in the Palace, but…but I’ve seen what he’s doing. What he’s *done*. Your cause is…it’s *right*. It’s just. It’s...these things...these things you do, they absolutely need to be done, this war *needs* to be fought, and you’re in a unique position to do so. I wouldn’t—would *never* ask you to stop fighting, especially for something like this. But...but Pooja is--she’s my *child*. My baby girl. And I don’t want...I don’t want to…” Her voice broke a little.

“I know,” Padme said. Because, for all the arguments she could make, about how *she* had taken substantial risks at Pooja’s age, and Ahsoka and so many others had been at war that young...

*It’s different, when it’s your child in danger. I wonder how my parents managed to bear it, all those years…*

*She* could barely stand it herself, and Luke wasn’t—he was only peripherally involved, and that because of the friends he had made, not any active work. And he would *stay* that way until he was at least a teenager, if she had anything to say about it.

And Leia...her Leia, lightyears away, wasn’t doing any active work yet either, and probably wouldn’t for the same amount of time as Luke. But she *was* already learning how to be a Jedi; how to *fight*.

(Padme had known that was coming; she and Anakin had discussed that years ago, in some of their earlier letters. When he and Obi-Wan would start training Leia properly. But it was one thing to say “someday; probably when she’s somewhere between seven and ten” when that was still distant enough to be abstract, and another thing entirely for it to be *actually happening.*)

“I know,” she repeated. Because she did. More than she could ever tell Sola, she did.

She nodded, relieved. “And please don’t think this means I don’t…” Sola took her hand, and squeezed it. “I would be *so* proud if Pooja grew up to be just like you. I just...I just want…”

Padme set her own glass down and put her other hand on top of Sola’s, squeezing in her turn. “You want her to grow up first. And not as...not as fast as I had to.” Because she *had* grown up too fast.

She’d known that for years. And, while being a Senate intern probably wouldn’t mean that kind of pressure, being a secret Rebel agent might.

“Exactly,” Sola said.

“I understand,” Padme said. “And I’ll do everything I can keep her out of it. I promise.” *At least for a few years, until she’s eighteen or twenty. Old enough that—old enough that she’ll know what she’s signing up for. If she wants to sign up. I still won’t bring her in on purpose, but I’ll stop trying to shut her out if she comes to me and asks.*

“Thank you,” Sola said, earnestly, then reached for her wine glass and deliberately changed the subject to lighten the mood. “I haven’t told Mom and Dad Pooja wants this,” she said. “To go work for you on Imperial Center, I mean. I think they’re still hoping she’ll turn out more like me, and settle down and start a family *before* she’s thirty.”

“I settled!” Padme protested. “I have a son. And I was *twenty-seven* when I brought him home, thank you.”

“Hey, this is what Mom and Dad think, not me,” Sola said, grinning at her. “Honestly, I’m actually
glad Pooja’s a little more career-focused, at least for now. Ryoo keeps bringing the most awful girls home. I don’t know where she got her taste in potential romantic partners, but I’m hoping she grows out of it.”

“Are they objectively awful, or do they just have the temerity to date your precious daughter?” Padme asked, arching an eyebrow. She couldn’t help but remember how Mom and Dad hadn’t approved of most of Sola’s exes, especially when she was Ryoo’s age.

“Objectively awful,” she said decisively. “She’ll probably bring a new one over for Pooja’s birthday. You’ll see.”

“Hmm,” Padme said, and left it at that, retrieving her own glass. “...am I a terrible aunt if I’m almost looking forward to it?”

“Well, maybe not terrible…”

Padme just laughed, and threw a balled-up napkin in her sister’s general direction.

Sola ducked, and stuck her tongue out at her. “Real mature, Padme,” she said, but she was laughing, too.

And, just like those first few seconds at the spaceport, when she breathed in her native air, Padme felt the warm, comforting warmth of home wrap around her like a blanket.

I really do need to come more often, she thought, wistfully. And she knew it wasn’t possible, not just now, but...

Someday, she would. Someday, she would stop spending too much of her time on Imperial Center-on Coruscant-- and nowhere near enough at home. And there would be no more lies, no more secrets. No more putting her family in danger.

Someday, she promised herself, as always, when all of this is over, I will make that happen. My whole family will be here, and together, and...someday, I will make it happen. Someday, I will make the time.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Obi-Wan and Anakin were not, strictly speaking, searching for Darth Infernalis.

As with Darth Specter, they, along with Master Yoda and Ahsoka, had decided that they lacked the resources to focus on Infernalis exclusively for any particular length of time. However, they had no intention of being caught off guard again, the way they had been when Specter had found Anakin.

Which meant that, when they came across an opportunity to try and learn a little more about their enemy, they certainly weren’t going to let it pass by without a very clear, immediate reason. Because even if they were a step behind him, even if they couldn’t...couldn’t save the people he had killed, or even do much to help the people he had hurt, they could learn something that might prove vital when their paths finally did cross.

And prevent any more limbs from being lost when they did.

So, they were here, where, only a few days ago, Infernalis had eliminated a group of pirates who had been attacking highly classified Imperial convoys. Not an affiliated group, or anyone Obi-Wan knew personally, which of course didn’t really mitigate the slaughter, but…

Well, if he were truly honest with himself, it...mattered. To a point.

And the fact that Infernalis had been sent to deal with the attacks, even as a probable test of his skills, meant that the disrupted convoys had likely been carrying something extremely valuable to the Emperor. Likely related to the giant infrastructure project that Obi-Wan knew was going on somewhere, though he lacked the necessary details to identify exactly what it was. Which was another reason, after he and Anakin had wrapped up their last mission elsewhere and caught wind of this opportunity, that they had decided to take advantage of it. The two of them were planning to break into the shipping offices later, see what they could find in the agency’s files, in the hope that they might gather more intelligence and finally figure out exactly what the Emperor was building.

But first, Infernalis.

They’d found the location of the skirmish, just outside the hangar, with little difficulty. The bodies, of course, had already been removed, as had much of the overt evidence. But they’d been scouring what was left for about twenty minutes now, and they had the knowledge and experience to read between the lines and put together a decent picture of the being responsible.

“Any thoughts?” Obi-Wan asked, running his hands over a lightsaber gouge in the rock, trying to trace the faint, oily, lingering impression of the being who had carved it. *He uses a single blade, I think. Not jar’kai, and not a saberstaff, either; but, judging by the angle here, his blade is maybe a little longer than average, or maybe he just has a particularly long reach.*

“He doesn’t have anything to prove,” Anakin said. He was crouched in the middle of the skirmish area, examining some of the half-faded footprints in the blood and dust and ash. “Not like Specter did. He...knows who he is. What he’s worth.”

“I agree,” he said. Which meant, likely, that they wouldn’t be able to off-balance Infernalis very easily. At least not in that way. There was probably a corresponding weakness, or vanity, that they could play on, but Obi-Wan doubted there would be enough information here for them to find it.
“And he seems to be less interested in concealment,” he added, after studying the slash and burn patterns in the wall for another few seconds.

“Yeah,” Anakin said, and stood up. “Or at least he’s much more direct in his approach. Less hit-and-fade then Specter was.”

Obi-Wan nodded. It wasn’t that there was an indication that Infernalis had deliberately drawn out the fight, exactly. Both apprentices were, by all appearances, swift and decisive; and this skirmish probably hadn’t lasted much longer than any they could attribute to Specter. And both were equally likely to set an ambush.

But once their target walked into the ambush and the trap was sprung, their tactics diverged significantly. There was a sort of—solidity to Infernalis’ presence, where Specter had been, well, aptly named. Striking from the shadows and moving on to his next target before the first even processed what had happened. Unless, as when he had come after Anakin, he had a very good reason to draw attention.

Infernalis, on the other hand, would have been impossible to ignore, and likely wouldn’t have tried anything like that it. Unless, Obi-Wan supposed, he had a very good reason to pass unseen.

Obi-Wan frowned a little, turning in a slow circle and broadening his focus, turning his attention to the specific location Infernalis had picked for his ambush. It was not one he would have picked—but there was something vaguely familiar about it, something that would read as an advantage under different circumstances, perhaps; if he could just—

Ah. I see it now.

“I think,” he said slowly, “we might find some trace of our new friend in prison records. Look at where he chose to set his ambush—not the best cover from the air, for example, but a lot of tight corners to trap opponents in, and likely to be in the security cameras’ blind spots.” Exactly the sort of place someone in prison would identify as a good position from which to pick a fight with another inmate.

Anakin considered, eyeing the space, and nodded. “Yeah,” he said again. “Yeah, I see what you’re saying. Plus, he’s brutal and efficient, and he stands his ground. He doesn’t linger when he doesn’t have to—but he...displays. Dominates.”

“Yes.” Much like stabbing a man with a fork, Obi-Wan added in the privacy of his own mind. Unlike Specter, who had been more a thief in the night--just as efficient and not at all less brutal, in his way, but.

It was a fairly radical change, going from an eager-to-please teenager who relied on speed and stealth and surprise, to a seasoned adult who relied on overwhelming displays of force. One who had spent significant time in, by the looks of things, a high-security prison, while Specter had been, so far as Anakin could tell, a solitary street thief who had never been caught. Obi-Wan wondered exactly why the Emperor had made the shift.

Something that I think will take a great deal of consideration to figure out. Assuming we can even fathom Palpatine’s motives here.

He sighed. “Can you spot anything else that might be relevant?” he asked.

Anakin shook his head. “I don’t think we can get much more from here. Not at this point. But I want to see if we can find security footage when we search the office too, to confirm what we’ve
guessed, if we can Maybe get a little more, even. If we’re lucky.”

Unlikely--given the camera blind spots--but they might get something out of watching Infernalis’ approach and exit. Species, at least basic body type, and how he moved, if nothing else. Useful information, when preparing to confront him. Especially if he did decide to take a more subtle, Specter-like approach when he came after them.

“All right,” he said. “Why don’t you look into that, while I see what I can pull from the shipping manifests?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Anakin agreed.

Once the decision was made, no further discussion was necessary. The two of them headed for the security office, taking an irregular path to avoid the remaining cameras and silence any guards. Obi-Wan took the lead, with Anakin half a step behind, to cover him.

Although--

Looking closer at the cameras, something seemed slightly off about the few he spotted.

Anakin signaled briefly; he’d noticed it, too.

Someone else is here.

And not a shipping company official, and probably not any Imperials, either; they wouldn’t have disabled the cameras.

Another thief. Maybe friendly, maybe not. Better not to take chances.

Obi-Wan nodded once, and gestured for Anakin to take a wider loop. He nodded and leapt out of view, circling around to find another entrance.

The threat was probably low-level, or they’d most likely have had more warning than the cameras. Most likely, one or two of the pirates had circled back to try and salvage what they could, or possibly seek vengeance for their fallen comrades. He and Anakin could flank them with little difficulty, detain them, and have an even better chance at real intel, on both Infernalis and the convoys.

Further signs of trouble as he entered the post; the lone security guard who had been on duty was dead just inside the door, slumped over with a neat blaster wound in the center of his forehead.

He could sense Anakin already in position at the other end of the hallway, as they closed in on where their unexpected companion was, in the main control room.

A raised eyebrow, when they met-- any other trouble?

Anakin shook his head. One dead guard. You?

The same. Shall we?

He grinned, shifted his grip on his lightsaber, and slammed the door button.

It slid open to reveal a single intruder, a young Nautolan woman at the main desk. She spun around, bringing a blaster already in her hand to bear and--

--wait!
Obi-Wan held out a hand to stop Anakin. “Moonshot?”

She blinked, and lowered her weapon, her presence thrumming with surprise. “Ben?”

“Yes,” he said, and put his ‘saber away, relieved. Partly because their unexpected companion was not a threat after all, but largely because…

He’d gone back, about two months after that-- disaster of an Empire Day mission, once Anakin was safe and at least well on the way towards recovering, and tried to re-establish contact with Moonshot and her cell, but they had vanished by the time he arrived. He had...he had feared the worst.

“It’s good to see you again,” he went on. “Good to see you’re all right. This is--”

“Kitster,” Anakin supplied. “Good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said, and flashed him a brief smile. “Sorry about the--” She gestured at her gun.

“Don’t worry about it,” Obi-Wan said.

“It’s not like we didn’t have the same reaction, when we figured out we weren’t alone,” Anakin added.

“Yeah,” she said, then paused. “It’s...it’s good to run into you, too. We...uh, we weren’t sure you’d made it out alive. We waited, a couple days, for you to make contact, but…”


“Lucky didn’t make it,” she said, very softly. “But the rest of us got out, at least mostly intact. Cleaver figured we should scatter, afterwards, all the same. Especially after I did a little more digging into Thrawn. He’s got one hell of a reputation.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Yes, I know.”

“We haven’t kept in close touch, but we all know how, just in case. We didn’t want to disintegrate. Just...”

“Disappear for a while,” Anakin finished for her.

“Exactly.” She, sighed and shook her head. “What were you guys doing here, anyway? If it’s all right to ask.”

“Couple things, really,” Anakin said, after exchanging a glance with Obi-Wan.

“We’re interested in what the attacked convoys were shipping,” he added. “Along with anything about the being who took out the pirates that were responsible.”

“There’s not a lot here, unfortunately,” Moonshot said. “I’ve been going over the system in a lot of depth, but the official investigators all already wiped it pretty clean. There’s some security footage, though--the guy you’re looking for is Mirialan, and big for his species.”

“It’s a start,” Anakin said. “Can I take a look?”

“Sure,” she said, and got out of the chair to make room for him.

“Thanks,” he said, and pulled out a datacard to start downloading everything he could. They could
go over it in more detail later, maybe find something the Imperial cleaning crew had missed. Not that there was likely to be much, but every little bit helped.

“What about you?” Obi-Wan asked. “Were you hunting down anything in particular here?”

She shook her head again, tentacles swaying. “Just general route and security detail information. I’m mostly smuggling food and medical supplies these days, stuff that’s not actually illegal to have on my ship, just...illegal or prohibitively expensive wherever I’m taking it. But I like to keep my hand in, about the bigger things. Feed information to some of the others, or...or other friends of mine, if nothing else. So after this depot was cleaned out, I figured it was worth seeing what I could find.”

Which made perfect sense. “Any luck?”

“Not really,” Moonshot admitted. “Like I said, the cleaners were pretty damn thorough.” She paused for a minute, then glanced over at Obi-Wan again. “But...while we’re on the subject, about my old team and me being in loose contact?”

“Yes?”

“Well, we are,” she said. “So...so if you and your people have something big planned...”

*She could bring her cell on board. What’s left of it, anyway--if they’ve scattered, something may have happened to the others, not just Lucky.* That was--very encouraging news. “We don’t,” Obi-Wan said. “Not at this time, anyway. But...”

“Someday we will,” Anakin said, looking up from the screen. “And in the meantime, we are trying to bring people together. Form links between cells that aren’t just--well, Ben, mostly, actually. Sometimes--uh, Ashla.”

*We...probably should have taken the time to iron out default code names for situations like this sooner,* Obi-Wan thought. *So he didn’t stumble over Ahsoka’s like that. And so I’d know which of his aliases he was going to pick before he does it.* Anakin had six or seven names that he rotated between at random; he mostly used them to add another layer of secrecy to his trips to the farm. None of them would hold up on a Core world, but for getting through what little spaceport security there was on Tatooine, or for providing a code name to another resistance cell, they were sufficient.

Moonshot nodded. “Well, even apart from my old cell, I have some contacts I could help you get in touch with,” she offered. “I mean...it’s mostly people like we were. Scattered cells of a couple dozen people at most. But some of them are also a lot more mobile than we were.”

Which had been one of the bigger problems in trying to integrate all the--he hesitated to call them field units. All the active combat cells, then. Most of the ones he’d made contact with were still so focused on their local problems that, apart from being willing to trade intel and supplies along the lines he’d set up over the past seven years, they weren’t in a position to look at the larger picture. And he couldn’t really blame them. In the places where things were bad enough, where the Empire’s hand was heavy enough, to spur people into action, the local problems usually needed that kind of attention.

But if Moonshot could put them in touch with mobile cells, that were already employing hit-and-fade tactics on a larger scale, and would be willing to at least take steps towards a wider battleground, to fighting the problem at the source, rather than desperately trying to keep their corner of the galaxy from bleeding to death...
It wouldn’t be the kind of force they would need, not yet, but it was a step in the right direction.

“We would appreciate that, very much,” he said. “Thank you, Moonshot.”

“Of course,” she said. “I’m sorry I can’t do much more than give you names right now, but…”

“It’s a lot,” Anakin said. “Reliable contacts mean a lot, Moonshot, believe me.”

She nodded. “And—you know, if you guys need a courier somewhere, my wanted posters aren’t too widespread. Even after our last meeting.” She grinned a little at Obi-Wan. “So I can probably get--maybe not all the way to the Core, but deeper into the Mid Rim than you two probably could.”

“We’ll remember that,” Obi-Wan said. With any luck, they wouldn’t need it for something so drastic, but it certainly would have made getting Anakin’s prosthetic a great deal easier, if they’d had a reliable courier of their own to turn to.

“Great,” she said. “I--can’t stay much longer, or I’ll miss my ride, but...do you have a way I can get in touch with you? Dead drop or something? That’s probably the safest bet.”

“We’ve got a couple,” he said. “Kitster?”

Anakin, who helpfully always had hard-copy writing materials on him, wrote out a couple locations. “We try to check these as often as we can, but sometimes it’s a while before we get there,” he said.

“Got it,” she said, sticking the paper into a pouch in her belt. “I’ll be in touch as soon as I can. In the meantime…” She tore off the bottom of the page, grabbed Anakin’s pen without asking, and scribbled down a couple things. “These are some people you can start with. Tell ’em Druthi sent you. They’ll know who you mean.”

Which may or may not have been her real name, but as long as it opened those doors for them, Obi-Wan didn’t really need to know more. “Right,” he said.

The console chimed softly.

“Shift change,” Anakin said, glancing at the screen. “In ten minutes. We should go, too.” He pulled the datacard out of the machine.

Obi-Wan nodded. “Thank you, Moonshot,” he said. “Or--I’m sorry, would you prefer…?”

She shook her head. “Either,” she said. “I should go. I’ll see you soon--it was nice meeting you, Kitster. And...both of you, good luck.”

“May the Force be with you,” Obi-Wan replied softly.

She nodded and disappeared down the back hallway.

Anakin, beside him, let out a breath. “So...that was...good. Really, really good. The whole day has been...good.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “It was.” Even if we turn out to be completely wrong about Infernalis, even if we don’t get anything else off that datacard...finding Moonshot alive and gaining a new set of contacts is has been one of the most solid wins we’ve had in a very long time.

He started to say something else, paused, then shook his head. “I think we should go, before it decides to explode or something.”
“Things don’t generally decide to explode, Anakin,” he said.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I mean, really sure? Because, I mean, in my experience…”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “Come on, I’d rather not have to fight my way through security again.”

“Yeah, good point,” he said, then double-checked to make sure the datacard was secure. “After you, Master.”

He nodded once, pulled out his lightsaber just in case, and headed for the door.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, guys! Sorry this chapter is so late, work/life/etc. intervened...

Also! The bonus I mentioned a couple weeks ago (for one whole year of Precipice) is up on my writing tumblr, if you want to check it out!

~shadowsong
Part 5, Chapter 7

Well, that went well, Ahsoka thought, peering up at the hole in the ceiling.

Neither of them was hurt, at least—not seriously anyway; a few bruises apiece, but she’d at least managed to slow their fall enough that that was it. It also helped that she’d managed to make sure she ended up on the bottom. She could take the impact a lot better than Leia could.

Getting out, on the other hand…yeah, that was gonna be a challenge.

The hole up above them was—well, if Ahsoka had been by herself, it wouldn’t have really been a problem. She could jump out, easy, and manage her exit so she wouldn’t just crash right back through when she landed on the surface. But it wasn’t quite big enough for her to fit through while holding Leia, and the landing would be that much riskier besides. And Leia probably wouldn’t be able to make the jump by herself.

She and Leia had spent the day sneaking through this forest, practicing techniques for simple recon. They hadn’t been on an actual mission, of course, just scouting the best way back to the spaceport where they’d left her ship from their campsite. So, they’d been looking for trails or other detritus left by sentients, so they could be either tracked or avoided, depending on the situation; and Ahsoka had been teaching Leia how to identify them as distinct from game trails. And figure out which natural trails, if any, were safe to follow, either for resources or to get a better vantage for a scouting mission.

And, on the subject of gaining a better vantage (and because Leia loved climbing things), they’d gone up into the trees to get a look around. Which had gone fine for the first half-kilometer or so, but then...

“Sorry,” Leia said. “Um. I swear the branch looked sturdier than that, and I’m usually pretty good at telling…”

Which wouldn’t have actually been an issue, if the ground beneath them had been more solid; but there was some kind of (fortunately long-abandoned) bunker or hiding place underneath, supported by mostly-rotted old timbers—probably a relic of some long-ago war or civil strife on this planet. Or maybe a mine; Ahsoka had no idea if there were any mineral resources here, but just going by design, this could have been part of a set of mine tunnels. If she had the time, or the resources, it might have been worth mapping them properly someday. Refurbishing them, even, for a future Rebel hideout or supply cache…

Well, whatever this cavern had originally been, and whatever use she and her friends might get out of the tunnels in the future, today, the supposedly-solid ground had buckled beneath her and Leia when they’d landed, dropping them several dozen meters deeper onto actually solid rock.

Ahsoka shook her head. “Not your fault,” she assured her. “These things happen, even when you know what you’re doing, and you’re still learning.”

Which didn’t say all that much for her, except that, in her defense, she’d been a little more focused on avoiding what looked very much like the nest of some kind of a bird of prey halfway down the treetrunk. The bird, at least, hadn’t noticed them—or, if it had, it hadn’t cared. Small favors.

Not that that made all that much of a difference now, of course. She sighed, and poked at a tear in her sleeve. “Your dad is gonna kill me, though,” she informed Leia.
Leia wrinkled her nose, and stared up at the very small opening to the cavern. “No, he’s not. I mean, I’m supposed to be learning how to do stuff like this, right? Get out of traps, or solve other problems and handle accidents and stuff.”

“Sure,” Ahsoka said. “Your dad’s still gonna kill me, because we didn’t plan this one out ahead of time.”


“He just worries about you,” Ahsoka said. “But, on the subject of learning how to get out of traps…”

“Right,” she said, and sat up again. “Um.” She squinted up at the hole again. “…could we climb the walls?”

Ahsoka ran a hand along them. “Hm. I don’t think so. Too smooth.” And not stable enough for me to carve out handholds we could use to climb up, either. The last thing we need is a further collapse. Same problem with her jumping up and widening the hole, then coming back for the kid. The odds that she’d bring down more of the ceiling than she needed were a little too high for comfort.

And, unfortunately, it was just the two of them on this trip. Anakin and Rex were running down a possible lead on a weapons research facility they’d found in some of the data Anakin and Obi-Wan had stolen a few weeks ago, and Obi-Wan was trying to establish contact with one of the cells his friend Moonshot has pointed them towards. So calling for help to extract them from above was not an option. They’d have to get themselves up and out somehow.

She pulled out one of her lightsabers and ignited it so they could see a little better. Worst case scenario, they could go laterally--whatever this tunnel system was, it had to have an actual entrance somewhere. But that would take time to find, and there was a good chance that, even with the Force to guide them, they’d be lost for a while. Maybe as long as a couple days. NOT ideal.

But, fortunately, there were bits and pieces of broken support timbers scattered around. Several of them were big--and hopefully solid--enough that they could maybe be used to piece together a ladder. Leia, at least, could climb up that—though Ahsoka wouldn’t trust her own weight to it—and she could spot her on the way, and work out the landing once they got up there and she could read the ground a little more clearly.

And, if that didn’t work, they’d just have to wander the tunnels until they found a way out.

“All right, I think I’ve got an idea,” she said. “Do you still have the rope with you, or did you drop it?”

“Um.” Leia checked her pack. “Got it!”

“Great. Okay, I want you to find the biggest and most solid pieces of wood you can.”

She nodded and the two of them got to work.

Ahsoka kept an eye on Leia’s search, sensing for any type of danger from the pieces she picked--unseen bits of rot, or potentially venomous insects making a home. But Leia, it seemed, was smarter than she’d given her credit for. She stopped halfway through picking up at least three bits that looked like some of the best, glowered at them, and moved on.

“I think we’ve got enough now,” Ahsoka said, after about a half hour. “Let’s start tying them
together, see if we can make a big enough ladder.”

“Okay,” Leia said, and sat down next to her, taking half of the pile of wood. She watched Ahsoka binding them together for a minute, then started copying her.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, then Leia shifted abruptly and muttered, “Ow,” followed by--

A word that a seven-year-old probably shouldn’t know.

“What happened?” Ahsoka asked. “You okay?”

“Splinter,” she said. “I forgot my gloves back on the ship, plus it’s hard to tie knots when I’m wearing ‘em.”

“Let me see,” Ahsoka said, setting her own wood aside and taking Leia’s hand. Fortunately, the sliver wasn’t in too deep. “All right, I got this.” She did have a basic medkit on her, always; she grabbed the tweezers and started working it out. “Also, this is probably the part where I’m supposed to tell you not to swear.”

“I promise never to do it again until the next time,” Leia said solemnly. “Ow!”

“Sorry,” she said, biting back a smile and adjusting the angle of the tweezers and starting to pull again, very gently. “Oh, I guess I’m already in trouble, and that part can be our secret.” Even if the accident itself probably couldn’t, especially if they wanted to use these caves later. “Just don’t say that word in front of your dad, okay?”

“Where d’you think I learned it?” Leia said, rolling her eyes. ...

...good point. “When he’s fixing things for your uncle and they’re not cooperating?” she guessed.

“Mostly,” Leia said.

“Some things never change,” she said fondly, setting the sliver aside and pulling out the disinfectant and her smallest bacta patch. “All right, you’re all set. Be careful, okay?”

“Uh-huh,” Leia said, and started back to her pile. Then she hesitated for a second, staring down at her bandaged hand. “...hey, Aunt ‘Soka, can I ask you something? Since we’re stuck down here and everything?”

“Sure,” she said. “I mean, I can’t promise I’ll answer, but if I don’t I’ll at least tell you why.”

“Sure,” Leia said. “Um. Do you ever...do you have dreams?” she asked. “About...about stuff that’s happening somewhere else?”

...oh, boy. Anakin had at least warned her about that.

She picked her words carefully before answering. “Well, I’ve never really dreamed about the present like that before,” Ahsoka said. “Or at least not clearly enough that I could tell that’s what it was. I mean, before I ran into your dad and Uncle Rex, I did dream about them and Uncle Obi-Wan sometimes.” Those hadn’t been true visions—not like that time with Padme and Aurra Sing on Alderaan. Just...vague impressions, that they were out there. And she never remembered the dreams in any detail when she woke up. Still, it was probably the closest thing to Leia’s dreams that she’d ever experienced.
“Right,” Leia said. “I think… I have dreams sometimes, which I guess someone already told you, but I think they’re kinda like that? They’re not warnings or anything. Those feel different. It’s like…it’s like this whole other person living in my head, with a whole other life all their own.”

“That’s more detail than I ever got,” Ahsoka said. “Does that bother you? That you pick up so much?”

“No,” she said. “Not most of the time. Sometimes it’s weird, I guess, but I always know what’s me and what’s the dream.”

“Which is important,” Ahsoka said. “Do your dreams ever make you want to get involved with…whatever this other person is struggling with, and you can’t? Is that what you’re worried about?”

“Not exactly,” Leia said. “Well, sometimes. When they’re really upset about something, or trying to help someone and can’t so they get frustrated. But it’s… I mean, most of the time, it’s sort of… nice, actually, ‘cause I get to see all these places I wouldn’t believe in if they were just pictures. Like the silver planet, and the green place.” She paused. “But… see, the thing is, this other person in my head is a lot nicer than I am.”

“Oh, yeah?” she asked.

“Uh-huh,” Leia said, wrapping another cord around the joined sticks. “I think that’s gonna hold, right?”

Ahsoka tugged at it, then nodded. “Yeah, that seems pretty solid.”

“Okay,” she said, and started piecing together another set of wood pieces.

Ahsoka added Leia’s to her own pile of finished rungs and started attaching them to each other, building the ladder itself. She didn’t say anything else just yet--Leia would probably get to the heart of her question without actual prompting. That was probably better, in the long run, anyway, for both of them. It would definitely make the discussion a whole lot clearer, if Ahsoka let Leia explain and then asked for clarification if she needed it, instead of making assumptions.

And, sure enough, Leia was only quiet for a minute or so before picking up where she’d left off. “It’s actually kind of good. I mean, it helps. That they’re such a nice person.”

“What do you mean?”

Leia frowned. “Well, sometimes, I get mad. Or, like, when Daddy got—when he got really hurt, before, with his leg. I wanted to do really mean things to the person responsible. And I talked about it with Uncle Obi-Wan later, and he said that that wasn’t… that that didn’t make me a bad person or anything.”

Because everyone has knee-jerk reactions, and impulsive thoughts, and not all of those are good, or Light, Ahsoka thought. But it’s how you process them, what you do with them, that really matters.

“But…I mean, I dunno if this other person has thoughts like that, but if they do it’s not anywhere near as much or as strong as I do, I don’t think,” Leia went on. “So, like… when I do, I can stop and think about how they’d react, and it makes me a nicer person. … least until it’s time to stop being nice. And I think they also help me figure out when it’s actually time and not when I’m just mad. Does that make sense?”
“Sure,” Ahsoka said.

“But…” She hesitated, fiddling with the end of the rope. “But...does that make me a bad person?” she asked, very quietly.

“That sometimes, you need an example?” Ahsoka asked. “To figure out the right thing to do?”

She nodded. “‘Cause…’cause you and Daddy and ‘specially Uncle Obi-Wan always seem to just know, and...I don’t.”

“No,” she said. “No, sweetheart, it doesn’t. And--we don’t, you know. We argue about the right thing to do all the time.”

“Really?” Leia asked.

“Really,” Ahsoka assured her. “I promise. Look, everyone needs help and advice sometimes. And it’s definitely okay to ask when you’re confused about what to do, or you think you’re a little too close to a problem to make the right choice. I know I always do, and Uncle Obi-Wan, too.”

“And Daddy?”

“Your dad...well, he still has trouble with that sometimes,” Ahsoka said. “But he’s gotten a lot better about asking for help since you were born.”

“Okay,” Leia said, relaxing a little, her relief bleeding out into the Force. She dropped her half-finished ladder rung and darted over to give Ahsoka a quick, but fervent hug. “Thank you, Aunt ‘Soka.”

“Of course,” Ahsoka said, hugging her back. “Any time.”

She held her for a minute longer, then let go.

“Better?”

Leia nodded. “Lots.”

“Good,” she said, and smiled. “Come on, let’s try and get this ladder finished before we run out of daylight, okay? Remember to watch for splinters.”

“Yeah,” Leia said, and dove back into her work with determined enthusiasm. “...hey, is this like that one cave where Daddy and Uncle Obi-Wan almost got eaten by a gundark except you saved them?”

Ahsoka bit back a grin. “Not really. Why, are you worried about gundarks? Because I’m pretty sure they’re not native to this planet.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not worried.”

“...you wanna hear that story again, don’t you.” She should’ve guessed right from the start. It was one of Leia’s favorites.

She turned big, beseeching brown eyes on her, just barely visible in the dim light from the ceiling and Ahsoka’s saber. Not an easy face to resist. “Please?”

Ahsoka did laugh at that. It would make the time go faster, keep Leia from getting bored or anxious while they were stuck down here.
Besides, if she were completely honest with herself, it was one of her favorites, too.

“All right,” she said, and settled into a more comfortable position with the half-connected ladder rungs in her lap. “So, it all started a couple months after I first met your dad…”
Bail had, back during the War, served on several key finance committees in the Senate; and so he knew what kind of logistical nightmare it could be to keep an army supplied and functioning. Particularly when (or, at least, so they had thought at the time) no one had had advance warning or time to prepare.

Their rebellion, of course, was still probably at least a few years off from open war, at least on that scale; far enough, even, that a determinedly optimistic part of Bail could still almost credibly whisper ‘maybe we can fix this some other way, maybe it won’t come to that after all.’ But with the rapid expansion of Obi-Wan and Anakin’s contacts in the last year, Bail thought it was time to start preparing for that eventuality. No matter how much he wanted to believe that little voice in his head.

Especially since, in all likelihood, the logistical problems facing them would be far more difficult than any during the War had been. Even leaving aside the need to conceal their activities and cover their tracks, at least for a few years more, they didn’t have much of an infrastructure to start from. Even without an army before the clones had appeared, they’d had the Judicial department and a few intrasystem militias to build off of, and the resources and trade routes to adapt with reasonable speed when their backs were against the wall.

Truth be told, he’d actually been thinking about this particular problem for a while now, ever since he’d had to improvise a secure supply line when General Skywalker had been so badly hurt after killing Specter. Because information, and even the physical letters Padme and General Skywalker exchanged, had been one thing, and they’d had communication networks set up from the very beginning. But a much larger, easier to track physical object had taken some doing. If they’d had the necessary supply routes and everything set up before then, it wouldn’t have been quite so difficult. And when they were at a point where they would need to move significant volume--let alone weapons --they would need even more.

But, since then, solving those problems had kept getting pushed aside for more immediate priorities. Keeping up appearances on Imperial Center and elsewhere, managing actual crises and mercy missions as they came up, stealing time to visit his wife and daughter at home, evaluating his fellow Senators as potential allies or threats…

That last could be a particularly complicated one. There had been one incident, not too long ago, where Bail had misjudged the...sense of debt, for lack of a better term, that one of his colleagues had felt to Palpatine’s government. It was all due to a situation that Palpatine himself, of course, had engineered, but attempting to convince the Senator in question of that would have been difficult and time-consuming, and posed an unacceptable risk. If Mon and Padme hadn’t convinced him to take a step back and reconsider, things could have gone very wrong very quickly.

They had been, though. Disaster had been averted. But Bail had, as a precaution, pulled back a little from evaluating contacts as a result, freeing his attention for other things.

But between that near miss, and the fact that that Darth Infernalis was now active-- openly active, going on missions and committing atrocities the way Specter had; not just a name whispered between children--Bail was convinced that it couldn’t be put off any longer. Palpatine hadn’t missed a beat in replacing his dead apprentice, after all, which was symptomatic of the larger issue
of the overall disparity between the Empire and the nascent rebellion: the Emperor had the resources, at this point, to simply starve them out if he so chose.

Of course, this would not be a war won by resources alone—if Bail believed that, he might as well give up now; there was no way their movement could ever match the Empire for manpower and weaponry, no matter how carefully, or how far in advance, they planned. Not in his lifetime. Likely not even in his daughter’s, or her children’s.

Still, the more they could shrink that gap, the likelier their success would become. If—when—their conflict moved out into the open, they would need every advantage they could have. At the very least, it would go a long way towards limiting their losses, which was—not least at all. Too many people had died as a result of Sheev Palpatine’s evil and ambition already.

So, under cover of discussing an education bill that had been stalled for over a year, he had set up a meeting to start getting things in motion. They might even actually discuss the bill, at least for part of the evening, depending on how long their actual business took. It wasn’t likely to unstall, but there was always a chance

And every step forward, even on something seemingly unrelated to their movement, meant something. So Bail never gave up trying.

Mon arrived exactly on time, as she almost always did. He hadn’t explained exactly what the meeting was about, for obvious reasons, but she didn’t ask. They’d been doing this long enough; she knew he would brief her as soon as they were clear.

“Are we waiting for Padme?” she asked, once they’d gotten settled in his study and Captain Antilles had confirmed the countersurveillance measures were up and running.

He shook his head. “She’s helping Pooja get situated.” Padme’s niece had joined her office as an intern at the start of the new session, after the Founding Week holiday, and Padme had promised her sister that Pooja would be kept far away from any Rebel activity.

Which Bail completely understood—Pooja was only a few years older than Winter, after all, and the idea of his daughter getting involved in all of this horrified him. And Breha felt the same. Padme’s sister, who wasn’t even directly involved herself, probably felt even more strongly on the subject.

“She may join us later,” he added, “but she said to go ahead without her. If she can’t make it, I’ll update her tomorrow, after the nature preservation committee session.”

“Right,” Mon said, and accepted a cup of tea. “What’s going on? Did something happen, with your…friends?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “More of the same, really.”

“All right,” she said. “Not exactly?”

He nodded. “Just…general trends, that got me thinking. I believe that we need to start putting some serious thought into dependable funding, among other things.”

“Things are moving that quickly?” she said.

“For a given value of quickly,” he conceded. “But I think we’ll be at a point where we need a real base of operations sometime in the next five to ten years. Assuming our…field network keeps developing the way it has been.”
That was the primary issue, really; and potentially the hardest to solve with any kind of speed or security. But they would need something truly centralized in order to actually integrate the disparate cells and resistance movements across the galaxy. Depending on Obi-Wan and the others running from cell to cell, and recruiting couriers like the Nautolan Moonshot to maintain the communication links when the Jedi couldn’t, was a temporary solution at best.

“I see,” she said, and set her cup down. “I don’t suppose they’ve stumbled across any reasonable locations?”

“One or two,” he said. “But I don’t think they’ve been looking in particular. I haven’t discussed this with them yet. I wanted things set on our end first.”

“Of course,” she said, and frowned, considering. “I can start looking into base sites--there are a few places I can think of already, actually, that have some sort of facilities we can adapt, which makes things easier. But once we have a base, and soldiers to populate it…”

He nodded. “We’ll need to supply it.”

“I think you’re better established to start working on that,” she said, after a moment of quiet thought. “Most of the communication already goes through you anyway, and we can build on that, I think.”

“Probably,” he said. “At least for getting the supplies to the base. But in terms of acquiring them…” In the scale they were starting to build to, there was simply no way they could get what they needed legally.

“I’d prefer to go to the black market rather than steal things ourselves,” she said, immediately. “On that issue, obviously, we’ll want Padme to weigh in--I think the risk of exposure is about the same either way, but the potential loss of personnel bothers me.”

She had a point there, but he wasn’t entirely sure he agreed about the risk of exposure being equal. That, however, was a debate they could have another time. Particularly since, as Mon said, they would need Padme’s input to make a final call.

“And that brings us to the question of funding. Even if we could manage something on the scale I’m picturing out of our personal discretionary funds, I’m concerned about the ethical implications.” The last thing he wanted was to set their party up as an oligarchy, with the implication that newcomers had to either buy or be born into positions of leadership. Not that he or Padme or Mon ever would, of course, but…

Appearances in politics meant a great deal. And they could not afford the appearance of overthrowing a dictatorship only to replace it with their own, however benevolent. Even if they made changes to the structure of the Republic, when they restored it, it couldn’t be that.

Something else they needed to start discussing, perhaps. If they found the time. There was no way the transition back to democracy would be entirely smooth, no matter how quickly or cleanly the open conflict phase of the restoration of the Republic went. But the more they could do to mitigate that, the better it would be.

Mon nodded, and started to answer, but Captain Antilles tapped on the door.

“Sorry to interrupt,” he said. “Senator Amidala is on her way up.”

“Of course,” Bail said. “Thank you.” Which was good timing, as well--Padme was still more familiar with the Banking Clan’s convoluted regulations than either he or Mon was. With her input,
they would be better able to make an informed decision about how to pull all of this off.

Padme was only a moment behind the Captain’s warning. “Good evening. I’m so sorry I’m late,” she said.

He shook his head, and passed Padme a cup of tea. “Pooja’s doing all right?” Bail asked.

“Yes,” Padme said, and smiled. “Luke’s very excited to have her here. He’s planning to show her all over the Senate district tomorrow. Dorme’s going to take them.”

And would probably be a better guide than a small child. But it wasn’t surprising--Bail knew that Luke got along reasonable well with his cousins, age difference aside, and he’d had a lot of fun showing Winter around, too, when she’d visited. “I’m glad to hear it,” he said.

Padme nodded. “So, what have I missed?”

Mon filled her in, as succinctly as she could.

“Huh,” Padme said. “So, to sum up, we have three problems--finding and concealing a long-term base that can support a small army, finding and securing a dependable supply chain, and finding a way to safely fund all of this. Right?”

“More or less,” Bail said. “I can probably expand our communications network, which is a start, but moving any high volume material--” He shook his head.

“I think our allies have some resources in the Outer Rim,” Padme said.

“Maybe,” Mon said. “But connecting our suppliers to theirs, not to mention verifying and securing routes, will still be a problem.”

“Yeah,” Padme said. “I can check some of my contacts, and have my handmaidens do the same. I’m not sure where to start looking for a base, though.”

“What about funds?” Bail asked.

She considered, tapping the rim of her teacup. “Sourcing credits is going to be the hard part, I think. Concealing them--I know how to do that.” Her mouth twisted a little, at unpleasant memories Bail knew better than to ask about. “It’s the same problem as political recruitment, really. We all know how to raise money, it’s finding sources that won’t betray us.”

Which would be both easier and more difficult than cultivating political assets within the Senate, since quite a few of them would be technically outside the political structures they’d spent the bulk of their professional lives learning to navigate.

“Why don’t you go ahead and set up the accounts?” Mon said. “And all of us can start sounding out allies of this type, as well.”

“All right,” Padme said.

“If you feel like you should wait, while your niece is here,” Bail started.

But she shook her head. “No, not for the accounting part,” she said. “Maybe for running down possible supply chains, but if I leave that to Sabe and the others for now, it should be fine.”

“All right,” he said. “Let us know if that changes.”
“Of course,” she said.

“Now,” Mon said. “Can you talk us through at least the bare bones of what you’ll be doing? The more we know now, the easier it will be to coordinate once we have a source or two to tap.”

“Sure,” she said, and pulled out her datapad.

And after that, if they had time, they would either switch gears to talking about the education bill--in case anyone asked them about the progress they’d made--or start putting together lists of potential locations or things they’d need.

The point was, they were making progress, and Bail felt a weight lift off his shoulders. They had all learned the hard way, through the War and its aftermath, that being caught off guard was costly, in terms of lives and resources and all those intangible things that made them who and what they were. But this time--they would be prepared this time, if--when--the worst happened. They would be not only willing, but ready to meet it.

With that, and a little bit of luck, maybe this war, when it finally broke out in earnest, wouldn’t have to last three long and bloody years.

Bail sincerely hoped it would be so.

Chapter End Notes

Hi, guys! So sorry about the long unplanned hiatus. Life got a little bit in the way, and this chapter ended up being hard for me to put together, due at least in part to writing about people much smarter than me talking about areas in which I have no expertise...

Anyway! The plan at this point is to actually put two more chapters out before the end of the calendar year, which should bring this arc to a close, and hopefully I'll be back to regular weekly updates starting with Part Six in January.

Thank you so much for your patience, and for sticking around this long <3
~shadowsong
Part 5, Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

As a note, towards the end of this chapter someone is briefly buried under a pile of rubble. They don't freak out about it and they get out very quickly, but if that's something that gets to you, I just wanted to give you a head's up <3

Anakin secured the next set of explosives, then dropped back down to the factory floor; he studied the rest of the workroom, considering. A few more charges, and he’d be able to bring the ceiling crashing down. Between that and the other sabotage he’d done over the past few hours, after the workers had cleared out for carefully scheduled routine maintenance, he’d put this place out of business for at least six months.

Definitely a good thing, on all counts.

He had maybe two hours and a half hours before the early shift showed up, just before dawn. But, assuming nothing went spectacularly wrong, that wouldn’t be a problem; he’d be out of here in less than half that time. That would leave enough of a margin of error that he was almost certain to get clear before he actually hit the detonator--very important, since the factory’s guards would secure the perimeter fast-- while still leaving enough room on the other side to minimize collateral.

It was...well, it was just like any number of missions he’d gone on in the last several years. Better than some, even. This factory built weapons, specifically turret cannons for Star Destroyers and military bases on the ground, which meant it was a relatively clear-cut target. Almost as simple as they came, really.

But ever since he’d landed two days ago for recon, something had been bothering him about the whole thing; he just wasn’t quite sure what yet.

Nothing unusual had happened; not during his recon, or when he’d sliced into the factory’s computer to tweak the maintenance schedule and expand his window, or on his approach past the stormtroopers who had remained on guard, or with his sabotage thus far.

And yet--well, and yet.

He sighed, picked another promising support beam, and vaulted up to it to plant the next set of charges.

It probably wouldn’t have been quite as bad if he’d had someone to talk to. But Obi-Wan was on his own mission, helping out one of the cells Moonshot had linked them to, and he’d needed Rex as backup more than Anakin did this week. And Ahsoka was working with Leia again, having sworn up and down that there would be no more treetop adventures over unstable ground.

That was probably a big part of his uneasiness, come to think of it; he was always tense when Leia was on one of her off-planet trips, especially without him, and especially when the last one had come so close to putting her in real danger.
Still, it wasn’t all that unusual, for him to fly solo like this. And, sure, the two days of solitary recon had had him clawing at the walls a little bit—it always did; recon was one of his least favorite assignments and always had been—but not enough to make him this antsy. Plus, he had Artoo with him, just a quick call away on the Waterfall, ready in case he needed an extraction in a hurry. So he wasn’t completely alone.

Maybe it was because their tip about this place hadn’t come from one of their usual contacts. But the source was a friend of a friend of his old friend Kitster, and he knew Kitster wouldn’t be party to setting him up.

Not intentionally, anyway.

*Or maybe I’m just being paranoid,* he thought, double checking the link between the charge and the remote detonator. *It wouldn’t be the first time.*

It was probably all of it together, really—the relative isolation, the untested intel source, Leia on a trip—which touched at something vaguely familiar in the back of his mind, but he couldn’t quite--

There was a sudden, perceptible change in the air.

Anakin was no longer alone in here.

He shifted position so he would be a little less visible from the ground; the metal support beam creaked faintly as his right hand gripped it a little too hard.

And then he went still, half-holding his breath, stretching all senses out towards the workroom’s only entrance; waiting for the threat to reveal itself.

With any luck, it was just local security—he’d done his best to cover his tracks and give himself a clean window, but that was never a guarantee. And if that were the case, it was better to try and avoid notice. Mind trick them so they wouldn’t see the bombs, send them on their way, and finish up as quickly as he could.

Of course, when the hell had he ever been that lucky?

Anakin sensed him a moment before he appeared in the doorway; Mirialan, tall for his species, built like a tank.

That, coupled with the cold, hungry tendril winding its way through the Force, could only mean one thing.

*Oh, karking hell.*

He thought back, trying to remember if there was anything about this planet or this factory that the Chancellor would consider worth sending his apprentice to deal with. Nothing came to mind, which meant either he’d missed something, or Kitster’s contact had screwed them both.

Except--

Darth Infernalis had paused in the doorway, head tilted. He went for his lightsaber, but slowly; wary.

*...if this is an ambush, it’s as much a surprise to him as it is to me.*

Well, *that* changed everything.
Because, yeah, going up against a Sith Lord by himself had never ended well, but Anakin had every advantage in the moment--he was stronger, more experienced, and he’d spent the last two and a half days learning the lay of the land. Plus, if he killed Infernalis here, that would set the Chancellor back at least a year or two, while he maneuvered his next apprentice into place.

Really, Anakin would be stupid not to engage.

The next instant, he vaulted down from the ceiling, lightsaber springing to his hand. He activated it a split second before impact, aiming a swift downward stroke at the center of Infernalis’ skull.

Infernalis sidestepped, activating his own ‘saber and throwing it up to deflect Anakin’s.

Just like Obi-Wan had guessed weeks ago, the Sith Lord’s blade was longer than usual by several centimeters. Fine; Anakin knew exactly how to handle that-- crowd him. Stay inside his reach, so he couldn’t use it properly.

So, he shifted his grip; drawing on some of Ahsoka’s technique--a reverse grip was particularly useful in close quarters--and pressed his advantage.

Infernalis was not comfortable on the defensive, and it showed. He bared his teeth, but he gave ground, step after step after step, barely keeping up with Anakin’s furious onslaught, trying and failing twice to turn the tables on him.

After the second attempt, Anakin scored a hit; cutting deep into Infernalis’ left shoulder. The angle was off; he didn’t actually sever the arm.

_Damn it._

Infernalis yelped, then lashed out, flinging a bolt of lightning in Anakin’s direction.

It went wide, but it was enough to drive him back a few steps.

Infernalis _snarled_ and leaped at him, enraged by pain and fueled by adrenaline.

Anakin held his ground--the Sith Lord wouldn’t be able to sustain his assault for more than a few seconds, and as soon as it let up, he could--

He felt a faint flicker of motion at his wrist, and then Infernalis abruptly disengaged, backflipping to put some distance between them and landing at the door.

Anakin launched after him--realized, a split second too late, _exactly_ what that flicker was--

Infernalis smirked at him. “See you soon, Skywalker,” he said, and activated the stolen detonator.

He threw up a shield as fast as he could to protect himself from the worst of the explosion, and then the world disappeared in a cascade of molten steel.

Infernalis trudged wearily onto his ship, wounded arm throbbing uselessly at his side.

_That, he thought grimly, could only have gone worse if Skywalker had actually killed me._
It was supposed to be a simple assignment--the factory manager was skimming; writing off perfectly functional parts as defective and selling them at a deliriously high markup on the black market. The kind of operation Infernalis would have appreciated, even participated in, a few years ago.

Of course, he had different priorities now.

Today’s task was: show some finesse, but make an example of the thieving manager.

*That*, of course, had gone completely out the window as soon as he’d arrived and found Skywalker already there. Instead of the nice, clear-cut murder he’d been sent to commit, Infernalis had been forced into a confrontation that he was in *no* way ready for.

Oh, sure, he was *delighted* by the idea of fighting and killing Skywalker; of being the one to finally vanquish the Jedi who had killed two of his three predecessors-- *someday*. But Infernalis was realistic about his own capabilities, and the simple fact was a neophyte Sith Lord with barely two years of training had no chance against a Jedi Knight with Skywalker’s power and experience.

The only thing that had saved him had been Skywalker’s bombs. He’d spotted them as soon as he’d entered the factory, of course. Infernalis had served a decade of hard labor in a cortosis mine, and had been sent there following his conviction for...call it something not too far off from Skywalker’s apparent goal. (*His* target, though, had been *much* more entertaining than an empty factory.)

The point was, he *knew* explosives.

With that in mind, all he’d had to do, really, was stick close to the exit and get his hands on Skywalker’s remote. And even *that* had pushed his skills to the very limit. If he’d been *any* slower to grab and activate the detonator...

Well, he’d managed. But it had only been a delaying action, in the end. He had absolutely no doubt that Skywalker had survived the explosion. The Jedi, much like Infernalis’ semi-legendary cyborg predecessor, seemed to be more or less unkillable. Infernalis wouldn’t credit reports of Skywalker’s death unless he’d been dismembered and set on fire--and even *then*, he’d have his doubts. Merely dropping a building on him certainly wouldn’t be enough.

Still, despite all of that, Infernalis *had* managed to get out of the factory with his head on his shoulders, which was no small victory.

Of course, *now* he had to figure out how to explain his catastrophic failure to his Master. Because not only had he failed to complete his actual mission, he’d allowed a significant threat to the Empire to escape *and* destroyed a reasonably productive weapons factory.

To say Sidious would be displeased was one *hell* of an understatement.

No help for it now. He’d just have to deal with whatever punishment was thrown at him when it came.

Infernalis growled a little, and plugged in the coordinates for Imperial Center. He closed his eyes and sank into a light meditation, doing everything he could to prepare himself for his arrival.

He might not be on Skywalker’s level--not yet, anyway--but he *was* a survivor, after all. He’d figure it out. Somehow.
Anakin came to in darkness, with his commlink shrieking anxiously in his ear.

“Shut up,” he mumbled.

It didn’t listen.

He groaned, and groped for it; finding it after a few seconds, he accepted the call without looking to see who it was.

/Where are you?/ Artoo asked. /I saw the explosion and you should be here by now. This signal is still coming from inside the factory. Why is your signal still coming from inside the factory? Are you damaged? Do I need to shoot people for you again?/

“Hey--uh--slow down, one question at a time,” he said. He opened his eyes cautiously, to find--okay, less darkness than he thought. He could see substantial patches of moonlight. He wasn’t buried too deep.

Oh, good. Small favors.

/Good, you’re alive,/ Artoo said. /You’d better hurry, the stormtroopers are already sealing a perimeter./

“Of course they are,” he said. “Hang on.” He set the commlink aside and closed his eyes, searching for the edges of the rubble and the safest way to lift it off of himself.

Okay, I think--there. He gripped it tight and pushed, feeling it shift at his command, just enough for him to wriggle out from underneath.

(Nothing like, he remembered with a twinge of grief that he tried to ignore, when he and Master Windu had been buried under half a cruiser a lifetime ago.)

He shook off the memory; Artoo was right, he needed to get out of here before Imperial security showed up.

“All right,” he said, picking up his commlink again and dragging himself upright. “I’m on my way. Get the ship running, we’re probably gonna have to take off as soon as I’m there.”

/Should I meet you halfway?/ Artoo asked. /And you didn’t answer my question./

“I’m fine,” Anakin said.

Artoo beeped something disbelieving that Anakin would never, in a million years, allow him to say in front of his daughter.

“I’m fine,” he insisted. I think. Probably. He took a careful, experimental step, and didn’t come crashing down. Eh, I can walk, that’s good enough for now. “And--no, hold tight ‘til I get there. We don’t wanna draw the troopers’ attention until we absolutely have to. Have Obi-Wan and Rex checked in with you yet?”

/No, but I expect them to call soon. Should I patch them through if they do?/

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, do that. Don’t bother calling them yourself, but, you know.”
/Yes, I know./ Artoo said. /Keep your comm on so I can find you if you collapse./

“Your faith in me is touching,” Anakin said dryly. “I told you, I’m fine. I still have the same number of limbs I did this morning and everything.”

Artoo was silent for a second. /That is disconcertingly specific./ he said.

Anakin winced a little. “Forget it. Just, uh, just patch Obi-Wan through if he calls.” He reached out and his lightsaber jumped out of the rubble to join him. “I’m headed your way.”

/I’ll be here./ Artoo promised.

Anakin slipped his commlink into his pocket, then closed his eyes. He picked the direction that felt safest, then started making his way across the rubble and out of what was left of the factory complex.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo I should probably stop promising extra updates, because without fail, as soon as I do, work/RL gets super busy. ^^;; Anyway, sorry that this is delayed, but I should be on time next week, at least?

Thanks for sticking around! <3

~shadowsong
Aunt Dorme had picked Luke up from the Palace after spending another afternoon with Lani, right when the sun was going down and flashing through all the buildings.

It had been a good day—they’d spent most of it out on her balcony, and he’d been trying very hard not to think about how easy it would be for the two of them to sneak out that way, if they could just distract her guards a little bit. It didn’t look like a very hard climb or anything—but then they’d both be in trouble.

*Also, she’s really little, I don’t want her to fall and get hurt again, like when she hurt herself a couple months ago,* he reminded himself.

Still, once he’d sort of seen a way to do it, he really just wanted to get her away from the red guards and the Palace with its unhappy walls and how it all made her seem so small and lonely, so he hadn’t exactly managed to talk himself out of thinking about how they could do it.

Even if they probably never would.

He couldn’t say any of that to Aunt Dorme, of course. He just watched the sun as they drove back to Mamma’s office—not the apartment, ‘cause Mamma had promised him that she would wrap things up early and they were going out for ice cream.

“So because we can,” Mamma had said that morning. “Besides, who *doesn’t* love ice cream?”

Luke was *not* about to argue with that. Especially since—well, he wasn’t sure, but he thought that Pooja had something she was supposed to do tonight, which meant *maybe* Mamma had time just for him. ‘Cause normally, every couple of weeks, Mamma made sure they had at least one whole morning, or afternoon, or evening like tonight, where it was the two of them spending time together by themselves. Except they hadn’t really had a chance since Pooja had gotten here, ‘cause she was staying with them, and he loved his cousin and having her here was *great* but he missed having special time with just him and Mamma a little bit.

So he was hoping, that was all.

Mamma’s office, when they got there, was really busy, just like it always was. She was at her desk, bent over a datapad with Threepio hovering next to her, Aunt Sabe was on watch at the door, Pooja was—Luke wasn’t exactly sure *what* Pooja was doing, really, except that it involved scrolling through a really, *really* long list.

“And this last one needs to be in—uh, one second, Pooja?”

“*Western Mountain Ryl,* Aunt Padme.”

“*Western Mountain Ryl, Threepio,”* Mamma finished. “Thank you.”

“Yes, of course, my lady,” he said. “Shall I--”

“Just a straight translation this time,” she said. “Senator Taa and I already went through the phrasing at length.”
From the way she said it, Luke figured Mamma had had at least four or five meetings with the other Senator, who he sort of got the feeling she didn’t like very much.

“Very well, my lady,” Threepio said. “I shall have it for you to seal and send in the next two hours.”

“Tomorrow morning is fine, Threepio,” she said, with a brief smile, then caught sight of Luke and Dormé at the door and her smile got bigger and warmer. “Just another minute, sweetheart, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, and found his usual seat in a corner with his favorite toy starfighter right where he’d left it.

Mamma went back into her desk, muttering something to herself, then finally signed off of her datapad. “All right, everything else can wait ’til tomorrow--Pooja, you’re set for the junior legislator’s reception tonight?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I just need to go home and change.”

“Motee?”

“Ready,” she said.

“All right, Pooja, you know the rules,” Mamma said.

“Back by eleven, and don’t do anything that would make Mom mad at either of us,” Pooja said, and grinned. “See you tomorrow, Aunt Padme.”

“See you tomorrow,” she said, then shooed her and Aunt Motee out the door. “All right, Lulu. Sorry about that, I was running a little late.”

“S’okay,” he said, and jumped down off his chair to give her a hug, still holding onto his starfighter. “Good day, though?”

“Yep,” she said, hugging him close. “Even better now.”

“Because ice cream?”

“Because ice cream,” she agreed, then took his hand and led him out the door and onto the lift down to the garage, leaving Aunt Elle to lock up, while Aunt Dormé and Aunt Sabe fell in behind them. “What about you? Did you have fun with the princess?”

“Uh-huh,” he said. “She’s got some really cool vines growing on her balcony. With little blue flowers except they’re just buds right now.”

“That does sound very nice,” Mamma said. “Hopefully next time, they’ll be blooming. I think she’ll like that, and I know you will.”

He nodded. “Yeah! Can I put flowers like that by my window, maybe? Not the same ones, ’cause I dunno exactly which ones she has, but pretty vines with flowers in them?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Mamma said. The lift chimed softly, letting them out where Captain Typho was waiting with Mamma’s speeder. “After ice cream, we can maybe look at some pictures and you can decide exactly what you want. And, since Pooja’s out tonight, I thought we could watch a movie or something, how does that sound?”

Luke beamed up at her, because that meant that she’d managed to clear all night, just like he’d
hoped.

“That sounds awesome,” he said, climbing into the car next to her and curling close. “Only you should pick the movie. ‘Cause I picked last time.”


“The most important,” he agreed solemnly.

She laughed and ruffled his hair, and the speeder started moving underneath them, on what had pretty quickly turned into the best day ever.

Leia and Aunt ‘Soka had gotten in really, really late last night; late enough that Aunt Beru had been a little bit mad at them, or at least at Aunt ‘Soka. Leia hadn’t really paid all that much attention, though; she’d been sort of half asleep the whole time and snuck off to her room as soon as no one was actually paying attention to her anymore.

The trip had been really cool, at least--more tracking and everything like last time, only on a big open plain with so much grass. No trees to climb, but also less likely for them to fall through the ground and land in a cave. It was also, Aunt ‘Soka had told her, a good place to learn how to be sneaky and not get caught somewhere it was hard to find places to hide.

Which she sort of already knew, from playing hide and seek in the desert with her friends, but the way she and Aunt ‘Soka did it was a lot smarter. And she’d done pretty good at the practice games, too. Or she thought she had, anyway, and Aunt ‘Soka would’ve told her if she hadn’t.

So, she’d come home pretty pleased with herself, even if she was really tired and Aunt Beru wasn’t very happy. And they’d let her sleep in this morning, too, judging by how hot her room was when she finally woke up.

Plus--

She sat up and tilted her head, concentrating.

Daddy had gotten home sometime after she and Aunt ‘Soka had, which was even better.

She grinned and wriggled down onto the floor and made her way over to the kitchen, where the two of them were talking and having caf together.

Daddy broke off mid-sentence when she came in--not secrets or anything, something about this season’s racing scores--and smiled.

“Morning, princess,” he said, kissing the top of her head when she got close enough. “Sleep well?”

“Uh-huh,” she said, climbing into the chair next to him. “What about you?” Up close, he looked tired, and she could see bruises peeking out from under his cloak, which looked a little bit burned.

“Well, I just got here, but I slept a little on the way,” he said, raising an eyebrow across the table at Aunt ‘Soka, who just shook her head and poured Leia a glass of milk.

“That’s good,” she said, picking up the glass and leaning into him a little. It was something,
anyway. Aunt Beru could yell at him later if he needed it. So could she.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and she could feel him relaxing--both outside and in her mind. “Missed you lots.”

“Missed you, too,” she said. “How long are you here for?” She hoped he’d get to stay for a bit longer this time--his last four visits had been really short, only a day or two each.

“A while,” he said, smiling down at her. “Maybe even a whole week, I’m not sure yet. But Uncle Owen asked me to look at a few things next time I was here, and Uncle Obi-Wan can spare me for a bit, so--”

Aunt ‘Soka rolled her eyes and muttered something Leia couldn’t really hear into her caf.

“I heard that,” Daddy said.

“I didn’t say anything!” she said, innocently.

“Not out loud, maybe,” he said. “But you were definitely thinking it, Snips.”

“Oh, that doesn’t count,” she said, grinning. “Come on, Leia, back me up.”

“Well, you did sort of roll your eyes,” she said. “But…” She tilted her head. That was mostly what Aunt ‘Soka did when Daddy was being dumb. And even if she didn’t know for sure… “I dunno, maybe Daddy deserved it.”

That made Aunt ‘Soka burst out laughing, which made Daddy throw a napkin at her, which she caught.

“Nice try,” she said. “Your daughter is wise beyond her years.”

He sighed, and rolled his eyes theatrically up at the ceiling. “Well, I’m not gonna argue with both of you,” he said.

“What are we even arguing about?” Leia asked.

“Long, boring story,” Daddy said easily, ruffling her hair. Which really meant something he didn’t want to tell her about. “The point is, I know when it’s time to retreat with grace--”

“Since when?”

“And,” he went on, completely ignoring Aunt ‘Soka and letting go of Leia to push himself up from the table, “I’ve got work to do, anyway. I’ll be out in the garage if you need me.”

Leia frowned a little, watching him straighten a little more carefully than she liked. It looked like he was just tired and bruised, but…

“Need a hand?” Aunt ‘Soka asked.

“Sure, if you want,” he said.

“Can I help?” Leia asked.

He considered for a minute, then nodded. “After you finish all your regular chores. And--do you have homework?”
She shook her head. "Regular lessons don’t start ‘til next week."

“I knew that,” he said. “All right, you can join us once you’re done with everything else.”

“Okay,” she said, and hopped down off her chair to hug him, carefully.

“See you later, princess,” he said, hugging back. “And depending on how much I get done today, we can maybe go out to the canyon tomorrow and you can show me some of what you and Aunt Ahsoka were working on. Sound good?”

“Sounds good,” she said; and then he let go, ruffled her hair one more time, and headed off toward the garage.

Aunt ‘Soka put a hand on her shoulder and squeezed briefly. “He’s okay,” she assured her. “Or he will be in a day or two. Just a little bit banged up.”

“Oh, okay,” Leia said, relieved. She’d thought so, but it was nice to hear for sure. Because he’d come home bruised and stiff and achy like this before, but this was—it hadn’t been this obvious since her sixth birthday. And even if it wasn’t nearly that bad… “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” she said. “See you in a couple hours, kiddo, all right?”

“Yep,” Leia said. She’d probably finish up faster than that, but she knew if she actually said it, Aunt ‘Soka would just give her that Look—the one she’d obviously learned from Uncle Obi-Wan—and remind her not to rush things when she didn’t have to.

Aunt ‘Soka flashed her a pointy little grin, then followed Daddy off to the garage, leaving Leia to find Aunt Beru and figure out what was on her list of things to do today.

Chapter End Notes

A little bit of domestic fluff on both sides to close out Part 5. Because they all deserve it.

Part 6, Reunion, will start with the next update!

:)  

~shadowsong
Part 6: Reunion, Chapter 1

It had been ten years since they had all gone their separate ways from Polis Massa.

Ten years of building careful alliances; of sabotage; of near-silence punctuated by whispered voices in the dark. Ten years of making slow and not always constant progress, but becoming something—something greater than five people who had made a pact, had agreed that they wouldn’t give up. That they would keep fighting, for as long as they still could.

Ten years had made them a movement.

They were still several years off from actually accomplishing their goals. Bail knew that. Still, looking back on everything they had accomplished in that time, it was hard not to be optimistic about the future.

Especially since, this week, after ten long years, Bail got to arrange for Padme to see her husband and daughter again at last.

Looking at the picture of his own family, sitting on the desk in his cabin on the Tantive, Bail was honestly more pleased about that than anything else, at least in the moment. Despite the logistical nightmare involved. It had taken nearly eight months of planning to make this work, including providing Obi-Wan, General Skywalker, and Leia with false papers that were high enough quality to get them through spaceport security. And, of course, he and Breha had needed to come up with a reasonable story for Padme and Luke’s visit. Ordinarily, this wouldn’t be a problem, given their long history of cooperation, but they’d needed to find something that required minimal public appearances from Padme, because Bail and Breha had determined that they could only keep the Jedi safe and undiscovered for three days. The fewer interruptions their friends had, the better.

Still, three days, after ten years apart—brief as it was, it was a precious gift, and one he was very glad he was able to give.

Bail would arrive a little bit ahead of the others, of course, so he could oversee a few last-minute details and make sure that the route from the spaceport to where Obi-Wan and the others would rendezvous with Palace security was clear. Padme had actually left Coruscant shortly before him, but was stopping briefly on Naboo for some last-minute duty regarding the recent royal election. He expected her no more than half a day after he landed.

The Jedi—would arrive when they arrived. He had a vague estimate of one or two days after Padme at the latest, but Obi-Wan hadn’t given him a lot of detail, for security reasons.

Well, all of that would have to wait until he actually landed and saw first-hand what still needed to be done. But Bail had plenty to do to keep him occupied on the trip there; between official Senate business and reworking a few letters he and Mon had drafted to send to certain sympathetic planetary authorities they had been cautiously courting for the past year.

But then, about an hour out from Aldera City, Bail was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called, closing and sealing the confidential and dangerous files he’d been reviewing.

Not entirely necessary, as it turned out, when the door slid open to admit Captain Antilles. Very little of what Bail did was unknown to his security chief, and nothing he’d been immediately working on.
“Sir,” the Captain said.

“What is it?” Bail asked, catching the look on his face and setting the datapad aside.

“We may have a problem,” he said. “May I?”

He nodded. “Please.”

Captain Antilles bowed slightly and activated the large viewscreen on one wall, dimming the viewports and ceiling lights at the same time. He pulled up an official news broadcast, revealing a scene of smoke and sirens on Coruscant.

Bail flinched a little, if only internally; for a moment flung back to the day the Temple burned.

He closed his eyes, took a breath, and shook it off as quickly as he could. He opened them again and leaned forward, trying to get a feel for where the footage had been shot and what the hell was going on before he asked any questions.

The first was easy enough. The explosion was in the very heart of the Senate district; on the far right of the frame, he recognized the distinctive stonework of the building where Senator Bel Iblis and a few of his other colleagues had apartments.

As for the second, though, no such luck.

He gave up, and glanced over at Captain Antilles. “When did…?”

“Far as we can tell, not long after we jumped to lightspeed,” he said. “An hour later, maybe two.”

Bail nodded, and turned back to the screen, pushing up the volume just a little to try and capture more detail.

The newscaster—a Human woman, blonde and dark-eyed; Bail vaguely remembered meeting her once or twice, but couldn’t recall her name—appeared, partially blocking the view of the explosion.

“We can now confirm that the Emperor was not in the vehicle at the time of the explosion,” she said. “No information regarding Princess Lavinia’s status or whereabouts has yet been released. We do know that—I am being told now that Grand Moff Tarkin has taken control of the scene, and that all those present in connection with the attack have been arrested or killed by Imperial security forces. A search for co-conspirators who were not on site is ongoing. We will announce the names and affiliations of these terrorists as soon as they become av—”

Bail switched off the display. Silence rang in the cabin for a long moment.

“Do we know more than the news is saying?” he finally asked.

“Our network as a whole? Probably,” Captain Antilles said. “But I would advise against trying to touch base to find out until we land and get to a secure line.”

Of course—a flurry of messages back and forth was probably the last thing they needed, especially with everything they had planned for this week. If the Captain had thought he could make inquiries safely, he already would have. And Bail trusted his judgment.

Unfortunately, that meant he didn’t have much to go on, and he had some very quick, very important decisions to make.

First and foremost among them, whether to try to call off the reunion.
The Jedi and Leia would have gone quiet while in transit, assuming they had already left Tatooine, which was likely. It was safer that way, for the same reasons Captain Antilles didn’t want to ask too many questions at the moment. Bail did have a way to reach Obi-Wan, if it came to that. It would have been tempting fate to leave that out of their plans—even with all their careful preparations, there was a great deal of risk involved in this meeting. They needed a failsafe.

But Bail had to assume that his friends were already en route at this point, which complicated things. Especially since he didn’t know all the details of the arrangements they’d made, so he wasn’t entirely certain how much room they’d have to maneuver if he activated that failsafe. He was pretty sure, though, that the three of them were flying in on some sort of charter, probably as part of a much larger group where they would hopefully not draw as much attention.

Which, unfortunately, made any attempt to divert once they were in motion significantly harder. Bail would be very surprised if Obi-Wan didn’t have some kind of contingency plan, but it wouldn’t be clean or quick, and it might put the three of them in danger anyway. So he didn’t want to take such a drastic step unless he was absolutely sure it was necessary.

And, with the scant detail available, that certainty was elusive.

What he did know—whatever had just happened, whether it was something Palpatine had staged for cover or a genuine attempt by an unaffiliated resistance cell, Imperial security would be tightened everywhere. And, yes, a great deal of work had been put in to ensure that the identities that the others were travelling under were absolutely airtight, but all it took was for one overzealous customs official to get suspicious and check something they couldn’t fake. The likelihood of that had now significantly increased; probably not as much on Alderaan as it would have on Coruscant, but still enough to give him pause. Come to think of it, he was glad that Padme had had that other errand to run and left when she did, before the planet was sealed, or she might have been caught behind the shields and they’d have missed their chance at this anyway.

On the other hand...on the other hand, everything was already in motion. And getting word to Obi-Wan, while possible, still risked exposing the Jedi. Getting word to Padme, in a way, was actually harder; since that would run the same risks of contacting any of their allies for more details about the explosion.

Not yet, he finally decided. The risk of going on is either still about the same or less than the risk of making contact. Until it’s greater, it’s probably better to leave things as they are. Especially since we know, more or less, what pitfalls we have to avoid right now, even with the--with the attack this afternoon. And what we might accidentally stir up by a sudden shift is a hell of a lot harder to predict.

“We proceed as planned,” he said quietly. “Unless you have a good reason otherwise?”

Antilles shook his head. “Nothing you don’t already know, sir,” he said. “I’ll update you as I hear things, especially if that changes.”

“Please do,” Bail said. He had more or less expected that answer; if the Captain had had specific advice for him, he would have said so straight out.

Antilles saluted briefly, then turned to go.

“A moment, please,” Bail said, and he stopped.

He hesitated; glanced up at the dark screen for a moment, then at the holo of Winter and Breha, placed comfortably on the corner of his desk.
“I’m...asking for conjecture now,” he said. “Who do you think the target was?” Which may not have been as important as who was behind the attack in the grand scheme of things, but at the moment, to him, it mattered a great deal.

“The princess,” Antilles said, immediately. “The broadcast didn’t show much of the scene, but what I could see looked more like the setup for an abduction than an assassination.”

And kidnapping the Emperor made no sense. Kidnapping his seven-year-old child, on the other hand…

Which just confirmed what he’d already suspected--if the attack was genuine, it was an unaffiliated cell. An assassination attempt might not have been, but no one in their network who was volatile or desperate enough to attack a child had the access to pull this off.

“Of course,” he said. “Thank you, Captain. Keep me posted.”

“Sir,” he said, then bowed slightly and left the cabin, leaving Bail alone with his thoughts.

Which were now lightyears away from what he’d been working on when interrupted, of course, but...well, the letters could wait. He considered for a moment, then put the broadcast back on. Watching it wouldn’t change anything, of course, but at least if he was paying attention, it felt like he was doing something. Besides, it was a better use of his time than worrying over whether he’d made the right call, in letting the reunion go forward.

Marginally.

The newscaster was onscreen again, saying precisely nothing useful--summarizing why Tarkin was on planet, and other bits of propaganda to fill airtime until she had actual authorized news to report.

He gave up after a few minutes, muting the screen but leaving it playing just in case there were any actual developments, and started working on a message for Mon, to send once they had landed safely. She would, of course, be in position to try and help the innocent bystanders who had gotten caught in Tarkin’s net after the explosion, but he wanted to coordinate and stay on top of things, so he could jump right into helping when he got back to the capital.

And one for Padme--as soon as she saw the broadcast, she would probably start asking herself some of the same questions he had already worked through. If she reached out and asked, he wanted to have the wording ironed out to confirm that things were still moving forward without exposing their plans.

Those tasks kept him occupied until the pilot announced they were coming in for a landing. Bail glanced up at the viewscreen one last time--Tarkin was making some kind of statement now; but there would be a recording he could review later--before switching it off and finally managing to bring his attention back to the actual task in front of him. He raised the cabin lights and the screens on the viewports at the same time, and the sight of Alderaan nestled there amongst the stars relaxed him, as it always did.

Tomorrow will bring whatever tomorrow brings, he told himself. Today, though--today, I get to do something uncomplicated and good, because it will brighten the lives of people I care about.

Focusing on that--and being so close to home, where he could see and hold his own wife and daughter again--was, if not quite enough to bring him back to the level of optimism he’d had when he left Coruscant, at least setting him back in the right direction.
Luke was not in his cabin.

To be fair, that wasn’t exactly uncommon. He liked to wander the ship when he got bored, especially while they were in hyperspace. Most of the time, this wasn’t really a problem, but right now, Padme needed to talk to him.

A conversation she really should have had days ago, if not weeks, but she’d been waiting for...something. Something she couldn’t really define. The right moment, maybe. But it had never really come, and now they were two hours out from Alderaan. There could be no more delays.

At least her ship wasn’t a very large one—even without getting any of her staff involved, it typically took a half hour, at the most, to track her son down when he wasn’t where she expected him to be.

It took even less time today. He was in the common area, perched on one of the couches and hugging his knees to his chest, watching a news alert from Imperial Center.

“The Princess was conscious and lucid when extracted from the speeder, and is now safely back at the Palace. We will continue updating you as further details on her condition are released.”

The reporter’s calm, near-monotone voice ran over Padme like a runaway shaak herd.

No. Oh, no, this can’t be happening. Especially not now.

Part of her--the calculating Rebel leader part of her--was scrambling to think of all this might mean for their plans. For this week, for the long term, all of it. *We’ve waited so long, and we’re so close now, who was behind this, how do we respond...*

But, then again, she’d found out from the *news*, not from a covert message from Bail. If there was any immediate worry, he would have reached out by now. So she trusted that he had things under control. Somehow.

That, of course, left her mind free to worry about her son, whose best friend had just been attacked and was hurt, maybe badly. And that demanded all of her attention right now. Her--revelation could wait until she was sure he was okay.

She took a breath to make sure she had properly steadied herself, then stepped into the room, switching off the viewscreen as she did.

Luke looked up at her, pale and stricken. “We’re going back, right? To the capital? Instead of Alderaan, because--because Lani’s hurt, and she needs friends right now, and…”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Padme said. She sat next to him and held out her arms, offering a badly-needed hug.

“We have to go back,” he said, his voice cracking a little.

Padme closed her eyes, and shook her head. “The Emperor will have locked down all the
spaceports by now. Even if we went back, we would never get clearance to land.”

“But--but you could...or Aunt Sabe…”

“Not this time,” she said. “I’m sorry, Lulu. I promise, as soon as--as soon as we get back…”

“But that’ll be days from now. Can we at least try?”

“No,” she said. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but no, we can’t. We have to make this trip, and...and you probably wouldn’t be allowed to see her until the security threat is resolved, anyway.”

He had been about to argue, but he deflated at that. He might not want to admit it, but he knew she was right. “I...I guess…” he said, glumly.

She hugged him close and stroked his hair. “What I can do is see if I can find out a little more from my contacts, all right? I can ask Uncle Bail, and have Dorme and the others start sending inquiries. We’ll probably know more than the news that way.” Not to mention more accurate than the news.

“Okay,” he said, and buried his face in her shoulder.

For a long time, they sat there without speaking. She just held him, wishing there was more she could do to make things better. Wishing that whoever the hell had attacked Princess Lavinia--well, of course she wished they hadn’t done it at all--children, no matter who their parents were, should be off limits--but especially right now.

Eventually, he pulled away. He seemed calmer now--still upset, but processing. Coping. Holding himself together.

He glanced over at the viewscreen she’d shut off.

And it wasn’t--good, to shift his focus like this. To bring him from hearing some of the worst personal news he ever had to what she hoped would be some of the best.

But it was her own damn fault for waiting for the perfect moment. Not only had it failed to come, she was now stuck with pretty much the exact opposite.

But what choice do I have at this point? she thought. Lulu, sweetheart, I’m so sorry for screwing this up. You deserve better.

“I’ll turn it on again in a minute,” she said, before he could actually ask. “But we need to talk first. There are some...some things I need to tell you before we get to Alderaan. Important things.”


And, for all the times Padme had rehearsed this conversation in her head, for all the focus and attention she’d given to planning what she would say, even more than most of her floor speeches in the Senate...now that she was actually here, it all flew out of her head.

I guess even if I had the perfect moment, it wouldn’t go the way I planned.

“Lulu...you’ve never asked me about your birth parents.”

That got his attention.

He blinked, and stopped fidgeting. “…no...?”
“Have you ever wanted to?” she asked. “Been curious?”

He shook his head. “Why would I? I don’t need them, I’ve got you.”

Which was exactly the way it should be, of course.

Then he sat up a little straighter. “Wait, why—why are you asking now? What do they have to do with—I thought they were dead?” His eyes widened. “Did they—are they not dead? Are they trying to take me away?”

“What? No, no, sweetheart, of course not,” Padme said. “No one’s going to take you away from me. Ever. I promise. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said, relieved. “But…but why are you asking me about them?”

“When you were born,” she said; just like she’d practiced, and she hoped it came out right. “When you were born…you were born right when the Emperor became the Emperor. And because of everything that had happened, because of the way the Clone Wars ended, that put your birth parents—your…your father, especially—in a lot of danger. And we were afraid that, because of that, you would be in danger, too.”

“So…” Luke said. “Wait. I don’t…I don’t get it? Who’s—is my father alive? What about my--did...did they give me to you? To keep me safe?”

She shook her head. “No, sweetheart,” she said. “No one gave you to me. I’m your mother. Your birth mother.”

He stared at her for a long moment. She could practically see him trying to make it make sense.

“But...but you adopted me?”

“Yes,” she said. “To protect you. And your father, and your sister.”

Which was the other part she’d worried about. Luke had been to Leia’s false grave at Varykino; he knew she’d had a daughter who was--gone. Padme had taken him to sit with her there a few times, and he might have gone there himself.

But for him to find out that that had been a lie...it still made her feel guilty and conflicted, and Luke had no way of knowing all the pressure and danger she’d been facing when she’d made that very difficult choice.

“My--my sister’s alive?” he asked. “I have a sister?”

She nodded. “A twin,” she said. “Leia.”


“Listen,” she said, “I know this is--it’s a lot to take in. And I’m sure you have all kinds of questions, and I’m sorry for not telling you all of this sooner, but--”

“Is that why I have the dreams?” Luke interrupted. “About the place with the wide-open sky? Are those--are those my sister’s dreams?”

“I don’t--um.” That wasn’t actually a question she was prepared for. She’d been ready for him to ask where they were, or who else had known, or why she hadn’t told him. But not about his dreams, which might or might not be visions. “I don’t know. Maybe,” she finally said. “Your father
Padme flinched a little. She tried very, very hard not to think about those awful days, when the information had come in short, unclear bursts and all she’d known was that Anakin was—was hurt, badly, and there was nothing she could do.

But she owed Luke those answers now, at least the broad strokes. She knew he’d overheard things he shouldn’t have—so she wasn’t…wasn’t totally surprised by the question.

“Yes,” she said. “That was…that was him.” Realizing how that might sound, she hastened to add, “But he’s all right now, so you don’t need to worry about that when you meet him.”

“Okay,” Luke said, and glanced one more time at the viewscreen, more thoughtful now.

“Princess Lavinia will get better, too,” Padme said, following his train of thought.

“I know,” he said, then shook his head and looked away, turning to hug her close. “Love you, Mamma.”

She hugged him back. “I love you, too,” she said.

He was quiet for another moment, then took a deep breath and changed the subject. “But…about my…my dad.”

And, even if part of him probably just wanted to think about anything other than his injured friend right now, he did want to know. He’d been excited for a moment, before he’d gotten distracted, full of questions about the family he’d just learned he had. He was trying, she thought, to fall back into that excited moment. He wanted to be happy about this.

For a long, long list of reasons, she was going to help him do that, however she could.

She kissed the top of his head. “Yeah?”

“Just…just…who is he?” Luke asked. “What’s he like? How come he’s in so much trouble with the Emperor?”

For a moment, Padme considered the best way to answer it, without just upsetting Luke again.

“But…your father,” she finally said, “is one of the kindest, bravest men I know. His name is Anakin Skywalker, and he’s a Jedi Knight…”
Well. *Mostly* excited, anyway.

“Still don’t really like our travel plans,” he admitted, in response to Uncle Obi-Wan’s skeptical eyebrow. Like he’d said *at least* twice a day since they’d left Tatooine. “Not enough flexibility for when and how we move.”

Uncle Obi-Wan gave a very tired-sounding sigh and started in on the same *response* he’d given every other time. “Given the resources we have--”

“I know, I know.” He shook his head. “Doesn’t mean I have to *like* it, though.”

“No, it doesn’t,” he said. “But it’s almost over. And then…”

“I know,” Dad said, and smiled a little. “Ten years.”

“Ten years,” Obi-Wan agreed, with a very faint smile of his own.

Despite what he’d said--what they’d both been saying *constantly* for the last *three days*-- Leia was pretty sure Uncle Obi-Wan didn’t actually like travelling like this all that much either. He was just better at hiding it.

And, to be fair, it *was* kind of weird to be flying in a ship that a stranger was piloting. So Leia understood why they were a little bit tense. Sort of, anyway.

On the other hand, it was hard for her to actually feel that way herself, given where they were going and *why*. Plus, it was actually sort of cool, to see the galaxy from a whole new perspective than she usually did, slipping around the galaxy on the *Waterfall* or Aunt ‘Soka’s ship with just her family. *And* they were going into the actual *Core*, which had never been safe to visit before.

It probably shouldn’t have been safe this time, even, except this trip had been building for *ages*. It had felt like something itching at the back of Leia’s mind for months, while Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan and everyone planned it. She’d known *something* was up, of course, but when she’d tried asking, Dad had just promised he would tell her as soon as everything was in place. And then changed the subject.

Which was *probably* a good opportunity for her to practice *patience*. Or Uncle Obi-Wan would’ve said that, if she’d tried asking him (she hadn’t; she knew if Dad wouldn’t tell her, he probably wouldn’t either).

Leia wasn’t all that good at patience, though. And it had been a long, *long* time of *knowing* something Big was going on, but not enough to figure it out. At least she was pretty sure it was a good thing. Which made sense--good things, people usually had to plan for, and Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan were *planning* something. Bad things, when they were big, only the Force knew until it happened.

She’d had a lot more silver planet dreams than usual since it had started, too, and that was usually a sign that important things were about to happen. Or around her birthday, for some reason. Even there, though, there had been a sense of *anticipation* coloring everything, even if it was a whole lot vaguer than when she was awake.

But then, *finally*, last week, Dad had come home more happy than distracted for the first time in ages. And, first thing, the two of them had gone out to the canyon, but instead of lessons, he just sat down next to her on the edge for a talk.

For a few minutes, they’d just sat there, quiet. Leia took her cue from him and watched the horizon,
focusing on a thin line of dust kicked up from a faraway speeder--too small to be a bantha, too fast to be an opie. Not headed their way, and not in any trouble. Probably one of the farmers who lived on the other side of the Wastes, going into town.

Nothing she needed to worry about, but it was good to practice ‘evaluating potential threats,’ like Uncle Rex said.

She had just decided that when Dad broke the silence at last.

“We’re going on a trip,” he said. “You and me and Uncle Obi-Wan.”

She looked up at him. Obviously, this was a very, very different trip than the ones they’d gone on before. Even without the building tensions over last few months, she’d probably have known that just from the way he said it.

“Okay,” she said.

“I didn’t tell you before,” he said, “because I didn’t--there were a lot of things that could’ve gone wrong, while we were trying to put this together. And I didn’t want you to get your hopes up, if it--if we couldn’t make it work.”

“Okay,” she said again, frowning a little. “Where are we going?”

For a minute, she thought maybe--maybe, if she was lucky--they’d found a place for her to get a crystal. Maybe she was actually going to get a lightsaber of her own. She was ten now, which was a whole year past when she was, by her count, supposed to start going on real missions. Even though Dad had apparently forgotten, and no one had brought her into anything like that yet, either.

Except...wait, no. Dad wouldn’t even let her practice with his ‘saber--Aunt ‘Soka let her borrow hers, sometimes, but when Leia asked Dad, he just got a weird look on his face and muttered something about curious toddlers and changed the subject.

So that probably wasn’t it.

“Princess,” he said; then, “Leia, we’re going to go see your mother.”

Leia wasn’t at all sure she’d heard him right. She knew who her mom was, ‘cause Dad and everyone had told her stories. And she had sort of vague memories of her, as someone warm and kind and beautiful and a little bit sad. Or maybe worried was better.

But she also knew that it wasn’t safe for them, where her mom lived. Cause her mom was busy spying on the bad guys, probably, and if they ever tried to see her, they might all get caught and arrested, which meant people would get hurt. Her people, not just the bad guys.

But Dad had never ever lied to her before.

“Really?” she said.

“Really,” he said, and smiled, and hugged her close. “It won’t be easy,” he added. “Getting there--and getting back--is going to be pretty dangerous. But I think it’s worth it.”

She nodded. “Definitely,” she agreed. The excitement was starting to bleed into her, too--not just reflected from Dad, but...she was finally going to meet her mom.

Not that she’d ever really--she had Dad, and all her aunts and uncles. She didn’t need anything
else. But she wondered, sometimes. That’s all.

“When are we going?” she asked. “Where are we going?”

“Alderaan,” he said, answering her second question first. “And we’re leaving day after tomorrow, as soon as Obi-Wan gets here.”

That was a long way from home--practically in the Core, really close to Imperial Center. No one knew her face, of course, but Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan would be in a lot of danger.

But it’s worth it, she said. Like Dad said. And that’s probably why it took so long to set up, to make sure we’d be okay getting in and out.

He’d explained the whole plan to her, then--they were travelling under fake names, Joren and Wat and Maia Retak. To make the disguises even better, Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan had both made their hair darker, more like hers. Uncle Obi-Wan had also gotten rid of his beard, which was the weirdest thing she’d ever seen.

Aunt ‘Soka and Uncle Rex had a mission, working with a friend of theirs Leia had never met, but they’d dropped them off on their way. That had been three days ago, and from that first stop, they’d boarded a crowded passenger shuttle that took them into the Mid Rim, spent a day pretending to be tourists and looking at some really boring rock formations, then caught another shuttle from there, and then two more transports before this one, their last.

And now here they were at last, dropping out of hyperspace in orbit around Alderaan.

Which was beautiful-- all blue-green and swirly and welcoming. She slipped away from Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan to go to the viewport and stare down at it.

Sure, she’d seen pretty, vibrant planets before, but this one felt special. It sang in her head like the silver planet or the green place.

She felt Dad’s hand on her shoulder. “Stay close, sweetheart, all right?”

“Sorry,” she said.

He squeezed briefly, then let go and took her hand instead. “Come on, time to strap in, anyway. We’ll be landing soon.”

And then meeting some kind of contact at the spaceport, who would sneak them in through the city, and then, for the first time since she was too little to remember, she’d get to see her mom.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the sporadic updates lately. RL got pretty hectic for a while (and the next month or so is going to be super busy...) I’m going to try and update every two weeks through the end of March (possibly extending into/through April, depending on how things go), and then get back to regular weekly updates. ::fingers crossed, knock on wood, etc.::

Thanks again for being patient and sticking around! <3 ~shadowsong
Security, when they landed in Aldera City, was tighter than Obi-Wan had expected. Regular port security--both local and Imperial--had been supplemented by...well not a full garrison, perhaps, but he counted at least a dozen extra troopers.

Anakin was on high alert, but hiding it far better than he used to. He kept a firm grip on Leia’s hand and scanned the crowd mostly inconspicuously.

Enough so that, when they finally got to the customs desk--manned by one of the stormtroopers, rather than a regular customs official--Obi-Wan was fairly sure the trooper wasn’t any more suspicious of them than he had been of everyone else.

“Let me see your identification,” he demanded.

“Yes,” Anakin said--he was getting much better about holding to a cover, too; even Obi-Wan could barely hear the tension underlying his voice. Anyone else who managed would likely put it down to a perfectly reasonable concern due to the upgraded security.

The trooper scanned their cards, studying whatever readout popped up in his helmet. “What’s your business on Alderaan?”

“Maia’s mother was...from here,” Anakin said, just as they’d planned, pulling Leia a little closer to him. “I want her to have more than stories.”

Half-truths were always better than outright lies. Easier to remember, and easier to make credible. Either Obi-Wan or Anakin could mind trick the trooper if it didn’t work, of course, but best to avoid that if at all possible.

“Where are you staying?” he asked, after mulling that over for a minute. “With relatives?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Obi-Wan cut in. “That side of the family has scattered, and we’re not in very close touch. We’re meeting a distant cousin, who’s going to show us around, but we won’t be staying with him. I understand he doesn’t have room.” He was careful to sound slightly annoyed at the prospect.

“Uh-huh,” he said. He was silent for another moment, studying them through his mask. “All right. You’ll need to provide your cousin’s contact details, and the address where you’ll be staying.” He passed back their IDs, along with a datastick. “Your visas are for three days, and you do not have permission to leave the city. The datastick has a map of areas that are off limits to ordinary citizens, and there is a curfew for tourists at 2100 hours. Obey the restrictions and make your flight, or you will be detained. Next!”

Obi-Wan stepped on Anakin’s foot, because he could see him about to mouth off. Well, at least he lasted this long. Given everything that’s at stake today... “Joren, come on.”

“Yeah, I’m coming,” he said, grabbing their papers and taking Leia’s hand again. “All right, princess?”

“Yeah, Dad,” she said. She was watching the crowd, too; noting where the troopers were and--no,
not the troopers; she was keeping an eye out for who they were watching.

*Clever girl,* he said, with a mingled pride and sadness, that she already knew those tricks. *They’re either truly dangerous criminals or potential allies. Either way, people worth noting.*

“Is it just me,” Anakin asked, once they were out of the spaceport proper and no longer being watched quite so closely, “or…?”

“Yes, I know what you mean,” Obi-Wan said. “While we wait for our cousin, we might try to find a news feed. I hope nothing’s happened.”

“Yes,” he said.

“There’s a cafe over there,” Leia said. “They might have a feed, and it’s not a cantina so I can come with you.”

Anakin glanced over at him. “Good a place as any, right?”

On the one hand, there was almost certainly nothing they could do about whatever security threat was in play. And there was a very good chance that, whether or not it had anything to do with anyone they knew—or even the three of them directly; though that was unlikely, otherwise Bail would have warned him—it would only serve as a point of stress. Spoil what was supposed to be a long overdue time of joy.

On the other hand, the more they knew, the better they could handle whatever else got thrown at them. The better they could keep the children safe.

*Better to know,* he decided. *There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

“Well, we are a bit off schedule, so we might have to wait for Arid a bit,” Obi-Wan agreed, keeping his voice light as he could. Maintaining his cover. “And they probably have hot chocolate.” Which made Leia perk up quite a bit, and coaxed an amused smile and a hint of relaxation out of Anakin.

*Good.*

Obi-Wan bit back a smile of his own. “Come along, then, follow me.”

Anakin followed, keeping Leia between the two of them. Unlikely they would lose her even if he didn’t, of course, but he felt more secure that way.

But then, when they were halfway across the plaza--

“Wat!”

He turned, and—yes, that was their contact. One of the crew from the *Tantive,* who had been with them ten years ago. Low ranked enough to not draw undue attention, but someone he would recognize. Just as he and Bail had agreed.

“Arid, it’s good to see you,” he said, forcing his shoulders to relax and wearing an open smile.

“You, too,” he said, grinning. “Joren, hi.”

Anakin nodded. “Hey,” he said.

“And this must be Maia,” Arid said, turning to Leia.
“Hi,” she said. “Uncle Wat told me lots about you.” Which was not precisely true--Obi-Wan didn’t
know enough about Arid Lendry to tell Leia much, but she was a remarkably convincing liar when
she wanted to be.

At least when speaking to a stranger.

“Really?” he said. “Well, I’m flattered. Hope they were nice things.”

“They were,” she said, and smiled a little. Anakin squeezed her shoulder briefly.

“We were just about to call you,” Obi-Wan said. “From the cafe--we got held up a bit in the port,
and missed our planned meeting.”

Arid nodded. “Yeah, all the troopers, I’m not surprised.”

“Do you know what happened?” Anakin asked.

Arid glanced down at Leia again, and Anakin made a show of covering her ears.
She rolled her eyes and unmistakably *sulked*, but Obi-Wan was sure she could hear everything
anyway.

“There was a bombing, on Imperial Center,” Arid said, lowering his voice. “In the Senate
district. Midmorning, local, so late yesterday here.”

And, despite the gravity of the news, he could *feel* a faint trace of relief from Anakin, bleeding into
the Force next to him, and couldn’t help but feel the same, for the barest of moments.

*It’s nothing to do with us, or with our trip here*, he thought. *So it’s...at least it’s not as bad as it
could have been. We’ll need to be careful, but--well, we would have needed to be careful anyway.*

Of course, the relief didn’t last long. For either him or Anakin. Because even if it was no threat to
*them*, a bomb planted in the Senate district, midmorning, could have gotten--very, very ugly.

“I do hope no one was hurt too badly,” he said.

“They haven’t reported any serious casualties, but I only know what they’ve been saying on the
news,” Arid said. “I guess the HoloNet hookup on the liner wasn’t great?”

“No, not really,” Anakin said. He let go of Leia’s ears, took her hand in one of his, and gestured for
Arid to lead them on with the other. “So it was a surprise when things were so...so tense when we
landed.”

“It’s not usually like that,” Arid assured them, as they started across the plaza to where he,
assuming everything was still going to plan, would have a speeder waiting. “Alderaan is a peaceful
planet. We always have been.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “Better to be careful, I suppose,” he added, with a half glance back at the
port. And whether he meant the Imperial response, or the need to keep their own heads down, or
something else entirely--that was for any observers to decide for themselves.

Anakin rather smoothly changed the subject, asking a few general questions about the best ways to
get around the city. Questions they had already researched, of course, just in case, but it passed the
time and should pacify any suspicious observers. Obi-Wan chimed in at appropriate moments, but
was only half-listening; keeping an eye out for trouble. As one of them always did, in unfamiliar
surroundings.

After a ten-minute walk, they were at last safely in the speeder, and Arid immediately dropped all pretense. “We can talk in here,” he said. “Solid countersurveillance, or I wouldn’t be picking you up in it.”

“Good to hear,” Obi-Wan said.

“I’m glad you made it through security,” Arid added. “We were worried.”

“So were we, for a minute there,” Anakin said. “But our IDs held up and everything.”

Arid nodded, and sent a quick message before starting the speeder. “We’re all set at the Palace. So far as we can tell, this is more of a general heightened-security situation, rather than an actual crackdown.”

Also good--while not a guarantee, it made it much less likely that the Palace itself would be examined too closely. Another point of tension in the back of Obi-Wan’s neck unknotted at the thought.

“As a response to the bombing,” Anakin said.

“Yeah,” Arid said, and glanced up at them in the mirror. “Any thoughts on it? Or who might be responsible?”

“Not really,” Anakin said, and tapped Leia’s shoulder. She looked up at him for a minute; he raised an eyebrow. She sighed, and pulled out her headphones, settling in to stare out the window and do her best not to eavesdrop.

While she was settling, Obi-Wan considered the question, then shook his head. “None of the cells we work with regularly would attempt something like this, I don’t think.”

“We know there are cells out there that might,” Anakin said. “Problem is, we don’t really have much of a relationship with any of them. But that might be changing soon.”

“We have an opportunity to reach out to...one of the more radical cells, out in the Outer Rim,” Obi-Wan said. “According to our intelligence, at least.”

“They’re affiliated with one of Ashla’s old contacts,” Anakin added.

Which was a large part of why Ahsoka was there and not here with them. She had wanted to come, of course, but between that, and the fact that she would make it a lot harder for them to blend in--a small Human family was one thing, but her species and, more importantly, their history together just might be enough to draw attention they couldn’t afford.

“We’re not sure if he has the resources to make a strike on Coruscant itself,” he added. “But if he doesn’t, he might well know the people who do.”

“Right,” Arid said.

“Beyond that, I’m not sure what else we can tell you,” Anakin said. “Sorry. Especially without...without knowing much about the target.” He frowned, and glanced over at Leia, who was still staring out the window.

“Something wrong?” Arid asked.
“No, not really,” he said. “But I can’t…” Anakin hesitated. “I’m sorry, I really--I can’t worry any more about this right now. The bombing. And the fewer details I know…”

The less likely he’d be to fixate on some of it, and take away from a reunion that was already going to be far too short.

“I’ll handle it,” Obi-Wan assured him, before Arid could try to object. “What there is to handle from here, anyway. I’m not sure there’s much of anything we can do. But I’ll keep an eye on the situation, and unless there is something, and I absolutely need you for it, I’ll wait and brief you when we leave.”

Anakin nodded, visibly relieved. “I trust you,” he said. “To know what I need to know.”

“Good,” he said, and smiled.

Arid, while disappointed, handled it with grace. “All right,” he said. “General Kenobi, we can talk in more detail later?”

“Of course,” he said.

With that settled--and the subject officially tabled for now--Anakin tapped Leia on the shoulder again, and she pulled out her headphones. “Thanks, princess,” he said, and bent over to kiss the top of her head briefly.

“Sure,” she said, rolling her eyes a little but not making any attempt to duck out of the way.

The four of them fell quiet then and Obi-Wan, too, set aside all thoughts of the bombing. Minute by minute, they drew closer to the Palace. Right now--for a few hours, anyway, everything else could wait.

Mom was settled on the couch in the suite Uncle Bail had set up for them, pretending to read something on her datapad, but really looking up at the window at least once or twice every minute.

Winter was teaching Luke how to play a board game, and he was trying to pay attention, really he was. It was just...hard right now.

Everything Mom had told him on the flight over was still buzzing through his head.

Mom was his birth mother, and had lied to him and everyone about it, so the Emperor wouldn’t hunt him down.

His father was alive, and coming here to meet them.

He had a sister.

It didn’t really feel real yet, except that it made so much of his life make so much more sense. His dreams, how they made Mom worry…

It was like there’d been pieces missing from him for ever and ever and now they were all fitting back into place.

“Right,” he said. “Um.” He hesitated for a second, then cautiously picked up one of his pieces and moved it a few spaces to the left. “I can move him that way, right?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Just not on the diagonals.”

“Got it,” he said.

Winter thought it through for half a minute, studying the board and chewing her lower lip, then made her own move, sidestepping one of his pieces and blocking him in to win the game. If he remembered the rules right.


“I’ll do better next time,” he said. “Thanks for teaching me.”

“Sure,” she said, and smiled. “We can go again if you want?”

Before he could answer, there was a soft tap on the door, and Aunt Sabe came in.

Mom half stood up, clutching her datapad a little nervously. “Any news?” she asked.

“They’re in the lift now,” Aunt Sabe said, and Luke’s heart jumped a little. His father. And his sister. They were just--just--not even minutes away now.

He was already standing next to Mom before he realized he’d forgotten to actually excuse himself from Winter.

“Oh, good, they made it,” Mom said softly, squeezing his hand once, comforting, before letting go.

“I should go tell my parents,” Winter said. Even though they probably already knew--Mom always knew important things like that before Luke could tell her.

“Thank you,” Mom said.

Winter bowed briefly, grinned a little at Luke and mouthed ‘good luck!’ , then slipped out the door, with Aunt Sabe following.


They stood there for a second that felt like forever, and then, finally, the lift door slid open.

There were two men and a girl standing there. The taller man, with a scar across one eye and another going along his chin, lit up like the sun when he saw Luke and Mom. The other, a little older, gave them a much softer smile, warm and kind and happy and sinking right to the base of Luke’s spine.

The girl--the girl looked sort of confused at first, taking in the whole room, tilting her head, like she was trying to figure something out.

Then she met Luke’s eyes. And hers went wide, and even if he hadn’t already guessed, he would’ve known.

A sudden bolt of understanding flew between them. Just a split-second flash of I know you.
His sister, Leia.

He grinned, and waved at her.

She waved back.

"Ani," Mom breathed, and took a step toward the lift.

"Padme," he said, and met her halfway, pulling her into a tight hug. "I missed you."

"I know," she said, wrapping her arms around him. "I know, I know." She let go and studied him for a second, then laughed a little, except she was crying at the same time. She picked up his hand and kissed it.

She was happy; so happy Luke could feel it spilling out of her even without looking.

Then, without letting go of the scarred man--of his father--Mom held out her other hand to Luke.

Leia, across the room, didn’t wait for an invitation--or even the nudge the other man gave her shoulder--before going to join their parents.

Their parents.

Mom, still smiling--still crying--said, “There’s someone you should meet.”

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the much longer hiatus than planned. <3 But I should be back now ::knock on wood, etc.::

Thanks so much for coming back/sticking around/your patience! <3

~shadowsong
In six years of drifting on her own and then four of working with Anakin and Obi-Wan and Rex again, Ahsoka had been on a lot of occupied planets.

This one didn’t stick out much from the crowd. The air was full of that too-familiar, all-encompassing weight of the Empire’s boot on their necks, undercut by an electric tension of things-will-Happen-here that made her montrals twitch.

To be fair, that undercurrent only came on occupied planets with active insurgencies, but it was still a very familiar feeling.

For some reason, though, it resonated with her more than usual. Maybe because of her history with the cell they thought--they hoped--was here. Maybe because she wasn’t usually the one to make a cold contact like this. Maybe because, with half her family in the Core under fake IDs, who stood to lose everything if they were caught, she was already tense.

Of course, the fact that there had been someone following her and Rex for the past six blocks, flickering along her senses at a strange nexus of threat-not-a-threat, probably didn’t help.

“All right?” Rex murmured, steady at her side.

“Yeah,” she said, taking a breath and letting it out slowly, forcing herself to relax. Patience. Either he’s still here or he isn’t. Either you drew attention from his cell or you drew attention from someone else. Or maybe you’re just borrowing trouble. Whatever it is, worrying about it won’t make a difference at this point. “I just don’t like the waiting parts.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he said, and, despite the mask hiding his face, she could feel him grinning at her.

Not through the Force, either. She just knew.

She rolled her eyes. “Like you’re any better.”

He huffed a laugh, and didn’t try to deny it. “It won’t be much longer, at least,” he said.

“You noticed?” she said, dropping the facade.

“Yep.” He considered for a moment. “Of course, we haven’t exactly been making it hard on them.”

“True,” she said. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to delay a little longer. See what they’re really made of.”

“My thoughts exactly,” he said. “You up for a bit of a chase?”

She gave him a pointed, sideways grin of her own. “Always.”

Rex picked the first feint, taking a sharp left into a busy marketplace. Ahsoka followed, keeping one half of her mind behind them, making sure they didn’t actually lose their target in the crowd.

Their pursuer matched them, inching closer through the crowd; most likely to avoid losing their quarry. They were good; Ahsoka couldn’t pick out exactly who in the milling crowd behind them was the tail.
“Cut through here,” Ahsoka said, flicking her fingers at a building up ahead; some kind of local transit station.

“Yep,” he said. “And then a roof run?”

The idea was tempting--but the longer they drew this out, the likelier it was they’d attract much less welcome attention.

“Let’s see where things stand on the other side.”

“Got it,” he said, and followed her into the station.

At which point the two of them slammed right into a massive crowd, much denser than in the market outside.

“Kriff,” Ahsoka muttered. “This’ll be fun.”

“That’s a word for it,” Rex said. “Turn back?”

She shook her head. “More trouble than it’s worth. If we get separated, go for plan qek, all right?”

He sighed, and was probably pulling a face behind his mask--plan qek was not his favorite--but nodded. “All right.”

They plunged into the sea of beings, weaving their way through and staying as close as they could without being disruptive or causing a scene. It took them an increasingly tense ten minutes--including a full seven seconds where Ahsoka almost lost track of Rex and started looking for vertical routes before she spotted him, two meters ahead of her, and scrambled to catch up.

Not the longest ten minutes of her life, or even of this week, but still not something she wanted to deal with again anytime soon.

But finally, those ten minutes ended, and she and Rex broke through to a dusty street on the other side of the station, with about half the milling foot traffic of the market they’d gone through earlier.

For a moment, when she got her bearings, Ahsoka thought they’d lost their tail in the mess in the station. Then, to her relief, just over a block away, that distinctive threat-not-a-threat taste filled the air again.

“I think this has gone on long enough,” she said.

“Probably,” Rex agreed.

“There’s an alley to the right up ahead. Should be a good spot, you think?”

He nodded once. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Ahsoka angled her path just slightly, trusting Rex to watch ahead while she focused her attention behind them.

Come and get us, she challenged the being at their heels silently. Whoever you are.

She felt them take the bait, quickening their pace and closing the remaining distance. She tapped Rex’s arm at the last second before she ducked into the alley. As one, they turned to face their pursuer. Rex had a pistol in his hand; Ahsoka left her sabers where they were.
The being paused, clearly unsurprised but wary.

He was a Kel Dor, armed with a simple staff; and Ahsoka couldn’t help but line him up against—against her memories, however hard she tried not to dwell on the past.

But he was shorter and leaner than Master Plo had been, and had none of her friend’s calm, easy warmth. Rather than giving her a feeling of peace and comfort, this man was full of wary, violent, tension. Not directed at her or Rex, not necessarily, but…

Hungry. Predatory.

*I think we were right; we found our cell,* she thought. *Or a cell, anyway. We definitely found something.*

“You were following us,” Rex said, without lowering his weapon.

“You gave me reason to,” the Kel Dor replied, in Sy Bisti, rather than Basic. Deceptively casual, he shifted his hands on his staff.

“We have a mutual friend,” Ahsoka said, in the same language.

He stared at her, and said nothing.

“Tell him Ahsoka Tano is here, and wants to talk,” she continued, ignoring the faint, sharp breath Rex took at her side. “I’ll be at the Grey Wind cantina on the edge of town in two hours.” She and Rex had scouted it, along with several other spots, when they’d first gotten here, and agreed it was the best option for the meeting, if they had an actual choice. Not a lot of troopers patronized it, but the clientele were not exclusively locals, either. She and Rex wouldn’t stand out too much.

Exactly the kind of location they needed.

The Kel Dor tilted his head, considering. “Ahsoka Tano,” he said.

“That’s right.”

“I’ll tell him,” he said at last. “You give me five minutes before you leave.”

“Agreed,” Rex said.

He studied them for another moment, as if wanting to be sure, then made his way out of the alley. He waited until the very last second to turn his back on them and rejoin the normal flow of traffic.

“Risky,” Rex said, holstering his gun once their contact was out of range. Keeping his hand near it, just in case.

“I know,” Ahsoka said.

He nodded, and didn’t question it any further than that. “We should go.”

“Yes.”

She followed him out of the alley, taking a wandering, circuitous route through the streets of the town towards the Grey Wind.

He was right. It *had* been risky, revealing her real name to an unknown quantity like that. Especially one that put her on edge like this.
On the other hand, it wasn’t like she and Rex reaching out to a total stranger here, and her name would maybe get them through the door, but...well, it had been a long time. So many things had changed.

But not that much. She was sure of it.

He might not be interested in being her friend anymore, but, apart from her own family, Saw Gerrera was still the last person in the galaxy that Ahsoka would expect to hand her over to the Empire.

Rex and Ahsoka made it to the Grey Wind with about fifteen minutes to spare, and found an empty table near a double handful of smugglers playing some variant on sabacc. Their table was in a corner where they could keep an eye on the rest of the place without being too obvious about it, and the players, all of whom were fully invested in their game, provided a handy screen against any unfriendly eavesdroppers. The downside was, it was pretty far from the exit if things did go south, but they had both singled it out as the best place to wait for Saw anyway.

Ahsoka kept one eye on the players--partly to spot any trouble coming from that direction, partly because seeming interested in the game itself was a decent cover.

Rex picked up drinks at the bar for them while she got into position. Neither of them did much more than pretend to drink, but in the interests of blending in...

But no sooner had they settled in then a familiar shadow fell across the table.

“So, it really is you,” he said. “I couldn’t believe it.”

It had been over a decade since the last time she’d seen Saw Gerrera, and the years had definitely left their mark on her friend. There were scars she didn’t remember seeing, both on the surface and in the shadows behind his eyes. And he’d filled out some, too, and grown a beard. He was older, obviously, and...harder, which made her a little sad.

But not, given how she remembered him and everything that had happened since, especially surprised.

“Sorry for turning up unannounced like this,” she said. “But…”

“I understand,” he said. He studied her for a moment, then took the seat Rex had left open for him. His shoulders relaxed a little, and he flashed a brief, but genuine, smile. “I’m glad you’re alive. Both of you.”

“Likewise,” she said, with feeling. “What about the others?”

He shook his head. “Scattered, or dead. Most of them melted back into their own lives as best they could, that last year or so of the War, after we put the King back into power and drove the Separatists out. A few came back to help me fight the Empire when the time came, but not all of them. It was probably better, not to seek them out. I made some new friends, over the years.”
I’m sorry,” she said. Because what else could she say? She understood it, at least in part—as difficult as it had been, hadn’t Anakin and Obi-Wan and Master Yoda made a similar decision, ten years ago? True, she hadn’t exactly done that herself; she had tried and failed to contact Padme more than once, but...well, she understood.

He shrugged. “It’s war,” he said.

Which was almost harder to hear, than that so many people, friends, were probably dead. But Ahsoka knew how that felt, too. And, of course, she knew that it was better not to dwell on her losses. But there was a difference between that and letting yourself grow numb. And it sounded like Saw was closer to the second than the first.

Then again, after Steela...

No other loss probably compared.

“But I’m guessing you didn’t come here just to talk about old times,” Saw went on, changing the subject before she could offer up any other kind of sympathy.

“No,” she admitted, letting him do it--this was neither the time nor the place to push him or reopen old wounds. And she did have a mission to accomplish here. “We wanted to establish contact with you--contact we hope we can maintain, long term. Because this is going to be a long-term kind of war.”

Saw caught her meaning right away. He leaned back in his chair, considering. “I’d heard whispers, of a wider, more organized rebellion,” he said. “That’s you?”

“To a point,” she said. “We’re building one, anyway. A network of resistance movements and cells like yours throughout the galaxy.”

“Meaning what?”

“Information sharing, mostly,” Rex put in. “At least for now. Some resources, too--weapons, medical supplies, other relief to planets we can’t help liberate, sometimes. Our cell is pretty mobile, and we help out anywhere we can, any way we can, in addition to making these connections.”

“The point is, the Empire is too big for any one cell to take on alone,” Ahsoka said. “Someday, we will be an organized, galactic movement. We have to be. And we’re slowly, carefully, building up to that now. So we have it when the time comes. And part of that is reaching out to cells like yours, and drawing them in.”

Saw frowned down at his commlink, and nodded once. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Still, it’s a risk. My people and I keep an eye on other groups--not anything like what you’re talking about, we don’t have the resources, but we know how to read between the lines when things happen. And the other cells we’re watching...not all of them know what this war will cost. Not all of them are willing to pay that price.”

And some of them go too far, she thought, remembering, again, what Obi-Wan had said about that fine line. The one she and her friends worked very, very hard to stay on the right side of.

Saw...

Well. Some of their intel said he wasn’t always as careful as they were.
But he does have a point, Ahsoka said. About some people being unwilling to act. Sometimes for very good reason, and sometimes...well, he has a point. But hopefully, we can rein groups like his in and spur the others on, by uniting somewhere near the middle.

So, out loud, she just said, “But there’s a lot to gain. And we will have to unite eventually.”

Saw chewed that over for a minute. “It’s interesting, what you’re suggesting. I’m not gonna deny that. But I don’t know if eventually is now,” he said. “Sharing intel, sure. I’m more than willing to do that. Like I said, I keep tabs, but if you’ve already got a network, we can help each other out. I’m not sure how much else I can commit just yet.”

“That’s fair,” Ahsoka said. And about what she’d expected, anyway, though of course she’d hoped for more.

“Thanks for understanding,” Saw said. “...are you two going to be here for a while?”

“We could be,” Rex said. “We don’t usually stay in one place very long, but our next scheduled rendezvous isn’t for a few days.”

“Right,” he said. “I have a plan in motion, one that should play out over the next couple of days. Before you leave. Work with me and my team--both of you. We could always use some extra help from people we can trust.”

Ahsoka exchanged a glance with Rex--they could help Saw out with whatever he had going on. Like Rex had said, they didn’t have anywhere else to be for a while. They certainly didn’t have any other missions planned. They hadn’t been sure, first of all, how long it would take them to find Saw, if he hadn’t moved on since their intel had placed him here a week ago. Besides, they wanted to avoid drawing attention to their own cell this week. They’d been planning to lie low, one way or the other, until the others were safely out of the Core.

Teaming up with another cell on something, on the other hand, was a whole other beast to track. Besides, if Saw was on the fence with helping them build a true galactic rebel alliance, this might help sway him to their cause.

Rex nodded once, and Ahsoka turned back to Saw. “Sure,” she said. “Where do you need us?”

Saw smiled. “Meet me in an hour on the other side of town, by the clock tower,” he said. “We can talk details there.”

So they wouldn’t be overheard, or seen leaving the cantina together. “Sounds good,” Ahsoka said.

“Great,” he said. “I’ll see you there in an hour.”

“We’ll be there,” Rex said.

Saw nodded, and stood up. He paused for a second. “It really is good, seeing you again,” he said, then headed off into the crowd before either of them could reply.

“I think that went pretty well,” Ahsoka said, softly, once he was out of earshot. And, even if a part of her still felt a little unsettled, still keyed up from that sense of things-will-Happen-here lingering in the air...

“About as well as we could’ve expected,” Rex agreed. “Another five minutes, then we follow?”
“Yeah,” she said, pulling her attention back to the card players and faking a sip of her drink. “Another five minutes should do it.”

And from there...they’d just have to play it by ear. Another waiting game.

But at least this time she knew for sure she was waiting on a friend.
Part 6, Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“There’s someone you should meet.”

Padme’s hand was warm in his, feeling exactly like it had ten years ago; Leia was right behind him, poking her head around for a better look; and Luke was on Padme’s other side, a little shy, a little nervous, maybe; but both kids were practically vibrating with anticipation and curiosity. He probably wouldn’t have needed the Force to pick that up.

If Anakin could have held on to this moment and made it last forever, he would have. Because the four of them were together again, at last, after ten years, and it was...it was...it was everything he’d ever hoped it could be. It was, if not actually perfect, the next best thing. Near enough that if it weren’t for the wholly tactile sense of Padme’s hand on his--and the fact that his actual dreams were never this happy--he wouldn’t have believed it was real.

And Padme-- just seeing her again was...was...he didn’t have the words for it. It was almost like picking up where they’d left off, in some ways. She hadn’t changed all that much. Not in any way that mattered. Sure, there were new lines decorating her face--soft smile lines at the corners of her eyes and worry lines traced across her forehead, but those just made her more beautiful. She was still small and dark-haired and perfect and brilliant, burning through his every sense with her bright light of courage and joy and kindness.

(He definitely hadn’t changed as much as he had--he only hoped she wasn’t disappointed in what she saw.)

She was happy, though--brilliantly, deliriously happy; just as happy as he was. There was that. He held on to that, as hard as he could.

In all honesty, he didn’t want to take his eyes off of her--not ever, ever again--but this wasn’t just about the two of them. There was Leia--and Luke.

Anakin let go of his wife’s hand and turned his attention to his son, smiling down at him. “Hello, Luke,” he said.

“Hi,” he said, with a warm but slightly tentative smile of his own.

And, even though he’d spent probably way too much time over the past ten years planning and preparing for this moment, every possible thing Anakin could say flew right out of his head. “I’m. Uh. I’m your dad. You’ve...you’ve grown a lot, since the last time I saw you.”

He was babbling. Oh, Force, he was babbling, why did he always do this.

Leia cut in then, much to his relief, stepping all the way out in front of him. Out of habit, and because he liked having her close, he rested his hands on her shoulders and squeezed lightly; trying to be encouraging.

Not that she seemed to need it. “I’m Leia,” she said. “You’re my brother.”

She was a lot better at this kind of thing than he was. Just like her mother.
“Hi,” Luke said, grinning at her, most of his shyness gone. “I always wanted a sister. Prob’ly should’ve figured out I already had one.”

She beamed at him, with an open, easy confidence and familiarity that Anakin found extremely encouraging, if completely unsurprising. They’d been dreaming about one another for years, after all. And even without the dreams, Anakin suspected they would’ve recognized one another right away. They had always been tied together in the Force--two starbursts; that was how he’d seen them from the very beginning, before he even knew what he was looking at. Of course they greeted each other like old friends. Even if each of them had a parent they barely remembered, and that was a different story.

And, sure enough, Leia looked up at Padme then, and Anakin felt a faint stab of uncertainty--almost matching the look Luke had given him--which she quickly covered up with a stubborn, determined smile. “Hi,” she said.

Padme smiled back. “Hello, Leia,” she said. She paused for half a second there; as if even she wasn’t totally sure what to say. “I’ve...I’ve missed you,” she finally added. “So much.”

It was all pretty overwhelming, Anakin thought. For all four of them.

“Yeah,” Leia said. “It’s good to meet you. Um. See you again.” She flushed a little. “Hi.”

“We have a lot of catching up to do, I know,” Padme said. “...can I give you a hug? I feel like that’s a good place to start.”

“Sure,” Leia said, and Anakin let her go. She stepped into Padme’s waiting arms; after a beat, she wrapped her own around her mother’s waist.

And they just--fit. Everything settled into place around them, and that slightly uncertain tension that had been hovering around them at least mostly dissipated. Even though, like Padme had said, they still had a lot of catching up to do--so much stolen time to make up for--they’d passed this first, awkward hurdle.

As with so many things, his wife had been absolutely right--hugs were an excellent place to start.

On that note…

Anakin half-turned back to Luke, and opened his arms in silent invitation.

Luke lit up and half-collided with him in his rush to accept, warm and bright and happy like another sun in the sky.

Anakin wasn’t sure how long the four of them stayed like that--not long enough, in some ways, but...well, one step at a time. Like Padme had said, this was just the beginning. They had three days together. There would be more hugs. There would be more of a lot of things.

So he let go, before it got awkward; around when Padme let go of Leia. Since Luke didn’t seem interested in pulling away, that was probably his best gauge for timing on all of this.

“Missed you, sunshine,” he said, ruffling Luke’s hair. And, by some miracle, managed to leave it at that.

“M’glad you and Leia could come, Dad,” Luke said, which was--Anakin would have to ask other people with more than one kid, if that first time being called ‘Dad’ still felt special with each one. Because it sure as hell did for him.
There was a brief silence then, with none of them quite sure what to say after that. Leia finally broke the spell, which was another completely unsurprising thing, tugging on Anakin’s sleeve to get his attention.

“Hey, Dad, can we go outside?” she asked. “‘Cause I saw the gardens from the lift and they look really cool.”

His first instinct was to say yes, of course—the gardens here were beautiful, enough that he kind of wanted to explore them himself. Besides, it had been a long time since her last off-planet adventure, a long time with just the desert around her to see. And they’d never been able to sneak her into someplace like this. She should have this opportunity.

Still, while Anakin knew Senator Organa would’ve thought of this and made sure the kids would have time and a safe place to play outside together, he wasn’t sure exactly what the boundaries were. And they still couldn’t afford to be discovered.

So he deferred to Padme. “What do you think?”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Padme said. “We can all explore for a while, and get to know one another a little better.”

“Sounds good,” Anakin said. ...and then turned back to the door because he’d just realized that Obi-Wan had been standing there this entire time, on the fringes of their reunion, and they hadn’t--Force, they hadn’t introduced him to Luke, hadn’t even really given him a chance to say hello to Padme...

Though, in their defense, they had had a pretty good reason to be distracted.

But Obi-Wan smiled and shook his head. “I’ll leave you four to it,” he said. “I should say hello to our hosts, anyway.”

Which...well, a part of Anakin wanted to object. Obi-Wan was part of their family, too—an important part—and he had come to Alderaan with them for a reason. Beyond just coordinating and touching base with Senator Organa, on a more extended, in-depth basis than they’d been able to manage since Polis Massa. This reunion was for him, too.

But at the same time…

“You’ll join us later, though?” Padme asked.

“Absolutely,” Obi-Wan assured her, with a smile. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” He nudged at Anakin’s mind briefly-- no, of course I don’t feel left out, relax and enjoy this moment with them, we have three days to catch up all together.

Anakin grinned, and poked him back, thank you, brother, I love you, thank you. “We’ll see you in a few hours, then,” he said.

“I’ll find you,” he promised, then bowed briefly to Padme and left with Arid to find the Senator.

“Bye, Uncle Obi-Wan,” Leia called after him, then, redirecting with the speed that only a small child who had been promised a chance to play could manage, turned back to her parents. “Gardens now?”

“Yes,” Anakin said.
“We need to stay behind the blue wall,” Padme said. “All right? There are a couple other areas that are safe for us to go, but for now, we’ll stick to that. Don’t wander off too far.”

“We won’t, Mom,” Luke promised, and squeezed his sister’s hand briefly.

“Good,” she said, and smiled.

And then--well, the twins had each other, so Anakin bowed, as formal and courtly as he could manage, and offered Padme his arm. Just like he used to, on those rare occasions when he could be near her in public. As a cover for what they really felt.

Which--kriffing hell, they didn’t have to do that anymore, at least not here, and that felt strange and wonderful and terrifying and liberating all at once.

But the old patterns felt familiar, and comfortable, and romantic and electric and all those good things, so there they were.

“Milady,” he said, softly.

Padme’s eyes were sparkling, but she kept her face smooth and gave him a regal nod before accepting, threading her hand through his. Just like she used to do. Just as if they were ten years younger and on Coruscant again. “Master Jedi.”

The twins looked at one another, then, in unison, rolled their eyes. Which made Padme start giggling, which did sort of kill the moment, but in the best possible way.

Because they were all here. It was finally actually sinking in. They’d made it this far. He and Padme and the twins--his family; most of the people he loved most in the world. And Obi-Wan was close, and even if Rex and Ahsoka weren’t there in person…

This moment was still pretty damn perfect. This moment felt whole.

Their patterns were changing now, for the better.

And in the kids’ defense, he did remember what being ten was like.

He laughed a little, and squeezed Padme’s hand lightly. “I guess we are pretty gross, aren’t we.”

“Very,” she agreed, solemnly, then leaned up and kissed his cheek.

Leia rolled her eyes again, then nudged Luke before dropping his hand. “Come on, I’ll race you.” And, without giving him a chance to answer, she was off like a shot.

“Hey, wait!” Luke said, already darting off, hard on her heels.

“H--stay where we can see you!” Anakin called after them, even though there wasn’t really a point anymore. He frowned a little, but Padme leaned into him a little, running a soothing hand down his back.

“Relax,” she said. “Let them have their fun together. They’ll be fine.”

He took a breath, and let it out slowly. “I know,” he said. They were good kids, clever and brave and resourceful. And he trusted Senator Organa’s arrangements, or else he wouldn’t be here. “I just…”

“Don’t want to let them out of your sight right now?”
“Can you blame me?” he asked, a little sheepishly.

“Nope,” she said, and kissed him again—properly, this time.

And, with no ten-year-olds to offend, he kissed her back, lingering. “I’ve missed you, my love,” he murmured, when they at last pulled away.

“Me, too,” she said. “The letters were...your letters were so wonderful, and they made it almost bearable, but…”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s not the same.” She leaned into his chest for just a moment. “I’m glad you’re here.”

He kissed the top of her head. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

One more kiss, and then she pulled away a little and smile. “We should probably go after them, though,” she said. “They’re our children, after all. Even if they stay in bounds…”

There was no end to the trouble Luke and Leia could get into together.

“You are absolutely right,” he said. “Let’s go find them before they start getting Ideas.”

Padme laughed and kissed his cheek again, then took his hand and tugged him toward the door.

And then, hand in hand, Anakin and Padme stepped out into the sunlight to watch their children play.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay, guys <3 Next chapter shouldn't take as long, lol.

Thanks so much for your patience, and see you next time! ~shadowsong
Saw was waiting for them when they got to the clock tower, a few minutes ahead of schedule. He was leaning against a covered speeder painted to look like a delivery van, one of several Ahsoka and Rex had seen during their earlier recon through the city.

Makes sense, she thought. It’ll blend in with the rest of the traffic.

Covered speeder, though. With no windows. Which, sure, meant no Imperial security could see inside and identify them, but at the same time...

The two of them paused. They didn’t look at one another--they didn’t have to. Just weighing their history with Saw against the risks of getting into a vehicle like that with a...a friend, yes, but it had been years. And so many things were different now.

Saw clearly caught their thoughts. “It’s not that I don’t trust you,” he said.

Except it is. And, honestly, if we had an actual base besides the farm and we were bringing him there...

“We get it,” Ahsoka assured him, touching Rex’s hand lightly. These days, it was better to be careful, even with friends. On the other hand, someone eventually had to take a leap of faith, or they’d never get anything done. And she trusted herself and her partner.

Besides. They’d come this far, and Saw and his people had something in motion. Which meant she and Rex could help. But only if they saw this through.

So, the two of them got into the vehicle, and didn’t object when the doors closed behind them, leaving them in semi-darkness.

Still, because it was better to be careful (even with friends), she left Rex in charge of keeping tabs on any more immediate threats, and spent the half-hour drive to Saw’s base camp in a semi-meditative state, memorizing the route by speed and direction. Just in case she and Rex needed to make a quick exit.

Other than that, the drive itself was uneventful, and the speeder finally let them out at the entrance to a network of caves, or possibly old mining tunnels.

Both, actually, I think, she decided. Probably started as caves, but they’ve been excavated. That entrance isn’t entirely natural.

Apart from a few sentries--one overt and three concealed--most of Saw’s people were gathered in a large cavern about half a klick into the warren. There were about fifteen of them, a variety of ages and species ranging from a Shistavanen whose muzzle was entirely white to a Human girl who looked a couple years older than Leia.

“Friends of mine,” Saw said, in response to a curious look from the Shistavanen.

She nodded, accepting that as enough, which was reassuring. It meant Saw’s people trusted him, and were willing to listen and follow his lead, which was always a good thing to see when making contact with a new group.

“I’m Ashla,” Ahsoka supplied--sure, she’d already used her real name once, but that was in a direct
message to Saw. The people in the caves had probably been out of the loop, and the fewer people who knew exactly who she was, the better. Obi-Wan and Anakin worked on the same principle when they met with resistance groups.

“Rex,” he said. He, on the other hand, had a name that was a lot less distinctive, and only used a cover ID when planning for a long-term mission. From what Saw had said, this would only take a couple of days.

“Kylie,” she said. “Good to have you on board.”

“Thanks,” Ahsoka said, flashing a brief smile.

“We get the last of the gear?” Saw interrupted.

“Yeah, we’re all set,” Kylie confirmed. “And we’ve been keeping track of things through the ‘net, we have the window we need.”

“Good.”

Window? Huh. Something must have happened. Not something Saw and his people had done, though; Ahsoka didn’t pick up any threat or deception in what Kylie was saying, just a sort of not-quite-relief that this opportunity had fallen into their laps.

“So, what’s the target?” Rex asked.

“A shipment,” Saw told them. “Didn’t originate here, but it was routed through as of about three days ago. Top-secret materials for some kind of Imperial weapons project. We don’t know exactly what it is, let alone where it’s headed, or what he’s building, but we know it’s here now. We don’t have the resources to go after it in transit now, but…”

“Current security threat means certain high-value shipments are being held,” Kylie finished for him. “Getting to it’s still gonna be a pain in the ass, but we can pull it off.”

Ahsoka nodded. That tracked with some of what Obi-Wan had been digging into, over the past ten years. About a massive infrastructure project somewhere deep in the Outer Rim. This was also exactly the kind of thing that building a real network might help with—pooling Obi-Wan’s intel with Saw’s might put them that much closer to figuring out whatever this project was and stopping it.

And that was something she could maybe use to bring Saw and his people in closer, especially if their mission was a success. At the very least, though, whether or not it put them any closer to seeing the whole picture, or got Saw to agree to join their network, even a brief derailment of whatever it was Palpatine had had up his sleeve was always a good plan.

On the other hand…

“This threat, though,” Ahsoka said. “If it’s bad enough they’re holding shipments…”

“Security is tighter everywhere,” Saw said. “But still better than trying for a moving target right now.”

“Fair enough,” she said. And he was probably right, especially if he and his people had been here long enough to really get to know the lay of the land.

“What is the threat, anyway?” Rex asked. It might not make a difference for the actual mission at
"There was a bombing in the capital," Kylie said. "Looks like Princess Lavinia was the target."

Ahsoka drew in a quick, sharp breath. That was—not good. Very not good.

But it could have been worse. It could have been a *lot* worse.

*At least the others are still safe on Alderaan, or we have no reason to think they aren’t,* she told herself. *And the propaganda machine would’ve already been in full swing if the princess had actually been seriously hurt.*

Still. Not the kind of news she liked hearing. Because even if this wasn’t the *worst-* case scenario, targeting seven-year-old kids was *never* good.

“Kriff,” Rex muttered; concerned, yes, but more resigned than actually worried. He’d probably come to the same conclusions she had. “Anyone claimed credit yet?”

That was the real question. Whoever was behind this might not be an ally—might even be someone in the Imperial establishment making a power play—but they were *definitely* someone Ahsoka and her family should probably be aware of.

But, “Not that I’ve heard,” Kylie said. “But there’s some gaps in the ‘net coverage, obviously.”

“It wasn’t us, if you were wondering,” Saw said. “Even if I had the resources to put a team on Coruscant, that wouldn’t be what I’d do. It’s not like I could keep her, and she’s too young for anything else.”

“I didn’t think it was,” Ahsoka assured him. After all, everything she picked up from him and Kylie said they were taking advantage of a situation someone else had made. Not that they were forcing the Empire’s hand themselves. Not yet.

Besides, Saw was a lot of things—she couldn’t help but remember the point he’d made earlier, about being willing to pay a steep price for what they were trying to do. And he was, by reputation, not as careful as she and her family were. And he *did* give off a much stronger sense of danger than she remembered. Still, she didn’t think he would *deliberately* attack innocents. He wasn’t that far gone.

If she thought he was, she wouldn’t be here.

“Any idea who it might be?” Rex asked. “Most of our contacts either don’t have the reach or wouldn’t try it. For the same reasons as you, among others.”

Saw and Kylie exchanged a look. “Maybe,” he said, cautiously. And, just for a second, his eyes flickered over to the Human teenager, who was busy cleaning a half-disassembled rifle in the corner.

Ahsoka decided not to ask. Not just yet.

“We can talk about that later,” she decided. And she would—*with* Saw, if he would let her, and definitely with Obi-Wan and Anakin when they got back from Alderaan. At that point, they might know more than she and Rex did, anyway, especially since Luke and Princess Lavinia were
friends. “It’s not like there’s a whole lot we can do about it from here, anyway,” she added.

“And we have a shipment to raid, and only a day or two to do it in,” Saw said, the set of his shoulders relaxing just a little. “Or, more accurately, a warehouse.”

“I think we’ve done that once or twice before,” Rex said, dryly. “Raided an Imp warehouse. Where do you need us?”

Saw flashed him a hard, dangerous smile, then grabbed Kylie’s datapad and pulled up a set of blueprints. “All right, so here’s what the security grid looks like...”

Sidious was not particularly concerned about this incident.

The bombing—the probable attempt to kidnap his child—had been disorganized, unlikely to succeed. Possibly connected to some kind of wider insurgency, but he thought that unlikely. Possibly an internal movement, which would be a little more interesting to hunt down and unravel, but even then, it wasn’t a serious or credible threat to his power.

On the other hand, that made it in some ways more irritating than a better-planned assault would have been. While the actual damage was slight, easily repaired, it was enough that cleaning up this mess would occupy time and resources better spent elsewhere for several days. And, inept though this attempt was, Sidious would have to deal with those responsible personally. The child was, of course, hardly irreplaceable, but she was still his child.

Conversely, the damage was slight enough that he could only make limited use of it. A handful dead, but no one of consequence, a speeder destroyed, a few buildings mildly scorched. That was all. Barely any political capital to be gained from it, either in terms of broad-based propaganda or specific bait for anyone susceptible to such things.

And nothing in Grand Moff Tarkin’s report was likely to improve the situation.

“The Princess broke her collarbone, and sustained a few other incidental injuries, but nothing serious,” Tarkin finished. “I left her and her guards in her quarters, back within the Palace perimeter.”

Which, of course, Sidious already knew, courtesy of the guards themselves—the one who had been with her at the time of the incident had been killed in the initial explosion, but two of the others had responded promptly to fill the gap. Even if Tarkin had arrived on the scene itself quicker, and handled the immediate aftermath while waiting for them to arrive.

In any case, Sidious was far more interested in how Tarkin pieced together his update than the actual facts at hand. In what details he highlighted, and what he might leave out. Always useful, to test those assets he had placed in particularly sensitive positions. “Good,” he said. “And the conspirators?”

“Unfortunately, Majesty, we captured none of them alive,” Tarkin said. “We are still searching for any who were not on scene. Of the four who were present, one was already dead when we arrived, two were killed as we secured the scene. The last was initially captured alive, but was able to break open and swallow a suicide capsule before we could stop him.”
So. That made an internal action less likely. A pity. On the other hand, the fact that the assailant had been so quick to end his life, rather than attempting to use his brief moment of celebrity to pontificate, might be relevant. Possibly this action was a mere feint--striking at the child while she was exposed to make some noise and draw attention away from some larger game.

Of course, the insurgent’s suicide did not rule out the chance that the attempt, however inept, was sincere. Idealists were often sloppy, desperate creatures. The dead man likely knew he wouldn’t be given a chance to speak anyway, and found the possible costs of an interrogation too great. That argued for the existence of other conspirators elsewhere. Possibly in waiting elsewhere on the planet, but possibly…

“Infernalis,” he said.

“Master.” His apprentice stepped up behind Tarkin, whose jaw tightened a little, but didn’t otherwise react.

“While Governor Tarkin investigates here on Imperial Center, you will pursue any links to off-planet groups,” he said.

Infernalis bowed. “It will be done,” he said.

“Anyone you find, bring them to me,” Sidious said.

“Yes, Master,” he replied, then, at a wave of Sidious’ hand, bowed again and swept out of the room, cloak swirling behind him.

Sidious turned his attention back to Tarkin. “Go,” he said. “Settle this. Report back to me on your progress by nightfall.”

“Majesty, it will be done,” Tarkin said, before following Infernalis out of the room.

Leaving Sidious alone with his thoughts, and his lingering annoyance at the situation.

True, he had lost nothing but time--and not even much of that--but it was irritating, nonetheless. Like an insect bite. Incidental, but distracting.

But soon solved, he was certain. And perhaps, buried beneath the incompetence of this paltry conspiracy, Infernalis or Tarkin might find something actually worth his time.

He doubted it. But one could never be too sure.
Chapter Notes

As a note, there's a bit of fade-to-black/implied sex at the end of this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It had already been pretty late when Dad and Mom and Uncle Obi-Wan had sent her and Luke to bed, and it was even later now, but Leia still couldn’t sleep.

Some of it was just because this place, Alderaan, was so different from anywhere else she’d ever been. Obviously, with its wide forests and soft sky and pretty mountains in the distance, it was nothing like home. But even when she’d been off-planet for lessons, or just to explore, it had never been like this. She’d been to plenty of beautiful places, sure--the moon where Uncle Rex had taught her to swim was still one of her favorite places in the entire galaxy--but it wasn’t the same.

And some of it was that…even if she was kind of tired (okay, really tired), she couldn’t stop thinking about everything. So much had happened since she and Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan had landed, that even being annoyed at the parts she wasn’t supposed to know barely even registered.

(She did know those things, of course. She could hear a lot more through her headphones than Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan thought. There had been a bombing, on Coruscant, and that’s why everything had been so tense when they’d landed. But Uncle Obi-Wan was looking into it, which was why he hadn’t joined them in the garden until after sundown, so she wasn’t worried.)

As for the rest...

There was Mom, obviously. Who Leia had already sort of felt like she knew, from Dad and Aunt ‘Soka and Uncle Obi-Wan and their stories, but actually meeting her was different. She was kind, and beautiful, and fierce. Like Aunt Beru, kind of--that same soft warmth, at least when she was around Leia and Dad and Luke, but with a different kind of durasteel frame underneath. Sharper, maybe. She was more like Aunt ‘Soka that way.

And then there was the way Dad had looked at Mom, and she’d looked at him, right when they’d first walked into that room. Leia had been mostly focused on Luke, of course, and all the little things that suddenly made so much more sense, but she’d still seen it. Still felt it. Like they’d been wandering in the desert for days and days and days, and finally found water again. There was bright and sunshiny joy, yeah; Leia had heard it in the way Dad’s breath had just stopped for a split second because it was almost too much; but there was also also the…the…the doubt underneath it. Like they weren’t sure if this was an actual miracle, or a mirage.

It made Leia mad. Not at the two of them, obviously. But at the people and the war that kept them apart. That made them doubt like that. She didn’t like it when her dad was hurting, especially about something that made him happier than she’d maybe ever seen him.

Which was something she probably needed to work on, when she got the chance. She should take the time, pick at the threads of that tangle in her thoughts until she could smooth it out. Otherwise, she’d be too focused on how mad she was, and she wouldn’t be able to figure out how to fix it. She’d talk to Aunt ‘Soka when they all got home, she decided. Aunt ‘Soka gave the best advice
about feelings tangles like this one.

And she would just not think about it until then. Because it was distracting, and messy, and they
only had three days with Mom and Luke and she did not want to ruin it. And one of them was
already almost over.

But that thought actually helped. A lot. Because it was hard to not-think about something, but on
top of all the other stuff, there was Luke.

And Luke definitely, definitely kept her mind off of being mad.

Leia had never thought there could be someone more important in her life than Dad, but she’d
known her brother for less than a day and she was already pretty sure he counted. Well, okay, that
wasn’t totally true. Really, she’d known she had a brother for less than a day. She’d known Luke
forever. Or at least that’s what it felt like. He was her other self, the one from her dreams about the
silver planet and the green place.

And he was here.

But only for three days, and then she had no idea when they’d be able to talk again. They could
probably send letters, like she was pretty sure Mom and Dad did, but that took forever and it wasn’t
the same.

…but maybe she and Luke had another way.

It would be hard. And maybe dangerous--Luke felt all sort of muffled in the Force, kind of like how
Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan had taught her how to hide herself as soon as she was old enough to
remember, except more. And if it was important for her to hide, it was probably even more
important for Luke, since he and Mom lived right under the Emperor’s nose. The last thing Leia
wanted was for the two of them to get into trouble. Or to get hurt.

But that didn’t mean she wanted to give up the chance to actually talk to her brother.

Maybe...maybe if we just try to make the dreams stronger. If linking up like that already happens
on its own, building on it probably won’t get noticed. We probably shouldn’t reach out on purpose,
at least not yet, unless it’s really really important, but...but we can use the dreams. We can keep
talking that way. We don’t have to lose each other for another ten years. Yeah. Yeah, we can do
this.

Then again, they only had three days to figure it out. If this was gonna work...


“Oh-huh,” he said. She heard him shifting on the other bed, on the other side of the room, and saw
his shadow sit up. There was just enough light from the moon drifting in through the window that
she could see his hair sticking out in all kinds of weird directions.

“Okay, I’m coming over.” Without waiting for him to answer, she kicked off the covers, climbed
out of her bed, and picked her way over to sit on his.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” she said. “…you dream about me, right? Like I’ve dreamed about you forever?”

He nodded. “I mean, it’s not about you, exactly. There’s not usually people or anything.”
“Just places?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Mostly a big, wide-open place with a sky that never ends. Sometimes other places, but not a lot. Oh, and feelings. You get that, too?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We should work on that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Make it… I dunno, stronger,” she said. “‘Cause…’cause letters take forever. But if we can figure out how to control the dreams, maybe we can talk that way.”

Luke thought about that for a minute. “That would be awesome,” he said. “‘Specially if we can figure out why it happens when it happens—‘cause, it’s not every night. Right?”

She shook her head. “No. Prob’ly when we’re both asleep at the same time or something?”


“Okay, let’s forget about that part for now,” Leia said quickly. She was okay at figuring out different calendars from Tatooine, ‘cause it was easier to track when Dad would be home if she knew sort of what time it was where he was. But it was hard and annoying and it was way too late to try and figure that out. Especially since she and Luke only had a couple days to make this work.


She tilted her head, considering. “Let’s try... let’s start with meditating together. So we have a better idea of what linking up feels like and we can figure it out faster when it happens on its own.”


She grinned back. “Okay. Close your eyes, and do what I do.”

“Right.”

She reached for his hand, just like when Uncle Obi-Wan had shown her how to meditate forever ago, so he had a clearer line to follow, and closed her own eyes.

It only took a few seconds for him to slide into place next to her, just as if he’d never been anywhere else.

This can work, she thought. This will work.

She squeezed his hand briefly, waited for him to squeeze back, then sank deeper into the Force to memorize this feeling, and make sure she would never lose her brother again.

Padme woke early the next morning--the sun wasn’t fully up; only a faint glimmer of pink light colored the edges of the blinds. For a moment she just lay there, waiting for her brain to catch up, basking in the feeling of the strange but familiar warm weight in the bed next to her.

More strange than familiar, really, at least like this. Even when Anakin had been able to stay the
night with her back during the War, he was almost always up before her, since he usually had to leave before dawn. He would sometimes wake her to say goodbye, and sometimes just leave a note, depending on exactly how early it was. Either way, mornings like this, where she woke up still curled against him, with his steady heartbeat in her ear…

They were rare. Something to treasure. Especially since, in her experience, they never lasted as long as she wanted.

She shifted a little, partly because Anakin’s metal arm was digging into her shoulders a little uncomfortably, and partly just to take a moment to memorize her husband’s face the way it was right now—not quite how she remembered it, even allowing for the new scar along his chin. Older, naturally, and more…finished wasn’t exactly the right word, but…something like that. Certainly still beautiful; that much hadn’t changed. And peaceful, at least for the moment. The faint worry lines on his forehead were smoothed out in sleep—he was sleeping better than she remembered, too. She wasn’t sure if that was just because of their current circumstances, or an actual long-term change for the better.

She hoped it was the second, but she was pretty sure it was the first.

Still, she thought. We’re here now. We have this. I’m going to focus on that, make this visit special, and happy, for all of us.

Which meant that, as much as she was enjoying this quiet morning, this wonderful feeling of waking up in bed next to her husband, with nowhere else she needed to be…well, it was a little bit selfish to keep it all to herself.

She leaned forward and kissed him, very lightly, just enough to wake him up.

And, sure enough, Anakin stirred a little and opened his eyes. He smiled when he saw her, softly, and she smiled back.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi,” he said, and half sat up to kiss her back, which she welcomed warmly. “What time is it?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “Early. I don’t think the twins are up yet.” She and Anakin had let them stay up—probably too late last night. And, in the grand tradition of ten-year-olds at sleepovers all over the galaxy, she was all but positive that they’d stayed up talking even later after being sent to bed. But…well, it was important to all of them to make the most of their time together, and she didn’t regret it. Not right in this moment, anyway. Luke could catch up on sleep after this was over, and probably Leia could, too.

He nodded, and took that as permission to sink back again, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her back as well. “I’m sure they’ll come find us when they are.”

“Probably,” she agreed, and shifted to a slightly more comfortable angle, resting her head right where it fit best on his shoulder.

The two of them lapsed into a comfortable silence. Which…was nice. They didn’t need words, not this morning. Their letters, of course, meant that the two of them didn’t necessarily have a lot of news to catch up on, just a lot of lost time to make up for. Just a lot of being together.

Of course, as beautiful and precious as this moment was, neither of them was all that good at being still and quiet, and it didn’t take long for Anakin to break the silence.
“You know,” he said softly, “I can’t actually remember the last time we did this? Just…lay here, listening to the sunrise together.”

“After the wedding, I think,” Padme said, after a moment’s thought. Even though it didn’t happen a lot, the two of them had occasionally been able to wake up together, back during the War. A few times on Coruscant, or, once or twice, when they’d managed to find a mission together as an excuse to spend some quality time…

But on Coruscant, even if Ani hadn’t had to rush out the door immediately, they’d never really had time for more than a few minutes of kissing and cuddling before needing to get ready for the day and get back to the real world. And on missions, they were…well, on missions.

“Yeah, that sounds right,” he said. “It’s nice. A little weird, not having anything I need to get up and do, but…nice.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “Well, we’ll just have to do this more often.”

“Every morning, while we’re here,” he agreed. “Spend some time together, quietly, just like this. Listening to the world wake up and holding on.”

Which, of course, just made her think about what would happen after they left-- they only had two more mornings here. Two more mornings to spend like this, and then probably at least a few years before they got another.

*We’re not going to worry about anything right now*, Anakin’s voice echoed to her, from a decade ago and lightyears away, and Padme decided to listen to it.

She knew, of course, that they would have to discuss the future and the Rebellion and all of the things they needed to worry about at some point on this trip. Obi-Wan and Bail already had, and she knew that she and Ani would need to weigh in, too. Before they all scattered again.

But it didn’t have to be now. It didn’t have to be this morning. And she had her husband in her arms, in a quiet and peaceful and beautiful moment all to themselves, for the first time in ten years. She wasn’t going to let it end. Not just yet.

Okay, so maybe she was still feeling a little bit selfish this morning.

She kept that particular thought to herself, and just said, “Absolutely. Or,” she added, letting her tone turn a little mischievous and shifting position so she could give him a light kiss, “we could find some other way to pass the time.”

“A brilliant idea,” he said. “You’re brilliant. As always. My brilliant, beautiful, beloved wife.” He punctuated each adjective with a kiss, each one sending a warm thrill down her spine.

She grinned and pulled him closer, tangling her hands in his hair, just like she used to do ten years ago and more. “I love you, too,” she said, and kissed him once again, harder this time.

He hummed a little against her mouth, low and warm and pleased; she felt his fingers flicker, using the Force to make sure the door was locked-- good idea, my beautiful, beloved husband; who’s the brilliant one now--and then…

Well.

Sure, there might be better ways to spend a free morning, but Padme couldn’t think of any just now.
In fact, for the next hour or so, at least, she and Ani were going to have a very pleasant morning that involved barely any thinking at all.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the long delay guys <3 life, etc...also, my profound respect to people who specialize in writing fluff. Y'all are awesome, this is not at all easy <3

Thanks so much for your patience and for sticking with me!!! ~shadowsong
Part 6, Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The four of them--Commander Tano, Gerrera, Kylie, and Rex himself--were sprawled on a ridge, overlooking the warehouse in the valley below. Security was a little heavier than Saw’s intel had said, but still manageable. A full garrison, but they had enough numbers that they should be able to get in.

The walkers, though, were definitely gonna be a problem.

“All right, change of plans,” Gerrera said, passing his viewer over to Kylie. “Three teams. I’ll take the bulk of our people, make a strike at the main entrance. Ashla, you take the rest and take care of those walkers. Meantime, we send a couple people in to dump their drives.”

This, with a nod to Rex. The drives had been his suggestion, during their preliminary briefing the night before. General Kenobi would want to see whatever data there was, and, while Gerrera’s tactics tended toward blowing everything up and asking questions of the rubble, he’d quickly agreed that figuring out the cargo’s intended next stop—if not its final destination—along with any other potential targets listed in those files, was a good idea. At least as a secondary objective.

“Once we get in,” Gerrera continued, “we decide if we’re blowing or tracking the shipment.”

The Commander shook her head. “Unless we’re going in stealth, they’ll be looking for a tracker. Makes more sense to blow it up at this point.”

She was right, about the tracker at least. On the other hand, security this tight probably meant highly classified R&D of some kind. Which could mean another monster like the one from Malastare, or an experimental bomb like the ones of the Separatists’ defoliators, or any number of other nasty creations. If that were the case, trying to blow it up would just make things worse. Hell, it could even be a stockpile of cortosis or the like, and adding bombs to that equation never ended well.

“Risky,” Rex said. “We’re still pretty close to the city. If whatever they’re moving is especially volatile, there could be a lot of civilian casualties.”

“Point,” she said.

“So we play it by ear,” Gerrera said. “Once we know more about what we’re dealing with, we can figure out how to end this.”

“Agreed,” Kylie said. “Who goes for the data?”

“Jyn,” he said after a minute. “Rex, you good to go with her?”

Slicing had never been one of his primary skillsets, but he knew his way around an enemy mainframe. And it had been his idea in the first place. Plus, it wasn’t that he didn’t trust their allies, but he’d feel a damn sight better if either he or the Commander went along with Gerrera’s slicer. Just in case he changed his mind about sharing intel, when the dust settled.

“Yeah.” He pulled up the schematics Kylie had shared—wishing, absently, he still had a helmet with a HUD; easier to access and track and less damn obvious once they were actually in motion--
and studied his options. “Best entry point for us is gonna be the south side of the complex.”

“We’ll keep the troopers as far away from there as we can,” the Commander promised.

He nodded, and shut down the hologram.

“Kylie, assign the others to their teams,” Gerrera ordered. “We move at sundown.”

---

Jyn turned out to be the young girl who had been in the caves the night before--not who Rex would have chosen for this. She was too small to credibly steal a uniform if they ended up in that position, which meant he’d have to steal armor himself and fake taking her as his prisoner. That was far from his favorite ploy, even working with someone whose capabilities he knew. Too many things that could go wrong.

And, all right, the fact that she was only a couple years older than Leia (the two girls even looked a bit alike) probably had something to do with his feelings on the subject. If he were completely honest with himself. Which was stupid on his part, and he knew it. For one thing, they were probably going to start bringing Leia along with them on actual missions before too much longer. That was what they’d been training her for, after all. Besides, it wasn’t like Commander Tano hadn’t performed similar tasks, and more, at around this kid’s age.

(The fact that he himself had technically done it younger didn’t count. Clones aged fast.)

Gerrera wouldn’t send Jyn into this if he didn’t think she could get out of it, he told himself.

On cue, two slightly-staggered explosions ripped the air.

“That’s us,” the girl said. “You ready?”

“Always,” he said, and headed for the base’s back door.

Their path wasn’t totally clear--he hadn’t expected it to be. He focused on the east side, picking off a pair of stormtroopers, one with a grenade launcher. A burst of precision fire behind and slightly to his left said Jyn was capable of holding her own.

See? You were worried for nothing.

Thirty seconds to reach it, and they both made it intact. “Cover me,” Jyn said, not waiting for an answer before she went to work on the lock.

He nodded, and got into position, screening her bodily from view and keeping an eye out for trouble headed their way.

None came.

“Got it!” she said, unnecessarily, as the door slid open--

To reveal a pair of stormtroopers standing on guard, just inside.

Ah. There they are.
“What the--” the one on the right said, and that was as far as he got before Rex and Jyn, in near unison, took him and his partner out with neat headshots.

“Nice,” she said, and grinned up at him.

He couldn’t help but smile back. “Come on, kid. Don’t want to keep the others waiting.”

She rolled her eyes, and called up the complex map. It only took her a few seconds before she nodded and shut it down again, jerking her head to the right. “This way.”

“Right behind you.”

With a healthy amount of caution, Jyn took point, starting down the hallway towards the central data hub at a steady, deliberate pace, eyes constantly moving, hands ready on her blaster in case of trouble. “So, is this what you and Ashla do, most of the time? Work with people like us?”

“A lot of it, yeah,” Rex said, keeping an eye out behind them. “We keep ourselves mobile, pitch in when other cells we have contact with need the help.”

“You hit your own targets, too, though,” she said. It wasn’t really a question.

“We do,” he confirmed. “The more cells we bring into our network, though, the more we’re doing things like this instead of our own missions.” Jedi business aside, but that, obviously, wasn’t his to share. “A lot of it ends up being the same sort of thing anyway--destroy an installation, make out with as much data or equipment or supplies as we can, get it to the people who can best make use of it. Sometimes, rescuing prisoners.”

“We don’t do a lot of that,” Jyn said. “I mean, if we run across anyone, depending on what they can do and what our actual goal was, sometimes Saw brings them back with us, but it’s usually not what we’re there for.”

“Right.”

They continued on in silence for another few minutes and two turns--Jyn checked her map once, just to be sure--and then she paused, poked her head around a corner, ducked back. “Okay. It’s just up ahead, third door on the left. I didn’t see cameras, but there’s two troopers on guard.”

“Probably more inside,” he said. “There’s likely a security feed, too.”

She nodded, and unclipped a flashbang from her belt. “I’ll take the two outside, you handle any backup?”

“Copy that,” he said. “Count of three, then.”

“One, two--”

She tossed the grenade, and the next thirty seconds were a chaos of smoke and lasers.

When the dust settled, there were a total of five dead armored troopers (two outside, one halfway through the door, the others still in the hub), and one junior officer in a grey duty uniform--corporal, based on his rank bar--slumped over the main console.

Jyn pushed the corporal’s body aside and stuck in the data spike. “Download in progress,” she said.

Rex nodded, and found a position where he could watch both the security feeds and the battered hallway for any approaching trouble.
She spun back and forth in the chair, and seemed like she was about to say something, if only to break the tension of waiting, when her comm crackled to life.

“Jyn. Status?”

Instantly, she sat up straighter. “All good here, Saw,” she said. “We’ve started the data transfer, should be done in a minute or so, then we’re headed to the rendezvous.”

“Change of plans,” he said. “Finish up there, then head for the primary target instead.”

“Problems?” Rex asked.

“Not really,” Gerrera said, followed by a sharp, staccato burst of blaster fire in the background. “These guys are just better at their jobs than the usual bucketheads. Taking us longer to get through the doors than we thought, that’s all, and Ashla’s still busy with those damn walkers. You two have explosives on you?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Always,” Jyn added.

“We’ll get there as fast as we can,” he said. “But if we’re not there in five minutes, make the call.”

“Copy that,” she said, and Gerrera cut the transmission.

Rex risked taking his eyes away from the surveillance feeds to glance at Jyn’s screen--talking with Gerrera had eaten up a lot of that minute she’d mentioned; they’d be ready to disengage in seconds.

It was his turn to call up the complex map this time, scanning for the best route to the primary hangar, where their target cargo was ready and waiting for flights to resume.

There wasn’t a clear one. *Kriff.*

“What’s wrong?” Jyn asked.

*No help for it,* he thought, eyeing the downed stormtroopers with a sigh. *Damage to that one’s less obvious, I think. And it’s closer to my size.* “How good are you at faking being captured?” he asked.

She followed his gaze, then nodded and hopped down off her chair to start stripping the armor while he kept watch. “I’ll make it work,” she said, freeing the helmet and tossing it his way.

“Good,” he said, catching it with his left hand.

*On the plus side, at least I have this now. Scanners and everything*

...yeah. Somehow, that didn’t really improve the situation at all.

---

Fortunately, the prisoner gambit worked, at least to get them as far as the main hangar.

But there they ran into another little snag.
What the kriffing hell are a pair of karking deathtroopers doing here?

“You there,” the one on the right said; automatically shifting his grip on his gun, pointing it at Jyn. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Caught this little rat trying to break into the data hub,” Rex said. He squeezed Jyn’s shoulder when she started to shift—*not yet, kid. Wait for my signal.* “I was told to bring her here.”

“By who? What’s your operating number?”

“MK-4119,” he answered—and it was, in fact, the number belonging to the trooper whose armor he stole. Safer that way.

(The *first* time he’d pulled a stunt like this, he had instinctively used his birth number. That...could’ve gone better. Fortunately, he’d learned since then.)

“Orders came from Captain Rahl,” he added. Who, according to the duty roster they’d found on the corporal’s terminal, was the ranking officer on this watch, though the commandant would have come back on duty when--

A split second later, Left Trooper’s gun was brought to bear on him.

...*oh, kriff.*

“Captain Rahl was killed in the firefight ten minutes ago,” Right Trooper said.

*Oh,* kriff.

It was lucky—*beyond* lucky—that Rex had been bred to keep up with Jedi. And even luckier that Right Trooper had decided to run his mouth rather than pulling the trigger right away.

Rex yanked Jyn behind him and fired his own weapon, aiming for Right Trooper’s head.

As it turned out, they weren’t making armor like they used to.

But, luckiest of all, he’d moved *just* enough to keep either deathtrooper from hitting anything vital. One bolt grazed his left shoulder; the other connected solidly with his right hip. He grunted a little as his right leg gave out underneath him.

Which, helpfully, cleared Jyn’s line of fire. Two quick shots, and both guards were down.

The whole thing had taken all of a second and a half.

“Rex?” she asked, dropping her discarded binders on the floor. “Rex, you okay?”

“I’ll live,” he said. He tried to stand—he could manage it, mostly, but that leg did *not* want to take his weight. Kriff.

*Getting out is gonna be a problem.*

Jyn hit the door control and slipped under his arm to help him stay upright.

There was a third deathtrooper inside, but his first shot went wide.

Jyn’s did not.
Rex scanned the room with the benefit of his helmet’s sensors. “Clear,” he said.

“Good,” she said, and helped him sit down on an upended crate before shutting the door behind them.

Once he caught his breath, it was damn near impossible to miss the top-secret project. The thing took up half the hangar; some of it in partially-assembled pieces of paneling and wiring, what looked like a turbine, links for a generator, a fuel pump, a pair of...no, those weren’t dampers, they were--

“What *is* that?” Jyn asked, staring up in confusion at the large metal structure.

Rex frowned. “Looks almost like a...a hyperdrive?” Though *what the hell would need one this big...*

“I’ve never *seen* one that size,” she said, echoing his thoughts. “But--yeah, that’s the accelerator, right?”

He shook his head. “Interface with the sublights. I think.”

“Right,” she said. “I don’t do engines a lot, just the basics. ...are they trying to build bigger Star Destroyers or something?”

“Maybe,” he said. This seemed excessive even for that, but depending on *how* big they were planning to go...

Oh, he had a *bad* feeling about this.

Before he could think through the implications any further, his comm chimed and Commander Tano’s voice cracked into the air. “Rex? What’s your status?”

“Sir,” he said. “We got the data, made it to the hangar. We’re not totally sure what we’re looking at, but it looks like…”

“Rex thinks it’s a massive hyperdrive,” Jyn said.

The Commander let out a breath. “How massive are we talking?”

“Taking up half the room, and it’s only half-built,” Rex said. “Most of the framework’s in place, but there’s some components missing.”

“Right,” she said. “Any fuel?”

“Hang on.” He activated another set of scanners on the helmet. “Negative. No fuel.”

“Then light it up,” she said. “We’re heading to the fourth backup rendezvous, you remember where it is?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“...what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“I took a couple hits,” he said. “It’s not serious, I don’t think, but I’m not very mobile at the moment. Definitely not with any speed, and I’m not sure how much longer my leg’ll support me.”

Unlike certain generals he might name, Rex knew better than to be anything less than completely honest in this situation, so Commander Tano could adjust her plans correctly.
“Kriff,” she said, then something he couldn’t quite make out, to Gerrera or one of the others on her end. “...okay. Set the explosives, I’m headed in to you. There’s a ground vehicle garage, should be pretty close to where you are. Think you can make it that far?”

He called up the schematics once more and studied them for a second. “Yeah, I think so. Unless we run into more trouble.”

“Don’t jinx it,” she warned him. “I’ll meet you there, we’ll get out together. Okay?”

“Copy that, Commander. See you soon.”

“Stay where you are,” Jyn said, when the call cut out. “I’ll set the bombs, then we’ll get moving. Okay?”

“Yeah,” he said. Best thing he could do, really, frustrating as it was. *The sooner we get out of here, the better, but if I injure myself worse...* “You know the weak points?”

“Um,” she said.

*That’s a no, then.*

“No one knows everything, kid,” he said. “I’ll talk you through it.”

“Thank you,” she said, and picked up the first of her charges. “Okay. Where do I start?”

Jyn kept the data spike, and Rex kept the detonator, and they made it to the garage with minimal resistance, leaving two dead Army officers--not stormtroopers, and, fortunately, not more deathtroopers--behind them.

*Please, please, let our luck hold just two minutes longer,* Rex thought, as he heard the telltale hum of a pair of lightsabers up ahead.

Commander Tano was perched on a speeder, keeping three stormtroopers back with reflected bolts; two more were dead on the ground. By the way the vehicle was vibrating, she’d already hotwired it and gotten it started before getting caught.

Rex pushed away from Jyn and shot one of the Commander’s attackers--no sense in wasting the element of surprise.

Jyn was half a beat behind him, hitting the second on the side--a glancing blow; nonfatal, but enough to drive him back a step.

“Come on!” Commander Tano called, spinning her longer blade to deflect a volley from the last trooper standing.

He took a breath, summoned all the stamina adrenaline could give him, and made for the speeder, keeping low; blindly laying cover fire down in the general direction of the shooter.

He made it. By some kriffing *miracle,* he made it.

“Jyn?”
“Here,” she said, getting into the driver’s seat next to him. Her sleeve was a bit singed, but she was bright-eyed and didn’t seem to be in any pain.

Commander Tano grinned down at the kid, then spared a worried glance for Rex.

“I’m all right,” he said. “For the moment.”

She nodded. “Go,” she said, nudging Jyn and adjusting her stance to stay balanced when the speeder started to move.

The kid didn’t need to be told twice. Rex hissed a little as his shoulder slammed back into the seat--sudden acceleration was never easy on burns--then twisted to help the Commander cover their exit.

“I’ve got this,” she said, her second lightsaber passing over his head to intercept a bolt aimed at Jyn’s back. “Stay down.”

“Ashla?” Jyn said. “Ashla, they’re closing the door--”

“Just keep driving,” she said. “We’ll make it.”

At the very last second, she dropped flat across the back of the speeder. They shot out of the hanger, clearing the space underneath the door with mere centimeters to spare.

They were out. They’d made it. All three of them, alive, with the data spike still intact in Jyn’s pocket.

Only one thing left to do now.

Rex took a breath, glanced back at the base to make sure they were far enough away, and hit the detonator.

Jyn shot him a half-feral sort of grin and made a hairpin turn to get them headed in the right direction; Commander Tano sat up next to him with a wild smile of her own; and when he glanced back, the only thing chasing them was a cloud of smoke and ash.

He let out a slow, relieved breath, and--yep, there was the pain. Kriffin adrenaline couldn’t’ve masked it for another five minutes--

“It’s okay,” Commander Tano said. “We made it. I’ve got you.”

“Sir,” he acknowledged.

The Commander, no longer needing to worry ducking under a closing door, resumed her position on the back of the speeder, and Jyn fed a little more power to the engines.

And Rex--Rex just closed his eyes and sank into his seat, leaving it to the others to get them the rest of the way to the rendezvous from here, and bracing himself for what was likely to be a very bumpy ride.

Chapter End Notes

:D
(Jyn was actually originally going to be playing the role of Sir Not-Appearing-In-This-Fic (because lol how to write Saw Gerrera's thirteen-year-old adopted daughter before he abandoned her), but then I considered this teamup and really how could I pass up that opportunity? Besides, Rex should have more people to bond with, right??)

Anyway, sorry again for the long-delayed update; RL keeps going nuts on me...and thanks so much for stopping by! See you next time! ~shadowsong
It was their last day on Alderaan, and still early. The children were already up; conspiring in a safe corner of the garden while Obi-Wan kept an eye on them from the terrace outside their suite.

They likely didn’t realize he knew what they were doing. He knew he wouldn’t have, at that age.)

He couldn’t hear them, not at this distance, but he didn’t need to. He’d guessed a good portion of what they’d plotted amongst themselves, and as for the rest…well, even ten-year-olds deserved their privacy.

And if some of what the twins had gotten up to was a little worrying, well…he and Anakin had, of course, taken the time to shore up the shielding they’d placed on Luke all those years ago, and walk him through building his own, the better to adapt to changing circumstances. It wasn’t ideal, especially since, unlike his sister, Luke lacked a teacher or three to guide him. But there was only so much they could do to prepare. And, short of keeping Luke in the dark about his father and sister for even longer--or essentially abducting him, or forcing Padme to leave Coruscant with him--that was their limit.

Well. Luke would be all right. Obi-Wan had to trust in that.

Those lessons, though, had been something of a delight in other ways. Luke wasn’t precisely like Anakin--less so, in most ways, than Leia was, apart from the physical resemblance--but there was still something of the same eager warmth that reminded Obi-Wan of the boy he’d taken in all those years ago. Tempered, a little, by the differences in the way they’d grown up--Luke’s warmth wasn’t undercut by the same need to please that Anakin’s had had--but still there.

Obi-Wan had certainly had more than a few moments of nostalgia, over the past three days.

Leia had sometimes joined them for those lessons, sometimes wandered off to spend time with Padme while Luke was otherwise occupied. And that was--probably--a good thing, too; give each of the children a chance, however brief, to bond with their other parent privately, or something near to it. Obi-Wan had occasionally left Luke and Anakin to their own devices, as well, for that reason.

True, he had spent most of his time here with the family in one way or another, but Obi-Wan had also met with Bail at least briefly once or twice each day. The others, of course, had focused entirely on each other and the children until now. As well they should.

But, as with all things, their brief reprieve was at last coming to an end. Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Leia were due at the spaceport in just under six hours. And, while it was not quite time to say goodbye, and most of that time would be stretched as long as it could, filled with last-minute conspiracies and confidences...Padme and Anakin, at least, would have to cut that short. The plan was--had always been--to have a brief return to business; one last strategy session this morning, this time, with the two of them in attendance as well.

His musings were somewhat abruptly cut short--almost as if summoned by his thoughts, the door behind him opened, letting Bail out onto the terrace to join him.

“Good morning,” he said, crossing the deck in three easy strides to stand beside Obi-Wan, leaning against the railing with a smile.
“Morning,” he replied, accepting the cup of tea the Senator passed him with a smile of his own and a nod of thanks, before turning his attention back to the twins. They seemed to have lost interest in conspiracy for the moment, and were now fully occupied with some sort of game whose rules he couldn’t quite track. It involved quite a bit of running around and jumping over obstacles, in any case.

*Probably for the best,* Obi-Wan said. *Even if she hasn’t been going short of sleep, with all this excitement, Leia will probably crash once we’re underway. Which will spare her, at least, the stress and discomfort of a long flight on a commercial liner*...

“It’s good, that they get along as well as they do,” Bail said, following his gaze.

“Oh, we weren’t particularly worried about that,” Obi-Wan said, as Leia abruptly turned and tripped Luke, sending him splashing into a nearby fountain. “Not for this visit, at least.”

Bail raised an eyebrow. “Have you never spent time around ten-year-olds before? Or siblings?”

Obi-Wan laughed, as Luke came up, spluttering and indignant, only to reach out and grab Leia’s ankle and drag her down with him, her giggling cutting off abruptly in a rather annoyed yelp.

“Oh, several,” he said. “And I’m sure that, when they have to share space--and their parents--on a more permanent basis, there will be some conflicts. But for three days like this…”

“A fair point,” Bail said, setting his own cup down on the railing--caf, by the smell.

The two of them weren’t kept waiting much longer--just long enough for the twins to fish themselves out of the fountain and sit on the edge of the basin, conspiring again--before Anakin and Padme emerged onto the terrace from the other door.

“Good morning,” Padme said, after a brief glance at her children to assure herself that they were alive, intact, and in a minimum of trouble.

“Good morning,” Obi-Wan replied, with a smile she returned, as Bail passed the two of them--more caf, of course, because they were all barbarians.

“Barbarian is a little harsh, isn’t it?” Anakin said, raising an eyebrow and dumping a heaping spoonful of sweetener in his. As always.

“I thought you two couldn’t actually read each others’ thoughts?” Padme asked lightly. She preferred her caf unadulterated, apparently.

“Oh, we can’t,” Anakin said. “It’s just I’ve heard this lecture a dozen or so times before.”

“*Really,* Anakin,” Obi-Wan said, though he couldn’t quite hide a smile at the old, familiar dance. “An opinion that differs from your own is hardly a *lecture.*”

“Well, considering that *I’m* the one you expound at…”

“Boys,” Padme said, which made Anakin laugh and kiss the top of her head.

“All right, we’ll behave,” he said, and then his expression turned a touch more serious. “I guess we should get started, then?”

“Probably,” Obi-Wan agreed.

“Over here,” Bail said, nodding towards a cluster of elegant wicker furniture where they could talk
in semi-private comfort, while still keeping watch over Luke and Leia.

Anakin and Padme settled on a small couch, with her leaning contentedly into his shoulder and their hands entwined. That had become their practice over the past few days, in the evenings after the children were sent off to bed. To be as close as decency would allow, always touching—if only to hold hands. Obi-Wan supposed it was a comfort to them, now that they were no longer keeping their relationship secret. At least among friends.

There had been a brief, awkward moment, though, that first night; when Anakin and Padme had settled next to each other, but with a few careful centimeters between them, out of habit. And it had—or so Obi-Wan believed—struck all of them at the same moment that they had never done this before.

That the three of them, for all the love they’d shared even in the darkest days of the War; for all the messages and work they’d shared in the decade since…

The three of them had never been together like this. With everything out in the open. With no secrets. With nothing to hide.

Even on Polis Massa, after everything had been revealed and Obi-Wan had given up on his thin veil of plausible deniability, there had been too much going on. Setting aside Anakin’s condition at the time, even, there had been too many decisions to make, too much focus on building the foundation for their new war.

It hadn’t taken them long, of course, to find their rhythm and figure out how to relate to one another now, but there had…there had still been that moment.

But now, Anakin and Padme were able to, and did, take every advantage of their physical proximity while they could, and Obi-Wan found it...sweet, if still a little sad. But mostly sweet—that they loved one another so much, and that they trusted him so much, to be so open about it.

“So,” Anakin said, once he decided Bail and Obi-Wan had situated themselves as well. “What have we missed?”

It didn’t take particularly long to brief them, at least. The bulk of what he and Bail had been working on consisted of finer points of detail, related to overall broad strokes that the four of them, with input from Ahsoka, Rex, Senator Mothma, and Padme’s trusted handmaidens, had worked out through messages left at dead drops over the past two years.

“So, our priority, now that we have a somewhat substantial network more or less in place, should be about gathering it more closely,” Bail concluded. “Until we do that, we can’t really make any effective large-scale maneuvers. We’ve been making small progress in the Senate—and I know you have been, too—but we need a more united, organized front. As quickly as we can, without sacrificing the safety of the movement itself.”

“We’ll start actively looking for places to set up a semi-permanent base,” Obi-Wan said. “There are a few places we’ve noted over the years, but we’ll want to do more thorough research before we pick any of them. Either way, may take us up to another year or two to get things going, but we can manage.”

“Let us know when you have something,” Bail said. “We’ve got everything more or less set on our end, in terms of funding and immediately necessary supplies. Longer-term arrangements will depend on where we’re going, of course, but we can at least get started.”
“We’ll want backup sites as well,” Anakin said. “We’re not quite extensive enough out there that we can settle too securely, I don’t think. At least not yet.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I agree. I think we’ll want to stay fairly mobile for as long as we can.”

“We’ll keep that in mind as we source equipment,” Padme said, adding a few notes onto her datapad. “We’ve got a few leads for some of what we’ll need–Bail, you remember the mobile emergency response units project we put together a few years back? I want to have Sabe re-evaluate some of our suppliers there, but…”

“Good thought,” he said. “How soon can your people be ready?”

“Once we find a place–it’ll take probably two to three standard weeks,” Anakin said. “And that won’t be our entire network, just a few key cells we think will play well together. Enough to staff a small, semi-permanent base.”

“I’ll reach out to my black market contacts,” Obi-Wan said. “When the time is right. We can use their activities for cover as we move in, and also to help supply on anything Padme’s people can’t procure.”

“Right,” she said. “And then–at some point, we’ll have to make a public stand. Come out into the open.”

“Any idea when we’ll be ready for that?” Bail asked.

Anakin and Obi-Wan exchanged a look.

“On our end…” Obi-Wan started, then hesitated. “Let’s see how this next project goes first. One year of a established semi-permanent base, serving multiple cells in a sector. If things go smoothly with this initial trial, then possibly as soon as that. Let’s say…three years, as a rough estimate?”

Anakin nodded. “Sounds about right,” he said, with a slightly disappointed sigh; but he didn’t argue the point further. And some of that was, perhaps, the product of time; increased maturity tempering some of his reckless need to move, but Obi-Wan suspected that it was largely the thought of Luke and Padme’s cover and lives potentially at stake if they moved too quickly.

He just wished that his friend had managed to develop that glimmer of restraint some other, gentler way.

“It also depends on developments in the Senate, of course,” Padme said. “Which may cause further delays. And we haven’t made a final decision, but we think Mon will be the one to step out and deliver the call to action at that time, so you’ll need to coordinate more directly with her as we get closer.”

Because her government could more easily disavow her than the others.

Because she was--unattached.

Because she had the least to lose.

The four of them fell quiet for a moment, the magnitude of that looming event--even three or more years in the future--sinking down upon them.

At length, Bail cleared his throat and broke the silence. “I think that covers everything we needed to do in person,” he said. “Unless any of you can think of something I forgot?”
Anakin shook his head, and Obi-Wan, after a moment, did the same.

“Not really,” Padme said, then, with a glance at Anakin, “unless either of you has heard any more about the bombing?”

Which was, of course, not the first time Anakin had heard of it, despite his request to be left out of the loop. Obi-Wan had taken Anakin aside briefly, the very first day, to update him on the exact nature of the bombing on Coruscant—and, more importantly, the target. Primarily because, while he didn’t need to actively involve himself at that point—there was very little that could be done from here, in any case—it was far better for him to hear the news from Obi-Wan than from Luke. Who, even with Leia and Anakin to draw his attention, would not be distracted from the danger his friend was in for long.

“Right,” Anakin said, and added, unsurprisingly, “Luke keeps asking. I’ve been trying to help him track and evaluate any warnings he gets from the Force, but he says he’s not picking much up. I’m not sure if that means the threat’s more or less passed now, or he’s just not experienced enough to sort it out from what’s going on inside his head.”

Which, as Anakin in particular knew, was hard enough even with experience.

“No update, unfortunately,” Bail said. “We’ve heard bits and pieces about a couple other incidents over the past few days, both on Coruscant and elsewhere, but it’s hard to figure out what’s actually connected, and what’s other groups or individuals taking advantage of the tension. There haven’t been any more official press releases since that first day.”

“I’ve been monitoring our emergency channel, and same thing there,” Obi-Wan said. “I wish we had better answers for him.”

Padme nodded. “It was a long shot, but I figured I’d ask.”

“If Ahsoka, or anyone else in our network, learns anything, we’ll pass it on as soon as possible,” Obi-Wan assured her.

“I know you will,” she said, then glanced out at the twins.

Leia was now up in a tree, hanging upside down by her knees—“She’s fine,” Anakin whispered—with Luke tossing stones and other small objects for her to catch.

“I think you’d better go see what they’re up to,” Bail said.

“Thanks,” she said and stood up, offering a hand to Anakin. “Obi-Wan, are you coming?”

“Oh, all right,” he said, setting his teacup aside and smiling at them both.

“I should go check in with Breha and Winter,” Bail said. “I’ll come get you when it’s time to go.”

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said, then followed Anakin and Padme out into the garden.

All of a sudden, it was all over.

One minute, Luke was playing with Leia and Mom and Dad in the gardens, and the next he looked
up and Uncle Bail was standing on the terrace, and Mom sighed, and Dad reached for her hand and squeezed it briefly, and he knew.

Leia caught that, and looked up at Uncle Bail too, and Luke could tell exactly when she figured out what he was doing there. “...can’t we stay a little while longer?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” Uncle Obi-Wan said. “I truly am, Leia, but we can’t.”

“Dad?” she asked. “Daddy, please?”

“Leia,” Dad said, and it came out as a sigh.

“Come on,” Mom said, and held out a hand to her.

Leia hesitated for a second, like she was about to argue more, but finally nodded. Mom pulled her aside, to where Luke couldn’t quite hear the two of them talking. Uncle Obi-Wan headed up to talk to Uncle Bail again, and Dad sat down in the grass next to Luke.

“I can’t promise when we’ll do this again, sunshine,” he said, looking off at the mountains in the distance. “But we will. Someday. Okay? Hold on to that.”

“I know,” Luke said, pulling up a few strands of grass and shredding them. “Three days seemed like ages except...except...”

“Yeah,” Dad agreed. “Time’s funny like that. Always too fast when you want it to go slow. And the opposite, too.”

Luke nodded. “Mom...Mom gets letters, right?”

“She does,” Dad said. “And you will too, from now on, as often as I can. But you gotta promise me something, sunshine, okay?”

Luke nodded, and looked up at him.

“Write me back,” Dad said.


“Good,” Dad said, and gave him a little smile. “C’mere, give me a hug.”

Luke really didn’t need that much encouragement. “M’gonna miss you,” he said, and he felt Dad running a hand over his hair; couldn’t tell if it was the metal one or not but it didn’t matter because both were Dad.

“Me, too,” he said, then held him a little tighter for a breath, before letting him go and studying his face for a second. “Go say goodbye to your sister, okay? You’ll hear from me soon. I promise.”

Luke nodded, and stole one more hug, before he looked up and saw Mom and Leia making their way back.

Leia picked up speed and slammed into him; he thought he heard Dad stand up and go over to Mom.

“This is stupid,” Leia said. “It’s all just stupid.”

“Uh-huh,” Luke said, because she was right. Leia was almost always right.
“But we’ll talk, right?” she said. “We’ll both do calendars, and next time it’s night for both of us, we’ll try dreaming. Just like we planned. Right?”

“Right,” he said. And it might not work the first time, or the second, but sooner or later they’d make it work. Because Leia was super smart, and strong with the Force and knew what she was doing, and they’d done it by accident so many times before. “I’ll talk to you then,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Not if I see you first?”

“You wish,” she said, and rolled her eyes, but it got her to smile a little, so Luke was okay with that.

“Keep an eye on Dad, okay?” Luke said. “I kinda get the feeling he does a lot of stupid things.”

“You are not wrong,” Leia said. “Tell you all about it?”


“When we talk,” she agreed, and hugged him one more time. “Be safe. And give Mom extra hugs from me.”

“I will,” he promised. “Bye, Leia.”

“Bye,” she said, then let go and went to take Dad’s hand and follow him and Uncle Obi-Wan up to the terrace and out of the palace and...

Luke felt Mom’s hand land on his shoulder, and he wrapped an arm around her waist in a sideways hug; the two of them quiet while they watched the rest of their family walk away.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long, guys, and thank you so much for your patience/sticking around!!! As of right now, the plan is for two more chapters in this arc, and my goal is to get them out by the end of the calendar year. Wish me luck, and see you next time!! <3 ~shadowsong
Darth Infernalis may have been primarily a blunt instrument but, despite what that might imply, he was not just dumb muscle. His Master wouldn’t have tolerated him this long if he was. And he had, to a point, learned how to be subtle in the years since joining the Sith. A blade, as Sidious put it, rather than a hammer. It didn’t come naturally to him, sure, but he was capable.

But all his talent and hard-earned skill didn’t necessarily guarantee success, especially not when tracking down possible offworld connections for some idiot’s attempt to kidnap his Master’s brat.

Oh, there were petty insurrections and insurgent cells that had taken advantage of the sudden shifts in security procedures--plenty of them, all over the galaxy. The problem was, none of them seemed deliberate. They were all, on closer look, acts of impulse, or, at best, pre-existing plans that were accelerated to take advantage of an unexpected opportunity.

The only thing that really stood out in all the noise had been an explosion in a warehouse, on an otherwise unremarkable Outer Rim planet. It didn’t necessarily seem any more connected than anything else he’d uncovered. The insurgent cell was a little more organized than most, but it still felt opportunistic, rather than deliberate.

On the other hand, the explosion had destroyed yet another classified shipment for the project Infernalis supposed he should probably care about. The one Tarkin seemed to care about a great deal. So, he felt like he should take a closer look. Yes, yes, he had an assignment, one he technically should still be pursuing until his orders changed, but--

Well. His Master did, on occasion, give him his head. And if this incident, or something he uncovered there, did prove to be valuable, all would be forgiven.

There might even be Jedi survivors involved. There were some hints that pointed to that, based on the preliminary reports from the stormtroopers who had been on site, but he couldn’t know for sure until he got a closer look. Besides, Jedi involvement would explain why Infernalis was drawn to this particular incident--even if it made it even less likely that it was directly connected to his official mission. All propaganda aside, to Infernalis’ knowledge, Jedi didn’t typically kidnap seven-year-olds.

And if there were Jedi involved--well, it wasn’t Skywalker, he didn’t think. This wasn’t particularly his style. But he had known associates, and there were still a few other survivors scattered around who occasionally poked their noses into Imperial business.

Worth a closer look, anyway. Especially since it had been a while since he’d last tangled with someone really worth his effort.

Of course, if he didn’t run into any fugitives, there was probably plenty there to interest him. For one, Infernalis didn’t particularly like Tarkin, and poking around in his business (within certain boundaries, of course; he wasn’t yet interested in interfering with his Master’s plans) seemed a much better use of Infernalis’ time.

Particularly after the call he’d gotten this morning from one of his contacts on Coruscant, advising him that there had been an attempt to breach ISB’s mainframes at around the same time as the
would-be kidnappers had struck. *That* seemed a much more likely secondary attack, but Infernalis wasn’t in position to do anything about it. Even if he *had* been present, there wouldn’t be much for him to do--the thief had been shot and killed by the agent who caught him. Something which probably meant Sidious was not best pleased with Tarkin, who had been in charge of the planetside investigation, after all.

And that, well. *That* certainly improved Infernalis’ overall mood. Jedi involvement or no, finding any evidence of further failure on the Grand Moff’s part, in that context--and, in so doing, potentially keeping Tarkin out of favor and increasing his own status in his Master’s inner circle--was an *excellent* plan.

So, he abandoned his pointless search and set out to see what he could find.

To Ahsoka’s relief, she and Jyn and Rex made it safely back to Saw’s base without anyone else getting shot. The rest of the cell was still trickling in, singly and in pairs; so, after treating Rex’s injuries, she settled back against the cave wall, where she would be out of the way, and considered their next move.

Most likely, she and Rex would have to get moving before too much longer, but she was pretty sure they could afford at least a moment to rest. And given how much attention she’d drawn in the warehouse, she wanted to be absolutely *sure* their exit was as clean as she could possibly make it. That probably meant bolting as soon as they had a path prepared, but it might also mean sticking around and keeping their heads down for as much as a day or two. She wasn’t sure yet. She’d probably have a better idea after checking in with Saw.

Besides, Jyn had promptly reattached herself to Rex as soon as they’d finished bandaging him up, and he didn’t seem to mind at all. The opposite, in fact. He was showing her something Ahsoka couldn’t quite see, but it looked like some kind of semi-dangerous dexterity game from his time as a cadet. Ahsoka *definitely* saw something sharp and shiny flashing in and out of view between them. They both looked happy, anyway, and Ahsoka didn’t want to cut into that until she absolutely had to.

She shook her head and bit back a fond smile; her attention drawn away from the two of them as Saw’s heavy footsteps approached and he slid down the wall to sit beside her.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” he replied. “Everyone’s accounted for, thought you should know. Some injuries, but no deaths.”

“That’s good,” she said. “Always nice when that happens.”

“Yeah, isn’t it?” he said, and paused again, his eyes on Rex and Jyn.

“Something wrong?”

He shook his head. “No, of course not. I just wanted to…he saved her, back there. Jyn told me. I don’t think that’s *all* of why she likes him so much, but it probably helped.”

“I’ll tell him you said thank you,” she added, with a little grin.
Saw rolled his eyes, and managed to smile back before it faded away, quick as it had come, and they lapsed into another, slightly tenser, silence.

“Spit it out,” she said. “Come on, the quiet is worse.”

He didn’t answer right away but, after a moment, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a muscle on the side of his jaw tighten. “The kid,” he finally said. “The one on Coruscant.”

Well, that was…not exactly a surprising subject change. He knew more than he’d said before, she knew that for sure.

“Yeah?”

“I know who went after her.”

And Rex owes me five credits. Not that Rex had thought Saw didn’t know, just that he wouldn’t give it up quite so easily. Sure, he was being a little blunter and more straightforward about reading her in than she’d thought he would be, but--well, what had happened between Rex and Jyn clearly meant a lot to Saw. Enough, maybe, to get him to trust them again. Really trust them, not just team up with them for a mission because they were there and skilled and not his enemies.

“How’d you find out?” she asked.

“Didn’t have to,” Saw said, eyes still on Jyn. “He tried to get me to join him. I told him no.”

“Okay,” she said. Also not exactly surprising, but still good to know that Saw had balked at targeting a kid over what her father had done.

“It was stupid, for one thing,” Saw went on. “His plan--he hadn’t done enough groundwork, didn’t have the resources or the current, accurate intel he’d need to pull off his primary objective, let alone grabbing a hostage like the Emperor’s kid. And even if she was a secondary target--I told him to go after someone that mattered, if he was that set on it. Tarkin is on Coruscant right now, we know that much. Security around him would be about the same, and taking him out would’ve meant something, in the long run. If, by some miracle, my friend had actually pulled it off.”

That made sense. And, honestly, if Saw’s anonymous friend had gone for Tarkin instead…

Well, at this point, it wasn’t only Ahsoka’s personal dislike of the man talking when she instinctively approved of that idea. Probably. She hoped.

“What was the primary target?” Ahsoka asked. “Did he tell you?”

Saw shook his head. “Not specifically,” he said. “Just that he was after something on ISB’s servers, and needed physical access to the mainframe for it. Maybe the location of a prison, or the identity of an undercover agent, I’m not sure. But he wanted the kid, too, if he could get her. Why, I don’t know. I didn’t ask.”

“Who was he?” Ahsoka asked. “Your friend?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s dead by now,” Saw said. “Probably. Even if the Empire hasn’t made any noise about it, I’m sure his execution will be all over the ’net before too much longer.”

Saw probably wasn’t wrong there--unless his contact had gotten killed outright instead of captured.

“I’m sorry,” she said.
He shrugged. “I told him it was a bad plan,” he said. “I told him to think it through and do it right, but he made his choice.” He paused. “I will say this for him, though—he had the courage to follow through and at least try to make a major impact.”

“Fair,” Ahsoka said. “But there’s a point where that kind of courage does more harm than good.”

“Yeah,” Saw said. “I still say more people are too afraid of hitting that limit to get anything done, but I know he blew past it as soon as he went to Coruscant with a half-assed plan like this one. In the end, he screwed up; got his people killed and didn’t really accomplish anything. Other than giving us—and maybe some other cells—a window to act on something real. Which, yeah, it’s good, but it would probably mean a lot more if that had actually been part of his plan.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I agree.”

He turned to her at last, raising an eyebrow. “Is there a ‘but’ coming?”

“Not really,” she said. “Not in this specific case.”

“But?”

Ahsoka considered for a moment, thinking through what to say while she watched Rex demonstrate his knife trick for Jyn again, a little slower.

“This war,” she finally said, “constantly puts us in a position where we have to ask ourselves is this worth it? And I find that the answer isn’t usually as clear-cut as it probably should have been for your friend. And it changes, all the time, for each and every mission. But we can’t always know, when we start, what the answer will be. Especially when you start looking at the bigger picture. Long-term impacts, you know?”

“Was our mission?” Saw asked, looking back over at her.

“As itself? Yeah,” she said, because that wasn’t really a question. Rex was hurt, but not dead, same for Saw’s people, and they’d damaged or destroyed something worthwhile to the Empire. They still needed to sift through the data Jyn and Rex had stolen to find out exactly how worthwhile, but they’d accomplished all their objectives for the moment and the price was more than reasonable.

“And long-term?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Too soon to tell, I think.” Because they still needed to sift through that data, for one thing.

“Fair,” he said, then shifted gears. “Will you two stay tonight? We’ll probably be clearing out in a day or two, once planetary security normalizes again. After everything you two did to help us, you’re definitely welcome.”

Ahsoka’s first thought was to agree—she had been trying to decide whether immediate flight or lying low was the better option, and Saw’s invitation pushed her more towards ‘lying low.’ After all, while the two of them had spent some time cautiously catching up during the hours between their initial contact and the start of the raid, it would’ve been nice to take a few more. For one thing, that would do a lot strengthen their alliance.

Besides, while the others would be leaving Alderaan around now, the convoluted path they had planned meant that she and Rex weren’t due to meet up with them for another two days. This was as good a place as any to wait out the extra hours outside of travel time, right?
But as soon as she made the decision, she immediately knew she couldn’t do it. A faint tinge of danger clung to the thought—maybe for her, maybe for Rex, maybe for Saw and his people…it was hard to tell.

What was clear, though, was that the Force was telling her that sticking around any longer than they already had was the wrong decision. Rex had had a moment to breathe and get cleaned up, and she’d had a moment to think and check in with Saw, and now it was time to move on, before someone less friendly found them.

Plus, while Rex had been cleaned up...true, his injuries weren’t too serious, and Saw’s people had decent supplies, but Ahsoka kind of wanted to swing by Dr. Naar’s place on their way to the rendezvous. Just to be safe. There weren’t enough hours to stay the night here and see him and make their set rendezvous on time.

So, even though part of her was still reluctant, she shook her head. “We should probably get going.”

“You sure?” Saw asked.

“Yeah,” she said, and then hesitated for a second, considering the best way to warn Saw of the possible danger. If she was the source of it, after all, the damage might already have been done, back during the fight in the warehouse, or while she was stealing the speeder. She didn’t think she’d been caught on camera, but it was even odds she’d missed an angle. Not to mention, they’d left living witnesses—the stormtroopers by themselves might or might not be believed if they insisted they’d fought a Jedi, but if there was security footage backing them up...

Finally, she just went with, “I had to get a little more up close and personal than I liked. It might cause problems for you and your people even if we do leave now, and if we stay…”

He nodded. “I get it,” he said. “Look, don’t worry about us, we can handle ourselves. And someone had to go in to extract the two of them. Worst case scenario, we’ve got contingencies for this kind of problem—evac plan or three—but I think we’ll probably be okay for a few days.”

“I believe you,” she said. “Still.”

“All right,” he said. “You two need any help securing your exit?”

“I think Rex and I can manage, but thank you.”

“Sure,” he said.

She started to get up, then stopped. One more thing to say, I think. “I probably won’t contact you for a while—let the heat die down, you know.”

“You can reach out when you’re clear,” he said, answering her unspoken question. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m still not sure about joining your network, exactly, but—yeah, we should stay in touch, at least. See where things go from there.”

She nodded, and gave him a brief smile. “Thanks, Saw. And—you know, on a personal level, it was good to see you again. Always nice to run into old friends.” Force knows we all have too few of them left.

He smiled back at her, and if it wasn’t quite the smile she remembered from Onderon ten years ago, it was a lot closer than anything she’d seen since making contact. Even during the hours they’d spent talking that first night, after their initial briefing. It made him look younger. Not quite
so hard.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” he said. “If I come across anything I think you and your network should know about, is there a way to reach you?”

“Here,” she said, pulling out a datastick. “Details for a couple of our dead drops. It’ll wipe itself after ninety minutes, so pay attention when you look through it.”

He nodded and took the stick, sliding it into one of his pockets. “Got it.”

That settled, Ahsoka finally stood all the way up; she caught Rex’s eye from across the room, and he nodded briefly and began gently extracting himself from his conversation with Jyn.

“I’ll be in touch when I can,” Ahsoka said.

“I look forward to it,” Saw said, standing up as well.

She grinned at him, and bowed briefly. “May the Force be with you, my friend.”

He nodded, and copied the gesture. “Good luck.”

As soon as Infernalis dropped out of hyperspace, he knew he’d made the right decision in coming here.

His attention was immediately drawn to a small light freighter, weaving expertly through planetary security and air traffic control.

And, more importantly, to its pilot.

Just as he’d suspected, the pilot was not Skywalker, or Kenobi--but it was the third in their cell, he thought. Tano.

His grip on the controls of his own ship tightened reflexively, as a slow smile spread across his face. He had encountered Tano once before, two months after his first face-to-face meeting with Skywalker. Though he hadn’t seen her in person--their prior meeting had been under circumstances not so different from this, both of them in ships, each trying to shoot the other down and live to tell the tale.

But this time, she didn’t have an asteroid field to dodge through while she calculated her exit vector and made the jump to lightspeed.

This time, he had her.

Oh, he was looking forward to this.

He felt a slight ripple in the Force; a jolt of recognition spilling out from the enemy freighter. Even better--she would be fighting back when he killed her.

It was always so much more enjoyable when they fought back.

Infernalis fed power to his forward deflector shields and spun onto an attack vector, letting off a
quick burst of fire in her direction. He didn’t particularly expect this first volley to hit—or, if it did, he knew it wouldn’t get past her shield—but seizing the initiative had its benefits.

She flipped, skewing to her port and neatly dodging his fire before returning it.

Interesting—she wasn’t the actually one shooting back; whoever was manning the guns was slightly slower, slightly more cautious. And definitely not a Force adept of any kind.

The clone, he decided. The deserter. Good, Infernalis could kill him, too.

On the other hand, having someone with her left Tano clear to focus on evasive maneuvers and, potentially, plotting her escape.

Infernalis would have to end this quickly.

He swung around the deserter’s return fire with ease and responded, herding Tano and her ship back towards the planet’s gravity well. Two benefits—it made her escape more difficult, and it made it possible for him to ground her, and finish this face-to-face. Bring back her blades, or some other trophy, to his Master.

But Infernalis was nothing if not practical. And he knew he had less than half the experience she did with a ‘saber. Killing her in space combat was a much surer bet. Proof of death aside, that would be his first choice. Still, best to leave that option on the table. Just in case.

Tano swooped and swerved; her gunner only took one in three of the shots Infernalis would in his position. Satisfied with that, that the deserter’s slower reflexes and Infernalis’ own abilities with the Force would enable him to predict the pattern and evade, he threw all of his own active focus into piloting, ducking and weaving and taking every possible shot he could at Tano’s ship.

Every shot he took missed by inches. He growled faintly, fed more power to his forward shields, and closed the distance.

A split second after he’d done it, he realized his mistake.

Tano fed more power than her ship should have had to the thrusters, flipping over him; the deserter fired once, twice, at the rear of his ship; Infernalis scrambled to adjust his shields, absorbing the worst of the blow, but his ship still rocked with the impact.

He brought his ship about—

Just in time to see Tano vanish into hyperspace.

He snarled and punched in her exit vector into his own navicomputer, intent on pursuit—she will not escape me again—and only then noticed the warning light.

The deserter’s final shot had taken out his hyperdrive.

Infernalis swore, and slammed a fist into the console.

Control, his Master’s voice echoed sharply in his head. Your anger gives you power. Use it, but do not let it use you.

Infernalis took a breath, closed his eyes, and concentrated.

With discipline, with attention to detail, he refined his frustrated rage; let it power through him without clouding his focus.
Tano and her deserter got away, he thought, letting his eyes fall open again. *I can’t pursue them now. I will have to deal with them some other time. But I doubt they pulled off that raid on their own. I will find their accomplices. Even if they can’t lead me to the Jedi base, slaughtering them has its benefits.*

Besides. He would need to find *something* to do to pass the time while he replaced his hyperdrive.

Now merely simmering, as opposed to boiling over, he headed towards the planet. He would contact his Master with an update and remain here to root out the other insurgents until his ship was ready to leave. At that point, whether he had found and dealt with them or not--well, either his Master would order him to stay, or would have another task for him somewhere else.

As for Tano and the other surviving Jedi…

He would find them again. And again, and again, and again--as many times as it took, until he killed them or one of them killed him.

Between his years in the mines and Sidious’ training, Infernalis had long since learned the value of being patient. An opportunity would come.

And when it did, he would be *ready.*

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, y'all! <3 May it be safe and prosperous and happier than the old.

One more chapter in this arc, which I’m hoping to get out either this weekend or sometime early next week! Fingers crossed!

~shadowsong
Anakin was, as he had been since they’d reached the farm a few hours ago, just sort of camping out in the kitchen. Obi-Wan had, probably sensibly, gone to bed a little while ago, and Leia had barely even woken up when he’d steered her in that direction after they’d gotten in.

Still, Ahsoka and Rex weren’t back yet, and Anakin had decided to wait up for them. There had been a message, at least—with a frustrating lack of detail, unfortunately; their codes were good, but not that good; but it was something. Ashoka had covered the most important details, anyway. Initial contact with Saw Gerrera had been moderately successful, although they’d helped him out on a mission and Rex had gotten shot. Which was awful, obviously, but he couldn’t have been hurt too bad, or the message would’ve been a lot more urgent.

But then, they’d encountered Infernalis on their way out, though they hadn’t engaged him directly. Ship-to-ship combat only—which was technically what they were supposed to do.

They had all agreed, after…after Specter, not to engage any of the Chancellor’s apprentices without backup, if at all possible. And, while Rex would have counted on a good day, he was hurt. Pursuing Infernalis, if they hadn’t been able to shoot him down and take him out that way, might have gotten one or both of them killed.

But at the same time, leaving like that had potentially put Gerrera and his people at risk. On the other hand, Ahsoka knew him and his capabilities a lot better than Anakin did—both from having spent way more time on Onderon than he had in the first place, and from having met with their ally more recently. If she’d left him in that position, she must’ve thought he had a decent chance of getting out of it alive.

The point was, Ahsoka had made the right call. Maybe not the call Anakin would have made, in her position, but she’d always been a hell of a lot smarter than him about that sort of thing. And she and Rex had gotten away safely, which was important. There were, as Obi-Wan had pointed out more than once over the years—usually in the aftermath of Anakin taking a stupid risk of his own—too few of them left.

As for Gerrera and the rest…they’d just have to trust the Force and hope for the best. There wasn’t much else they could do, other than head back as a group and try to hunt Infernalis down, which—was maybe a stupid idea, and probably either an exercise in futility or an Obvious Trap, but Anakin could always suggest it once they all sat down to debrief.

Of course, he’d never been all that good at trusting in the Force and hoping for the best. He’d feel a lot better, he suspected, when Rex and Ahsoka were actually here, and relatively safe.

In the meantime, he had hours to kill. So he’d dragged in a couple portable projects from the garage to keep himself occupied, because tangled wires were a lot easier to sort through than his uncertain thoughts in the middle of the night.

He was buried deep enough—and she was quiet, familiar, and safe enough—that he just barely registered when Beru joined him.

“You’re up late,” she said. “Everyone else is asleep.”
He looked up. “Sorry,” he said. “Did I wake you?”

She shook her head, and sat down in one of the other chairs, at the least-cluttered section of the table. “I figured you’d be waiting up.”

“Didn’t mean you had to.”

“No,” she agreed, but smiled.

He smiled back, briefly. “I’ll be cleared out of here at least an hour or two before breakfast, I promise.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “You know better than to bring anything in that’ll stain the table.”

“Yes, I do,” he agreed.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence for a moment, which Beru finally broke. “You never told me how things went,” she said. “On Alderaan.”

Well, that was—if he could find the words, Anakin was pretty sure he’d never stop talking about it. If only as a way to keep Luke and Padme closer for a little longer; keep their voices echoing in his ear.

The problem was, of course, finding the words. Some things were too big for words.

At least he didn’t have to worry about holding anything back anymore. Not with Beru. He’d filled her and Owen in on all the details he’d left out in the past—the relevant ones, anyway—before they’d left. Mostly because he didn’t want Leia to have to worry about keeping secrets from the two of them.

But also because—well, he’d trusted them with his daughter for ten years, and they’d more than proven themselves worthy of it, hundreds upon thousands of times over. He knew he could trust them with his son.

...in all honesty, he probably should’ve done this sooner, but he couldn’t change the past. He’d done it now, which was what mattered.

“Pretty much as well as we’d hoped,” Anakin finally said. “Almost—almost better than I could’ve hoped. Padme and Luke are—they’re—amazing. And the twins got along so well, it was like they’d never...never been separated at all.”

“I’m glad,” she said, reaching over and squeezing his hand briefly. “What’s he like?”

Anakin considered that for a minute. “Bright,” he said. “Just... bright. Not just as in smart—I mean, he is, obviously, just look at his mom, of course he’s brilliant—but...he’s just a very bright and shining person. Very sweet, and energetic, and always looking out to the horizon. Lighting the way.” It wasn’t enough, not nearly enough, to really explain, but it was something. “He wants to be a pilot, he told me. Asked me for stories about flying.”

Beru giggled, clapping a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound and not risk waking the others up. “Hopefully you edited them,” she said.

“Hey, give me some credit,” Anakin said, but he grinned a little at her. “Yes, I did edit them. I mean, partly ‘cause I don’t want him getting any ideas, but I don’t want to discourage him, either.”
“Well, I’m glad you two were able to find common ground,” she said.

“I don’t think it’d be hard, with Luke,” Anakin said. “But...yeah, I was worried about that.” It was easy to admit that to Beru. Something about her invited confidences he didn’t share easily except with Padme, or Obi-Wan.

“I know,” she said. “I look forward to meeting him someday. And seeing Padme again.”

Which--

He couldn’t help but think of the one time Beru had met his wife, and…

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, burying his fingers in the wires again.

Beru let him take a minute, to feel it and try to--try to refocus on the present again. It was...easier now, a little, after ten years of spending a lot of time at this table, making much, much happier memories.

Easier still didn’t mean easy, though. Grief was...grief was something that was never really gone, no matter how much he tried to let it go.

But, then again, love was like that, too. Maybe--probably--because they were related somehow. Something to meditate on, if he thought he could focus that deeply on something that close to the darker corners of his soul by himself with any safety. Probably better to talk it through with Obi-Wan, the next time the two of them had the time and were both in the right mental space for that kind of conversation.

For now, though, he eased his way through those old, familiar thoughts of grief and managed to follow them back to the love at the root of it all, and the moment passed.

“Me, too,” he finally said. “...he’s a lot like her, I think. And Padme, too, of course. But...yeah. I see a lot of the two of them in him. More than myself, for sure.”

He felt, rather than saw, Beru nod, and she just reached over and squeezed his hand again. “I’m sure I’ll find out sooner or later.”

“Yeah,” he said, then cleared his throat. “Can we change the subject, please?”

“Of course,” she said. “What are you working on, anyway?”

Oh, good. This, he could do. Fixing things, mechanical projects--easy to talk about with anyone. Just...needed to shift gears, now she’d pointed him in the right direction. “Uh.” He blinked down at it. “HoloNet transceiver,” he said. “I’m gonna make it better. I can probably boost the range, maybe add an encryption module or two.”

Beru nodded. “More security is always good,” she agreed. “I mean, Owen and I might not need that, but I’m sure you all or Leia could use it.”

“Yeah, something like that,” he said. He finished unhooking the last of the tangled leads--whoever had built this or last messed with it had gone about it completely backwards; the idiosyncratic would’ve been almost impressive if it had actually worked. He studied it for a moment, considering the best way to hook it back together, and reached for the cup of caf he’d made earlier.

Which was now empty. Naturally.
He sighed, and set the transceiver aside so he could get up and make more, only for Beru to pluck the mug out of his hands.

“What?”

“Nope,” she said. “You’re gonna have to get some sleep later.”

“Beru--”

“You don’t get enough as it is,” she said, firmly. “No more caf.”

He stared at her for a minute. “Really?”

She raised an eyebrow, and pointedly put the cup out of his reach.

“...all right, then,” he conceded. “No more caf.” *At least until you go back to bed.*

“Good,” she said, smiling beatifically. “...did Ahsoka say when they expect to get in?”

Anakin shook his head. “Not specifically. It’ll probably be at least another hour or two, though.”

She nodded, and settled back into her chair. “Need an extra pair of hands? I can wait up with you for a while, then.”

“You don’t have to do that,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

“...I think I’m good, as far as extra pairs of hands go,” he said. “But I wouldn’t mind hearing about how much trouble Artoo got into while I was away. He told me he was bored. I’m so, so sorry.”

“Oh, I think I can manage that,” Beru said, dryly. “You don’t actually have to apologize for anything, but I’ve got a couple of stories I could share.”

“Please,” he said, turning half his attention back to the transceiver, as she leaned back in her chair; he could practically see her thoughts turning behind her eyes, trying to pick her own starting point.

He still didn’t think he’d totally relax until Ahsoka and Rex walked in through the door, but he felt some of the tension leave his shoulders. It was nice to have some company while he was waiting, not just a task to keep him occupied.

A comforting, tangible reminder that, even with two of the most important people in his galaxy so far away, he wasn’t ever completely alone.

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It had been just over six weeks since the reunion on Alderaan, and things were more or less back to normal. Luke, to his relief, had finally been allowed to go see Princess Lavinia about a week ago, shortly after the announcement of the official scapegoat for the bombing—a small insurgent cell from the Outer Rim, planning to hold the child hostage in exchange for the release of a handful of political prisoners.

Oddly enough, the official story was actually, for once, something in the same star system as the
truth, based on everything Padme and the others had been able to find out. The attempt to breach
ISB’s servers to find the prisoners in question hadn’t made the news, of course, and the specific
motive for the kidnapping was speculation, since none of the beings involved had been captured
alive to explain themselves, but the rest was almost worryingly factual.

Then again, that was probably the best way to control the press and put together effective
propaganda--tell the truth just often enough that the lies, when they came, were credible. So, the
task now was less to expose the truth and more to do everything they could in the Senate to keep
the reaction from getting out of control.

It was almost anticlimactic, when she thought about it. For all the tension of those first few hours,
the fear that it would delay Padme’s rare and precious time with her husband and daughter, or
worse…

In the end, it was really just another incident in an endless stream of excuses for the Empire’s
escalations. She and Bail and Mon already had a plan in place for their response, one that would
hopefully keep the new galaxy from slipping too much further into the dark, but it was at least
partially dependent on waiting for Palpatine to make his moves. They could only do so much, so
fast. And all the other little trailing threads and details left over from her time out of her office (and
thoroughly distracted) had been more or less handled.

Except for one.

And because the rest was more or less tied off, she could finally turn her attention to this last, very
important task. It had needed to wait until now; until she and her son and her handmaidens had
completely re-established their routines and the dust had settled enough for her to make another
trip home to Naboo.

It was time, and long past time, to finally read Mom and Dad and Sola in on everything that had
happened--everything relevant, at least--in those first few awful weeks after the Republic fell.
Everything that she and Anakin had done, the choices they had made to protect their children.

But this was a conversation that had to be handled face-to-face.

Six weeks, though, had been long enough, and now she could visit without raising too many red
flags. True, she’d been in the capital just before Alderaan for work, in the wake of the election. On
the other hand, it had been months since her last personal trip home--while she tried to find time to
stop in when she was there for work, it wasn’t always possible. She certainly hadn’t had time on
her last business trip, so it wasn’t like she really needed a cover for this visit. And…well. Mom and
Dad and Sola had been left in the dark enough.

Of course, deciding to finally have that conversation and making the trip to do it was the easy part.
Actually finding an opportunity for it was another thing entirely.

In the end, it wasn’t until the third day home that she managed to get a long enough block of time
alone with Sola and her parents to pull this off. And it had to be just the four of them in the house
when she brought it up--in case any details came up that Luke was too young for, to start; and also
because Sola had made it very clear that she wanted her daughters kept out of the more dangerous
parts of Padme’s life as much as possible. Ryuu, at least, was away for the weekend, off in the
mountains with her latest girlfriend--who was, according to Sola, a huge improvement on her
previous choices--but Pooja was here. And had, during her time as Padme’s intern, if not earlier,
picked up the habit of eavesdropping on adult conversations when she thought there was
something interesting or important to overhear.
So, that third morning, the children were sent off to a nearby zoo, with Threepio to guide them around and entertain them with trivia and Motee and Elle for security, to keep them out of the way so the adults could have a serious discussion in private.

And of course, her parents and sister had completely seen through her—admittedly pretty transparent—excuses. She didn’t even have a chance to ask for a moment to sit down and talk about something important; Mom beat her to it.

“So, Padme,” she said, as she was finishing up the last of the breakfast dishes. “I feel like there’s something you wanted to tell us?”

Mom always was direct.

It was almost comforting, really. Put her on familiar ground for what she knew was going to be a difficult conversation.

On the other hand, after telling Luke, telling her parents and Sola couldn’t be too hard. Especially since they knew something was coming.

So, Padme relaxed a little, and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Something to do with your most recent trip to Alderaan?” Sola guessed.

She laughed a little. “What gave me away?” Not that she was all that surprised. Sola could usually read her pretty well, better than just about anyone else other than Sabe. An older sister’s skill, she supposed.

“You’ve been more evasive than usual, when you call home,” Mom said, handing the last of the plates to Dad for him to put away.

“Right,” she said. “Sorry about that. I just...this is something I had to tell you in person.” Partly for security, of course, but partly because...some things just couldn’t be done at arm’s length.

“Of course,” she said. “What’s going on, sweetheart?”

“It’s...complicated,” she said.

“We’ve got time,” Dad said.

Mom nodded, and Sola got started on making a fresh pot of tea; Padme waited for her to finish and join the rest of them at the kitchen table before she continued.

“So?” Sola prompted, passing her a cup. “What is it? What happened?”

Here we go.

“There are...a lot of things I haven’t told you, these past ten years,” she said, quietly. “Some of them, I think you’ve probably guessed. Some of them, I’m pretty sure you haven’t. And yes, that was part of the reason for this last trip to Alderaan.”

Mom took Dad’s hand, and Sola nodded for her to continue.

“Luke is...” Padme started, then hesitated. Not because she didn’t want them to know, but because she’d spent so long not saying it that the words stuck in her throat. She took a deep breath, and forced them out. “I took Luke to meet his father.”
“His father?” Dad asked, puzzled. “I thought Luke’s biological parents were dead. The paperwork from the orphanage…”

“Forged,” Padme said. The first, hardest part was over, like tearing off a bandage. The words were coming much more easily now. “Sabe put it together for me. All the documentation, making sure Luke got there safely and no one else claimed him before I could. And--no, his birth parents aren’t…they’re not dead. We’re not dead.”

The silence that followed was deafening. Padme could see Sola’s grip tighten on her cup, white-knuckled, enough that she was half-afraid it would break.

And Mom and Dad…

Mom and Dad looked at her, then at each other, then at her again.

“Luke is…” Dad finally said. “He’s…”

“No more mine than he would have been if I had adopted him,” Padme said, firmly. “Except that he’s been mine for a little longer. From the very beginning, not from six weeks old.”

“So you lied to us,” Dad said. “All this time.”

“I had to,” she said. “Luke is…his father is--”

“We know,” Mom said, finally finding her voice. “We know how…certain things are, and we do know who he is. We’ve known that much for…well, for a long time. It may have taken you a while, sweetheart, but once you finally did give your heart, it wasn’t hard to tell.”

Padme flushed. So, I guess you can read me pretty well, too. Which shouldn’t have been so surprising, either--Mom had figured out she was in love with Ani days before she herself had been willing to admit it in the first place.

She coughed awkwardly. “Right. So. Yes. We weren’t as…subtle as we thought we were. But that’s…not the point.” She paused, choosing her next words with care. “The point is, he…if he…his son is in danger. For being his son. A lot of danger.” She looked down into her tea, wrapping her hands around the cup and letting the home-like warmth seep in. “And so we lied.”

“I understand that,” Dad said slowly, after another brief, uncomfortable silence. “And I think I can speak for all of us in that. I understand that you had to…that you had to have Sabe do what she did, and the rest, at--at Varykino, but us, Padme? We’re your family, we’re Luke’s family, did you really think we would--do something, or say something, to put the two of you in danger?”

“Of course not,” Padme said. “It’s not that at all, it’s…”

“It was to protect us,” Sola said, setting her teacup down with a faint, emphatic clink. Padme looked up, and saw that there was something sad, but determined behind her eyes. “Wasn’t it? Because the less we know, the less can be used against us.”

Padme nodded. “Yes,” she said, and left it at that.

True, that hadn’t been her only reason--the fewer people around Luke who knew, the less likely he was to pick up on hints and ask questions. And it was…at least at first, it was easier to keep the lie straight in her own mind, to avoid slipping up and saying the wrong thing at the wrong time herself, if only the bare minimum of people knew the truth.
But part of it, a big part, had been to keep her parents and her sister and her nieces safe. Because she recognized that look behind Sola’s eyes, and the shadow stealing across Mom’s face, which almost hurt more than Dad being so upset, because Padme knew exactly what it meant.

They had been down this road before. She knew that, in the past, they had all been targeted because of their connections to her. They didn’t talk much about the invasion, at least not with her, but Padme knew. How could she not?

And that had only been the first time her politics had impacted the people she loved.

It wouldn’t stop Padme from fighting, of course--because her family wasn’t the only one in the galaxy that needed protecting--but…

But.

“I understand,” Dad said once more, heavily. “I think. But, Padme…you should trust us more. We’re your family, we can help…”

“I know, Dad,” Padme said. “I know, and believe me, it’s not about trust, I promise you it’s not. I know it…it feels patronizing, or worse, from where you sit, but…”

Another long, heavy silence.

“How much of this does Luke know?” Mom asked.

“Most of it,” Padme said. “Well, to a point. He’s still a child, and the full…I don’t want him to know all of the ugliness that’s in play here. But on our way to Alderaan, I told him everything he was ready to hear.”

She nodded, hesitated, then asked, “The…grave. At Varykino.”

“I had twins,” Padme said, after taking a moment to collect herself. She closed her eyes, pictured Leia’s face--Anakin had said she looked like her, but apart from coloring, Padme thought Leia was more like her father; same stubborn chin, same nose, same shape to her eyes.

Hells, but she missed them.

She heard a swift intake of breath from her mother, and she knew her parents were exchanging another of those long, long looks.

“Twins?” Mom asked, subdued.

“Leia is…” Padme stopped, realized how that must have sounded. “Leia is alive. I didn’t mean to imply--she’s alive. She’s fine--she’s, she’s wonderful, actually. But she lives with her father. We thought…it was safer that way. For both of them. Luke and Leia, I mean. If…if anyone uncovered my deception, or tracked him down to his safehouse…”

“Hells,” Sola breathed, and then she stood up, nearly knocking her chair backwards, and took a few quick footsteps before Padme found herself wrapped in her sister’s arms. “I can’t imagine having to--I’m so sorry, Padme.”

Padme leaned into the embrace. “Thank you,” she said. “And I’m…I’m sorry for lying. I can’t say I’d handle it differently, if I--but…I’m sorry. For what it’s worth, I am sorry.”

Once again, the four of them fell silent, but this one was a little lighter. A lot less uncomfortable.
“Tell us about them?” Mom said, at last. “I know we met your partner once, but that was so long ago.”

“Of course,” she said. “Of course.” She sat up straighter, squeezing Sola’s hand briefly as she did before pulling away.

The conversation wasn’t entirely over, she knew that. And she knew it would probably take a while, after she left, for Mom and Dad and Sola to really come to terms with her lies. Things would be awkward, a little bit, for a few weeks. But the worst of it was over. Things would get better from here.

And she knew...she knew it would be a long time--maybe years--before she actually saw Anakin and Leia again. But she still had sporadic, semi-legible letters to look forward to, and now she also had stories she could tell the rest of her family, and feel closer to her husband and daughter that way.

It wasn’t much, comparatively--a cup of hot tea in her hands instead of a soft, heavy blanket wrapped around her shoulders--but it was still a comfort. Still enough warmth to carry her through the years ahead.

“Where would you like me to start?”

Chapter End Notes

And thus, Arc Six comes to a close. It only took me a year, lol...

(In other news, it still takes me at least two or three tries to spell Gerrera correctly...)

Thank y’all so much for your patience and for sticking with me through all, like, 175k+ of this behemoth XD Arc Seven will start up soon! <3

~shadowsong
Anakin and Leia were alone on the Waterfall for this trip--something that actually hadn’t happened very often since he’d first brought her to Owen and Beru’s farm, thirteen years ago.

Not that they didn’t spend a lot of time together, one-on-one, because of course they did, it just…had worked out that it was usually on Tatooine, or after they’d all gone somewhere as a group and he and Leia split off for a private lesson or adventure on their own.

To be fair, none of them actually took Leia off-planet by themselves very often. They’d each done it before, on occasion--Ahsoka most of all--but probably four times out of five, at least two of them were along for the ride. It was safer that way, with more people to keep watch.

And, Anakin was willing to admit, doing things that way was probably better for him, as well as safer for Leia. He had a tendency to go a little bit overboard, when he thought his daughter might be in danger. It helped, having Obi-Wan or Rex or Ahsoka along with him, to keep things in perspective.

Still, it was nice to have this time together, just the two of them and Artoo and the swirl of hyperspace to keep them company. Enough so that he had to keep reminding himself how important this trip was, how serious it was, so he could focus on the task at hand and not the fact that he was taking a trip with his daughter, just the two of them.

With that in mind, while they’d spent the first part of the trip together in the cockpit playing dejarik (he’d let her win, of course), after their fourth hyperspace redirect, he’d sent her off to run through some meditation exercises, so she’d be prepared for what came next.

And, almost as important, so he could do the same in the familiar, safe environment of his cockpit, without any distractions. So he could make sure he had everything in perspective. Make sure he was ready for this.

Which he was, more or less. Or, at least, he’d talked himself around to this in the abstract. Then again, it was one thing to be ready in the abstract, and another thing entirely to be setting up for the last couple of hyperspace jumps that would bring them to Jedha, and the next stage in Leia’s life.

But he’d had a couple of weeks to get used to the idea, ever since Ahsoka had first brought it up and he’d stopped short of his knee-jerk, instinctive reaction to shut it down, and they’d talked it through. There had been several days of back and forth, a trip to Dagobah so Master Yoda could weigh in, and finally the decision had been made. And it was the right one. Leia was ready for this. Anakin knew that.

Sure, they were making this trip a little earlier than he would have preferred, but…

They were stretched thin. Oh, they had a substantial network now--enough that the others were actually meeting up with Bail to finalize setting up their first actual semi-permanent base, at least for the dozen or so cells in this sector--but that wasn’t exactly what he meant.

They were stretched thin--their core team, the people Anakin knew and trusted absolutely. There were too few of them, and none of them were getting any younger. Obi-Wan, at fifty-one, had noticeable streaks of silver in his hair and Rex…Rex was still shaving his head, but he’d decided a
couple years back to grow out his beard, which was more grey than not, these days. A *decidedly* unfriendly reminder of the modifications the Kaminoans had made to him and his brothers.

And Leia was thirteen now. Old enough for active field work, for potential combat missions. Even under pre-war rules--as soon as she’d taken this last, important step. So, they had all agreed it was time.

Of course, if Anakin were honest with himself, a part of him would *always* feel like they were putting her out there too soon. No matter *how* long they delayed. He’d spent the last few hours meditating on that, so he *knew* it was true. He’d accepted that his perspective on this was flawed and always would be, and had once again talked himself into viewing this as objectively as he possibly could.

He’d managed, he was pretty sure, but it was still hard.

So, meditation. A *lot* of meditation. And sending Leia off to prepare herself for a leap into the unknown.

But that had been several hours ago, and he’d mostly gotten his head back on straight. He dropped out of hyperspace to do his last redirect, and felt Leia’s mind brush against his briefly--checking to make sure he was ready for her to come back in; he’d maybe been a little too transparent about needing his own private meditation time--and then the door slid open with a faint hiss.

She wrapped her arms around him, giving him a quick hug from behind, then dropped into the copilot’s chair. She looked...a lot like Padme had, at that age--except that she had Anakin’s more stubborn chin, and a little more of the shape of his eyes. But, rather than making Leia seem that much more adult, it just reminded him how young Padme had been--how young they’d *all* been--back when they’d first met more than twenty-five years ago.

He closed his eyes, and let it all--the association, the nostalgia, the worry--dissipate as best he could.

“All set, princess?” he asked, shooting Leia a brief smile.

“Yeah,” she said, tucking her legs up under her in a way that reminded him, in a strangely comforting way, of Ahsoka at that age. “Well, as much as I can be, without knowing what I’m about to do.”

“We don’t always have that luxury,” Anakin reminded her. “Adaptability is an important trait, for a Jedi. For any sentient, really.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, and gave him a little smile of her own. “Still.”

“I know, it’s hard,” he said. “Waiting is *always* the hardest part. For me, too.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” she said, deadpan.

He rolled his eyes, which made her giggle and relax a little bit. Good, that was the point. Half the reason he’d waited this long to tell her where they were going--and why --was so she wouldn’t get all tense and riled up with anticipation.

Or maybe that was just him projecting, remembering when *he’d* taken this trip, and how he’d been bouncing off the walls the entire time.

*Thank you for putting up with me, Master,* he thought, with a faint, fond smile for his absent friend.
I don’t know where I’d be without you.

“So, where exactly are we going?” Leia asked, peering out at the stars as he keyed in the final set of coordinates. “You said you’d tell me once we made our last jump. This is number six, are you really planning to make more?”

Which was true, he had. Adaptability and calm in the face of the unknown were valuable skills, but they weren’t going to land with her still in the dark.

“Patience,” he said, and smiled briefly at her. “Hasn’t Ahsoka taught you anything?”

With that came a twinge of—not quite guilt, since it hadn’t been his idea for her to stay behind, but it probably should have been Ahsoka doing this. Or, at least, she should have been here with them, even if he came along, too.

True, they were all teaching Leia—raising her—as a kind of team effort, but Ahsoka had taken over the majority of Leia’s training the past couple years. To the point where, if they had to point out any one of them as Leia’s Master, like in the old days, it would be Ahsoka. Because Obi-Wan had way too much on his plate, and Anakin…was wise enough now to know that there was no way he could be objective enough to do things right. Hence why he almost never took her off-planet by himself. And why Ahsoka did so more than any of the rest of them.

But there had been some kind of Incident, during the years before he and Rex had found Ahsoka, involving the sector’s governor at her last posting, and a fire, and a herd of wild grekkt and maybe Ahsoka had gotten caught on camera…

“We probably shouldn’t add another layer of risk to this,” she’d said. “And Jedha isn’t a great option, I know, but it’s better than any of the others we’ve come up with, and I don’t think we should wait too much longer on the off-chance we find someplace else.”

Obi-Wan and Master Yoda had agreed, and so here they were.

“I’ve been patient,” Leia insisted. “Have I asked before now?”

“No, you haven’t,” he admitted, pushing the lever and sending them into hyperspace one last time.

“So?” she prompted.

*Here we go,* he thought.

“We’re going to Jedha,” he told her.

There was a beat, while she mulled that over.

She frowned, and straightened up a little. “Jedha…that’s…pretty heavily occupied, isn’t it?”

“It is,” he said. More so than any other planet they’d ever taken her to. There was greater risk, going to Jedha, than any trip she’d made since going to the Core to meet Padme and Luke three years ago. But none of the alternatives were any better, and it was time.

“So, listen to me, and remember this, because it’s important,” he went on, taking his eyes off the swirling sky to meet her eyes. “This is *not* supposed to be a combat mission. We’re not going to Jedha to liberate it. Not right now. We are going to keep our heads down as much as possible.”

Not an easy task for *either* of them, but--well, maybe there was a lesson in that, too. About
patience, and restraint, and making the right step at the right time.

Rites of passage tended to have that effect.

“Right,” she said.

“And if anything does go wrong, you will do exactly what I say. Even if what I say is run and hide. All right, princess?”

“All right,” she said. “I promise, Dad.”

“Good,” he said, and smiled at her to break the tension. “I don’t think it will, but, you know.” He paused, and, in his best imitation of Rex, added, “It’s always best to be prepared.”

Leia giggled. “He does not sound like that.”

“Well, if you knew who I was mocking, then clearly he does.” And, honestly, Rex being prepared had saved him, and Obi-Wan, and Ahsoka way more often than he cared to admit. Maybe all that grey in his beard wasn’t just his altered genetics after all...

She rolled her eyes. “If you say so, Dad,” she said. “So...if we’re going in quiet, does that mean we’re Maia and Joren Retak again?”

That was their usual cover, when they travelled somewhere sensitive together. And those names hadn’t failed them yet, and he hoped they never would. But--

“No, not this time,” he said. “Obi-Wan and I set up some new IDs, just for this trip. Ones that, if we get caught, can’t possibly trace back to your mom and Luke.”

Leia nodded. “Are we meeting a contact there, or something?”

“Not...exactly,” he said. Though he’d try--if there was anyone there for them to meet, it would make the whole mission go that much more smoothly. He hoped. “We’re going to land outside the city, make our way into the center, and break into the Temple there.”

She blinked. “The Temple? …wait--”

He took a breath, and let it out slowly.

“I have something for you,” he said, opening one of the false panels under his seat and pulling out a little box and passing it over to her.

She opened it, very carefully, clearly trying to demonstrate her self-control and patience even as she was all but vibrating with excitement. He didn’t need to see her thoughts to know she’d already half-guessed what was in there, but it was one thing to guess, and another to actually see it all spill out onto her lap.

Because inside the box was some metal tubing, a power cell, assorted wires…everything she needed, except for the one key component that was hardest to source.

She looked up at him. “I’m going to build a lightsaber,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “And for that, you need a crystal.”

“So we’re going to Jedha.”
“We are going to Jedha.”

Leia took a deep breath, and carefully replaced the components in the box and shut it neatly. “I’ll be ready,” she said, quietly; and he could still feel that jangling excitement running through her—now edged with just a hint of nerves, as the reality started to sink in—but she had it under control. Better control than he could manage at that age—and maybe even now.

He was so very proud of her in that moment.

“I know you will, Leia,” he said, and smiled. “I know.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay, we're back! The goal at this point is to update every two weeks, so fingers crossed!!!

Thank you so much for your patience, and for sticking with me this long! =~3 shadowsong
Part 7, Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Contrary to their collective optimism on Alderaan, it had taken a full three years for their rebel movement to reach the point of constructing a semi-permanent base. The delays had come from various directions, ranging from the inconvenient but costly--one of the sources Obi-Wan had hoped to use for shielding and certain surface-to-orbit defensive armaments had fallen through--to the outright dangerous--their first-choice base location had been compromised just as they were about to begin construction.

After that, Rex had suggested--with ready agreement from the rest of them, including all three Senators--that they take the time to investigate how that had happened before making any further moves. Fortunately, it hadn’t been any kind of overt betrayal on the part of anyone they’d trusted; an ISB counterintelligence agent had been in the right place at the wrong time and gotten just enough of a thread to unravel everything.

But now, eighteen months later, they were back on track, with a base that was within a day or two of fully operational, hidden and secure on their second-choice planet; the vast salt plains of Crait.

While Crait was approximately as dry as Tatooine, it was, fortunately, nowhere near as hot. On the other hand, the glare of the sun reflected off the salt flats made it, at local noon, actually brighter than the desert that had been Obi-Wan’s home for the past thirteen years.

But that, more than an annoyance, was actually an advantage--between the sheer white reflective surface, and the elemental composition of the reddish mineral deposits underneath, any sensors attempting to get imaging data of the surface would have to be very close indeed to find them.

It wasn’t perfect camouflage, by any means, but it was the primary reason why he and the others had decided to settle here.

Of course, that camouflage came with its own trade-offs. Those same mineral deposits and iron-rich crust which helpfully confused sensors looking in had a nasty habit of doing the same to their own tech attempting to look out, not to mention making it difficult to establish and maintain reliable communications. Setting up a handful of relay satellites in the low atmosphere would’ve cleared the interference, of course, but also negated its ability to protect them.

Still, they were working on correcting the problem, and Obi-Wan had every faith that it was merely a temporary inconvenience. Though it did leave him a little bit uneasy, especially with Anakin and Leia off in occupied territory for what was, at the moment, a fairly risky mission.

But his personal comm was linked to the base system already, which would boost him past the atmospheric interference as soon as they had a working solution. Besides, Anakin had other ways to contact him--though he wouldn’t, unless something had gone wrong--and Obi-Wan was planning to stick his head out, so to speak, if they weren’t up and running in the next twelve hours. Just in case.

Apart from that, though, just about everything was in place. There were a few additional things he would like to have access to, but nothing they couldn’t live without. Internal base climate controls, for one, were up and running and had been for a while--which was particularly vital for amphibious beings, such as his old friend Moonshot, who had been one of the first to agree to join
them here.

While the hierarchy of their newly-organized movement was still somewhat nebulous, and far more fluid than the GAR had ever been, Moonshot had settled into a semi-official role as the base commandant, while Obi-Wan himself, supported by Anakin, Ahsoka, and Rex, seemed to have ended up in overall command. Of course, he didn’t think that would last particularly long, as their movement grew and they hopefully recruited someone more qualified. But, for now, he would serve in that role to the best of his ability.

Those, of course, were problems for another day, and there were still a handful of immediate tasks to complete before the base could be ‘officially’ in use. Obi-Wan was assisting with those as needed--mostly where heavy lifting was required; he had something of an advantage there--and keeping an eye on how the gathered rebels were settling in.

Just as they’d planned three years ago, he and the others had, over the past six months, invited a dozen or so of the cells in their network to staff the base. They had put together their list primarily based on skillsets and location--they had a mix of primarily guerilla fighters with ground fighting experience, but had managed to scrape together enough pilots to put together two flight groups--but made every attempt to limit their selections to the ones likeliest to integrate into a cohesive force.

Not an easy task, when working with insurgent cells that had operated more or less independently for, in many cases, as long as the Empire had existed. If not longer.

Still, most were here now--having trickled in in small groups over the past couple of weeks, using routes he and the others had mapped out with help from their black market contacts. And he was pleased to see more cooperation than conflict, overall. It might not last, of course, as the setup tasks dwindled, but he hoped it would.

Rex came up beside him, interrupting his thoughts, and sketched a quick salute, which Obi-Wan returned with a nod; relaxing as they fell into a familiar, if long-disused, pattern.

It struck him as a touch odd, that it felt so familiar, despite everything that had happened. Or perhaps not odd, so much as a little--sad. Being back on an active military base, even a small, furtive one that wasn’t quite ready for action, shouldn’t...shouldn’t feel quite so much like coming home.

It was a disturbing thing, that they’d all gotten so used to war.

“Sir?”

“Sorry,” Obi-Wan said, flashing Rex a brief smile. “Lost in thought.”

Rex nodded. “Think I know what you mean,” he said, eyes flicking out over the crowd with practiced ease, scanning for anything that needed intervention from Command. “ Didn’t expect it to feel like this.”

“No,” Obi-Wan agreed, softly. “I’m not sure any of us did.”

“Probably not.”

Obi-Wan sighed faintly, and changed the subject. “Everything else running smoothly? Things seem to be coming together, from what I can tell.”

“So far,” he said. “Much as it can, at this stage, anyway. Shield generator’s fully up and running as of about an hour ago, but we’re still having some issues with comms. Moonshot’s putting in the last
few updates General Skywalker suggested, we’re gonna try again in a few minutes. Hopefully, that’ll do it.”

“Good to hear,” he said. “So far as I know, Senator Organa is still on schedule, and should be here some time tomorrow.” Not that their base really needed an official stamp of approval, but it made things feel more connected. Besides, it would probably help with morale, for those gathered here to see they had friends and allies on Coruscant, even now.

“We might not be quite up to standard by then,” Rex said. Then paused, considering, and added, “Depending on who’s defining ‘standard,’ anyway. But we should have the basics going pretty reliably by then.”

“Excellent,” Obi-Wan said, feeling a slight tension he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying leave his shoulders. Despite the strange half-familiarity of the Crait base—or perhaps even because of it—the last few days here had felt somewhat surreal. Hearing how close it was to reality helped, especially coming from one as grounded and as trusted as Rex.

“General Ben?” a familiar voice called from halfway across the hangar--Moonshot and some of his other contacts had yet to get out of the habit of using whatever alias they knew, as opposed to his real name.

Although, he supposed, he wasn’t really in a position to comment, given that he still primarily thought of her as Moonshot, rather than Druthi.

“Yes?”

“We’re ready for another test run,” she said. “Care to join us?”

“Might as well,” he said. “Rex?”

“Sure,” he said. “Unless you’d rather have me stay and supervise in here.”

He considered the room, then shook his head. “No, I think they can do without us for a half hour or so.” He turned back to Moonshot. “After you. Which test are we running this time? Rex said you were still working on comms?”

“We are, and interference again,” she said, dodging an unfamiliar astromech as it careened around a corner. “We think we’ve got it solved, in a way that won’t overload the power cells and short out the crypt module this time. We have Blue Group running a CAP, making a manual scan of the system for any trouble that we can’t see clearly from here. Goal is to make simultaneous contact with them and an out-of-system relay without frying anything.”

“You’ve managed separate tests?” he asked. He felt fairly certain he knew the answer--Moonshot was careful, and thorough--but it never hurt to double check.

“We have,” she confirmed. “About ten minutes apart. We thought about gradually decreasing the interval, but…”

“We have,” she confirmed. “About ten minutes apart. We thought about gradually decreasing the interval, but…”

“With any luck, that’d just be a waste of time,” Rex finished for her.

“Exactly,” she said, as the doors to the command center slid open to admit them.

The room felt somewhat incomplete--or, better put, still asleep--with half of the scanner panels still dim and deactivated, but apart from a few piles of cables that Obi-Wan carefully stepped over, everything was in place. Just waiting for the final connections and orders to be made to turn them
“General,” the being on comms said—a thin-faced Twi’lek, one of Ahsoka’s contacts; Obi-Wan couldn’t recall his name off the top of his head.

So, instead, he returned the salute and said, “Carry on, I’m simply here to observe.”

“Yes, sir,” he said, then flipped a few switches. “Druthi?”

“We are a go.”

“Commencing comms test 87, on my mark.”

Moonshot picked up a headset—modified to fit around her tentacles—and started plugging in her frequencies.

“Three...two...mark,” the Twi’lek on the main, local comms console said. “Blue Group, this is Base Command. Do you read?”

There were a few seconds of staticy silence; Obi-Wan resisted the urge to lean against the console and get in the officer’s way, half-unconsciously holding his breath, until--

“If that, base,” came the reply. “We read you loud and clear. Finally.”

Half a step behind him, Rex sighed faintly.

Clearly, the Twi’lek communications officer—Liir Arend, that was his name—agreed. “Keep the snark to a minimum, Blue Four. You’re on duty.”

Obi-Wan bit back a smile and absently scritched behind the ears of a vulptex that hopped up onto the console, sniffing curiously at Arend’s hand.

“Understood, Command,” Blue Four said, sounding not at all sorry. “Minimal snark is a go.”

“Blue Group,” Obi-Wan cut in, because he knew from long experience where the conversation might go from there. “Finish your patrol and then return to base. Report in as necessary.”

Another brief silence, before a new, more familiar voice answered.

“If that,” Blue Leader said. “Clear skies so far. We’ll let you know if that changes.”

“Understood. Base Command out.” He set the local comms back on standby, and smiled at Arend. “Well, that part, at least, went well. Moonshot?”

“We are officially up and running,” Moonshot said, with a grin, setting her headset aside and tossing her tentacles back. “The test message and response from a contact of mine in the Ivriid system went through, no issues. Even with the local messaging back and forth at the same time. Systems didn’t throw up any overload warnings. No alerts from the scanners on either end, and the crypt modules worked like we hoped they would.”

“Excellent,” Obi-Wan said, as the vulptex, apparently through being petted, stood up and shook itself off before leaping down off the table and disappearing deeper into the base. “I think Anakin will be sorry he missed this.” Though perhaps he would’ve matched Blue Four in irreverence, and the test would have taken twice as long. Even after I interrupted.

As if on cue, his personal comm chimed before Moonshot could reply.
Though it was not Anakin on the other end, to his relief—nor Bail or Padme, though she rarely risked reaching out directly, even now.

“Excuse me,” he said, and stepped aside to take the call; he felt Rex following him and stopping at a discreet distance, just in case.

“Kenobi!” Hondo Ohnaka’s voice rang out from the commlink. “My very dear friend, at last. It has been too long, and I have been trying to reach you for nearly a day now.”

“My apologies, Hondo,” Obi-Wan said, catching Rex’s eye and nodding briefly for him to come closer and listen in. Hondo generally only made contact when he had something he wanted to sell, which might be information—which might be urgent—or it might be materiel or other supplies. “I’ve had some technical difficulties.”

“Ah, of course, of course,” Hondo said, apparently unconcerned.

So, likely, whatever he has to offer isn’t particularly urgent, Obi-Wan thought. Or he’d be playing up the delay a bit more. If only to drive up the price.

“But things seem to be resolved now,” Obi-Wan continued. “What’s going on?”

“I have a proposition for you,” he said. “Can we meet?”

“That all depends,” Obi-Wan said. “On the proposition, and the timeframe.” While he’d prefer to be here when Bail arrived, he wasn’t, strictly speaking, needed. Rex and Moonshot could handle things perfectly well on their own, and Ahsoka was due back on site in a few hours, as well.

“Let’s just say that I have come across some items which might be helpful in your recent endeavors,” Hondo said. “But better to discuss the details in person, I think.”

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at Rex, who made a face, but shrugged.

Hondo, for a long, long list of reasons, was of course not privy to the actual location of the base, but he had been helpful when it came to outfitting the place. Besides, he and Hondo had an understanding, with a decade and a half of history backing it up. Even more importantly, the Force gave him no warning tingle of danger when he considered agreeing to the meeting.

Worst case scenario, he was probably looking at a day or so of wasted time. Possibly an attempt to wheedle him into helping the pirate with whatever his project of the moment was, but, again—Hondo knew his limits, so all Obi-Wan would lose was time.

“All right, I’ll bite,” Obi-Wan said. “When and where?”

“Ah, magnificent! I knew my very dear friend Kenobi would not let me down.”

“Hondo.”

“Yes, yes,” he said. “The same place we met last time, twelve hours.”

Obi-Wan ran some quick mental calculations, then nodded. “Yes, I’ll be there.”

“Excellent,” Hondo said. “Until then, my friend. I bid you goodbye.” With that, he signed off, and probably would have flourished in some way if this had been a full holocall, rather than voice-only.

“Mind if I tag along, sir?” Rex asked, as Obi-Wan was putting his commlink away. “Moonshot can handle herself ‘til the Commander gets here.”
He thought about it for a moment, then nodded. While there was no indication Hondo was leading him into any kind of trap, having an extra pair of hands and eyes along couldn’t hurt. His pirate friend could be...unpredictable.

“All right,” he said. “Send a message to Ahsoka, so she knows where to find us if anything comes up. I’ll brief Moonshot. We leave in an hour.” That should be enough time to pass the necessary information along and get his ship prepped, while still ensuring they arrived a little ahead of the scheduled rendezvous.

“Sir,” Rex acknowledged and, with the ease of frequent repetition, the two of them separated to attend to the necessary last-minute details before an unplanned departure.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the delays! I will be on an actual schedule at some point in the not-too-distant future, I promise XD Thanks so much for your patience and for sticking around/stopping by! ~shadowsong
Part 7, Chapter 3

Luke was *not* sulking on the balcony.

Or, well, he *was* on the balcony, having excused himself from the main room where he’d been allowed to join Mom and Uncle Bail and Aunt Mon for dinner, but he wasn’t *sulking*.

Just...thinking about stuff. Watching the traffic spin by. That was all.

Especially since there wasn’t even any *reason* to sulk right now. It had actually been a nice dinner, and while he hadn’t really had much to add to the conversation, the fact that Mom was starting to let him be there and listen to them having serious discussions about the Rebellion...it meant a lot.

But, then again, that was sort of part of the problem. He *didn’t* have anything to add, and as much as he liked getting to listen *officially*, instead of eavesdropping whenever he thought he could get away with it, being there but not *contributing* was almost *worse*.

He’d been out there maybe five or ten minutes when he felt, rather than heard, the door slide open and shut again behind him. He groaned internally--company was the *last* thing he needed right now--but, well, probably it was just one of his aunts checking to make sure they knew where he was just in case, and then hopefully she’d leave him alone with his thoughts.

Still, it was better to check, instead of just guessing. He closed his eyes, let out a breath, and *focused*.

Yeah. Definitely one of his aunts, but he couldn’t quite tell which one without turning around, which was *another* frustrating thing. He was still figuring out how to that; how to identify *exactly* who or what he’d noticed, when he noticed things, without giving too much away.

Leia told him he’d get better with time and practice but…

He had plenty of the first. The *second* was the hard part.

“Half a credit for your thoughts,” Aunt Sabe said.

But Aunt Sabe didn’t need to know all that, and if he told her, she’d probably tell Mom who would start worrying he was making stupid choices that might get him in trouble. Which he *wasn’t*, he knew how to be careful.

He sighed, and kept his eyes on the traffic instead of looking back at her. “I dunno that they’re worth *that* much.”

“Even so,” she said, coming up beside him and leaning on the railing herself, face turned in the general direction of the Imperial Palace looming on the horizon. “The offer stands.”

And then it occurred to him that if Aunt Sabe had followed him out here…

“I shouldn’t’ve left dinner like that,” he said, looking over at her at last, contrite. “I’m sorry. That was rude.”

She shook her head. “Don’t worry about that. It was a boring dinner anyway.” She gave him a sidelong, sideways half-smile. “Trust me. I *know* boring dinners.”

He rolled his eyes, because that wasn’t *really* true--well, that the dinner he’d left had been boring.
The rest of it, maybe. Probably. She’d been to a lot of State Dinners, after all.

Still, the fact that she was joking about it made him feel a tiny bit better.

“Mom’s not upset?” he asked.

“No,” Aunt Sabe said. “Why would she be?”

“I dunno,” he said, and turned back to the horizon, watching the lights from the speeders go by.

“I think she knows something’s been bothering you, though,” Aunt Sabe added.


He wasn’t looking at Aunt Sabe, but he could feel one of her eyebrows going up, and she didn’t even bother to point out the obvious lie. “So, what is it, my young lord? Perhaps I can help.”

He shook his head. “I’m not…it’s dumb, anyway.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But I’m still willing to listen.”

He hesitated for another minute. Because it was dumb, and he knew that, which was why he wasn’t sulking out here.

But he was thinking, and sometimes talking things out helped him work through things. Normally, at least for the past three years, he talked to Leia when he was worried about something, but he...couldn’t. Not about this. And Aunt Sabe was—saying he trusted Aunt Sabe was like saying he had blond hair, it was so obvious that it didn’t need to be said.

“It’s just…” he started, then gave in and let it all come out in a rush. “I just feel sort of…stuck. Like I’m not doing anything.”

“You don’t need to measure yourself against other people,” Aunt Sabe pointed out.

“No, I know that,” Luke said, because he did, and that wasn’t the point. Or, not the whole point, anyway. “It’s just…I don’t know. Like I said. It’s dumb.”

“I didn’t say that,” Aunt Sabe said. “Because it isn’t. I know that finding the balance between avoiding unwanted scrutiny and finding your own way in life hasn’t been easy for you. Especially with—well, you’re right. At home, under normal circumstances, your life would be...very different, this year.”

“Yeah,” Luke said. “I mean...yeah.” He stared down at his hands instead of out at traffic again. He maybe felt a little better about it. At least that he wasn’t upset over nothing. Aunt Sabe would’ve told him if he was.

They stood there quietly for a moment, letting that sit between them, before Aunt Sabe spoke

“Um.” That was...not at all what he’d expected her to say next. Then again, he’d brought up Mom’s career first, so he probably should have.

Besides, there was the Conversation he’d had with a handful of Assembly delegates when they were in Theed last week. On the other hand, he hadn’t told anyone about that yet, not even Leia--although that was at least partly just because their dreams hadn’t lined up since he and Mom and his aunts had gotten back. And it was one of the things he really, really didn’t want to talk about right now, no matter how much he trusted Aunt Sabe.

“Um,” he said again. “Not…no, not run for office exactly. I just want to do something, instead of just staying here and waiting for other people to do things.” Especially while my sister is off doing some kind of Mysterious and Important Jedi Thing, and my cousins are building their own grown-up lives and isn’t that the point of why we start everyone so young, on Naboo? I’m thirteen. I should be doing something.

Which made him worry that maybe he’d been too quick to turn those delegates down. Except--no, that wasn’t what he wanted, and he didn’t think he’d be good at it, either, so…

And that just put him right back where he’d started.

Aunt Sabe didn’t answer him right away, taking some time to think it through. “Most of what I’m about to say,” she finally said, “is going to sound placating, like I’m trying to humor you. But please believe that that isn’t my intention.”

“Okay?”

“I’d have to talk to your mother about specifics,” she said. “But we can find a project that will be all yours. Something for you to do, as you put it. Not makework, something real. It all depends, of course, on what you want to accomplish, and what’s feasible and comes with an acceptable level of risk.”

Which was another part of the problem, and why the whole thing was dumb and he probably shouldn’t’ve said anything, even to Aunt Sabe. It went back to what she’d said before, about balancing safety and everything else. Because Luke knew why he had to keep his head down. It was to keep him and his entire family, including Dad and Leia and Uncle Obi-Wan, safe. Because if the Emperor ever found out what he’d learned on Alderaan three years ago, it would put everyone he cared about in a lot of danger.

Then again, Aunt Sabe wouldn’t have brought it up if she hadn’t thought it was possible. And--she hadn’t said it straight out, but it occurred to him that maybe it would start to look weird soon if he didn’t do anything. Because he was thirteen now, and most kids his age back home on Naboo were entering into some kind of public service, even if they weren’t actually holding office, or starting on training for their planned careers in the arts or sciences, or…something.

Or maybe not. He wasn’t good at that kind of circular thinking. Lani was, but of course he couldn’t tell her about most of this. And, apart from Lani, Aunt Sabe was probably the best person he knew at figuring out this kind of problem before it happened. So telling her how…how frustrated and stuck he felt right now was actually probably a good thing. Just because it got that maybe-important conversation started.

Yeah. He was glad he’d done it now.
And she’d asked him what he wanted, so he decided to be honest and ask for the first thing that came into his head.

“Can I go with Uncle Bail on his trip?” Uncle Bail was leaving later tonight to go to the new Rebel base, their very first one. And Uncle Obi-Wan at least would be there, even if Dad and Leia weren’t right now. Luke would probably get to finally actually meet Aunt Ahsoka and Uncle Rex, too, which he’d wanted to do for ages. It was a long shot, he knew, but it couldn’t hurt to try.

“No, not this time,” Aunt Sabe said, right away. “But maybe-- maybe --on a future visit, if we have time to set it up and put together an adequate cover story for you.”

That was actually way, way more than he’d expected. And it helped. It helped a lot, to have that hope to hold on to. Even if it was only maybe.

But because was only maybe, and he didn’t know when that ‘maybe’ would become ‘yes,’ he still needed something, to make him feel less...useless. Less like he was stuck just watching all his friends and family growing up and doing big important things, for the Rebellion or for their people or even just for themselves, while he got left behind.

“Oh, not this time,” he said, then took a breath and shot for something a little more realistic. “I wanna learn how to fly. Really fly. A starfighter.”

He’d been thinking about that for a while, especially after hearing some of Dad’s stories on Alderaan, and in the letters they’d exchanged since then. Mom and his aunts had taught him a lot of useful skills that probably most Senators’ kids didn’t know, some more legal than others--he could pick most locks, for one thing, and hotwire a speeder, and clean and reassemble a pistol in the dark--but flying had never been one of them. Obviously, he couldn’t go to one of the Imperial Academies, and even entering Naboo’s planetary security forces might not be the smartest choice, but…

“That, I think we can arrange,” Aunt Sabe said, with a smile. “But you should start thinking about what you might want to do with those skills, once you have them.”

“Right,” he said. “I will. I promise.”

“There are, for example,” she said, “a handful of mercy and relief missions we’ve considered but set aside, for lack of time and resources. If you took point on that sort of thing--well, we’d probably want you to be able to get to safety on your own, if the worst should happen, anyway.”

That made him stand up a little straighter. Like Aunt Sabe had said, it wasn’t makework, it was real. And it was...it was…

He knew that just preparing for things was important. That there was a lot of background that had to be done first before any real moves or progress could be made. That’s what Mom and Uncle Bail and Aunt Mon had been talking about all night. And, now that Aunt Sabe had talked him out of his bad mood a little bit, he knew that he was already helping, at least a little--having access to the Palace, because he was friends with Lani, might mean he overheard something Important, even if Mom and his aunts didn’t want him to do anything like actively spying. Plus, he gave Lani someone to talk to and trust who wasn’t one of her father’s minions, and that was good for a whole lot of reasons.

But this would be something...something he could see, where what he was doing felt real.

Obviously, that wasn’t why he should do it, but that would...that would help him stop feeling
so...so…

Jealous.

He wasn’t out here sulking, he was out here feeling _jealous_.

He didn’t _like_ that feeling, but just ‘cause he didn’t like it didn’t mean it wasn’t there, or that he could just ignore it and hope it went away on its own. He had to figure out how to make it stop in the _right_ way. And what Aunt Sabe was suggesting, doing something obvious and constructive in ways he could _see_, was probably exactly what _he_ needed.

“I could,” he said. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

“I’ll talk to your mother in the morning,” Aunt Sabe said. “To iron out some of the details. In the meantime, why don’t you start researching flight schools? I think you know what to look for.”

“I do,” he said, then reached over and hugged her. “Thanks, Aunt Sabe.”

“Of course,” she said, holding him close briefly before letting go. “I should get back inside. You have another half-hour out here, all right? Then bedtime.”

He nodded. “Got it, I’ll be in.”

“Good,” she said, then smiled and slipped back inside, leaving him alone on the balcony, in a _much_ better mood than she’d found him.

He pushed away from the balcony and claimed his favorite chair, where he’d left his datapad after finishing up his homework earlier, and started his search.
While not quite as effective as they would be on an open prairie, the markings on Ahsoka’s face, montrals, and lekku did a lot to help keep her hidden among the leaves of the tree she was sitting in, overlooking Dr. Naar’s clinic while she waited for him to wrap up for the night. Especially since the local season meant the colors of the foliage were only a few shades redder than her face. It wasn’t protection against anything like a scanner, of course, but anyone doing just a visual sweep would miss her, and probably no one would make more than a cursory glance without a good reason.

And that, she could supplement with what Obi-Wan called a low-level distortion. Not a true mind trick, just a broad-range, very faint projection of “nothing to see here.” Most people who got caught up in it, when it worked—which Obi-Wan insisted was only about half the time, but she had yet to it fail when he did it—were just uninterested in looking in that direction. Her level of success was maybe one in three times, but it seemed to be holding up so far today.

Again, nothing that would hold up against a scanner or a systematic search, but it suited her purposes today.

She’d been here for a few hours, watching people come and go—mostly locals; or at least no resistance fighters and no troopers that she’d been able to identify, though there had been one Twi’lek she was pretty sure worked for one of Hondo Ohnaka’s competitors. The last time she’d seen anyone enter the place had been almost an hour ago, but full dark was still a ways off, and Dr. Naar usually kept his doors open until then.

And so, she waited. Because while she might risk a daylight approach if she actually needed his professional services, that wasn’t her mission here today.

She hoped she’d have a little more luck here than when she’d found Saw three days ago, out in the Cadavine sector. Fortunately, she hadn’t interrupted any kind of actual operation—he was on a resupply trip, meeting up with one of the less-disreputable independent weapons dealers.

Unfortunately, Saw, while open to collaborating on specific missions, still wasn’t interested in coming to their base. Or any kind of more formal or permanent alliance.

He’d seemed…harder, too, than he had the last couple times she’d run into him. Colder, more withdrawn, which, yes, had been a general trend over the three years since they’d reconnected, but the difference between yesterday and four months ago had still stood out. And she was pretty sure she knew why.

Jyn was no longer with him.

“Jyn has to walk her own path,” Saw had told her, grimly, when she’d asked, and refused to share any more details. Kylie and the rest of his cell hadn’t even given her that much.

Ahsoka knew damn well there was more to the story than he was saying. Of course, without prying, she couldn’t be sure exactly what that meant. On the other hand, she could be pretty sure that Jyn was still alive somewhere—or at least Saw believed she was; she would’ve picked up a different kind of grief if his adopted daughter had been killed.

So, she decided it was probably better to back off the subject, at least for now, and privately resolved to keep an eye out for the kid herself. Maybe not actively look for her—even with the
expansion of their movement, she didn’t necessarily have the time or resources to do that.

Especially since she had become Leia’s primary teacher--and, the fact that her personal history meant she couldn’t be with Leia and Anakin when they went looking for a crystal was maybe part of why she’d slipped off for this last-minute recruiting trip, instead of helping Obi-Wan and Rex and the others get Crait up and running. To keep her from distracted from worrying about them, and regretting that she wasn’t there.

But, anyway, she could at the very least passively keep an ear out for any news of Jyn--just to make sure she was okay, wherever she’d ended up. After all, the likeliest explanation was that Jyn and Saw had had a fight, and Jyn had left to figure out what to do next on her own. And if that was the case…

Yeah. Ahsoka knew what that was like.

Either way, there wasn’t much of anything she could do about it, especially from here. She closed her eyes and, just like she’d been taught, let out a breath and set those worries aside.

Or, she’d planned to, but was interrupted when her comm buzzed.

She blinked and, after a quick glance at the ground to make sure no one would notice any inconvenient leaves rustling, she picked it up.

Text-only message, from Rex. She activated her decrypt module and opened it.

“We have a minute, Commander?”

Which meant nothing urgent, just an update he thought she should get before she made it back to Crait.

“Hey, Rex. Yes, I do, still waiting in a tree. What’s up?”

“General Kenobi got a call,” he said.

Ahsoka’s eyes narrowed slightly. Still not urgent, or he’d’ve been much more direct. Still…

“Trouble?”

“Probably,” Rex said. “We’re going to meet with Hondo, says he’s got something to sell.”

Even with lightyears separating them and no audio on the call, she could practically hear the faint exasperation there.

“Oh, that kind of trouble,” she said, relaxing a little. “Should I pull out of this, come meet you instead?”

“No, the General and I should be able to handle anything Hondo might throw at us,” he said. “Not sure how long it’ll take, though.”

“Right, understood.” So, not quite urgent enough for her to give up on her contact here, at least not yet, but she should be mindful of the time. It was probably better for at least one of them to be on base, especially when Senator Organa arrived. “I should be wrapping up here soon, then I’ll head back.”

“Copy that. Any luck?”
She grimaced. “Not really. Our old friend is still unwilling to commit, and I’m waiting for a chance to speak to our new one discreetly.”

“About what we expected, then.”

“Yeah. I’ll fill you all in on details when you get back.”

“Likewise. Anything else?”

“No. Anything I need to know before I meet up with the Senator?”

“Nothing on our end,” he said. “But Moonshot will probably have more current information when you get there.”

“Right,” she said. “Tell Hondo hello from me, and feel free to smack him from me if you think he deserves it.” Which he might or might not--Hondo had been a good friend to them, these past thirteen years. Despite the complicated history they’d had back during the Clone Wars, he’d more than made up for the bad parts since. On the other hand, he was still Hondo Ohnaka, and sometimes came very close to crossing the line.

At least he hadn’t kidnapped any of her friends lately.

“Yes, sir.”

“May the Force be with you, my friend.”

“Copy that, sir. See you in a few days.”

Ahsoka cut the connection and slipped the comm back into her pocket. She glanced over at the horizon--the sun was already half-behind it; she shouldn’t be stuck up here more than another hour.

But it was another hour, and she should probably use that time semi-productively.

She closed her eyes again and leaned back against the tree trunk, settling in to meditate until she had an open window and cover of darkness to approach Dr. Naar.

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When Ahsoka opened her eyes again, the sky was filled with stars and she could spot Dr. Naar’s shadow, as he locked his back door.

*Excellent,* she thought, and leapt down from the tree.

He paused, and half-turned with his hand still on the doorknob.

“It’s me,” she said, coming a little further out from the treeline, where she was more visible under the planet’s two moons.

“Ah,” he said, but she was his shoulders relax a little. “What happened this time? Are your friends with you?”

“Nah, I’m all right,” Ahsoka said. “And so are they, as far as I know. Really. That’s not why I’m here.”
Dr. Naar, while very good at controlling his facial expressions during an actual crisis, wasn’t quite as good at not looking confused when the stakes were lower.

But all he said was, “I’m glad to hear it,” before pushing the door back open, silently inviting her inside.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m glad to be able to say it.”

“I take it that doesn’t happen very often?”

“Well,” she said. “Not as often as I’d like anyway. But we’re really not…you mostly see us at our worst. Physically.”

“True,” he said. He made sure the screen on the window was fully opaque, then turned on one of the lights. “I don’t think you’ve ever just…dropped by like this before.”

“No,” she said. “We didn’t want to risk drawing too much attention to you.”

“And I’m grateful for that,” he said, before taking a seat and rolling his eyes a little when she just hopped up onto the table. “What’s going on?”

And now comes the hard part. “We’ve set up a base.”

“I see,” he said, after taking a minute to let that sink in. “Congratulations, I think. I’m guessing you want me to move there?”

“I’m here to invite you, yeah,” she said. “We know we can trust you, and you’re good at this. Good in a crisis. You’re exactly the kind of person we want running our medbay, now that we’re getting a little more organized.”

Dr. Naar didn’t answer her right away. Instead, he stood up and started needlessly sorting through the various supplies on his shelves.

But Ahsoka could already guess what he was going to say. He was just looking for the words.

“I have a rule,” he said, turning to face her again. “No one gets turned away.”

“I know,” she said.

“And that would change, if I worked out of your base instead of here,” he said. “Not because I think you or your people would stop me, exactly, but…it’s different, working for an active military. Of any kind.”

Ahsoka winced a little, as Saw and his people leapt back into her surface thoughts.

“Maybe having you there would remind us why we shouldn’t stop you,” she said. “Like you said, I think most of our people wouldn’t. Or, at least, I don’t like to think that anyone we’ve brought in so far is that cruel. But at the same time...”

He wasn’t wrong. People got...caught up, and there were extremists out there. She didn’t think Saw was that bad, but after seeing him a few days ago, she had to admit that he was starting to lean that way. Which was actually part of why she still wanted to bring him in now, to integrate him into the community they were building and give him reasons to keep things in perspective. But maybe Jyn could help him walk it back, whenever she rejoined him. The kid seemed to bring out the best in him.
Still, that tendency was there. And Saw wasn’t even the worst of them.

“I appreciate the thought,” Dr. Naar said. “But my answer’s still no, at least for now. You and your people are of course always welcome to come here, when you need me, but…I think I need to stay where I am.”

“I understand,” she said, softly. Because she did. His rule was a good one, and it was there for a reason. And even leaving that aside, it wasn’t just soldiers he treated out here, after all.

“Thank you,” he said. “Besides,” he added, a little more lightly. “I’m not sure I’d be all that good at the non-medical side of things, anyway. Not the kind of being you want running things.”

Ahsoka grinned. “I think you’re selling yourself short there,” she said. “You built all of this, didn’t you? Your clinic, your network…all of it.”

He smiled back, but shook his head. “I didn’t build a network,” he said. “At least not on purpose. But I will admit to the clinic.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “Still, the way you’ve kept this place running, with your rule and everything—we could use your administrative skills almost as much as your medical skills.”

“Thank you,” he said. “That doesn’t change my mind, you know.”

“I know. I didn’t expect it to,” she said, and hopped off the table. “I still thought it needed to be said.”

“Right,” he said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t give you the answer you wanted. But I’m sure I’ll see you again, one way or the other.”

“Probably,” she agreed. “Hopefully not too soon. Although…” She considered his shelves for a moment. “You know, we have some more reliable supply lines and black market contacts these days. Is there anything in particular you need? I could try and get it for you.” Even if he wasn’t coming to Crait with her, they probably owed him that much, and more.

He blinked. “A few things, yes,” he said. “But you have an active military base to supply.”

“We do,” she agreed. “But we can only stockpile so much.” Their base only had so much room they could devote to medical, after all, and some medicines and other supplies had a limited shelf life, besides.

“Fair,” he said, then stepped past her to where he had a few sheets of flimsi, and jotted down a brief list. “Any of these, if you have surplus, I’d be very grateful.”

“I’ll check into it,” she promised, slipping the list into a pocket.

“Thank you,” he said again. “And…listen, if my situation here ever changes…”

“Our offer’s always open,” she said, firmly. “Do you want a way to reach me, in case?”

He shook his head. “Best not,” he said. “I haven’t been raided yet, but if I am, that wouldn’t be the kind of thing I’d like being caught with.”

“True,” she said. “And, with that in mind, I really should go. I’ll be in touch.”

“Yes,” he said, and walked with her to the door. “Until next time,” he said, with a wry smile.
“Until next time,” she agreed. “And hopefully, it’ll be about your list.”

He shook his head and smiled.

“May the Force be with you, my friend,” she said.

He nodded. “Good luck,” he said, softly.

She bowed once, then slipped off back into the relative safety of the treeline, heading as quickly as she could for where she’d left her ship.

He hadn’t given her the answer she’d hoped for, maybe, but Dr. Naar was still a valued friend, and one she was glad to have.

Even at a distance.
Jedha was a desert, like Tatooine, but that was where the similarities ended.

The air smelled different, felt different; sort of rounder, heavier. Full of—something. Full of life. The sand itself was a whole other texture, too, and the moon as a whole just felt… older. Settled, sort of, in a way that Leia was pretty sure Tatooine never would, even after a thousand years. More solid, at least at its base, though the surface was restless and full of barely-restrained tension.

Even that wasn’t really all that much like home, even though she could’ve said the same thing, kind of. But here, that shimmery, shivery feeling was less wild, more…

She didn’t exactly know the word for it, except different.

Dad had landed the Waterfall in the shadow of an enormous statue, half-buried in the sand—which just added to the sense of history and depth to this place. There was definitely nothing like that on Tatooine. Then they’d put the last security and cloaking measures in place, leaving Artoo behind just in case they him to bring the ship in so they could make a quick exit, before starting the two-hour walk to the city.

Which was another different thing—the way it dominated the horizon on its wide mesa, rising up towards the sky in a way that no one ever built on Tatooine, with its frequent storms. A city back home would’ve been at the base of the cliff—if you could even find one that tall—or maybe built into the side, rather than perched on top like that.

It was impressive. And beautiful. And different.

They didn’t talk much along the way. Dad kept his eyes on the horizon and his thoughts to himself; his shields wrapped up tight, tighter than she’d ever seen them. For her part, Leia took the time to try and bring her more scattered thoughts back in line, to be really ready for the challenge she was about to face.

Thinking through all the ways this desert was so different from the one she’d grown up in helped. Gave her something to focus on, to blunt the edges of her nerves.

And when that started going in circles, too, she focused on watching Dad instead; because even before she got to the Temple and started hunting for her crystal, she still had an occupied city to walk through. She’d never done that before—sure, there were troopers in Mos Eisley and some of the other cities she’d visited, both on Tatooine and on her off-planet training trips, but not on this level. Dad, on the other hand, had been slipping in and out of places like Jedha City for her entire life.

So it was probably best to watch him closely, to make sure she was following him right.

Of course, for her, it was a little different. Leia wasn’t a known Imperial fugitive the way Dad was, so she hadn’t really had to disguise herself, other than the name on her fake papers. Dad had had to put a little more effort into things.

Which was what she was trying to track; all the ways he’d managed to become almost a different person without doing all that much, at least on the surface, to change what he actually looked like.

He hadn’t even dyed his hair again, like he had for Alderaan, but somehow he looked even more different than he had then. There was something about the way he moved, the way he carried
himself, that she couldn’t quite figure out. Plus, there was a blaster on his right hip, where he usually carried his lightsaber, and that was somehow weirder than seeing him without any visible weapons, the way he had been in Aldera City.

Between that and his extra-tight mental shields, if she hadn’t known better, she’d’ve almost guessed he was completely ordinary—well, okay, not completely, because the obvious blaster and probably more weapons that she couldn’t see. For one thing, even though she had no idea how, without Artoo along, Leia would bet just about anything that Dad had still managed to smuggle his ‘saber in with them somehow. Besides, all the careful movement in the world couldn’t totally hide that Dad was a very, very dangerous man when he wanted to be.

But still, the kind of ordinary she’d grown up with. A regular bounty hunter, maybe. Not a Jedi, or Force-sensitive at all.

Of course, that might just be her; she was pretty sure that Uncle Obi-Wan or Aunt ‘Soka would still know, even if they didn’t know Dad.

On the other hand, Dad was…well, Dad; and he drew a lot of attention unless he was trying really hard not to. The trick, she guessed, was trying without making it obvious that he was trying.

Maybe that was why he was keeping his shields so tight. That alone, at least for her, would’ve taken a lot of focus. So even if they might not actually work against someone with experience, the shields might give him a single focus point, which would keep him from getting too wrapped up in all the little details, which might make him seem stiff and unnatural.

Just like the way she was focusing on all the ways this trip was different from every other one she’d ever taken was helping her.

“All set, princess?” Dad asked, as they finally approached the city.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Stay close to me, all right?” Dad said, stopping just shy of putting a hand on her shoulder to reinforce it. “Trust your instincts, and keep an eye out for trouble.”

And, especially given why they were here...

“I will,” she said.

The stormtrooper at the gate checkpoint seemed more bored with his job than anything. He scanned their IDs, and made Dad fill in an extra form ‘cause he was carrying a weapon. But their covers held, and Dad’s allowed for a blaster. The trooper stamped their papers and waved them through. Dad hadn’t even needed a mind trick to get them past that first problem.

Dad relaxed a little once they were through. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s see what we can find, princess, okay?”

“Right behind you,” she promised.

They went up and up and up a series of stairs, cut into the cliff face, and came out into a crowded market square. The place was full of beings of all kinds of species, arguing in more languages than she could identify, and buying and selling food, clothing, jewelry—all from a mishmash of cultures; some native and some not.

It all sang together, in the Force and along Leia’s ordinary senses; even with the tension lingering
just under the surface, it was all so full of life.

If this were any other day, Leia would’ve slipped away from Dad to try exploring.

But she had a mission here; in the Temple at the center of the city, that was humming in a too-quiet counterpoint to the crowd.

She just had to get there.

“May the Force of others be with you,” a voice cut through the crowd.

Leia blinked, and just barely stopped herself from outright turning in that direction, even though everything inside her wanted to. Instead, she glanced up at Dad, who was smiling slightly.

“Follow me,” he said, and started moving--but he didn’t head straight towards the voice. He picked his way across the crowd in a wide circle and Leia didn’t know how he could stand it. Because those words were still echoing in her ears, and she knew that was who they were supposed to talk to.

“Patience,” Dad murmured, stopping at a stall to examine some wirework sculptures. And then Leia caught sight of how much his hands were moving, with barely-suppressed tension. “See the troopers?"

And it wasn’t like she’d forgotten those white shadows, skulking around the edges of the crowd, just...

“Right,” she said, taking a breath and letting it out slowly, in the hope that her nervous tension would dissipate with it. Don’t give yourself away. Don’t put that person, whoever they are, in danger.

Finally, finally, they finished their circuit, and Dad drifted to a halt, dropping a couple coins into a bowl held by a blind man who was maybe as old as Uncle Obi-Wan, or maybe closer to Dad’s age. Leia couldn’t quite tell.

“May the Force of others be with you, friend,” Dad echoed.

The blind man smiled. “It’s been a long time,” he said.

“I know,” Dad agreed, softly. “I wasn’t sure we would find anyone.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’m Chirrut Imwe.”

Dad nodded. “I’d give you my name, but…”

“The soldiers, I understand,” Chirrut said, then fell silent, tilting his head in her direction.

Leia glanced up at Dad, who shrugged one shoulder, leaving it up to her.

“I’m Leia,” she said.

Chirrut smiled. “Welcome, little one.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling back.

“Can we talk here?” Dad asked. He was leaning against the wall, eyes scanning the crowd.
“We could,” Chirrut said.

“But it might be better to wait,” Leia finished for him.

“There is a right moment for all things,” Chirrut agreed. “Meet me by the fountain, three blocks over. At sunset, when the patrols have their shift change.”

“We’ll be there,” Dad promised.

“I look forward to it,” Chirrut said, with another grin, then turned his focus back to the crowd.

Chirrut was waiting for them, as promised, by the fountain square at sunset--and he wasn’t alone. He was with a big man, about his age, with long hair and hard eyes and an enormous gun.

“My friends from the market,” Chirrut called softly.

Dad bowed, and Leia copied him. Chirrut’s friend didn’t quite scoff, but the general distrust spilling off of him into the Force was almost physical. It wasn’t directed at them, exactly, but he wasn’t all that happy about the situation as a whole.

Hopefully, they could win him over. Somehow.

“I want to thank you,” Leia said, “for agreeing to help us.”

“Why are you here?” the stranger asked. “It’s been a long time since Jedi came to Jedha. Only dreamers and fools stay here now.”

“Baze says these things,” Chirrut said, “without entirely believing them.”

“You don’t know what I believe.”

“I can’t answer those questions for you,” Dad cut in. “And I’m not here to stay, though I wish I could.”

Chirrut nodded, his face turning serious for once. “We have always had our place here. You and your Order took a broader view of things. But all things are as the Force wills it. We may be the only Guardians left, but we are still your friends.”

Baze, Leia noted, didn’t actually scoff at that.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said instead. “Though I think I can guess.”

Dad nodded to Leia, who took a breath, and searched the Force for the right words.

“I seek a crystal,” Leia said. “And request your permission to access your sacred site to find one.”

Chirrut nodded. “The task of the Guardians has always been to protect the Temple, and the crystals inside,” he said. “If the kyber cannot stay, better for it to be in the hands of Jedi than the Empire.”

Baze studied him for a moment, then turned to Leia. “Fine. We will help.”

“Thank you,” she said, and bowed again.
“But if you’re going to try the Temple,” Baze said, “it should be tonight.”

Dad nodded. “The sooner, the better,” he agreed. “The longer we’re here, the more we risk exposure. Which would be bad for all of us.”

“Yes,” Chirrut said. “And it’s a good night for it.”

Leia could feel the truth of that as soon as he said it. And Chirrut knew this place and this Temple in a way that even Dad or Uncle Obi-Wan or Aunt ‘Soka couldn’t, so she trusted him.

“Is there a way in?” Leia asked. “Past the troopers, I mean.”

“It won’t be easy,” Baze said, then his eyes flickered over to Dad. “But Chirrut can guide you to an entrance, if we draw the soldiers’ attention away.”

“Right,” Dad said. “Did you have something in mind?”

“A few things,” he said. “Some that might even keep you from getting caught, if you go where I tell you.”

“I think I can manage that.”

“Good.”

“And Baze can draw you a map of the Temple itself,” Chirrut said. “There are still a few places in there the Empire hasn’t reached yet.”

Wordlessly, Dad pulled out his flimsi pad and ink pen, passing both to Baze.

Baze raised an eyebrow at him.

“Long story,” Dad said.

“All right,” Baze said, and started sketching. “But pay attention when you’re in there. The soldiers may have gotten deeper than we think.”

“I will,” Leia said. Between the Force and her ears and other mundane senses, she was pretty sure she could avoid any soldiers who were in there.

“What about extraction?” Dad asked. “I may be speaking out of place, but I remember that timing on Ilum was hard to predict, and didn’t...always feel the same inside the cave as outside. I know it took me longer than my apprentice, when I took her there for her second crystal.”

Chirrut smiled slightly. “That can be the case here, too,” he said. “But getting out will be much easier than getting in. The Force and the crystal will protect and guide her.”

Dad didn’t look entirely convinced.

“Here,” Baze said, circling a spot on his sketch of the Temple, before handing it to Leia. “There’s at least one door I know of that can only be opened from the inside. We will wait for you there.”

So if she needed extra help, or there were troopers too close, the others could draw them away again.

“Thank you,” she said. “Both of you. For everything.”
“Thank us when you leave,” Baze said, then turned to Dad again. “Are you ready?”

Dad nodded. “Lead the way.”

Baze moved faster and more quietly than Leia would’ve guessed, given his size and the massive gun he carried; but she blinked, and he and her father had disappeared into the deepening shadows of Jedha’s evening.

Chirrut sighed. “Baze will come around,” he said. “He is bitter now, but I have faith that he will recover his hope and his faith one day.”

“I hope he does,” Leia said.

Chirrut smiled at her. “Come on, this way,” he said, then took off down a side street, his staff held loosely in his hands.

Leia slipped after him, trying to move as quickly and as quietly as he did, relying on her size and keeping to the shadows to go unnoticed, just like Aunt ‘Soka had taught her. Even if she’d never tried it anywhere it mattered quite this much before.

They wound through narrow alleys, even cutting through an empty apartment building once, until, as abruptly as he’d started, Chirrut held out a hand for her to stop.

They were here.

The kyber Temple loomed above them, its history and presence and pain leaning over Leia like a physical weight; the wall was cracked and pitted in places from being so long under siege.

“There’s an old garbage chute,” Chirrut said, softly. “It should be right across from us. Do you see it?”

It took her a moment, before she could see a faint depression, probably about at eye-level for her if she was standing right in front of it.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Good,” he said, with a brief smile. “That’s where you go. You have your map?”

She nodded, and started to say something else, but he put a finger to his lips and tilted his head, listening.

Two troopers rounded the corner, making a regular perimeter patrol. Leia pulled back just a little bit further into the shadows--

And then, from the other side of the Temple, an explosion ripped through the air.

“What the--”

Both troopers turned towards the sound.

_Come on_, Leia said. _Come on, go investigate_...

“How come,” one of the troopers said; the other nodded and they started back the way they’d come, picking up speed.

Leia let out a breath, waited until they were out of sight, then counted to ten for good measure
before darting across the alley, with Chirrut half a step behind her.

The chute was sealed, but Chirrut felt his way along the wall beside it. He found some mechanism she couldn’t see, and the rock wall slid open with an audible crunch.

She winced, and glanced up at her guide.

“Don’t worry about it,” Chirrut assured her. “If they come back, I’ll handle it. Go.”

She nodded, and hauled herself up into the chute, which was just wide enough for her to fit; it continued upward at a steep, but still climbable, angle.

“Good luck, young Jedi,” Chirrut murmured, just as Leia heard the sound of running footsteps heading their way.

“Thank you,” she said. “May the Force be with you.”

He grinned, and hit the mechanism. She scrambled back half a pace, to make sure nothing got caught as the rock started grinding shut again.

“You again—” Leia heard one of the stormtroopers say, before the panel slid back into place, leaving her alone in the dark and silence beyond.

She took a breath and let it out slowly. “Here we go,” she whispered, and started to crawl.
Anakin stayed silent as Baze guided him back through Jedha City’s winding back alleys, to the Temple and, more specifically, wherever the garbage chute Chirrut had mentioned was.

Their part of the operation, at least, had been a success. Baze had pointed out the target, and from there, they’d worked together pretty well--refining the broad “make some productive noise” plan on the fly. Baze was smart, and very good at what he did, if not all that talkative.

It had been a nice explosion, too. Attention-getting, effective, and well-contained with minimal damage to the surrounding buildings. He wasn’t sure exactly what the target had been, but he trusted Baze to pick wisely. Even for a last-minute distraction like this.

And he was almost positive their exit had been clean. On any other day, he would probably have called this one of the best missions he’d been on in a long time. Even without Obi-Wan or Ahsoka or Rex along for the ride.

But today, he was still keyed up, unable to relax. Some of it, of course, was because Leia was off facing the unknown where he couldn’t protect her--no matter how much work he’d put into calming himself down on the road here, letting her go and trusting her safety to someone else, even one of the Guardians, hadn’t been easy.

Leia’s got this, he reminded himself, for the hundredth time. We’ve trained her well. She is ready.

The other part, though--the other part was the way the kyber Temple itself was screaming, faintly, at the back of his skull. It wasn’t the same, for so many reasons, but he couldn’t help but remember another screaming Temple, thirteen years ago.

He perceived it as low-level pain, like a shard of glass buried in his shoulder--certainly not as all-consuming as his fear for his daughter--but sharp and distracting and constant.

The sooner we find Chirrut, the better, he thought grimly. I need to get out of my head a little bit. If I’m talking to someone, if I can have something else to focus on, maybe I can--stop hearing it. Just for a minute or two. Grieve later, when there’s not so much at stake.

Fortunately, the next corner they rounded led them to an alley facing one of the Temple’s walls; and Chirrut sitting on a stone step across from it, waiting for them. A pair of stormtroopers were slumped on the ground in front of him, out cold. For his part, Chirrut looked completely unruffled, and a little smug.

“You’re late,” he teased, as soon as they were close enough that he didn’t have to shout.

Baze ignored him, taking in the scene with a glance and a faint, long-suffering sigh. “And you had to pick a fight.”

“Who says I picked it, my friend?” Chirrut said. “I picked nothing. They found me.”

“Hah.”

In that moment, Anakin had a lot of sympathy for Rex, and Cody, and Yularen and the rest, for
having to put up with him and Obi-Wan and Ahsoka bickering fondly in the middle of stressful situations.

He took a breath, let his irritation slide off him as best he could—which was not helped by those echoes of pain; which were much stronger standing in the Temple’s shadow, without even a thin layer of the city’s population as a buffer.

He locked it down as best he could.

“Leia?” he asked.

“Is where she needs to be,” Chirrut assured him, more seriously. “She was inside before they rounded the corner. They never saw her.”

“Good,” he said.

“But we shouldn’t linger here,” Baze said.

“Agreed,” Chirrut said, standing up and positioning his staff again. “I was only waiting for you. Shall we?”

And then--more waiting when we get to the exit, for who knows how long. More listening to the Temple scream.

He took another breath, and let it out. “Lead the way.”

Climbing up the garbage chute had taken a lot less time than Leia had expected. Her shoulders weren’t even starting to get sore from hauling herself up by hand, by the time she reached what seemed like the other end.

The inside of her head, though... that hurt, dully, like a half-healed broken bone. The Temple itself was in pain, and it echoed through the Force. She wasn’t sure why she hadn’t picked up on it from outside--maybe her senses just weren’t that attuned yet.

Now that she was in the middle of it, though…

She wished she could do something. To ease its pain, or at least grant it some kind of justice for what had been done. But she was just one half-trained Jedi, and trying to intervene would only get her killed.

She reached the end of the shaft after about twenty minutes, stopped to catch her breath and her bearings, then carefully tried to push the access hatch open.

It gave, after a few seconds of shoving, but made a worrying, rusty-sounding screech that echoed all around her.

Leia froze, her heart thumping in her ears, trying to listen for running troops or digging machines heading her way.

No footsteps. Machines--yes, but muffled. Like they were on the other side of two or three thick stone walls. She was safe. For now.
She let out a breath and climbed out of the shaft to get a look around.

It was dark.

Whatever damage the Empire had done to the Temple, the roof was still intact and at least this particular corridor didn’t have any windows to the outside.

But that was at least as much of an advantage as a disadvantage. The Force would probably keep her from tripping over any cracks in the floor or anything dumb like that, and if she let her eyes adjust, she’d see any troopers coming long before they saw her. Because they didn’t have the Force to guide them.

...on the other hand, Baze’s map in her pocket would need an actual light to see, and she should probably keep an eye on it all along. Even if she might not really need it until she was on her way out.

“Okay,” she whispered and it echoed.

...better keep my mouth shut, she decided. But, yeah. ...actually, I should probably get a light handy, but keep it off as much as possible. Right? Best of both options.

She had a little mini-flashlight in one of her belt pouches--part of the kit Aunt Beru had put together for her ages ago, in case she ever got separated from Dad or one of the others when they took her off-planet. A couple ration bars, dry tinder and a striker, the flashlight, a mini-condenser, and bandages and a couple emergency meds.

Leia was just glad she hadn’t left it on the Waterfall.

She played with the settings on the flashlight for a few seconds, finding the dimmest one where she could still make out the map, then flipped it off again and waited for her eyes to adjust.

After a few minutes, with the rough stone of the wall a comforting anchor point against her back, Leia could pick out dim, fuzzy shapes in the gloom. She pushed away from the wall--leaving one hand on it as a guide, just in case--and after a moment’s thought, turned left.

She wandered for what felt like hours. Of course, she didn’t actually have any kind of chrono with her--that, she had left on the Waterfall, since it felt sort of wrong for this. Besides, the Temple was probably going to test her on her weaknesses, and she knew as well as anyone that patience was one of them.

So, she wasn’t totally sure how long she’d been in here, but she was starting to get a little worried. She probably didn’t have all that much time. It wasn’t like she and Dad could stay on Jedha forever; there was work to do and an Empire to fight out there. Besides, all her aunts and uncles would worry. She figured she needed to find her crystal and make her way out by morning, at the very latest, or they’d be in real trouble.

But each turn she took, occasionally stopping to double check Baze’s map, looked just like the last one. Aunt ‘Soka and Uncle Rex had taught her how to navigate through mazes even when she couldn’t see, at least, so she knew she wasn’t actually going around in circles, even if it felt like she was.

And the Temple was still aching in her mind, and she could still hear the Imperial machines digging, faintly off in the distance, too; it wasn’t getting any louder, at least, so there was that.

She’d finally found something that felt new--a steep, narrow staircase; almost more like a ladder--
and was trying to decide whether to go up or down, when--

“You could burn it all down, you know,” a voice said behind her.

Leia spun around, drawing herself up and ready to fight whoever had managed to sneak up on her. With her flashlight, or her bare hands, if she had to.

There was a woman standing there in the shadows, leaning casually against the wall in a sleek, dark jumpsuit with her hair braided and pinned up and out of the way. She was maybe Dad’s age; and Human, Leia was pretty sure, but her eyes shone in the darkness. She reminded Leia of something like a krayt dragon, or maybe one of those wild feline predators she and Uncle Rex had run into that one time; napping lazily for the moment, maybe, but not safe to ignore.

This stranger, Leia was certain, was at least as dangerous as a dragon or a wild cat.

But she was also not quite real.

The woman smiled, and it was not a friendly smile. “You catch on pretty quick, kid.”

“Who are you?” she asked, cautiously lowering her hands--they wouldn’t do much good here anyway--but not dropping her guard.

“Oh, you’ll find out,” she replied, pushing away from the wall and moving to circle Leia.

But Leia wasn’t stupid and she turned with her, watching her closely. “You’re not real, which means the Temple sent you. You’re my test.”


All kinds of warning bells were going off in Leia’s head--this woman felt wrong, skin-crawlingly wrong, like looking into a bent mirror.

But maybe that was the test. Lesson. Whatever. Patience, sure, but maybe...maybe especially with the entire galaxy at stake, the Force wanted to see how she would respond to this before it armed her.

Or maybe the Temple was too badly damaged, too corrupted by the Empire’s mining efforts, and this was a true Dark Side shade.

Either way--either way, this wasn’t something Leia could ignore. And it wasn’t something she could fight, either. She had to find another way around. She couldn’t get her crystal until she had. That much, she was sure of.

And finding out what this woman had to say would be useful--there is no ignorance, there is knowledge. She couldn’t decide how to do that until she knew what she was up against.

“What kind of lesson?” she asked.

“Like I said,” she said. “That fire is in you. Just like it’s in me. You really could burn it all down, if you wanted to. And don’t you want to? After everything that’s been done to your family--to everyone living in this galaxy?”

Her initial reaction was to snap back at the vision, because that had to be a trap. It was too obvious to be anything else.

“Think about it, Leia,” the vision said. “Really think, before you answer.”
Or maybe--maybe it was the opposite. It was so obvious, that it couldn’t be a trap.

And, maybe it was a shade influencing her, or maybe it was the desperate pain leaking into the air, but for a moment, whether she meant to or not, whether it was right or not, Leia couldn’t help but think of all the reasons her vision wasn’t totally wrong.

She thought of Mom and Luke and the constant danger they were in on Coruscant, on everything that would be done to them if their secrets were found out, or just if the Emperor wanted to hurt them.

She thought of Dad and Aunt ‘Soka and Uncle Obi-Wan and everything they’d lost.

She thought of Uncle Rex and the bad dreams he pretended not to have.

She thought of the very Temple she was standing in, and the faint hum of Imperial mining equipment ripping it apart.

The Empire had done all of that.

And she felt it building inside her, the righteous fury, the need for justice. To write all these wrongs.

The fire. Just like her vision had said.

“See?” the vision said, laughing. “You feel it now, don’t you? It’s always been there. All you have to do is unleash it, and the Emperor and everyone else like him will burn.”

It was so, so tempting.

And wasn’t this what everyone had been working towards since before she was born? Burning the Empire to the ground?

The Temple shivered around her, and she paused, blinked, shook her head to clear it.

This is wrong.

She didn’t know how she knew it, exactly, but all at once she did.

Yes, she could burn everything down. But that didn’t mean she should. Not like this. She had to find a better way to fight back. And that was why she was here--to find a crystal so she could do this right.

But first, she had to earn it. And if she gave in to this--this toxic sense of right, if she let herself be ruled by it, she never, ever would.

Feeling it in the first place didn’t make her a bad person. How she dealt with it was what mattered.

It was like what she and Aunt ‘Soka had talked about ages ago. No one ever automatically just knew the right thing to do. Not all the time. Not even Uncle Obi-Wan. They disagreed, they leaned on each other when they weren’t sure, they asked for help. And sometimes they still messed up, because it was hard.

But they always tried.

She didn’t--she didn’t have anyone to lean on here. But she had herself, and all the things she’d learned over the years--as a Jedi and just as a person.
And I can be better than this.

So she took a breath, let it and that white-hot sense of Righteousness out at once; squared her shoulders, and stared right into the stranger’s glowing eyes.

Which were--

She could see it now. Those were her eyes, older and harder and turned golden and sickly-sweet with rot.

Later, she told herself, firmly, when all she wanted to do was yelp and back away. React later. It’s not real. It’s not me. Not really. Bent mirror. Just a bent mirror. Don’t pretend it isn’t there, because it probably is, but don’t--don’t assume it’s all there is. Because that’s as good as giving in and we are not letting her win, okay? Okay. Good.

“Yeah,” she said, quietly, proud of how steady her voice actually was. “I could do that. And yeah, part of me wants to. But that doesn’t mean I should. And it definitely doesn’t mean I will.”

“Really?” her older not-self said, with a faint, amused smile. “I’m almost disappointed.”

“Sorry,” Leia said, and grinned back at her, as close to Aunt ‘Soka’s pointy Challenge Smile as she could muster when part of her still wanted to deny all of this or burst into tears or run away and part of her wanted to give over talking or proving herself or whatever and just stab this monster who had her face. “I want to be better than that. Better than you. And I will be.”

“We will see,” the vision said, and gave a mocking half-bow, and vanished.

Leia held still for a moment, just in case she came back. But she heard nothing but the drilling, felt nothing but the dull ache in the Temple around her.

She slumped against the wall, letting out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. All the adrenaline of the confrontation left her at once, leaving only the horror and guilt at what she’d come so close to doing.

At what might still be her--

Not yet. Not yet, don’t fall apart yet, this isn’t over yet. Or--or is it? Was that it? The test? Did I pass? …I still don’t have a crystal. I should just keep moving…

Her legs, though, didn’t seem to want to listen to her right now; and her hands were shaking.

Because, yeah, she knew that she wasn’t always nice, especially inside her head. And she knew she sometimes needed Luke or Uncle Obi-Wan or Dad or Aunt ‘Soka to show her the right thing to do.

But to see it like this…

She sniffed a little and ran her arm across her face, not really surprised to see she’d started crying, somewhere along the line.

Okay. Okay, I can stay here another minute. Just until I’m a little bit steadier. Just until…just until the aftertaste fades a bit. One more minute. Then I have a Mission.

“Are you all right?”

Leia jumped and turned to see another woman, more visible than she should be in the dark, with her hair braided and pinned up and out of the way in almost the same style as the first; wearing a
soft-looking tunic and leggings cut along the same lines as what Uncle Obi-Wan usually wore, when he wasn’t pretending to be someone else for a mission.

She was older than the other had been, probably actually somewhere around Uncle Obi-Wan’s age; worn and weary, but unbent. It was a lot easier--maybe because she was kind of half-expecting it, or maybe because the first vision had been so wrong, or maybe just because Leia hadn’t wanted to see it before--to recognize herself in this woman’s eyes.

“Um,” she said.

“It’s okay if you’re not,” the second vision said. “It’s never easy to face down the dark parts of your own heart.”

Leia nodded. “Is...is she...” she started, then took a breath to steady herself and forced the question out. “Is she my future? Or are you?”

“Both,” she said. “And neither. You’ve gotten the ‘future is always in motion’ lecture by now, right?”

“Sure,” Leia said, and something deep inside of her unknotted a little. Because, of course, she knew that. She shouldn’t have let it get to her that much, really. It was just a vision, and visions didn’t always come true.

“She’s your potential,” she said. “And so am I. Both of us are possible, at least from where you stand now. But whether you become one of us or someone completely different is in your hands.”

“Okay,” she said, wiping away the tears again. “I mean. I know that. But…”

She smiled wryly. “Yeah, knowing it is one thing, but actually coming face to face with your potential darkness is something else.”

“Yeah,” Leia said, and smiled back, a little shakily.

Her older self--her other potential--turned serious again for a moment. “But she’s not wrong. You are--we are--a child of fire. You do have it in you to burn it all down. If you truly wanted to.”

"I...I know,” Leia said, sliding down the wall to sit, hugging her knees to her chest. After all, what she’d felt was real, even if where it might take her didn’t have to be. “I just--I just don’t know how to...” She stopped, not sure how to put it into words. “I mean, everything--everything Dad and Mom and Uncle Obi-Wan and Aunt ‘Soka--it’s all been to take down the Empire, right? Because the Empire is evil, and…and I can’t not try to destroy it somehow. Right?”

“I’m not saying that,” she replied. “Of course not. You’re not wrong, and besides, it’s your choice to make. All I’m saying is that you should be very sure, if you choose to set this kind of fire, that it’s the right time and place. That you’re doing it for the right reason. And,” she added, with a faint shadow stealing across her face, “that you can tolerate the collateral. Because there will be collateral, even if you don’t lose control.”

“Oh,” Leia said, and chewed on that for a moment. “That...that makes sense. Basically...basically, I shouldn’t get caught up in it, like--I should stop and think things through, before I act.”

“Pretty much,” her vision said, then smiled wryly. “So simple, and yet. It’s not something that comes easy to our family, is it?”

Leia thought about Dad, and her sixth birthday, and all the stories Uncle Rex and Uncle Obi-Wan
and Aunt ‘Soka had told her. And a few of the stories they’d told her about *Mom,* too. And some of the things she and Luke had talked about, when they met in their dreams. About their parents and themselves.

“No,” she agreed. “No, it’s not.”

Her vision laughed, much warmer and nicer than the other one had, then shook her head. “My point is, the *important* thing is to remember that actions—which includes choosing *not* to act—have consequences. Sometimes, those consequences only affect you. Sometimes, they impact a *lot* of people.”

It wasn’t anything new, really—nothing she hadn’t heard from Uncle Obi-Wan and Aunt Beru and everyone over and over—but it was one thing to be told, and another thing to *feel* it, like she had a few minutes ago.

She was really, *really* glad that she’d gotten the chance to face it in the abstract, here where it was just her and the Temple and the Force, before she’d come up against a test like that in reality, with a weapon in her hands. Maybe she’d be able to beat it again, maybe she wouldn’t. But at least she knew what to look for. At least she’d have some way of knowing *when* she needed to take a step back and think it through.

Not easy, no. But not *impossible,* either.

“I understand, I think,” Leia said.

“Maybe you do, and maybe you don’t. But you *will,* in time,” she promised. “So, think about it. These aren’t easy questions, and they *shouldn’t* have easy answers. Unfortunately, it’s a lot easier to do harm than good. Especially when you burn like we do. Trust me on that one.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I do.”

She considered her for a moment, then nodded, apparently satisfied with what she saw. “I think you’ll be all right,” she said. “But I also think our time here is just about up. You still have to find your way out, and you probably don’t want to stick around after dawn.”

Leia blinked. It wasn’t that she’d *forgotten* about all the potential dangers waiting for her outside the Temple, exactly, just...it took her a second to switch gears.

“Did something happen? Is Dad in trouble?”

“Whether or not he is *now,* the explosion from last night will be investigated,” her vision pointed out. “And the city is tense enough as it is already. Baze and Chirrut can handle themselves—this is their home ground, and it’s not the first time they’ve tangled with the occupying forces. But I don’t think you or your father should be here when the inquiry really gets underway.”

“...point.”

The vision offered her a hand up, and Leia accepted it, feeling something small and hard and warm press into her fingers as she stood.

“Thank you,” she said, and bowed, withdrawing her hand and clinging tight to the crystal in her palm.

*I did it.*
Somehow, it was heavier than she’d expected.

The vision smiled. “May the Force be with you,” she said, and vanished.

Leia waited another moment, then slowly opened her hand to see the crystal. It was small, maybe half as long as her thumb, and irregular. Not at all like the shaped rocks lining the little shelf in her bedroom at the farm, that Dad brought home every year for her birthday, or whenever he thought she needed a present, but it reminded her of them all the same. Warm to the touch and soaked in some kind of feeling, or memory.

She probably could’ve stayed there, staring at it, for at least another hour or so, but a distant thud from one of the mining rigs jerked her back to the present.

Right. Time to go.

She closed her hand again, and fumbled for her map and flashlight to figure out her next step.

Okay…I think I’m here, which means…down two levels, then cut across to the west, and I should find the exit before too much longer.

It was lucky, really, that she’d had her visions in this hallway.

She tucked the map and flashlight back in her bag and, after making sure her crystal was still secure, felt her way over to the stairs to began her descent.

Anakin, Baze, and Chirrut had been waiting beside a featureless stretch of aching wall for hours, and he had somehow managed not to go half-mad with worry.

These things take time, he reminded himself. You were in the cave on Ilum for twice this long.

He probably should try meditating, if only to calm himself down, but he’d rather stay fully present for when she came out. He had taken a quick look around a little while ago, to make sure they were still clear (but really to have something to do), and was considering doing that again, when--

“She’s coming,” he said, relieved. Finally. “Where--?”

“About two meters up,” Baze said. “Not far to fall.”

He nodded, distracted, scanning the wall at the right height until a chunk of it slid aside, and his daughter’s slightly dusty, but uninjured face poked out.

...she looked like she’d been crying, though. And he knew he couldn’t ask, because whatever she’d seen was for her and her alone, but--hells. She’d been crying.

Without bothering to check if it was clear, he stepped out into the street where she could see him, and held out his arms for her to jump.

She gave him a quick, relieved smile, then came all the way out, and he held her close for a second.

She clung back for a second, then said, “Um, Dad? Metal arm, squishy ribs…”
“Sorry,” he said, and let go, holding her at arms’ length so he could be really sure she was okay.

“I’m fine,” she said. “It was...weird. And hard. But I’m fine. And I got it.” She gave him a tiny, proud smile, and opened her hand.

He grinned back at her, and ruffled her hair. “I’m so very proud of you, princess,” he said, and hugged her again, more gently this time.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said, ducking out of the way, but she stayed close as she turned to Chirrut and Baze and bowed, solemnly. “Thank you, again. For sharing your Temple with me.”

“I’m glad we could help,” Chirrut said, with a bow of his own. “And that the Force brought all of us together, if only for a moment.”

She nodded. “I wish we could stay, and help you, but…”

“Better if you don’t,” Baze said.

“Yeah.”

“You could come with us,” Anakin said. *Jedha might not be safe for you much longer,* went unspoken. What was being done to the Temple here was--devastating. Even without the pain burning along the edges of his mind, he’d know that.

But the people who belonged to it were far more important. More than the building, more than any texts or history, maybe even more than the crystals. He didn’t want probably the last of the Guardians to...

Chirrut shook his head. “Thank you, my friend,” he said. “I appreciate your offer, and your concern. But the Force will protect us, and we will protect the Temple. I will stay here until I no longer can.”

Baze stood silent beside him, but his answer was just as clear.

Anakin bowed his head. “I understand,” he said. “May the Force of others be with you.”

“Yes,” Chirrut said, and grinned. “And I hope we meet again someday.”

“Me, too,” Anakin said.

“Thank you,” Leia said again, quietly, with a solemn bow, her crystal held tight in her right fist. “For everything.”

Chirrut nodded, then touched Baze’s arm, and the two of them disappeared into the city.

Anakin let out a breath.

“What now?” Leia asked, looking up at him.

“Now,” he said, “we get out of the city, back to the ship. We head somewhere quiet where you can build it, and then back to base to meet up with the others.”

She nodded, and, without any other warning, took two quick steps and wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight.

“Everything okay, princess?” he asked. Not that he was complaining, obviously, but Leia wasn’t
usually this clingy unless she was worried about something. And she’d been crying, and he still wouldn’t-- couldn’t --ask what she’d seen in there, but...

“Yes,” she said. “Just...yeah.” She pulled away after a second. “But we probably don’t wanna get caught in the street.”

“Probably not,” he agreed. *...screw it. She’s my daughter, and she’s hurting. ...I won’t ask, princess, but--”*

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m just glad you’re here with me, Dad.”

“Me, too,” he said, and dropped the subject. Hopefully, she’d gotten the message, and she’d bring it up herself if she needed to talk.

*We did it,* he thought. *We pulled it off. Well, most of it. The hard part, anyway. Now we just have to get off this moon, and we’re home free.*

“Come on, this way.”

She nodded and fell into step beside him. And, as quietly as they could, they ghosted through the pre-dawn streets of Jedha City and away.

---

So. Anakin Skywalker was on Jedha. Alone.

Well. Not *quite* alone; he’d met up with a local troublemaker and made some noise. But none of the others in *his* cell--not Kenobi, not Tano, not the clone--were with him.

The being who had told Infernalis this reported only to him, so there was a reasonable chance--say, sixty percent or so--that he was the only one who knew. Which gave him a brief window of opportunity.

The question, of course, was how to *use* it.

Infernalis had, over the years since their first meeting in that factory years ago, encountered Skywalker and the others in his cell a dozen times or more. Sometimes by chance, sometimes by design--on their part, perhaps, or his Master’s, or his own.

They had fought--face-to-face and cockpit-to-cockpit. They were finding a rhythm to it, almost. An engagement, which would end with one party or the other breaking away without securing any kind of final victory. The same dance, or so he’d heard, that Skywalker and Kenobi had perfected with his predecessor’s predecessor during the Clone War. If he pursued Skywalker now, there was every reason to assume it would be just one more round of thrill and adrenaline crashing into dissatisfaction, until the next engagement--and the next disappointment.

Except.

Except there was something *different* this time. A sort of *charge* in the air--more than that, in the Galaxy itself. Infernalis hadn’t needed his Master to point out the tension in the Force, a tension that had been gradually building over the last few days.

Change was coming.
A turning point.

He would be a fool to let this opportunity pass him by.

Of course, Infernalis couldn’t very well approach Skywalker on Jedha. The moon was still important to his Master’s plans, and with the way things were trending—well. Prior confrontations with Skywalker had been explosive enough, and Jedha was full of kyber crystals. Bringing this energy to a head there was a mistake.

But Skywalker probably wouldn’t stay on Jedha for more than a day or so. And if Infernalis was close enough, and focused enough, the Force would guide him; those winds of change stirring behind his back would speed him in the right direction.

True, they could just as easily be pushing him towards his own death, but that was simply the way of the universe. Victory and death, and the knife’s edge between them.

Change was coming. Opportunity was here.

And Infernalis would be a poor excuse for a Sith Lord if he didn’t seize it.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the very late update--work got super busy and I went through three or four different versions of the middle part before settling on this one. This also turned out waaaaaaaay longer than I was expecting it to, whoops XD

Anyway, thank you all so much for your patience, and for stopping by! ~<3 shadowsong
The same place as last time turned out to be a tiny, arid moon, barely large enough for a dilapidated and disreputable trading post that consisted of little more than a cantina and a small spaceport. Rex had never been to this particular location, technically, but he’d spent plenty of time in places like it over the last thirteen years. He knew the type.

But, of course, that was a large part of why Rex had insisted on backing General Kenobi up on this venture, and he was glad of it. Not that the Jedi couldn’t take care of himself, but a place like this benefited from an extra pair of eyes. Especially if they came with weapons of their own. Besides, specifics of the location aside, Rex felt there was a limit far they could trust Ohnaka. And even that level of confidence didn’t really apply to any place where the pirate was welcome, and absolutely did not apply to any of his associates.

And if there was another, less-important, reason...it was personal, and harder to name, even in the privacy of his own thoughts. But the truth of the matter was, the Crait base, even half-finished, was all at once familiar and strange. Sure, the layout wasn’t exactly the same, but he’d still spent a good portion of his life in places like it, both in training and once he was placed on active duty. It was close enough to the places he’d grown up that it felt almost like a sort of homecoming--except that none of his brothers were there. And he kept turning corners, expecting to run into Cody, or Fives or Echo or any of the others he had lost or left behind. Being surrounded by a majority of non-identical faces instead was...it took some getting used to. And he wasn’t quite there yet.

The worst of it was, the feeling had flat-out ambushed him, when he’d come to help oversee the last few steps necessary to make the place operational. Before, when the base was still just an unpopulated shell on the salt plain, it hadn’t occurred to him that it would be a problem.

But it was.

So, he’d practically jumped at the chance to take an offsite mission for more than just to watch General Kenobi’s back. It was probably better, anyway, until he sorted all of that out, to go off-base when he could, get a break from that tangle of who-the-kriff-knew what. Out here, at least he knew which of his ghosts would rise up to haunt him and had a decent handle on how to deal with it when they did.

And, as he’d hoped, just walking through this city, watching the people watching him, had already made him feel more secure. More than enough to turn his full attention to the task at hand.

He raised an eyebrow at a scrawny-looking local who seemed a little too interested in them as they entered the cantina; and the being backed down quickly enough. Probably just a petty thief, probably just hungry, but appearances could be deceiving.

“Trouble?” Kenobi asked.

“Probably not,” Rex admitted. “Unless that was someone’s lookout.”

He nodded, and then they split up like they always did on missions like this--Rex went to snag a table where they could wait, while General Kenobi made conversation with the bartender. Partly for cover, and partly as a means to maybe tease (or flirt) a few supplementary details out of the
locals before the mission really got underway. He was a hell of a lot better at that than Rex was.

And Rex, without having the Force to supplement and camouflage potential blind spots, would pick a better table that balanced their need for visual surveillance with their need to minimize being seen themselves.

Kenobi joined him after a few minutes, sliding a mug of whatever middling beer this place sold at him and resting a shot glass full of something violently purple on the table in front of himself.

“Any news?” Rex asked.

“Nothing of use to us,” Kenobi replied. “At least not today. Though apparently another of my contacts has taken to using this cantina as a waypoint, so we may want to drop by again in future. You?”

He shook his head. “Not yet,” he said. “Usual gambling, couple potential fistfights and at least one with knives just waiting to happen, but no one interested in us.”

Kenobi nodded, and was about to say something else when the door swung open and their pirate sometimes-friend sauntered through.

Ohnaka’s monkey-lizard chittered a little on his shoulder as the pirate scanned the bar. He spotted them and grinned, but headed first to the bar to get his own drink before joining them at last.

“Here we go,” Rex said, under his breath.

“My friends!” Ohnaka said, sidling over to them and sprawling in the chair next to Kenobi, almost but not quite blocking Rex’s view of the bar and setting his own drink down with a sharp, cheerful clink. The monkey-lizard chirped and scampered down his arm, disappearing into the crowd. Presumably picking every pocket within reach.

“Hondo,” Kenobi said, raising his glass in a brief salute. “Always a pleasure to see you.”

“Yes, yes, delighted,” the pirate said, his eyes flickering over to Rex. “You even brought my favorite captain with you!”

Rex nodded in acknowledgement, keeping his face stony, trying not to give anything away.

It wasn’t that he disliked Ohnaka, exactly. And the pirate had come through for them in the past, more than once. More often than he’d worked against them, come to think of it. Especially in the last decade.

Still, Rex wasn’t sure how long that could last. And, all right, he was maybe still a little on edge from everything the Crait base had dredged up in him.

“Relax, relax, my friends,” Ohnaka said. “This business that I have to propose should be very profitable for all of us. If you agree, of course.”

_Huh. He’s getting to the point pretty quick._ Which could be a trap, but Rex had the feeling that wasn’t Ohnaka’s style. If he wanted to lure them somewhere, he’d go on a tangent or three, tell a story that might or might not have been true. Build up to it a little more. So, there was a good chance that whatever Ohnaka had for them really _was_ worth that much.

Didn’t rule out a trap, of course, just not one Ohnaka had set himself. Something to keep in mind for later. Whether or not it was one they should avoid, on the other hand...
“Indeed,” Kenobi said, with a faint smile. He didn’t quite glance at Rex, but he was pretty sure the General had come to the same conclusion he had.

Conferring secretly in a crowded bar, when the party you wanted out of the loop was right in front of you, wasn’t easy. But Rex and General Kenobi had their ways. Experience, as in all things, made all the difference.

Abort? he asked with a quick, discreet hand signal.

Not yet, Kenobi signaled back, before turning his full attention back to their contact. “So, my friend, what is it you have to offer?”

“I have recently gained access to fifty vials of bacta culture starters,” the pirate said, taking a swig of his drink and setting it down for emphasis, and looking extremely pleased with himself.

And with damn good reason. A single vial, with the right equipment and enough time, could grow enough bacta for a good ten to fifteen tanks, depending on the strain. An opportunity like that was huge, whether you were in it for the money or because you had the beginnings for an army to supply. And Ohnaka, at least in theory, had fifty.

Profit for all of them, indeed.

On the other hand, involving a third party meant sharing the profits, which the pirate was practically allergic to.

“Why contact us?” Rex asked. “Pretty sure your crew could handle a pickup like this.” Culture starters weren’t particularly hard to transport, after all. They did need careful packing and a fair amount of insulation, but fifty vials still wouldn’t take up any more space than two standard shipping containers. Relatively light ones, too.

Reaching out to them for added muscle made even less sense, frankly. Unless Ohnaka and his crew were at odds again, but Rex had a feeling there was something more to it than that. Vials like that, even on the legitimate market, cost a hell of a lot. Add a black-market markup…

“Yes, yes, in most cases,” Ohnaka said. “But, sadly, not all of my friends are as trustworthy as you.”

“And no one on your current crew has the skills or the tools necessary to determine whether or not the product is genuine,” General Kenobi finished for him.

…yep, that would do it. Rex relaxed slightly. Not that he’d really thought Ohnaka was planning on doing something as stupid as trading General Kenobi’s location to one of their enemies for the vials, but there were at least a dozen other ways he could screw them.

Beyond the usual trying to cheat them out of their share, of course, but that was just the cost of doing business with any underworld contact, and Ohnaka and General Kenobi had enough history that he kept it to a reasonable level with them. Or so Kenobi always insisted.

So, back to his initial assessment of the situation—with bait like this, chances were good they were walking into a trap, but there was probably an eighty to ninety percent chance that Ohnaka wasn’t the one who’d set it.

And, assuming the vials were real…

If reliable intelligence was the most important thing an army needed, it was a tossup between
medical and food supplies for the second most important thing. And of the two, meds were a hell of a lot harder to source. Especially in bulk. Especially in a form easy to transport as culture vials.

General Kenobi had always said that the best way to handle a trap was to spring it on your own terms. At least on this occasion, based on his own standards and risk-reward analysis, Rex had to agree.

“Such is my misfortune,” the pirate said, with a theatrical sigh. “But, I think, a benefit for you.”

“Hm,” General Kenobi said, leaning back in his seat, considering. “Did your contact say who they stole it from?”

“One of the Hutt clans,” Ohnaka said. “Or perhaps Black Sun. Rumor has it, they are planning an artificial bacta shortage in another sector, so they are stockpiling.”

So, not an Imperial storehouse or a hospital. Good.

“All right,” General Kenobi said, after a brief glance at Rex. “We’re in.”

“Wonderful!” Ohnaka said. “I knew you would not let me down. So! We go in, you confirm that it’s genuine, I make the exchange, we get out, split the product. I think five vials for you, to compensate you for your time and trouble, and the rest for me.”

“Well, that hardly seems fair,” General Kenobi said, but there was an easiness to his tone that told Rex it wasn’t unexpected, either.

Of course, that meant that now came the part that Rex didn’t particularly enjoy; the part where the pirate inflated his price any way he possibly could. On the other hand, General Kenobi was probably enjoying himself, talking him down to a more reasonable split. He usually did.

“My friend, you wound me,” Ohnaka said. “Is it not my information? My contact? You would not even be here if not for me!”

“And if not for me,” General Kenobi said, “you would never know if you were walking away with something worth your time or not. I think an even split is perfectly reasonable, under these circumstances.”

“Highway robbery!” the pirate exclaimed, throwing his hands up for emphasis. “You are not the only expert I can call, you know--”

“But you called me for a reason,” Kenobi cut him off.

“Yes, yes, fine,” Ohnaka said. “But I cannot-- cannot --go higher than twelve.”

“On the other hand,” General Kenobi said, his tone still light and easy but there was a familiar, subtle edge underneath. “I will be taking on the greater risk here. If your contact happens to recognize me…”

Ohnaka’s eyes narrowed. “You trust me so little?”

“You are not the problem.”

There was a moment of tense, electric silence, and then the pirate sighed.

“Oh, very well,” Ohnaka said. “Twenty to you, and thirty to me. And that is my final offer.”
“Acceptable,” Kenobi said, leaning back again with a faint smile.

“But you will owe me for this one,” Ohnaka grumbled, but he didn’t seem particularly upset, either. Not that Rex could tell, at least. “At least one favor. Possibly two.”

“If the product is genuine,” Kenobi replied. “If not, I think the attempt itself will make up for that incident last year in the Vega delta.”

Not an adventure Rex had heard about in great detail, but he knew that it had irritated General Skywalker and amused Commander Tano, and involved Kenobi having to destroy his planned exit strategy and call on Ohnaka for an alternate route. Not the first time, and probably not the last.

“Deal,” Ohnaka said. “We shall be taking my ship—I have access codes and a transponder my seller will be expecting. I would advise, my friends, that you take pains to secure your ship before we leave. There are so many unscrupulous people in this town.”

“Naturally,” General Kenobi said, finishing his drink in a single swallow. “Shall we meet at your ship in a half-hour?”

“Magnificent,” Ohnaka said, and, not to be outdone, downed his much-larger drink in one go as well. He stood up, gave an extravagant, flourishing bow, and made his way towards the exit. His pet joined him halfway across the floor, leaping up to its place on his shoulder and depositing something Rex couldn’t identify into one of the pirate’s many pockets along the way.

Kenobi shook his head, smiling faintly. “He never changes.”

“No,” Rex agreed. “…you think he’s figured it out?”

“I’d lay the odds on that as fairly high,” he replied. “As to who the seller is…” He shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Translation: bring as close to a full kit as you can, because this one’s gonna get messy.

“Not that I’m saying we should,” Rex said quietly, “but in the interests of covering all our bases, I should probably point out here that it’s not too late to pull out.”

“I wouldn’t put it past the cleverer among Hondo’s rivals to have at least some genuine vials mixed in with their bait,” he said. “No. We should see this one through.”

“Copy that, sir,” Rex said, and finished the last of his surprisingly-not-awful drink. “I’ll go ahead and gear up, then.”

“Indeed,” he said, and rose to follow Rex out of the cantina and back to the ship. General Kenobi had less equipment to gather up, so he’d take care of updating Crait and setting a few extra traps for any would-be thieves.

Not that they’d left their ship entirely undefended the first time, of course, but security for a meeting and security for a probably day-long mission were two entirely different things.

Rex spared one last moment to take a quick, surreptitious look around the place on their way out—but no more signs of trouble than when they’d walked in.

We’ve had worse starts to missions, he told himself. Here’s hoping that our luck holds out.
And now, several chapters later, we finally touch base with Obi-Wan and Rex again, hurray! Per Legends canon, bacta is actually some kind of bacteria or algae or something? I've read some cool meta about it, at least...anyway, this is me extrapolating from that fact, but isn't that what SW fanfic is for? ^_^

Thanks so much for stopping by! Hopefully the next chapter will come out in a slightly more timely fashion, lol... ~shadowsong
Bail was well on his way to Crait—may already have arrived, depending on what route he and Captain Antilles had settled on—and Padme was left on Coruscant to do her absolute favorite thing in the world.

Wait.

Not that she was waiting for anything in particular. Or anticipating trouble, for Bail or anyone else—everything involving the base, according to the latest they’d heard, just before he left, was proceeding as expected.

Well, technically, she was waiting for responses from certain committee members on different aspects of official Senate business, but none of it was urgent. Mostly queries and updates to various items she was collaborating on, based on input from the Queen and Assembly on her recent trip home.

Then again, waiting on responses from colleagues didn’t mean there was nothing for her to do, even if it felt that way. But there were ongoing projects and problems to at least check in on, even if she couldn’t make any actual progress, which was part of why she and her handmaidens were holed up in her study—Luke was in his own room, theoretically catching up on some reading for his classes next week before he went to see Princess Lavinia tomorrow. Though, given what he and Sabe had discussed after he’d left dinner the other night, Padme was pretty sure he was looking into flight schools instead.

Which was fine. She trusted he would find a way to get everything done—he usually did—and at least this was better than things had been for the past few days.

Her son had been, for lack of a better word, moody ever since they’d gotten back from Theed. Which wasn’t totally new, exactly, but it had definitely become more obvious. And the worst part of it was that Padme wasn’t totally sure how much of this was just ordinary thirteen-year-old grumpiness, or if something was actually going on. He wasn’t quite sulking, wasn’t quite angry, just...a little withdrawn, a little sullen. He tried to cover it, but he was...well, suffice to say that one of the things he’d inherited from his father was an utter inability to hide what he was feeling.

Or maybe it was just because he was her son and she knew him well enough to tell. Either way, he wasn’t talking to her about it, at least not yet.

That much, she was pretty sure, was just ordinary teenage behavior. She herself had mostly skipped that phase of shutting her parents out and moping on her own instead when something was bothering her, but she’d watched Sola, Ryoo, and Pooja all go through it. Besides, while she hadn’t necessarily witnessed it directly, she’d certainly heard enough about her beloved husband’s teenage years. Some of it even directly from him. There was no reason to think that Luke wouldn’t go through a sullen-teenager phase, too, as much as she’d hoped he’d take after her in that way.

Apparently not.

Of course, just because it was normal and she was more or less resigned to putting up with it for a year or so, that didn’t mean she didn’t worry. Especially when there had been a sudden, subtle, but
noticeable change. Something had changed on this trip home, something to push him deeper into that perfectly normal, if difficult, teenager mental state.

Then again, she knew pushing him would probably get the exact opposite of what she wanted, which didn’t exactly help. She had never liked standing by and doing nothing when faced with a problem, even when it was the best course of action.

She wondered if Anakin was dealing with similar problems with Leia. He hadn’t mentioned anything, but maybe she’d ask in her next letter. Even if there wasn’t much to do about it, at least they could commiserate.

Other than that, she just had to hope she was finding the right balance between giving him privacy and space to sort things out for himself, to start to grow into his adult personality, and continuing to keep him safe and make sure he had everything he needed--all the support and love and tools she could give--to help him succeed.

More watching and waiting, like so much of her life these days.

At least she was fairly sure that, however much of the avoidant-teenager game he wanted to play, he would come to her if he was in real trouble. Or, if not her, then one of her handmaidens. Which was good, that he could depend on them, as well--the wider his support system, the better off he’d be. She’d learned that from experience. And, given how much Anakin had decided to rely on the others with Leia, she had a feeling he was taking the same approach. Making sure that, whatever else happened, their children would always have someone trustworthy they could talk to about whatever was bothering them.

And that part, at least, was already paying off on her end. Sabe had unraveled at least some of what was going on in Luke’s mind. And her intervention had probably come at the right time--Padme had been almost at the point of giving up on giving him space and just flat-out asking him what was wrong, rather than waiting for him to come to her, when he’d left dinner the other night and Sabe had followed him outside. Of course, she didn’t expect Sabe to betray Luke’s confidence unless she thought it was something Padme genuinely needed to know, but at least he was talking to someone. And Padme trusted her judgment on that, as with so many things.

So, the short version was--Luke was feeling adrift and stagnant, like his life wasn’t going anywhere and he wasn’t contributing enough. That would explain a lot of it. Probably. She hoped.

Which was where they’d started this informal meeting, of course. The situation with Luke, and coming up with a way to fix it.

“I have a feeling there’s more to it than he was willing to tell me just yet,” Sabe said. “But mostly details, would be my guess. Possibly something specific happened that made this feel that much more urgent or important to him.”

Padme nodded. “But you don’t think it’s anything we should be worried about?”

She shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. Certainly nothing dangerous. And I doubt he’s gotten involved in anything illicit we don’t already know about.”

Illicit, here, meaning his awareness of--and beginning participation in--her own extra-legal activities, his letters to and from his father and sister, teaching Princess Lavinia how to pick locks, sneaking out to a diner a few levels down that made excellent milkshakes…

Harmless, or at her side, for the most part--and if that ever changed, they were in a position to deal
“Good,” she said. “I’m sure we have some projects he can start on?” Which wasn’t a bad idea, really. She just wished she’d thought of it herself, before Luke got to the point where he felt this left out.

“We have a list of things we’ve been putting off for lack of resources,” Motee said. “We can review them over the next few days, then give him a few options.”

“Thank you,” Padme said. “If you could send that to me, I’ll look over it later tonight.”

“Done.”

Padme flashed a brief smile, then sighed. “Which brings us to flight school.”

“I have a few in mind,” Sabe said. “Managed by people I’m familiar with on a reasonably personal level. And I suggested he do his own research, as well.”

“Oh, I know,” she said. “That’s not what I’m worried about.” She remembered, out of nowhere, how tightly Shmi Skywalker had gripped the balcony rail at that race all those years ago.

This isn’t podracing, she reminded herself. It’s just flight. The same kind of flying I used to do on a semi-regular basis. ...we’d better have a talk with him about sneaking out, though. I know Ani used to find street races in the underlevels when he needed to blow off steam...

But that was a problem for another day.

Then again, now that Sabe had gotten Luke to open up some, Padme wasn’t so sure that giving him space was the best play. Better to keep those lines open, remind him that she was here, when he was ready.

Subtly. Ish.

“I think I’ll take him out for ice cream after dinner,” she decided. “It’s been a while since we did that, and even if we don’t talk about anything important…”

“We’ll make sure you’re clear,” Dorme promised, making a few notes on her datapad. Probably messaging Threepio, so he could rearrange her schedule as necessary.

From there, they moved on to more Official topics, going through legitimate and semi-legitimate business--not that there was much; mostly status updates on a pair of conservation bills she’d introduced shortly before her trip home. Neither of which she expected to pass, or even make it out of committee, of course, but that wasn’t the point. The point was to see which of her colleagues actually supported them and try to figure out why; if it was a one-time support of this particular issue, or if they might be worth approaching.

Or if they might be trying to lure her and her allies into a trap, which hadn’t happened recently, but was always a risk.

“I think we want to keep a closer eye on Senator Ah’Zedrin,” Dorme said. “They just attached an amendment about trafficking in exotic pets to the botanical imports bill. Not the first time they’ve tried to get it shoehorned in on something tangentially related, so it may just be a pet cause of theirs.” She paused. “Uh. No pun intended. Anyway, there are some interesting keywords in the text this time.”
Padme scanned the copy on her datapad, and frowned. Not like the usual bait the Emperor or his minions have tried to dangle, but not the kind of overture I’ve seen from potential genuine allies, either… “Huh,” she said. “I see what you mean. Set up a meeting, would you? I’d like to sound them out in person.”

Dorme nodded. “You have time the day after tomorrow, I think. I’ll confirm with Threepio after we wrap up here.”

“Good,” she said. “Anything else?”

“Not Senate business, exactly,” Motee said.

“Go ahead,” Padme said, once Elle confirmed their countersurveillance was still up.

“We’ve received an update from Crait,” she said. “Back-channels, as always, through two or three relay points. As of yesterday, comms and shields are finally in place, though I think we’re still leaning towards avoiding direct transmissions, as a precaution. I’m sure Senator Organa will make a final judgment call when he arrives.”

About what she’d expected, even if a tiny part of her had hoped that maybe--

But better not to risk it, outside an emergency. And there had better not be any emergencies, either.

“All right,” was all she said out loud. “Keep me posted.”

“Of course.”

“On a related note,” Elle said, “I’ve been vetting some additional black market contacts.”

“Oh?”

She selected a file on her datapad and pushed it into their private network, to share it with everyone else’s. “I think this arms dealer is promising. Better than quite a few of our current sources.”

Padme scanned the file, considering. The dealer was, on the surface, a perfectly legitimate trader in art and antiquities, specializing in tapestry and other fabric or fiber arts. But his travel and contacts put him on worlds that saw a lot of under-the-table dealing in weaponry. Mostly small arms--pistols, rifles, and so on--but some of the flashier things, too. It had probably taken Elle weeks of careful research to connect the dots and confirm that he actually did have that particular side business.

“If we do end up using him, that puts us a little more overtly at the center of things than we have been thus far,” Sabe pointed out. “Are you sure you want to risk that?”

“That is the main problem,” Elle agreed. “But none of the others I’ve been looking into have a cover business any of our key allies can take advantage of quite this well. And, unless Senator Organa sees something we’re not expecting on Crait, we probably need to start moving arms and other supplies in higher volumes. What we’ve stockpiled over the past decade won’t last forever.”

“It’s something to consider,” Padme said. “But Sabe has a point, too. I’d like a little more detail, about him and his operation. Could you set a meeting with one of him, or one of his lieutenants? Any of us can go, but I want someone’s in-person impressions before we make any potentially irrevocable moves.”

Elle drummed her fingers on her screen for a moment, considering, then nodded. “It’ll take me a
week or two to set up. And it should be one of us, milady. Just in case.”

“We can settle on that once we have the meeting lined up,” Padme said.

All four of the others exchanged a long look.

Padme raised an eyebrow. “No scheduling the meeting for when I have a conflict I can’t move,” she said, firmly. Which they had done at least twice, she was pretty sure. Granted, both times had been in connection with things she probably shouldn’t have handled in person, and when she was being particularly stubborn about it, but she still didn’t like it. “I’m not going to insist on going--don’t give me that look, Dorme--but I’d like the chance to talk you into it, at least.”

“Fine,” Sabe said, speaking for all four of them, after a moment. “Unless we have no other choice, we’ll try to set it when you’re available.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Is that everything?”

“Everything we had,” Elle said, and the others nodded.

“All right,” Padme said. “In that case, I have some notes I want to make on the resolution Senator Chuchi asked me to co-sponsor.” She called up the file on her datapad, setting it to project. “Feel free to chime in if you see anything I miss.”

It was one of her favorite ways to work, really. Collaborating, like this, surrounded by people she trusted. Particularly her handmaidens. And even if Senator Chuchi didn’t expect her response for another four days...well, it was still productive.

And it took her mind off waiting.

Chapter End Notes

Sooooo we are coming up on a couple of Milestones! As was pointed out to me recently, this fic is very nearly three years old, and it is also just past 200k words long. I have a prompt call for bonus fics to celebrate up on my writing tumblr--feel free to send me your suggestions!

And thank you so much for sticking with me this long!! <3 ~shadowsong
Rather than the saucer he’d flown in the old days, Hondo met them at a much smaller, sleeker light freighter, with at least two aftermarket gun emplacements that Obi-Wan could see, and probably a few more that were hidden from view.

A speaker crackled to life as they approached.

“My friends!” Hondo said, voice slightly tinny and distorted. With a faint creaking noise, the ramp extended to allow them to board. “Come, come, we have a few hours’ flight ahead of us. I must commend your excellent disguises--had I not known you already…”

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said, with a wry smile.

He was fairly sure Hondo was exaggerating, of course--though perhaps not for Rex, who wearing the nondescript armor and matching helmet he’d acquired for jobs like this. While it was substantially less likely that Rex might be recognized than it was even five years ago, still better to limit the possibility of complications from that end. And it wasn’t hard to conceal one’s identity in a full-face helmet and body armor.

As for himself, Obi-Wan had lacked the time and resources to make a complete transformation, as when he had become Rako Hardeen a lifetime ago; or even the lesser transformation into Wat Retak for the reunion trip to Alderaan. Still, over the years he had learned a variety of subtler tricks to conceal his identity. A change of clothes, a few quirks of body language, and he could reasonably pass for a rumpled academic. This disguise, such as it was, wouldn’t hold up under close or prolonged scrutiny, of course--nor could he impersonate anyone specific --but it would suffice for their purposes today.

The last thing he’d added was a heavy coat, treated with some sort of resin that made it somewhat resistant to blasterfire, with a rather ingenious inner pocket that would conceal his lightsaber from most scanners. Padme had sent it, along with one for Anakin, about a year ago. Exactly which of them had come up with the idea, Obi-Wan wasn’t certain, but he was very glad to have it either way.

Not that he particularly planned on using the weapon today--true, adventures with Hondo had a tendency to go off-script very quickly and in very unpredictable ways, but unless he had no other choice, he’d maintain as much of his cover as he could and borrow a blaster off whoever was closest instead. Still, he preferred to have it with him, just in case.

Besides, while the security he and Rex set around their ship was decent, he wasn’t entirely sure he trusted it completely, particularly in a place like this. Should it come to it, while hardly easy, the ship could be replaced with far less difficulty than his ‘saber could.

In any case, flattery aside, they were here and as well-disguised as they could be on such short notice.

The boarding ramp let them into the ship’s cargo hold, which was cluttered with miscellaneous supplies and unmarked crates, but still had room for the shipment they hoped to procure. Obi-Wan left his bag there--he’d grabbed their portable scanner and a few miscellaneous vials and the like on
their way out. While they didn’t actually have any of the correct equipment to test bacta cultures, he could fake it well enough with what he did have access to, aided by the Force and a bit of sleight of hand.

The passage to the cockpit, naturally, was just as cluttered as the hold, and dimly lit to boot--Obi-Wan heard Rex curse faintly behind him when he walked into a pipe--but the cockpit itself was relatively neat.

“Welcome, welcome,” Hondo said. “Strap in, and we can be on our way.”

“Where’s the rest of your crew?” Rex asked, as he complied. Not an unreasonable question--while Hondo’s supplier had likely tried to limit his entourage when setting the meeting, it was unusual for the pirate not to cheat the system, just in case. More than he, perhaps, already had by involving Obi-Wan and Rex.

But they hadn’t come across any other beings on their way here, nor did Obi-Wan sense any other presences on board.

“Attending to other business, my suspicious friend,” Hondo said lightly, but in a tone that invited no further queries.

And that could be the simple truth of it, particularly if this opportunity had come up fairly suddenly and Hondo hadn’t wanted to abandon a surer profit just because the potential here was so great. Or it could mean that he hadn’t wanted to split the profit more than two ways. Or it could mean that he and his crew had had some sort of breach, and they weren’t available to him at all.

At the moment, Obi-Wan decided, it wasn’t particularly relevant. He doubted that any of Hondo’s men were responsible for this trap, if only because of the bait in question.

“Right then,” Rex said; still suspicious, but he dropped the issue.

“So!” Hondo said. “As I said, we have some time ahead of us before we meet my other friends--I should mention, I have a comm channel set up for us to use, one that they likely cannot tap.”

“Ah, yes,” Obi-Wan said. He was less than thrilled with the idea, but, on the other hand, being able to signal one another discreetly could be useful, and he didn’t have as much shorthand with Hondo as he did with Rex. And it wasn’t as if he’d be able to respond to any messages from Crait or elsewhere until after they’d wrapped things up, anyway.

Besides, Rex had two comms on him--his usual one, plus an extra built into his helmet. He could monitor both channels.

Resetting their comms took only a few moments, and then Hondo took off and eased them up through the atmosphere and into hyperspace.

“Is there anything else we should know about before we arrive?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Of course not--you know the important parts already,” Hondo said. “What the prize is, that we are meeting an old friend of mine, a very old friend…”

“Hmm,” Obi-Wan said, and leaned back in his chair to watch the stars swirl around them, wondering just how much Hondo was leaving out--and how much trouble it would get the three of them into this time.
Hondo’s contact’s compound was, naturally, under heavy guard—Obi-Wan counted half a dozen armed beings on their way in, and, from what he could sense, at least twice as many were positioned strategically throughout the building.

*Oh, yes,* he thought. *This will certainly get interesting.*

The three of them were met by an impatient-looking Rodian. “You’re late,” she snapped at Hondo, who shrugged expansively.

“It takes time to put these things in motion, my dear,” he said. “And I am, I think, well within the window your employer specified.”

“Barely,” she said, then studied Rex and Obi-Wan for a long moment. “You brought new people. The boss doesn’t like new people.”

“Ah, but he can’t possibly have expected me to make such a costly yet profitable decision without confirming the product!” Hondo said, shaking his head. “Of course I had to bring an independent expert of my own.”

“Fine,” she said, though she still didn’t seem particularly happy. “And the muscle?”

“I am but a simple pirate,” Hondo said. “If all is well and we reach an agreement, I will be transporting very valuable merchandise. You cannot blame me for enlisting extra security, can you.”

She didn’t answer right away, typing a few things onto a datapad instead. She kept one eye on the three of them as she did it.

Finally, she sighed. “All right. Boss is still willing to deal. But the muscle stays downstairs.”

While hardly unexpected, Obi-Wan did *not* like that development at all; and, given the way he had ever-so-subtly tensed, Rex liked it even less.

“Come, come, be reasonable, Atii,” Hondo said. “We’re all friends here, are we not?”

“Sure we are,” she replied. “So you should have no problem leaving your bodyguard behind.”

Hondo did not look back at the two of them, but Obi-Wan could see him weighing his options, deciding whether it was worth putting up a fuss.

On the one hand, if they stayed together and things went south, they had a somewhat better chance of fighting their way through whatever difficulty they found themselves in.

On the other hand, of course, if they were sealed in upstairs, having an ally on the outside might make all the difference.

Obi-Wan decided to leave it in Hondo’s hands. He and Rex had the experience to handle either eventuality, if they needed to.

A swift, covert hand signal let Rex know the plan; he still radiated unhappiness with the situation, but signaled his confirmation nonetheless.

“Oh, very well, very well,” Hondo finally said, waving a hand in irritation. “My well-armed and
armored friend will wait for us here.”

“Fine,” Atii said. She ran a scanner over the two of them—which caught, two obvious ones on Hondo, but missed Obi-Wan’s lightsaber; Padme’s coat was doing a wonderful job. Not that she’d confiscated the pistols, that probably would have been a bridge too far, but now she and her people know what he was carrying and where. “And the case?”

“My equipment,” Obi-Wan said, pitching his voice half an octave higher than natural, and doing his best to sound anxious and innocuous. Modeling his persona, perhaps a touch more than he should, on C-3PO. “To test the cultures. I have a scanner, and some--”

“Just open it so I can see,” she said. Had she been Human, or some other species capable of the gesture, Obi-Wan was fairly sure she would’ve rolled her eyes.

“Right. Yes. Of course. I don’t want any trouble.” He set the case on the table and flipped the latches open.

She took a cursory look inside, then nodded, seeming satisfied. “Shut the case and follow me.”

Taking care to fumble it just a bit, Obi-Wan did as instructed; he took a moment to pass by Rex as he did--

“Be ready,” he murmured.

“Always am,” Rex agreed, before stepping back and shoving the case into his hands, leaving Obi-Wan to scramble to catch up to Hondo and their guide.

The boss, perhaps fortunately, was not one of the Hutts, nor affiliated with any of the syndicates Obi-Wan was familiar with. Or, more importantly, any of the syndicates which were familiar with him.

He was smaller than Obi-Wan had expected; a middle-aged Twi’lek, hard and scarred and missing one eye.

Obi-Wan, leaning into his role as best he could, sidestepped halfway behind Hondo for a moment.

The Twi’lek studied him for a moment, neutral-shading-disapproving, before turning to focus on Hondo, face going blank but with something decidedly unfriendly rolling about beneath the surface.

Obi-Wan took a moment to count the blasters in the room, and weigh the odds of getting his hands on one if a firefight started.

“Jeth, my very good friend,” Hondo said; there was a slight edge to his voice and he avoided the grandiose, off-putting gestures he might have made under other circumstances, staying close to Obi-Wan.

“You’re late,” Jeth replied.

“Yes, yes, this is something I went over with Atii downstairs,” Hondo said, waving his left hand dismissively--his dominant right stayed casually at his side, close to his primary weapon.
“True,” Jeth said, and let it hang in the charged silence for a moment.

“Much as I would love to chat and catch up with you,” Hondo said, breaking it, “we both, I am sure, have other things to do with our time, yes?”

“indeed.”

“You have the product?”

“Don’t I always?” Jeth said, signaling one of his people to bring a crate forward. His coat swirled aside with the gesture, revealing the blaster strapped to his hip.

Obi-Wan kept his face under control with the ease of long practice, but something about this being’s weapon seemed off, in a way he couldn’t quite identify. Yet.

“Well?” Hondo prompted, turning to him.

“Ah. Yes. Right. I’ll just…I’ll just…run my checks. Please, excuse me…” Clutching the case to his chest as if it would serve as a shield, he moved past Hondo. He looked up as he did, catching Hondo’s eye and flicking a glance carefully at Jeth’s weapon. Hondo nodded slightly.

“Come, come, my friend, we haven’t got all day,” he said out loud, pushing Obi-Wan forward.

He stumbled, letting out a faint “oof,” and then opened the crate.

As soon as he did, he knew immediately that at least the top layer of vials inside were the genuine article. They sang with that unique energy of growth and life, that he had only ever picked up from bacta cultures before.

Now, as to the purity or quality of the samples--that was something he couldn’t determine from here. But, in the moment, it didn’t matter.

He took a breath. “Right,” he said, then unpacked the scanner and got to work. The scan revealed what he’d expected; now time to pick two or three vials at random and fake a few chemical reaction tests…

“Well, stranger?” Jeth asked, after a tense two minutes.

“Oh, my friend, these things take time,” Hondo said, sauntering over to Obi-Wan. “I’m sure we’re finding exactly what you said we would, aren’t we?”

“So far,” Obi-Wan said.

“In the meantime,” Jeth said. “Let’s talk price.”

“My very favorite word,” Hondo said amicably, leaning on the crate and almost-but-not-quite getting in Obi-Wan’s way.

Obi-Wan let out a little exasperated huff, and moved slightly to the side--which, he noted, left him in a much better position to grab Hondo’s backup pistol, and allow the two of them to cover each other and the cultures much more effectively.

It was never wise to underestimate Hondo’s ability to adapt to any situation.

“Thirty thousand a vial,” Jeth said, flatly.
“An outrage,” Hondo replied. “You are robbing me, my friend.”

“You can move merchandise like this more easily than I can,” Jeth said. “And it’s what they’re worth, isn’t it, expert?”

“Oh!” Obi-Wan said, looking up. “I…uh…please don’t…I just want to…I don’t want to get in the middle of this.”

“Should’ve thought of that before you walked in here with that pirate,” Jeth said, evenly.

“I will pay you ten thousand a vial,” Hondo cut in. “And not a credit more. I need to line up buyers, secure the merchandise, possibly gain access to processing vats…yes, yes, I can move this more easily than you, but my expenses will be astronomical!”

“Thirty thousand,” Jeth repeated.

“You are being ridiculous,” Hondo scoffed. “Really, now, I’m not sure why you even called me here if you just wanted to waste my time--”

“You call culture vials of this quality a waste of time?” Jeth said. “That was always your problem, Ohnaka. No appreciation for anything other than yourself.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t see Hondo’s face from this angle, but he could almost hear his eyes narrowing.

“You misjudge me, my friend,” he said, all traces of his usual excess of dramatics gone in an instant. “I am wounded.”

In response, Jeth pulled his weapon--

Which was just a hair too heavy, and moved just a hair too slow for a blaster of that size.

And everything became clear.

Weequay skin was moderately blaster-resistant. It was a major contributor to their success, working as hired muscle in various corners of the underworld.

If you wanted a Weequay dead, and only had one chance at a clear shot, you had to bring a slugthrower into the mix.

Hondo saw it in the same instant Obi-Wan did, and ducked to the side just as Jeth pulled the trigger; Obi-Wan grabbed Hondo’s exposed blaster and fired back, leaping over the crate, which provided some moderate cover.

Assuming Jeth and his people wouldn’t want to risk their valuable merchandise, which was a chance Obi-Wan was willing to take.

Hondo joined him a second later, goggles askew and his other gun held loosely in his right hand. His left was pressed tight against the opposite shoulder, with greyish blood already oozing between his fingers.

“You need some better friends, Hondo,” Obi-Wan said, grimly, taking his uninjured arm and hauling him further back against the wall, pulling the crate along behind them with the Force, until they were well and truly concealed--and well and truly trapped.

“Yes, well,” Hondo said. “Can you blame me? Bacta culture vials…the profit I could make!”
“That all depends,” Obi-Wan said, firing a few shots blindly out from behind their cover. “What in the world did you do to upset him this much?”

“A few stolen shipments over the years, nothing special,” Hondo said. “Or perhaps he’s still upset over the time I stranded him on Nal Hutta. But that was years ago.”

Obi-Wan stared at him for a moment. “Next time,” he said, “warn me.”

“Would you have come along if I did?”

“Bacta culture vials,” Obi-Wan said. “Besides. You’re my friend.” Vexing as you are at times, you’ve overall been more of a help than a hindrance to us, over the years. Especially since the Republic fell.

Whether or not that would’ve been enough without the vials--that was a question he could meditate on when there were no longer blasters bolts and bullets flying over their heads.

Hondo merely hummed faintly in response, leaning against the crate with his eyes half-shut.

“Just…keep pressure on that shoulder,” he said. “And don’t you dare pass out. Rex will have heard the shots. We just have to hold out until he gets here. All right?”

“Yes, yes.”

Although he’d better hurry, Obi-Wan said, checking the power pack on his borrowed blaster. I don’t think we can keep this up for much longer.

He just had to hope that it would be long enough.

Chapter End Notes

Bonus fics I mentioned in the last update should be out sometime in the next week or so! I am still open to prompts on my writing tumblr, if you’d like to send some my way!

Thanks so much for sticking with me this far, hope you're enjoying the ride! ~<3 shadowsong
Part 7, Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rex was far from idle after General Kenobi and Ohnaka disappeared upstairs.

True, he couldn’t do anything overt until he saw an actual move from their enemies--and, for all the pirate insisted otherwise, Rex knew damn well that’s what they were--but there were some initial steps he could take.

Steps like gradually maneuvering himself into a better position to take out the guards between him and the stairs--not optimal, perhaps, not without tipping his hand, but it would suffice.

Or like making a quick scan with the infrared scanners on his HUD to better detect anyone coming at him from outside his ordinary visual range--they weren’t as good as the ones on the helmet he’d left behind on Coruscant when he’d deserted, but they were serviceable..

Or priming one of the smoke grenades he’d clipped to his belt to give him room to work.

A man could always find a use for a smoke grenade, when things got dangerous.

So, when he heard that first, inevitable shot from upstairs, he sprang into action almost simultaneously.

First, the grenade; no real cover in this room but he could invent some; then fire off a few shots into the smoke to keep everyone busy while he ran for the stairs.

Atii shouted through the smoke and he heard an explosion; switched filters just in time to keep from getting blinded and dove to the side to avoid the debris from the stairs. Which he mostly managed; the armor had a few new dents in it, but it had held up and done its job.

Kriff. Okay, new plan--if she was willing to do that, there’s gonna be an alternate route. I just gotta find it.

Ideally, before anyone he cared about got killed.

“Find him!” Atii yelled in Ryl; good, they’d lost him in the explosion; that bought him a second or two.

He flicked through the filters on his helmet again and found the night vision, which pointed out a door just past him, to the right of where the stairs used to be. It was guarded by two beings of indeterminate near-Human species; he fired twice as he closed the distance, taking out the kneecaps of the one on the left; and laid out the second with a quick strike at what would be the solar plexus on a Human with the butt of his gun. He heard bone crack and moved on, wrenching the door open and plowing through.

No one immediately in sight; he slammed the door behind him and shot through the lock to provide a split second to get his bearings.

All right. First job done. Now. If I were a back way up in a criminal’s secret hideout, where would I be...
Before he could answer that question, he heard running footsteps heading his direction; saw a shadow approaching along the opposite wall. Fortunately, there was a hell of a lot better cover out here than in the entryway; Rex ducked into a convenient doorway on his right, holding his guns at the ready and waiting for a clear shot.

The newcomer was Human, about his height; wearing armor not that different from what Rex had on.

Rex took the initiative and fired two shots in his direction—which didn’t connect; he didn’t expect them to; hadn’t wanted to wait for a clear shot.

The enemy soldier ducked to the side and fired a warning shot of his own.

This was…not ideal.

That same convenient cover that had saved Rex’s skin was as much a hindrance as a help at this point--there were enough recessed doorways and nooks and crannies in this hallway that they could play this game for a good ten minutes or more, which time Rex doubted Ohnaka and General Kenobi had to spare.

So, time for a new tactic.

Rex pulled another smoke grenade and rolled it into the center of the hallway; gave the other half a second to switch the filter on his helmet and then followed it with a flashbang.

He heard someone swearing and grinned to himself before launching out of cover just as the smoke began to dissipate, ready to fight past this next obstacle.

Except--the shooter had pulled off his helmet; a risky trick, but sometimes it helped your eyes recover faster while the filters rebooted.

Which meant Rex could see his face.

His extremely, intimately, personally familiar face.

But this time...this time, it wasn’t like looking into a mirror.

It was like looking through a window into the past.

Because that was his face--but not as it was now. Not even as it had been the last time he’d shot at it, four years ago; something that was fortunately getting a hell of a lot rarer as the years ticked by.

No, this was his face as it had been a decade ago. During the War.

This--this--this person was maybe half of Rex’s apparent age.

So, of course, his first thought was-- Boba?

Except that was wrong. He knew before he even said the name. Because, sure, there were some things that were bred into them, and Boba Fett came from the same progenitor Rex and his brothers had.

But some things had to be taught. And Boba had been raised different from the rest of them. He had never moved like they did, not unless he was making a concentrated effort to disappear among them.
And this person, this--this too-young, too-familiar stranger--he did. Rex hadn’t seen much, but he’d seen that shadow tracking across the wall--he moved like a soldier.

Rex took a breath and placed a bet, raising the visor on his own helmet and lowering his blaster.

The stranger stopped short, studying him for a second.

Neither of them moved. Neither of them even breathed.

“…your friends are pinned down upstairs,” the stranger finally said, shortly. “The Weequay’s been shot. Nonfatally, far as I know. The Human’s covering him. Keep going down this hall, turn right at the end, first door on your left’s gonna be a back way up. I’m guessing you can find your way home from there.”

“Yeah, of course,” Rex said, then hesitated. “…vod’ika--”

“Don’t,” he cut him off. “Just--go.”

He stood aside, and Rex hesitated for half a second more, because this--finding one of his youngest brothers like this was something he had never expected to happen.

But he had a larger purpose. He had a duty here.

One of his Jedi was in danger, and needed him now.

He nodded once and moved down the hallway, quick as he could, following his little brother’s directions until he found the back stairs.

There had been an explosion downstairs two minutes ago, which was not...not ideal.

Obi-Wan continued firing from behind the crate, considering trying to make a break for the window, which--no, too many enemy fighters between here and there; the increase in the faint hum of warning buzzing behind his eyes made that perfectly clear.

So, he and Hondo were stuck, for the moment, until he could think of something better. And quickly; this was not a pattern he could maintain for long; and Hondo had stopped firing.

Obi-Wan was not quite out of hope, but he was nearly out of charges, and Hondo was nearly out of consciousness, when the wall behind them shifted.

He swore under his breath, turning to face what was probably a new threat, but--

“Sir,” Rex hissed.

“You’re certainly timely,” he said, relieved.

“Sorry, ran into more resistance than I thought,” he said. “You all right?”

“I’m fine. Hondo’s been shot. Slugthrower.”

Rex nodded. “There’s a door to the outside at the bottom of these stairs. You want me to cover up
“Clear the way,” Obi-Wan said. As close as they were to the exit, and as badly as Hondo was bleeding—he could use the crate to seal off the exit behind them, at least temporarily. Better to avoid further delays of their own after that.

“Copy that.”

“Thank you,” he said, then frowned a little. There was something—“Are you all right?”

“Fine, sir,” Rex said, shortly. “We should move.”

*He’s not wrong. I can ask again later. Or mention it to Anakin or Ahsoka, it might be better coming from one of them.*

Obi-Wan nodded, and nudged Hondo as Rex disappeared back through the hidden panel. “Still with me?”

“Of course,” Hondo slurred. “Am I drunk or bleeding?”

“I can’t speak to the first, but you have lost quite a bit of blood,” he said. “We’re moving, I’m going to help you.”

“Ah, you are so good at that, my friend,” Hondo said, then his head rolled to the side and he lost consciousness completely.

Obi-Wan slung his arm over his shoulder and crawled through the opening in the wall, firing a few blind shots behind him before using the Force to drag the crate of cultures across the opening.

He was able to straighten up on the other side, which made carrying—or, well, half-dragging—the pirate significantly easier. He heard a few crisp, precise shots down below, and then saw Rex’s head pop around the corner.

“Need a hand?”

He shook his head, and picked up the pace.

When they reached the ground outside, he passed Hondo off to Rex and pulled out his lightsaber—the value of keeping his identity secret now came in a very distant second to getting them across the open ground to Hondo’s ship unshot. And, barring several more slugthrowers…

“Ready?” he asked Rex.

“Always, sir,” he said, shifting his grip on Hondo.

Obi-Wan nodded, and moved, doing his best to keep to a pace that Rex could match while carrying Hondo—he felt a bolt come perilously close to his ear, and another was partially absorbed by the treated fabric of his jacket, leaving a minor burn across his forearm; he was fairly certain another two or three had gotten past his guard completely and grazed Rex’s armor.

About the only thing one could say for the experience was that, between the bolts Obi-Wan successfully reflected and Rex’s consistent barrage of cover fire, no one was able to get close enough to truly bar their way.

Still, the compound gate—and Hondo’s shuttle, waiting outside—was one of the more welcome sights Obi-Wan had seen in quite some time. He shoved the gate open with the Force, and let Rex
precede him, using Hondo’s prints to unlock and extend the ramp.

“Find a gun,” he said, already on his way to the cockpit. Hondo’s injuries would have to wait another few moments until they cleared the compound’s airspace. Possibly even the planet’s atmosphere.

Rex nodded and darted off in another direction; he seemed to know exactly where he was going—which made perfect sense. He would have used the opportunity of their transit time to memorize the ship’s layout.

As luck would have it, Hondo’s console was fairly intuitive; Obi-Wan got the engines activated and the shields up within seconds—and, whether or not Jeth and his people had weapons capable of piercing said shields, they didn’t have them immediately accessible. If Rex could just hold off the smaller guns and any attempted boarders long enough for them to get out of range--

Forty-five seconds later, they burst through the cloudline slightly singed, but very much alive, and Obi-Wan let out a breath and relaxed a little. Nearly there now.

He input a course for spaceport where they’d met Hondo the day before, and leaned back in the chair while the navicomputer ran the calculations.

“Sir?” Rex said, poking his head in.

“We seem to be clear, for the moment,” he said.

He nodded. “Pity we didn’t get any of the cultures.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “But we are alive, and mostly unscathed, which is rather more important, I think. ...although we may want to check Hondo’s pockets. I wouldn’t put it past him to have grabbed a few.” And we’ll renegotiate our split, depending on how many he has.

Rex laughed a little. “Fair enough,” he said.

Obi-Wan hit the lever to send them into hyperspace, and switched on the autopilot for this first jump. He let out a faint sigh of relief when the stars swirled around them.

True, the faint hum hadn’t quite dissipated, but at this point it could be merely lingering adrenaline. Such things sometimes took a few moments to fade completely.

“We should check on him either way, now we’re clear,” he added, unstrapping himself and standing up.

“Yeah.”

Side by side, they started down the narrow hallway again; Obi-Wan reached into his pocket for his comm, to switch it back to its usual channel now that their mission, however unsuccessful, was complete.

It lit up right away, collecting a message that had been sitting there for--who knew how long.

That warning hum increased ever so slightly in pitch.

...I have a bad feeling about this, he thought, pushing the button to pick it up.

He was right.
“Sir?” Rex said, turning to see where he’d stopped.

The message was very brief--a coded set of coordinates, for one of their set rendezvous points, and a single word-- hurry.

And it had come from Leia.

He took a breath and forcibly dislodged his heart from his throat. They’re alive. They’re alive, remember how it was with Specter, I would know if--

“Sir?” Rex said again, eyes on the message now.

“...get Hondo’s bleeding under control,” Obi-Wan said. “And then sedate him, I’ll make it right later.”

Rex nodded and ran to the hold, as Obi-Wan turned back to the cockpit at speed; dropped them out of hyperspace; input the new coordinates; held his breath while the navicomputer reran its calculations; and hoped, beyond all reason, that they somehow made it in time.

Chapter End Notes

A while ago, someone asked me if Rex would ever get his own plotline--the Last Batch is something I was playing with for a Leverage crossover I never got around to actually writing, and giving Rex something of his own to look into seemed like a good place to put them. Rex's new friend will absolutely turn up again, and become particularly relevant if and when Boba Fett becomes a problem for Our Heroes.

Also, the bonus fics I mentioned the other day are up on my writing tumblr! One and Two. I'll crosspost them here over the weekend, as well. If you sent in a request that didn't get filled, I will probably fill it at some point! (Possibly even Soon, if I need to beef up my NaNo wordcount, lol...)

Anyway, Happy Halloween, y'all! Thanks for stopping by ~<3 shadowsong
Part 7, Chapter 11

After leaving Jedha, Dad took Leia to a completely different planet to build her ‘saber. It was cool and slightly damp; and seasonal--more dramatic seasons than most planets she’d visited. Or at least a more dramatic season than she’d ever seen.

The area they’d landed in was forested, but not green. Or, not entirely. Most of the leaves were shades of red and gold; the air smelled heavy and just slightly smoky. The whole place felt quiet and peaceful, in a natural way. Like the forest was about to go to sleep.

“We’re pretty far away from any population centers,” Dad had said, when they landed. “And air traffic control is pretty lax here. So take your time. We’re good for as long as you need.”

Leia wasn’t sure exactly how much time people were supposed to spend on building their actual lightsabers, and Dad refused to tell her if she was taking too long or going to fast or just the right speed.

“It’s different for everyone, Princess,” was all he’d said, the third time she’d asked. “The Force is slightly different for all of us, and every individual being is unique. Why would every lightsaber be the same?”

Which made sense. She supposed. And after everything she’d seen and heard in the Jedha Temple, the last thing she wanted to do was rush this. Not with the warnings she’d gotten from her other selves still echoed through her mind. Be careful. Think things through. You can burn it all down, if you really want to.

With a weapon--her own weapon--almost in her hand, those warnings felt very, very real.

So, she had maybe taken a little bit longer than was strictly necessary, building her ‘saber, but now she had it, which was the important thing. And it was completely hers. She’d based the hilt on a few designs Dad had shown her, or at least used those as a starting point. But it wasn’t exactly like any of them, really.

After all, like Dad had said, why should every lightsaber be the same?

Hers was smoother than either Dad or Uncle Obi-Wan’s; the grip was wrapped in scraps of soft, worn bantha leather she’d repurposed from a pair of work gloves Aunt Beru had made for her a while ago, that didn’t really fit anymore. She’d etched the leather with designs that reminded her of the crystals and other gifts Dad had brought her over the years--even if she’d had them with her, trying to attach the actual things would make the hilt too rough and bulky to be useful, but having the suggestions of them at her fingertips felt right all the same. The rest of the casing was made out of a shiny metal framework that reminded her of Mom and Luke and their ship.

Because, if her ‘saber was supposed to be, as Uncle Obi-Wan put it, her life, what better way to do it than to wrap it all up in the bits and pieces of her family? All the people who, one way or another, had made her who she was? Had gotten her to this point where she was ready to build this thing, where it felt like it belonged in her hand?

Anyway. It was hers, and it felt--different, from what she’d expected. Lighter than she’d thought it would be, for one thing. Not as heavy as Dad’s, for sure, although it was maybe a little heavier
than Aunt ‘Soka’s shota, which she’d practiced with a couple of times, to get used to how a plasma blade felt, and how it was different from the bone one.

But now her blade was finished. All that was left to do now, really, was turn it on and see what it was like.

She took a breath and held it, counting to seven with her eyes closed; she let it out and opened them, settling into a very basic Form I stance—the first one Dad had ever shown her with her bone sword, what felt like forever ago.

She hit the activator, and with a comfortingly familiar and yet completely new-sounding snap-hiss, the blade spilled out from between her hands.

It was blue—mostly; but a greener shade than either Dad or Uncle Obi-Wan’s ‘saber. Closer to some of the turquoise stones Aunt Beru had in her good jewelry; the earrings and brooch she only took out on birthdays and major holidays.

It was beautiful.

She just stood there for a moment, basking in the dim glow from her blade and feeling the way its hum resonated with her heartbeat and her breath, before shutting it off and going to find Dad.

She’d done it, and she couldn’t wait to show him.

Leia found Dad right where she’d left him, with one of his fiddly mechanical projects spread out around him, taking advantage of having more room than in the cluttered hold of the Waterfall.

“You at a stopping point?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, then rewound and taped off a set of wires before standing up, brushing dirt and leaves off his pants. “You’ve got it?”

“Yeah,” she said, and held out the hilt for him to inspect.

He took it from her, turned it over in his hands; ran them along the grip and the etchings, then handed it back with a smile. “It suits you.”

“I thought so,” she said, and grinned.

“Go ahead, let’s see it, then,” Dad said, and she nodded, and hit the switch again. He watched the blade—what he was looking for, exactly, she wasn’t sure—then tilted his head, listening. For what, she wasn’t sure—probably some kind of flaw, but...he seemed satisfied with what he heard. Or didn’t hear.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Everything’s great,” he said. “Now, it’s just a matter of lots and lots of practice with it.”

She blinked, shutting it off, and her eyes darted over to his weapon.

“No, not yet,” he said. “No sparring for a little while. Not until you’re used to it. Why don’t you
run a few forms, instead? *Slowly, princess.*"

Leia didn’t roll her eyes, because she knew that, obviously, but it was good to have a reminder. Just because she’d worked with a true lightsaber before…each one was different. And this one was hers, so it’d be all at once easier and harder, until it felt not just right, but like an extension of her hands and arms.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. “Only probably?” he asked, but she could hear him half-laughing as he said it.

“Well, obviously,” she said. “I mean, as long as it’s been since *you* did this, I’m sure you’ve forgotten a few things.”

He *did* laugh then, and shook his head. “I’m wounded,” he said. “Here, just give me a minute to clear some of this out of your way, and you can get started. We’ll see how much of the basics I remember after all, hm?”

“Deal,” she said, and set to helping him put the parts away.

She ran forms for a couple hours on her own, with Dad keeping a close eye and occasionally correcting her stance. She picked up the pace until she as moving almost as fast as she could with her bone sword—probably would’ve been faster, even if she wasn’t tired.

“Good job, princess,” Dad said, smiling at her. “Break time.”

It was getting later than she realized, anyway. The planet’s sun was sinking, and the sky was almost the same colors as the leaves.

She nodded, and put her lightsaber away. It took her a couple tries to clip it to her belt, which was a little embarrassing, but Dad didn’t say anything.

He pulled out a couple meal packs from the pack they’d brought with them and tossed her one. “I think we should head out soon,” he said. “Tomorrow morning, probably. I think you’ve got enough of a handle on things that you can keep this up with regular lessons with Aunt Ahsoka once we get back to Crait.”

Leia nodded again. “Okay,” she said. “And then missions? Real missions?”

Dad made a face. “Not right away,” he cautioned her. “But it’s...that’s gonna be Aunt Ahsoka’s call, in the end.”

Leia blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s been doing most of your training, so she’s got the clearest picture of what you can and can’t handle.”

“Right,” she said, because that *did* make sense. She’d gone on trips with Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan and Uncle Rex, separately and in all kinds of combinations, but when she thought back…
If she *had* a single Master, like under the old system, it probably *was* Aunt Ahsoka.

And now…

The ‘saber was heavy at her waist, and the lessons from the Temple weighed on her mind.

She’d be going on *real* missions now. And as much as she’d wanted that, as much as she’d wanted to be a better help to the people she loved…it was a lot of responsibility.

Everything was changing. She could sense it now. Like the leaves on the trees here, that were probably green a few standard months ago, but were now set up for a new stage in their lives.

Things were going to be a lot different, from now on.

Dad was watching her. “...everything all right, princess?” he asked

But, before she could answer, the air went still around them; an unnatural, *dangerous* still, like the air just before a really bad storm blew up. Only--only *more*. Only *unnatural*.

And *cold*.

Almost like…

Almost like her first vision, in the Temple on Jedha, except somehow--somehow less natural and yet more *real*.

For a split second, she thought she’d imagined it, or something, except it didn’t fade, and Dad was already moving.

He got to his feet in one fluid motion, the hilt of his lightsaber in his hand faster than she could see it moving. Leia scrambled to stand, too; resisting all her instincts--the ones that she’d been taught over and over again over the past seven years--stepping up *beside* her father instead of taking a step back so he was between her and--and whatever was making the air and the Force go *still* like that.

At first, she couldn’t tell what it was--she knew it was *real*, obviously; she trusted her feelings enough for *that*, and besides, Dad had felt it too. She opened her mouth to say something but he hushed her with a quick hand motion.

And then she saw him.

He was Mirialan, but bigger than any other Mirialan she’d ever seen; wearing a black cloak and a simple flight suit underneath; there was a long, heavy-looking lightsaber hilt hanging at his belt.

She *knew* who he was, without needing to be told. *Infernalis*.

Dad pushed her behind him, but it was too late.

“...well, how about that,” the Sith Lord said.

Leia fumbled for her brand-new lightsaber. Dad would need her help here, he would--

“Princess,” Dad said, sliding his cloak off his shoulders, “go back to the ship. Find Uncle Ben. Tell him I have everything in hand. It’s something of a specialty of mine.”
“But--”

“Leia.”

Dad didn’t use that tone with her very often. The kind of tone that made people shut up and listen and do what he said.

It was a kind of tone even she couldn’t argue with.

She nodded, and nudged his mind a little with hers since she couldn’t take his hand. A brief flash of warmth in response, then his shields shut down.

She didn’t want to go. She didn’t want to go. But if she hesitated--she wasn’t good enough yet, not strong enough. She’d just got her proper ‘saber, and…

And Infernalis would take her hostage. He would use her against her father.

Dad was right. She had to get Uncle Obi-Wan. He’d be able to help. He’d know what to do.

Leia backed away slowly, then turned and ran back to the Waterfall.

Leia had never flown the Waterfall by herself before--well, Artoo was there, still, technically, but she’d never done this without Dad or Uncle Obi-Wan or Aunt Ahsoka to help, too.

Artoo greeted her with a worried beep.

“We gotta go,” she said. “Um. To…” She closed her eyes, ran through the rendezvous points Dad and the others had drilled into her, trying to remember which was the easiest to get to from here, and hopefully fast to get to from Crai, which--

She needed to brush up on her astronav. Like. A lot.

She took a breath and let it out slow. There is no passion, there is serenity. Worry about all of that later. Pick a place, and Uncle Obi-Wan will get there in time to help Dad and everything will be okay. It’ll be fine. We’ll all be fine.

Artoo beeped again.

“Ketry,” she decided, opening her eyes. “We gotta go to the Ketry point. Okay? And--and I need to send a message to Uncle Obi-Wan. But not--not ‘til we’re...no, I should send it now. Okay. Encryption first, then get us moving.”

Artoo crooned wordlessly and bumped into her lightly, and she hugged him tight. “Dad’s in trouble,” she said. “So work fast.”

He swore creatively, then zoomed back into the cockpit, plugging himself in and whirring his head back and forth for a second.

/Encryption ready. I’m running the calculations for lightspeed. Send your message./

“Thanks, buddy,” she said, and booted up the comms. Keep encrypted messages brief, just like
Uncle Rex said. Bare minimum of what your partner or contact needs to know, and if you can use a reference code on top, so much the better.

She could do that.

...text. Text is better. That way, if he's with anyone who shouldn't overhear--except he's at Crait so he shouldn't--better safe than sorry.

Deep breath.

Ketry, she typed in. Hurry.

If she could’ve underlined it or bolded it or made it stand out more somehow, she would’ve. But Uncle Obi-Wan would know what to do.

“Sent,” she told Artoo, even if he probably knew. “We good to jump?”

/Go./

She slid into the pilot seat—which was set up for Dad and way too far from the console for her, which was almost enough to shatter her resolve and make her start crying.

Deep breath. Focus. You got a ship to fly.

She hit the switch to adjust the seat, then booted up the engines.

And then she relaxed, as the familiarity of the specific task took over. She wasn’t quite as physical and hands-on as Dad was, needing something concrete to ground her, but she couldn’t deny it helped.

Or maybe it was Uncle Owen’s influence, even more than Dad’s. She’d never met another being so firmly rooted in the here-and-now as him.

Either way, it cut through her worry for her dad, her guilt that she couldn’t help--all of the messy tangle that stole away her focus. She guided the ship out of the atmosphere and then hit the lever to take them into hyperspace.

...of course, then the task was done, and all those worries came crashing back down on her.

/He’ll be fine,/ Artoo said.

“I know,” she said. “I know.”

He backed off a little, leaving her alone to fret.

For her part, she stayed huddled in the cockpit, trying to relax into a meditative posture and calm herself down with something more long-term, more Jedi-like, than just losing herself in immediate needs. She’d gotten away, so she couldn’t be used as a hostage. She’d gotten word to Uncle Obi-Wan, who hadn’t pinged her back yet, but he would soon and then he’d be there and everything would be okay.

She’d done everything she could. Except stay and help Dad, except--

She hugged her knees to her chest as the autopilot dragged them through hyperspace. Breathe. Breathe. Let the Force flow through you, like a soft breeze through your hair. Breathe with it. Center. Come on, come on, Leta, you’ve been doing this since you were two--
It wasn’t working. Nothing was working.


She sat up straighter, and let her eyes drift shut, and reached for him. Even though she knew she shouldn’t, she didn’t know what time it was on Coruscant or on the farm or anywhere right now. Even though they’d never connected outside of their dreams before--she wasn’t even sure they could, not through the shielding Dad and Uncle Obi-Wan had built around her brother, but--

“Leia?” his voice echoed in the back of her head. “Leia, what’s wrong?”

“Dad’s in trouble,” she said. “I’m going to get Uncle Obi-Wan, but...but Dad’s in trouble. Real, serious trouble.”

There was no answer for a moment, and she felt her brother’s fear echoing hers, then a sensation like he was taking a deep breath.

“He’ll be okay,” Luke said. “This is Dad, remember?”

You don’t even have the training, and you’re already better at this part of things than I am.

But that was why--part of why--they fit together so well. It was like she’d told Aunt ‘Soka, ages ago, before she’d even known what her dreams meant-- just having Luke in the back of her head helped her be...nicer. Keep her fears and her rage, when it came, under control. The right way.

Besides. He was right. Infernalis hadn’t even been training for as long as she had. And, sure, he was a fully-grown Sith Lord and kind of intimidating, but Dad was probably already running circles around him back in those woods.

She very firmly did not think about her sixth birthday, and seeing Uncle Rex pull Dad out of that speeder at the farm.

This was different. This was way different. She didn’t know how she knew, but she did.

“I know,” she said. “I mean, I know, but…”

“Do you need me to distract you? Just keep talking until you get to wherever you’re going?”

She nodded, and sniffled a little, despite herself. “Please?”

“Okay,” Luke said. “Okay, we can talk.”

“Okay,” she said.

“I’m gonna learn how to fly,” he said.

“Like, starfighters?” She was pretty sure that he already knew the basics of his way around a speeder or a regular ship--Mom would’ve taught him that, right?

“Yeah,” he said. “Aunt Sabe and I talked about it, and I’ve got a couple flight schools I’m gonna apply to.”

“That’s great,” she said, and latched on to his good news so she didn’t have to think about her own fear. Because, yeah, okay, Luke helped her be nicer, but part of it was also that...it was easier for her, it had always been easier for her, to deal with her own problems by trying to work her way through someone else’s. Not the best way, but better than wallowing or lashing out, right? “I know
you’ve been wanting that for a long time.”

“Yeah, ages,” he said. “Since I was...I dunno, three or four? First time I saw the fighters at home on Naboo do some display tricks for a parade…”

“Empire Day?” she asked, dryly.

“Well, it was always the biggest one.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said. “Maybe next time, you’ll fly in it. Bet that’ll make all the newsreels.”

“Ugh,” he said. “Yeah, it probably will. ...totally worth it, though. To fly like that.”

“Yeah, I figured you’d say that,” she said. “...what else is going on? You guys were just back on Naboo, right?” She both hoped and didn’t hope he’d have stories--the green place, like she still called it in the privacy of her own mind, did more to help her relax than pretty much anything else ever, except those rare times when Dad was home for more than a couple days and they could just talk; but on the other hand, she didn’t like the idea of anything dangerous coming near her mother and her brother and their home.

Which, of course, given where they spent most of their time, was stupid, but it made sense in her head.

“Yeah,” he said. “Got back a couple days ago.”

...huh. She got the impression that he didn’t really want to talk about it, or at least not mind-to-mind like this--probably he’d write her an actual letter later, when he could have a bit more distance from whatever he didn’t like.

And, on the one hand, she sort of couldn’t blame him, since she was kind of hiding from her problems, too, but on the other hand...he was her brother, and she wanted to help.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said again. “I’ll tell you later, okay?”

“Okay,” she said.

“There was something funny that happened in the Senate rotunda right after we got back, though. I’ve told you about Senator Taa, right?”

Leia focused in on Luke’s steady stream of Coruscant gossip, just letting it wash over her and not really paying attention to the words, because they didn’t matter. He’d’ve led with it if there was anything Important that Dad or Uncle Obi-Wan or anyone else should know, anyway. And it was funny--even her concern over whatever was bothering him, let alone her worries about Dad which it had already halfway distracted her from, didn’t bother her so much anymore. Luke’s voice, that sense of her brother at her side, whatever else happened…

That worked much better than breathing and imagining the wind in her hair.

It was only a couple more minutes before the Waterfall beeped at her, signalling time to drop out of hyperspace and take over manual control.


“Okay,” he said “You’re okay now?”
“Yeah.” She took a deep breath and uncurled, reaching for the steering column. “...thank you.”

“Always,” he said. “And...um...tell me...when you know...?”

“I will,” she promised. She checked the ship’s chrono, and now her brain was working well enough for her to do the math. “Sixteen hours, right? That’s when we’re meeting?”

“Uh-huh,” Luke said. “I’ll talk to you then.”

“I’ll let you know everything I do,” she said. “I love you. Thank you.”

She felt the impression of his arms wrapping around her, and she gave him a mental hug back, as tight as she could, before bulking up her shields again and letting her sense of him dwindle down to a pinprick.

She pulled the lever to bring the Waterfall out of hyperspace, and found nothing.

Just the planetoid, drifting at the innermost layer of this system’s asteroid belt, spinning lazily off to her left.

No other ships.

No Uncle Obi-Wan.

Her heart sank for a minute. Sure, Uncle Obi-Wan hadn’t replied to her message yet, but at the same time, she’d hoped...she’d hoped he’d just forgotten, that he was already on his way, that…

/Incoming./ Artoo interrupted her thoughts.

Leia held her breath. Please, she thought. Please…

The ship that dropped out of hyperspace, just barely in visible range, wasn’t one she recognized. It was a beat-up little freighter, practically a shuttle, that looked like it had seen better days and probably a lot of illegal cargo.

But there was a presence on that ship, one she would have known anywhere.

“It’s him,” she told Artoo. “He made it.”

Artoo beeped once, to acknowledge, then exchanged confirmation codes with the other ship and began maneuvering into position to link up.

It’s gonna be okay, she told herself, and she actually started to believe it now. Uncle Obi-Wan’s here, and he’ll know what to do. Just a few more minutes, and then…

Everything will be okay.

Chapter End Notes

One of the things I miss about the broader Legends canon re: lightsaber crystals, was the wide variety of colors you could get. And I did decide to stick to canon rather than Legends, at least for Leia’s crystal. But I really wanted her to have a turquoise lightsaber. Plus, I figured--it stands to reason that different strains of kyber crystals, so
to speak, might have slightly different colors, right? And Leia got hers from Jedha, rather than Ilum, so...right???

...anyway, all of that aside, thank you all for stopping by again as the Plot catches up again, and for sticking with me through all this time and all these words. Hope you're still enjoying the ride, and see you next time! ~<3 shadowsong
Infernalis watched Leia leave, with a faint, cold smirk. “You know that won’t protect her, don’t you,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

And, yes, of course Anakin knew that. He knew Leia wouldn’t be a secret for much longer.

But they’d had a plan. A way to introduce her into the wider Rebellion, into the galaxy, without putting Padme and Luke at any more risk than they already were. And, almost as importantly, in a way that would let Leia sort of ease into things a little--Ahsoka taking her on what at least should be straightforward missions first (though that was never a guarantee), and then, as she got a little direct combat experience, letting her take on more and more dangerous fights.

None of that, of course, would matter if Infernalis reported her existence to the Chancellor. Partly because a lot of their plans revolved around Leia being introduced as Ahsoka’s apprentice, rather than with Anakin or even Obi-Wan, but part of it…

Anakin couldn’t be sure how much Infernalis had seen, or deduced, by watching them together.

The fact of the matter was, he could not let Infernalis do that. No more games. No more back and forth. No more minimizing engagements without backup.

Anakin had to stop him here.

He matched the Sith Lord’s smirk with one of his own. “Only if you live to tell about it.”

That cold smile widened to a grin, as Infernalis pulled out his lightsaber and activated it, giving Anakin a mocking salute. “Shall we, then?”

Anakin didn’t bother answering in words. His ‘saber was active in the space it took him to take a breath, and he ran straight at Infernalis.

Infernalis met him just as he always had, every other time, force for force.

They exchanged a quick first series of blows; Anakin struck high, then low, everywhere he could see an opening; he came within a hair of a disabling blow to Infernalis’ knee, but the Sith Lord broke away, flipping back to land on a branch above Anakin’s head.

Anakin itched to follow him up there; instead, he held himself steady, letting his blade rest in a low guard position, trying to bait Infernalis into making an attack of his own.

Almost like the first time they’d fought, back in that factory--but in reverse.

Infernalis had improved since then--he’d gotten noticeably better since the last time they’d met, even. Not in terms of raw strength, exactly; he’d always been built like a kriffing tank and hit like it; but in terms of focus and precision. Skill.

Or maybe he was just as aware as Anakin was that this would be the last time they fought. One way or another.

Not that either of them had held back in previous encounters, obviously. Anakin wasn’t that stupid, and Infernalis--was practical enough to know his own limits, so especially in the early days, he’d fought as much to get away as to kill. But that didn’t mean holding back.
But there was a *charge* to the air, when that kind of inevitability sank in. Anakin had felt exactly the same thing before, a lifetime ago, on the *Invisible Hand*.

He could feel his own heart beat faster, his nerves thrill at the thought—like with Specter on the mountain; there was something *different*, in a real fight, against a real enemy, when it was an end-of-the-line, do-or-die fight.

And, after all, he did his best work in fights like that. Always had.

Except—with Specter, he’d lost his leg.

With Dooku, he’d almost lost *himself*.

*Focus*, he reminded himself, and shook off those ghosts. He stayed where he was, keeping still, breathing, watching his enemy prowl back and forth along the branch, as if looking for the best angle for his approach.

“Is that really all you’ve got?” Infernalis taunted, after ten seconds of *waiting*.

“Why don’t you come down and find out?” Anakin called back.

Infernalis grinned at him, all teeth, and made his jump.

Anakin was ready for him; he ducked under the wide swing of Infernalis’ long blade, bringing his own up to protect his head and slashing upward.

He knew as soon as he made the cut that it hadn’t connected; not all the way. He felt the Force swirl around him; a bitter autumn wind; as Infernalis shifted his trajectory just in time. A shallow graze across his back; nothing disabling.

Damn it.

This time, Anakin didn’t wait for Infernalis to make the next move. He moved sideways and then launched upward, vaulting over the branch and landing on the Sith Lord’s other side with an angled strike aimed at his abdomen.

Infernalis dodged; slashing wide and bringing an entire tree down where Anakin’s head would’ve been had he not sensed it coming.

Anakin leapt back, and Infernalis followed; he cleared the downed tree with ease, but Anakin was *ready* for him.

He rushed him again, keeping close, harrying Infernalis and staying within the range of his blade, pinning him against the trunk and pounding at his defenses, searching for an opening.

Infernalis dropped under the attack, slashing at Anakin’s feet to buy a breath of space--

--no, not at his feet, at the ground between them, kicking up a burst of smoldering dirt and rotting leaves; aiming it right at Anakin’s face with a little nudge from the Force.

Anakin sidestepped, throwing up his arm to shield his eyes, and in that split second, Infernalis had disappeared from sight.

Anakin paused for a moment; the forest had gone quiet apart from the hum of his lightsaber and the faint whistle of the wind. Infernalis was still *here*. He knew that. The Sith Lord hadn’t disengaged entirely. So where…?
The canopy again, he thought; he couldn’t sense exactly where, but close.

He considered baiting him again, staying low and quiet on the ground and drawing him out, but—no.

Every instinct he had, fueled by the Force and his own pumping adrenaline, told him to keep pushing.

He took a breath and launched into the trees; deactivating his lightsaber as he went. Infernalis had a slight advantage here—the blue of Anakin’s saber would stand out against the sunset sky and dying leaves much more than Infernalis’ red blade.

He moved from branch to branch, trying to still the leaves as he went; keeping one eye out for a swirl of black cloak; a glimpse of green hands; a flash of red just a hair too bright—

Behind!

He spun around and caught Infernalis’ blade near the hilt centimeters from his neck; he reached out with his left hand; grabbed the Sith Lord’s wrist; used it as an anchor to gain a little distance from the locked weapons; they grappled in silence for a few seconds before Infernalis disengaged and flipped back down to the ground; with Anakin hard on his heels.

They circled one another for a moment, lashing out with strikes that never quite connected, probing for weak spots.

Definitely gotten better. Shored up his defense; he was always weaker there.

“You know,” Infernalis said, “we’re a lot alike, you and I.”

“Is that so.” He spotted an opening; lunged forward with a wide, sweeping strike at Infernalis’ unprotected ribs.

Infernalis brought his hilt up so the blade pointed down, catching the cut just in time; then slid the hilt forward, aiming for a blunt-force strike at Anakin’s face.

One thing he was right about—they had similar fighting styles, favoring Form V; stand your ground and meet force with force.

Anakin turned into him, striking out with his elbow, aiming for Infernalis’ solar plexus.

“We’re both weapons,” Infernalis said. “Attack dogs. And we’re both very good at it. But there’s a difference.” He leapt back; keeping his blade up; watching for another opening; maintaining distance.

Anakin didn’t let him—he charged back in with a quick flurry of thrusts borrowed from Dooku’s Form II. Infernalis met him, barely; smoke drifting up from one sleeve, but the flesh beneath unharmed.

“The difference is,” Infernalis went on, “that I admit it. I embrace it. I don’t try to hide from it.” He flipped over Anakin’s head and lunged; Anakin sidestepped with a parry of his own. “You should do the same. You might suffer less if you did.”

It was Dooku all over again— you have hate, you have anger, but you don’t use them --only a little blunter.
And a little…

Not truer, exactly.

But Anakin was good in a fight. Good in a cockpit. At his best with a target and a weapon in his hands. And he enjoyed it, too. He’d been enjoying this more than he should—even knowing, even knowing that he would have to take a life here. Or die trying.

He thought of Dooku, kneeling at his feet; the Chancellor’s voice in his ear. He thought of Specter, screaming down at him off a cliff face; dying on top of him.

And all that old guilt started whispering back— you failed at everything you were supposed to do; everything you were supposed to be; a true Jedi, a true Chosen One, wouldn’t revel in a fight like this. Would do it, because he had to, but he’d grieve every step of the way.

But he also had Obi-Wan with him—maybe not here in this moment, but with him. And Ahsoka, and Rex, and--


“You might be right,” he said. “Maybe I am just an attack dog. Just like you. But the difference isn’t in our commitment.”

“What, then?”

“I can trust the people holding my leash,” he said. “Can you?”

Infernalis shrugged, and gave him a slightly feral smile. “Trust is overrated.”

He darted at Anakin one more time, feinting to the right; but Anakin felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise in a very specific way, and he knew what was coming. He dodged to the side—not quite fast enough; Infernalis’ lightning skimmed across his back.

Okay, so he’s better at that, too.

Lucky, though; both that he’d only been grazed and that even after years of practice and improvement, Infernalis’ lightning was, at best, half as strong as Dooku’s had been, otherwise he’d’ve maybe blacked out or worse--

He barely had time to register the thought before Infernalis was on him again; still seeing stars, he shifted to a reverse grip and stopped the Sith Lord in his tracks by driving the hilt up towards his chin. He danced back half a step, but that bought Anakin a split second to scramble back to his feet.

And a split second was all he’d needed.

He kicked out at Infernalis with his metal leg; the Sith Lord yelped and danced back a step, just barely evading a shattered kneecap; the leaves swirled, whipped up by the wind and the Force; and Anakin smiled, and attacked.

He pressed Infernalis as hard as he could, falling back on Form IV this time—hard to maintain for long, but easier to keep Infernalis from reclaiming the initiative; and he wouldn’t need much time for this.

He made a series of quick strikes, in and out, pushing the Sith Lord back and back and back to the edge of the clearing and into the denser woods beyond.
Infernalis was on the ropes now, and Anakin could tell he knew it. He was relying more and more on lightning to keep Anakin out of range; forced on the defensive; cutting down another tree to bar his way.

It wasn’t enough.

Anakin saw his opening for a final gambit after maybe five minutes of this dance--Infernalis was boxed in; between an old-growth hardwood and a highly-venomous kiirdek nest, with a heavy stone shoving its way up through the forest floor at his back.

Infernalis snarled at him, feinted left; darted right; trying to get past his guard.

The first three times, Anakin held fast, borrowing from his Master’s favored Form III and refusing to be passed.

Early tactical lessons; ones he’d learned ages ago, and gone over with Leia only hours before.

*When you do get into a duel, establish a pattern. Most beings like to follow patterns, especially when it seems in their favor--even when established by an enemy. Establish a rhythm with your opponent, so you can break it. Even if it gives them another advantage, it’ll take them a split second to reset.*

*And a split second is all you need.*

The fourth time Infernalis rushed him, Anakin gave way; feeling a shallow gash score its way across his left arm. Enough that he felt it; enough that *Infernalis* would feel it connect, but not enough to slow him down.

The Sith Lord continued one more step past him before spinning around, blade going high to cut off Anakin’s head--

But Anakin was faster.

He didn’t bother taking the time to turn; he switched his grip and drove his blade backward, ducking to the side to avoid Infernalis’ blade as it fell from suddenly nerveless hands; Infernalis let out a faint gasp--of surprise or sudden pain, Anakin couldn’t tell--as Anakin deactivated his saber and let him fall to his knees.

This was--different. Different from Dooku, where he’d mostly felt numb. Certainly different from *Specter*, who had...nearly undone him.

Watching this Sith Lord die, with the adrenaline from the fight finally draining away, Anakin just felt...tired. Sad.

*We’re a lot alike, you and I.*

And Infernalis *hadn’t been wrong*. Maybe not on the ragged edges Anakin had shared with *Specter*, that part of him that was still a volatile teenager, eager to earn his place--but there was a core they shared, something deeper than that, violent and feral and maybe not as contained as Anakin hoped.

As he’d learned again today.

As he would keep on learning for the rest of his life.
If I’d made different choices, thirteen years ago...if I’d made up my mind faster and left the Temple...I wonder if I would have ended up something like you.

The Sith Lord let out a little choking laugh. “Almost...almost had you there,” he said.

“You did,” Anakin agreed. “You did.”

And if it wasn’t exactly true, well--there was a certain compassion, due to the dying.

Wearily, he sank down at Infernalis’ side, scooping up his lightsaber so he wouldn’t get any bright ideas.

There was a sudden sense of danger, but he saw the echoing flash of metal in Infernalis’ hand just a fraction of a second too late; couldn’t get out of the way fast enough as the Sith Lord surged up with one last burst of energy.

He yelped and stumbled back, one hand going reflexively to the knife now buried in his side.

Infernalis laughed again; fell back; and died, smiling.
It took four minutes for Leia and Artoo to finish linking up with Uncle Obi-Wan’s ship--Dad or Aunt ‘Soka or Uncle Rex probably could’ve done it in two, which still would have been forever with Dad left alone with a kriffing Sith Lord, but her forever was twice as long.

*I need to get better at this stuff,* she thought.

Uncle Obi-Wan came through the hatch immediately, and first thing offered her a hug, which--okay, Luke’s had *helped,* and this one almost made her start crying which was *dumb,* she wasn’t a kid anymore she had her own lightsaber now and everything--but…

It was nice. She needed it. She could admit that.

“What happened?” Uncle Obi-Wan asked, pulling back after a few seconds.

“Dad’s in trouble,” she said.

He nodded. “What kind of trouble?”

“Infernalis,” she said. “He found us, Dad said--he told me to go get you, he said he had things under control, and…and to tell you that.”

Something Leia couldn’t quite read flickered through Uncle Obi-Wan’s eyes, but he otherwise seemed just as calm as he always was. “Do you remember exactly what he said?”

She closed her eyes, and traced back in her memory, and-- “I have everything in hand. It’s something of a specialty of mine.”

Uncle Obi-Wan muttered something he probably would never have said in front of Aunt Beru--except, maybe, on a day like *this*-- and nodded. “All right. I want you to take the ship I came in. Uncle Rex is there, he’ll take you back to base. I want you to *stay there* until you hear from me again, all right?”

“All right,” she said, wondering a little why Uncle Rex hadn’t come across, too, before deciding that didn’t really matter. “But Dad--”

“I’m going to go help him,” Obi-Wan assured her. “And I’ll make contact as soon as I can. We’ll join you shortly, if all goes well.”

“Okay,” she said. “And…and if it...if it doesn’t…”

“So you remember Doctor Naar?”

She nodded.

“If things go badly, we’ll meet you there instead,” Uncle Obi-Wan said. Which made sense, because that was closer than Crait. She was pretty sure, anyway. *Astronav. Lots of studying. Soon as we get to Crait.*

“All right,” she said again.
Do you want me to go with her? Artoo asked.

Uncle Obi-Wan glanced at the readout--he wasn’t as good at understanding Artoo without something to translate as she and Dad were--then shook his head. “No, I think I’ll need your help on this one, my friend.”

“The ship flies better when you’re on it, anyway,” Leia said. “Even Dad says that.”

Artoo whistled something like a laugh, then went back to the navicomputer.

Uncle Obi-Wan wasn’t quite managing to hide a little smile behind his beard when she turned, but it faded quickly and his face went completely serious again.

“Go,” he said. “Tell Uncle Rex to detach as quickly as possible, and get moving. I’ll contact you as soon as I can.”

Leia nodded. “Okay,” she said, then hesitated a moment before hugging him one last time. “May the Force be with you, Uncle Obi-Wan.”

“And you, little one,” he said, then nudged her towards the hatch.

She nodded once, then darted across without looking back, heading straight for the cockpit and Uncle Rex as soon as the hatch sealed itself; trusting the Force to keep her from getting lost in the dim, cluttered hallways.

Uncle Obi-Wan would take care of this. Everything was gonna be fine.

As long as she kept telling herself that, she was sure she’d start believing it soon.

Leia had just faded into her usual spot in the back of Luke’s head when Aunt Motee came to get him so they could head to the Palace.

“…everything all right?” she’d asked, taking one look at him.

“Yeah,” he’d said. “I’m ready, let’s go.”

It wasn’t that part of Luke—a pretty big part, even—hadn’t wanted to say no, and cancel his trip to the Palace to see Lavinia. There was too much going on in his head, he’d barely had time to even process what Leia had told him, and however much he tried to bury it, he knew it would just be eating away at him until he heard from his sister again. Which would be hours, even if everything went exactly as well as they hoped from here on.

Hours of not knowing--well, he was pretty sure he’d know if Dad was--

He tried not to think about that.

Except maybe seeing his friend, instead of just pacing around his room and worrying, would be a good thing. Help him calm down.

Seeing Lani would give him other things to think about, which was probably better when there wasn’t anything he could do besides worry. It was the same thing that had been bugging him since
that last trip home, except a whole lot more, because now there was something specific for him to focus on.

Besides. The last time he’d had to cancel a visit at the last minute, it had been two months before he’d been allowed to see her again, and he didn’t want that to happen. It wouldn’t be good for him or Lani. He knew that much.

Aunt Motee hadn’t brought it up again while they drove over there, but she’d kept maybe a closer eye on him than usual on the way down to the garage. He’d gone straight into the back of the speeder rather than asking to drive—which she wouldn’t have let him anyway, Coruscant law said sixteen and they were headed to the Palace so they couldn’t fudge it. He’d shut his eyes and gone through some of the relaxing exercises Leia had showed him, and by the time they actually got to the Palace, it had worked. Kind of. Mostly.

Enough that they made it the rest of the way in without any problems.

That had been a couple hours ago, and now he and Lani were out on her balcony, which was the closest thing they ever got to privacy. Which normally didn’t matter, except a couple months ago, Lani had asked him to teach her how to pick locks, and that was generally something better to do without witnesses.

“If someone tries to kidnap me again,” Lani had said, “especially if they’re better at it and actually get me off-planet, I would like to be able to do something. I don’t know how long a rescue will take to get to me, after all.”

It was hard to argue with that logic. And Mom had all kinds of stories about the times she’d used a hairpin and a sloppy search against someone who wanted to hold her hostage. Lockpicking was a valuable skill to have.

“Got it,” Lani said, pulling her hands out from behind her back. The binders were still hanging from one wrist, but the goal wasn’t to get totally free, just enough to escape whatever had gotten her into them in the first place.

“That was faster, I think,” Luke said. “Less than a minute.”

“We should try a harder set, next time,” she said. “Could you see my shoulders moving?”

He made a face. “Sorry, I wasn’t watching as close as I should have.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I can try again.”

“Fast is good,” he pointed out.

“Secrets are better,” she countered. “If I know something the people trying to hurt me don’t, that might be the only advantage I have.”

“I guess that makes sense,” he said.

She refastened the binders behind her back. She closed her eyes, and Luke really did try to pay attention this time. She’d asked him to help, and hadn’t he wanted something to focus on besides—

“Is everything all right?” Lani asked. There was a very, very small shift in the set of her shoulders, but otherwise she hadn’t moved. Hadn’t even opened her eyes.

“All right,” she said. “You just seem…”

“…sorry, I’m kind of distracted, I know,” he said.

“Can I help?”

He wished he could tell her. She was one of his best friends, and he hated that he could never be totally honest with her. He knew the reasons why, and he did what he had to, but he didn’t like it.

And even more than that, even more than not liking secrets between them…he needed a friend right now, someone he could talk to about how worried that back corner of his mind was, about Leia and Dad and everyone. Which he couldn’t do with Mom, because if this was how upset he was, for her it would be worse and that wasn’t fair. She was closer to it than he was, probably, and Aunt Sola had told him once--when something bad happens, the people closest to it should never have to comfort anyone who’s farther away.

…but, then again, this thing with Dad wasn’t the only thing that had been bothering him lately, and there was something he could talk to Lani about. And Lani might’ve been only ten, but she was almost as good at sideways thinking as Aunt Sabe. Maybe three quarters, or a little less. Enough to help.

Maybe if he worked through one problem, the rest wouldn’t seem so big. Just like picking a flight school had, until more problems landed on him.

“Just…” He sighed. “It’s kind of dumb.”

“It’s still bothering you,” she said, then frowned; her right shoulder lifted another couple of centimeters. “What happened?”


“I didn’t see anything weird in the official reports?” she said, opening her eyes again.

“Yeah, well,” Luke said. “This wasn’t exactly official. I haven’t told Mom. Yet.” He hadn’t known Lani had access to those--he should probably let Mom know about that, if she didn’t already.

“Oh,” she said, and then there was a click; she pulled the binders out again, but didn’t bother refastening them or asking how she’d done. “What happened?”

“Couple of Assembly members approached me,” he said. “About running.”

“For Queen?”

“Yeah.”

She nodded. “That…makes sense,” she said. “That they’d ask you. And that you’d say no.”

“You don’t think that’s weird?” he asked. “Or the wrong decision?”

“For you?” Lani said. “No, definitely not. You’d be very unhappy, I think.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Plus, I don’t think I’d be any good at it. All the stuff Mom does…I help where I can, but I’m not like her. Not in that way.”

She tilted her head to one side, considering. “I think you could be. Not the same way your mother was, but you could be. If you wanted it enough.”
“Thanks,” Luke said. “But...I don’t know, I know what I’m good at, I think, and it’s not politics.”

“No, maybe not the politics,” Lani admitted. “You’re too nice to be good at politics.”

He laughed, which felt nice. “Thanks, I think?”

She wrinkled her nose a little. “That sounded meaner than I meant it, sorry.”

“No, I know what you mean,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “And I meant that--maybe not the politics, but you’d be good at leading people, if you wanted to.”

“Maybe someday,” he said. “But not from Theed. Not that way. I don’t really want that.”

She nodded, and her eyes flickered towards the door to her room, where her guard was stationed just inside. “But, anyway, I don’t want you to stop being nice. There’s not enough nice people in the galaxy.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promised her.

“Good,” she said again, and then fell quiet for a minute. “Because...I mean, going back to what you were asking before...I watch how the Senate and the Moff’s and all of them work, and...” She shrugged. “But you don’t want it, and that’s the most important thing. I think you have to want it, one way or another.”

“That’s true,” Luke said. He’d watched the Senate, too, and if he wasn’t good at finding the patterns the way Mom was and Lani was learning how to be--almost all the Senators wanted to be there, for one reason or another.

A lot of the time, because they wanted power for themselves.

Sometimes, because they wanted to make sure their constituents didn’t get ignored or trampled over more than anyone else.

Every once in a while, because they genuinely thought they could make the galaxy a better place. Like Mom, and Uncle Bail, and Aunt Mon.

He didn’t know the Queens very well, though he’d met pretty much everyone who’d been elected since he’d been born, and a few from before that were still at least a little involved in public life. But it was probably true for them, too.

Luke felt himself easing a little bit. He hadn’t exactly been doubting that he’d made the right choice before, except...

“Do you think your mother will be upset?” she asked. “That you said no, I mean. Is that why you’re worried?”

“No,” Luke said, immediately. “I mean...I’m not worried about that. She might be upset, but not with me. She knows the kind of person I am, and the kind of life I want, and if she’s ever been...if she’s ever been...sad, or disappointed, or whatever, that I’m not like her and I’m not interested in politics or the kind of life she’s had, she’s never ever let it on to me. And I’m not sure she is sad about it, if that makes sense?”

“It can be a hard life,” Lani said. “And maybe she wants something simpler and safer for you?”
“Not exactly, but close enough. “But she’d be mad at the people who asked me,” he said. “Especially since probably most of why they asked is because I’m her son, and that’s not how it’s supposed to work. Not on Naboo.”

She nodded. “So, if your mom found out, she’d be mad, and then it would be a Problem,” she guessed.

“Yeah,” Luke said. “I mean… I don’t know how much of a problem, because Mom isn’t like that exactly, but she loves me and she loves our planet and the way our government should be, in an ideal world, and all of that lining up…”

“She’d try to fight the entire Assembly over this,” Lani said.

“Maybe,” Luke said. “Or at least she’d make some angry calls. Maybe a speech, depending on how big a faction wanted this.”

She nodded. “And then that would be all over the news services until something else happened to draw their attention.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Which is kind of cool, seeing Mom in the news, but also kind of embarrassing, especially for something like this. And I don’t want her to get distracted from her actual job ‘cause she thinks she has to defend me, you know?”

“That makes sense.”

“And it’s dumb, because they were really nice about it when I said no, even if I was kind of awkward and just sort of blurted it out.”

Lani considered that for a moment, then with carefully-pretended surprise, just enough that he could tell, she said, “Really? I never would’ve guessed, I’d’ve thought you’d have a perfect answer on the spur of the moment, just like in the movies—”

He laughed and threw a seat cushion at her, which she ducked. “Thanks,” he said, only half-sarcastic.

“Better?”

“…a little.”

She nodded. “It takes time.”

“Yeah,” he said. *But at least this doesn’t feel quite as much of a problem anymore.*

“Okay,” she said. “We’ve got another half-hour or so before your aunt comes to get you. Do you want to play a different game now?”

Which meant her wrists were probably getting sore, or she wanted to be doing something more innocent when they were called in. Or both. Probably both.

“Sure,” he said. “And I’ll see if I can get a better set of binders for next time.”

“Thank you,” she said. “Cards or dejark?”

“Dejarik,” he said. He played against his aunts sometimes--and almost always lost--but it had been a while since he and Lani had played.
Besides, it took a little more thought than cards and he had a feeling that if he let his mind wander, he’d just start worrying about Dad and Leia again.

“Dejarik, then,” she said, getting to work on her second cuff. “Just give me a minute with this.”

“Got it,” he said, and pulled the portable set out from under the bench to start setting it up.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in getting this updated! Time got away from me, holidays, etc.

Also, as a note about Luke being asked to run for office--Queen's Shadow, at least to me, implied that the monarch of Naboo is always a queen/girl, which...well, I had a variety of issues with that, which I wrote up here, if you're curious. Anyway, I decided to go the Dealing with Dragons route as a result--meaning that Queen is an Official Job Title, regardless of the gender of the person holding it (as with the King of the Dragons in the aforementioned novel!) ETA: I've updated that post to clarify a couple points that came up in comments here.

We are getting close to the end of this arc! Probably threeish more chapters? And after that, there's gonna be some formatting/etc. changes. Please see this post on my writing tumblr for detail.

Thanks so much for stopping by! <3 ~shadowsong
Leia came back through the hatch alone, which was not what Rex was expecting. But General Kenobi knew what he was about, and the last Rex had looked, Ohnaka was still out cold.

She accepted a quick hug, then said, “Uncle Obi-Wan said to detach as fast as possible and then go back to base.”

“Got it,” Rex said; he checked the seal on the airlock, then pulled the lever. “C’mon, cockpit’s this way.”

Leia nodded and followed him down the corridor, climbing into the copilot seat with a faint frown.

“It’ll be fine, ad’ika,” he assured her.

“I know,” she said, watching the Waterfall maneuver away and then disappear into hyperspace. “Just...I know.”

Rex put a hand on her shoulder, squeezed briefly, then double-checked the nav system. He considered, for a moment, going back to the relay point where he and General Kenobi had picked up Ohnaka in the first place to drop the pirate off, rather than exposing their base. Trusting him with individuals was hard enough, and trusting him with Crait...

*Let’s go by standard evac procedures,* he decided. *Redirect a couple times on our way out. Depending on what condition the General is in when he gets there, Kenobi may want us to meet them somewhere else, anyway. I’ve got time to make that call.*

Once he was satisfied with their intermediate destination, he hit the lever and sent them into hyperspace.

She stared out at the swirling stars. “...everything had gone so *good* up til he showed up,” she said, after a moment.

“Happens like that sometimes,” Rex said. “A lot of the time, actually. Change comes faster than anyone wants.”

“Yeah,” she said, and sighed. “...you want to see it?”

Her ‘saber, she probably meant.

“Of course,” he said.

She stood up, took a breath, unclipped it from her belt, and ignited it, filling the cockpit with a shimmery turquoise glow.

Rex didn’t know much about lightsabers, but he knew she was proud of it, and it looked solid and *suited* to her, to his untrained eye.

“That’s amazing,” he said. “I’m proud of you. I’m sure we all are, little Commander,” he added, with a brief salute.
She shut it off, and shook her head. “Don’t do that, okay?” she said. “You’re still Uncle Rex, I don’t want that to change. Please?”

“It won’t,” he promised her. “Ad’ika.” And--maybe it should have, with that Jedi weapon in her hands; maybe it should have been hard to still think of her as his beloved niece, the kid he’d helped raise, but the old endearment felt just as easy as it had that morning, and days ago, and all these years.

“Good,” she said, then launched herself across the meter or so dividing them, pulling him into a tight hug.

He held her close until she let go, and pretended he didn’t see her wiping at her eyes.

“I’m gonna go practice in the hold for a while;” she said. “Unless you need me up here?”

“Go ahead,” he said. “Careful of the clutter, all right?”

“I will be,” she promised. “Love you, Uncle Rex.”

“Love you, too, ad’ika,” he said, and then she slipped away, leaving him to worry about the General and Ohnaka and contemplate the swirling sky alone.

It was after local nightfall, but only just, when Obi-Wan and Artoo landed, not far from where the droid and Leia had left Anakin--longer ago than he would have liked. They found the place where the Waterfall had been within moments--the grass, while beginning to sway slightly in a chill evening wind, was still flattened down where the base of the ship had been--and set down at precisely the same spot.

He could sense Anakin--close by, and unmoving, but definitely alive and not fading.

He could not sense Infernalis.

That...augurs well, I think, he thought.

Artoo beeped inquisitively behind him.

“No, stay here,” he said, after checking the readout. “Keep the engines warm. Everything seems in order, but…”

He didn’t need the translation of the droid’s response, somewhere between worried and sarcastic, because it wasn’t far from what was in his own head at the moment.

He lowered the ramp; the air outside was colder than he expected, cold enough that he could see the steam off his breath. He made sure his ‘saber was ready in his hand, just in case, and took off, at speed, in the general direction of Anakin’s presence.

It didn’t take him particularly long to come across signs of the fight. Charred tree trunks, including at least one completely downed tree, ashen leaves and grooves in the earth. It had spread further from the ship for maybe a quarter of a mile, before the two of them had had their final engagement in a clearing.
Infernalis was sprawled across the grass, face to the sky with his eyes open, wearing an unsettling smile. Anakin was leaning against one of the larger trees—an old-growth hardwood next to a large rock and not far from a kiirdek nest. Fortunately, given the season, the venomous creatures inside were likely hibernating, but they would rouse if threatened enough.

Anakin’s eyes were closed and his face was worryingly grey, with his lightsaber in one hand and the other half-inside his tunic.

There was blood on the ground, shimmering in the low twilight.

He stirred a little, but didn’t open his eyes. “You made it,” he said.

“Of course I did,” Obi-Wan said. “Although it looks like I missed all the fun.”

“Mnhmm.”

He stepped over Infernalis’ body—paused a moment, reached down to shut his eyes—then took the last few steps across the clearing and knelt next to Anakin. And—now that he was closer, he could see the darker spot on his brother’s tunic, which was dishearteningly large; the hilt of a knife glimmered faintly, still buried in Anakin’s side.

Oh.

Anakin knew better than to pull the knife out without an extra pair of hands to help control the bleeding after, unless he had no other choice. The fact that he’d been able to leave it in was something of a relief, then, as it meant the knife probably hadn’t been poisoned, which was—always a worry, with someone like Infernalis.

Even so, that was…quite a bit of his blood on his tunic and the ground. Hard to tell how much internal damage the knife had done.

“How bad is it?” he asked, resting a hand against Anakin’s neck to check his pulse—thready and rapid, but still there.

“Not that bad,” he said. “Think the bleeding’s mostly stopped.”

And he’s still conscious, which is...that’s something.

“What happened?”

“Wasn’t watching his hands close enough,” Anakin said. “Missed the knife.”

“Ah,” he said. He tore a few strips from the hem of his tunic, wrapping them around Anakin’s torso to make sure the knife stayed steady when he moved. Better to leave actually pulling it to an expert, as soon as they could reach one. “Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“Don’t think so,” he said. “Not seriously, anyway.”

He nodded. That about lined up with what he could see—a few tears and scorch marks in Anakin’s tunic, indicating minor hits from the Sith Lord’s saber, but nothing of immediate concern. And thank the Force for that--this could have been so much worse. “I’m glad you’re--well, at least mostly all right.”

“Mm,” Anakin said. “I’m leaving with as many limbs as I came with and everything.”

“Still not funny,” Obi-Wan said, but--well, Anakin was conscious, and as lucid as he ever was, and
his injuries weren’t--given what Leia had said before, Obi-Wan could feel himself relaxing.

“What are you talking about?” Anakin said, opening his eyes at last and giving him a tired, crooked smile. “I’m hilarious.”

“Yes, clearly,” he said, deliberately not smiling and giving a perhaps slightly theatrical sigh instead. “Can you stand?”

“I think so,” Anakin said. He started to drag himself upright; stopped; placed a hand against the tree to steady himself. “Uh.”

Wordlessly, Obi-Wan slid under his arm and helped him get to his feet. Between the two of them, they managed it without Anakin passing out; nonetheless, Obi-Wan caught himself half-holding his breath, just waiting for something else to go wrong.

Anakin didn’t resist the extra support, which was both gratifying and worrying, but he was on his feet and still awake and aware.

“Leia?” he asked.

“With Rex,” Obi-Wan assured him. *And Hondo*, though he chose not to mention that out loud just yet. He would fill Anakin in once he was lying down somewhere warm and relatively safe; that way, if he overstressed at the thought and fainted, he was less likely to do further damage.

It hadn’t been ideal, but he and Rex had used most of the medical supplies on Hondo’s ship already, and with no way of knowing exactly how badly Anakin was hurt, that was a serious factor to consider. The *Waterfall* was better stocked, and attempting to move Hondo over as well would’ve wasted time and possibly injured him worse, which was also not ideal.

In the end, it had been the better of the two options. Besides, Hondo was his friend, and after thirteen years, Obi-Wan felt he could, for the most part, have faith in Hondo’s goodwill--and sense of self-preservation. And if he was wrong, he certainly trusted Rex to handle any problems that might crop up.

“We’re to meet them back at base,” he added, “although I think we should stop and see Doctor Naar first.” The clinic was closer--only by an hour or two, but the sooner Anakin got actual help, the better. The longer they waited, the more likely complications were to arise as he healed. And given the time that had already passed...

Of course, that meant it was Anakin’s turn to give a theatrical sigh, after which he winced and curled around his side again, his free hand tightening just a hair on Obi-Wan’s shoulder. The metal one, which meant bruises; but Obi-Wan could handle it. It was hardly the first time such a thing had happened. In either direction, as a matter of fact--although, lacking a metal hand, Obi-Wan didn’t think he’d gripped that tightly...

“All right?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah, sorry, just...” Anakin took a breath, and Obi-Wan felt the Force swirl around him, lending him energy his body couldn’t provide at the moment. “I don’t think it’s *that* bad.”

Because of *course* he didn’t. “Indulge me.”

“Fine, fine,” Anakin said, and didn’t argue further as Obi-Wan began guiding him back to where he’d left the ship.
They walked in silence for a time, Obi-Wan concentrating on the terrain around them and making sure Anakin didn’t fall and hurt himself worse; he kept his lightsaber in his free hand, just in case, but with Infernalis dead in the clearing and the native fauna only just starting to resume their normal routines, he doubted he would need it.

Still, better safe than sorry.

“Master?” Anakin said, after perhaps five or ten minutes of their slow, careful trek through the battered woods.

“Hm?”

“...you know I trust you, right?”

“Of course,” he said. “And I trust you, completely.” There was something about the way he’d said it, though... he paused, and half-turned to look at him a little more closely. “...Anakin, is everything--did Infernalis--?”

“No,” Anakin said quickly. “Or, I mean, he didn’t tell me anything I don’t already know. Just...you know, Sith Lords. The way he said it.”

“He was trying to get under your skin,” Obi-Wan said, as bracingly as he could. Although he doubted what Infernalis said was anywhere close to what he would consider the truth, or that the Sith Lord had his own Master’s particular talent for making half-truths out to be the worst case scenario...

That didn’t mean whatever he’d thrown at Anakin hadn’t hurt. Quite...quite deeply, by the sound of things. As deeply as the knife.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

He shook his head. “Not...not right now,” he said. “Still too…”

Obi-Wan nodded, and they got moving again. “Later, though. When you’re ready.”

“Yeah,” Anakin said. “Later.”

They rounded the last bend in the path, and the Waterfall, warm and lit and vibrating with light, was a welcome sight. “Almost there, old friend,” Obi-Wan said.

“Good,” he said. “...I think I might pass out. Sorry.”

“It’s all right,” he assured him. “Rest as much as you need. I’ll be here.”

“I know you will,” he murmured, as they hit the ramp—safety, or something near it, at last. “I know.”

When Rex went to check on her, Leia had cleared herself some space in the hold, by some miracle, and was running saber forms. Like Rex had seen her and her dad and the other Jedi do time and time again.
...and he wasn’t the only one watching.

**Kriffing hell**--

Rex moved, before Leia could notice the pirate or Ohnaka could do or say anything. He grabbed Ohnaka’s uninjured shoulder and hauled him back into the corridor, shoving him up against the wall and pinning him there with his left forearm—*not* trying to choke him out, since he didn’t know *for sure* that Ohnaka was an active threat; General Kenobi trusted Ohnaka, and Rex trusted General Kenobi—while his right went for his pistol.

He didn’t say a word. He didn’t have to.

“Ah, my clever, suspicious friend,” Ohnaka said, softly; there was a hell of a lot less than his usual flair to it. Trying to keep up appearances, probably, but for all his effort, he mostly sounded tired.

*Blood loss will do that to a man.*

Still, you’d think that between the blood and the drugs Rex had given him…

He let up the pressure. “Cockpit,” he said, after a quick glance at Leia to make sure she was still all focused on her exercises. “We need to talk.”

Ohnaka nodded, and made a shadow of one of his usual sweeping gestures. “After you, my friend.”

Rex just stared at him.

“Oh, very well, if you insist,” he said, and started down the hallway.

Rex spared one more glance at Leia before following, keeping the pirate in sight and his gun ready, just in case.

Ohnaka sank into the copilot’s chair with a sigh, and Rex took the other seat, more stiffly.

“...how the hell are you *conscious*?” he started with. “What I gave you could’ve taken down a rancor.”

“Ah, but I am *not* a rancor,” Ohnaka said. “I am a Weequay. That drug doesn’t work so well on my kind. Or Zabraks...a few others.”

That--was something he should’ve thought of.

“Right,” Rex said. “So, I know for next time.”

“Yes,” he said.

The silence hung heavy between them for a moment, with Rex debating the best way to proceed.

Outright threats?

Oh, that was *tempting*. To say, *If you ever hurt her, in any way, I don’t care how much General Kenobi likes you. I will hunt you down and end you.*

It was true, too.

But that risked burning a bridge that his Jedi might want to use again someday. So, against all instinct, Rex went with a more moderate approach.
“I don’t trust you,” he said, instead. “Not with--what you saw, down in the hold. With who you saw. General Kenobi might, but I don’t trust you.”

“That is because you are a very clever man,” Ohnaka said, with a faint smile. “You should not trust me. There is very little I will not do, if there is enough profit in it. But--” He held up a hand to stop Rex from interrupting. “Sometimes, there is more profit in keeping a secret than in selling one. Yes?”

Rex studied him for a long moment. “Are you trying to blackmail us?”

“Of course not,” he said. “I am not so foolish. But Kenobi is my very dear, very valued friend, and as you said, he trusts me. Whether or not he should. But, from where I sit, I find very little is worth losing that. So, I have kept Kenobi’s secrets for thirteen years, and I do not intend to stop.”

That was--something, at least. And it was true. Kenobi had told him that he’d run into Ohnaka within weeks of--everything. And Ohnaka hadn’t turned him in then, or at any point since. Rex wasn’t exactly a gambling man, but even he would bet on the pirate having multiple opportunities to do so.

“...I suppose that’s fair,” he said, after a long moment. “And I’ll--accept that, for now. Because General Kenobi trusts you, and I trust him.”

“Perfectly reasonable,” Ohnaka said, nodding. “After all, who can say where we will be five years from now? So many things change so quickly in this galaxy of ours. Especially under the current regime. But..well, I consider myself a Jedi sympathizer, even in these times, yes? So, I will promise you this much: that child in the hold--I may not go out of my way to help her, unless there is some other profit in it for me as well, but I will not harm her.”

Rex considered that, then nodded, and offered the pirate his hand. “Fair enough,” he said.

“Wonderful,” Ohnaka said, accepting it with a grip that was firmer than Rex had expected, given his general slippery character, and the bloodloss, and whatever was left of the sedatives in his system. “We are all friends, then!”

“Yeah, don’t push it,” Rex said.

Ohnaka laughed at that, but the door behind them swished open, cutting off any actual reply he could make.

“...uh,” Leia said. “Hi.”

“Hello, my young friend!” Ohnaka said. “I am Hondo Ohnaka, a very dear friend of your uncle Kenobi!”

Which was--a very revealing way to introduce himself.

...just how much did he know already?

“Sure,” Leia said. “I’m Leia.”

“The Captain and I were just having a very--enlightening conversation,” he said, then gave a theatrical sigh and gestured to his shoulder. “But our business is concluded and, alas, I think I should perhaps return to my bed. You and I will have to get to know one another some other time.”

She frowned. “Are you all right?”
“Of course, of course,” he said. “Just a scratch, nothing more. But I will depart until the next time. I am certain that you and Hondo will meet again, young Leia.” He stood up, and gave a flourishy bow, patting her head as he walked past, leaving her and Rex in the cockpit alone.

Leia stared after him, then wrinkled her nose and poked at her braids to make sure he hadn’t mussed them too much.

“That’s…” Rex sighed. “Like he said, General Kenobi likes him, and he has helped us out in a pinch more than once. He’s a…well, an ally.”

“Right,” Leia said. “…is he always like that?”

“Usually, he’s worse,” Rex said dryly.

She cracked a smile, and climbed into the seat Ohnaka had just vacated. “I don’t know, I think he might grow on me.” There was a faint thunk when her pocket hit the side of the seat; she blinked and reached in, pulling out--

--one of the bacta cultures they’d tried to steal.

...well, General Kenobi did say to search him.

“…is this what I think it is?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Rex said. “Careful with it, all right?”

She nodded. “Do I even want to know how he got it?”

“Well--”

The console chimed, interrupting him; time to drop out of hyperspace for their first redirect.

“--hold that thought,” he said.

“Right,” she said, settling back in the chair and holding the vial very, very delicately in one hand; but he knew, from experience, and knowing how well she’d been taught, that her attention was spiraling outward, looking for trouble while he reset the nav.

It was about halfway through calculating when the console chimed again, this time the comm system; he recognized the signature as one of Artoo’s encryptions.

Oh, thank every deity in the known universe. …I hope.

“Go ahead and get that,” he said. “It’s for us.”

She perked up immediately and hit the receive button.

No video--probably safer that way--but General Kenobi’s slightly staticky voice filled the cockpit.

“Rex?”

“It’s me, actually,” Leia said. “But Uncle Rex is here, too. Is everything okay? Is Dad…?”

“With me, and safe,” he assured her. “We’re going to make a brief detour to see Dr. Naar.”

Leia paled, and Rex felt himself gripping the arm of his seat just a little tighter. “That bad, sir?” he
"Yes and no," he said. "I don’t think we’ll be there long, and we can still meet you at the base. I just didn’t want you to be concerned at the delay."

Well, that was...not at all as reassuring as General Kenobi probably thought it was.

"Can I talk to him?" Leia asked. "Please?"

"He’s sleeping, little one," General Kenobi said. "But we’ll call again when he wakes, all right?"

Leia bit her lip, then nodded. "Okay," she said. "He’s really--he’s really okay? You promise?"

"I promise," General Kenobi assured her. "This is mostly being extra cautious, and taking advantage of having a friend we can count on, one we can reach more quickly than the base medics. If anything changes, you will be the first person I call."

"Okay," she said again.

"We have a detour of our own to make, anyway," Rex said. "Need to see to our guest."

"Probably for the best," Kenobi said, after a brief moment of silence. "How is he holding up?"

"Yeah, less sedated than I thought," Rex said. "Weequay, different metabolism. Everything’s fine, though. We talked."

"...fill me in on the details when we meet," he said. "Artoo is telling me I should end the call, anyway."

"When will you get there?" Leia said.

"Barring anything else going wrong, some time tomorrow," he said.

"Right," she said. "I’ll keep an eye out."

"We’ll be in touch," he said. "May the Force be with you."

"You, too."

"See you soon, sir."

The connection cut off, and Leia sighed. "I wish I was there," she complained.

"Me, too, ad'ika," Rex admitted. There had been too damn little concrete information in that, only that General Skywalker was hurt badly enough that speed in getting treatment was important—but not so badly that he couldn’t be moved, he supposed. Which was somewhat heartening, when he thought about it that way. "But General Kenobi has a handle on things, yeah? And he would’ve said if things were...were as bad as last time." Not outright, maybe, but there were ways. Telling them to meet at Dr. Naar’s, for starters.

That did seem to reassure the kid, though, which was good. "That’s true," she said, relaxing a little.

He smiled at her, then reset the nav to a waypoint that would get them closer to where they’d met Hondo. "It’ll be fine, ad'ika," he said, as he hit the lever and the stars swirled around them once again.
And if it was as much to reassure himself as her...well, she didn’t need to know that.

But between the promise Ohnaka had given him, and everything General Kenobi had said, he felt closer to believing it than he had since they’d first gotten Leia’s distress call hours ago.

“Just hold tight for a little bit longer,” he added. “And everything will be fine.”

Chapter End Notes

I know it's been a while, but I'm here XD. I know things are Really Weird right now, but I am here and have no intention of that changing. Thank you guys so much for your patience!!! I can't promise exactly when the next chapter will be coming up, due to some other fanfic commitments with a hard deadline, but hopefully soon?

In other news, as I mentioned in the last update (lo these many months ago <. <) we are coming close to the end of Arc Seven. I'm guessing one or two chapters left, depending on how long these last few scenes end up being/how I decide to split them up. At that point, there will be a bit of a shakeup in how I post this story--most pertinently, I'll be splitting off into a second fic beginning with Arc Eight, most likely titled either Protectors or Promises. I'm doing this partly for length concerns, and partly because of some shifts in the narrative at that point. Just to be extra clear, I am not done in this AU by any means (unless y'all are, but I hope not???), but there's a divide coming. For more detail, see this post on my writing tumblr. ...obviously some of the things about scheduling mentioned in there are out of date XD But the general context of plans for this story still applies.

Anyway, I just want to say thank you guys again for stopping by and sticking with me on this ride. <3333333333 ~shadowsong

Works inspired by this one choices we make and their consequences, by Konokuro

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!