A Mouthful of Ash

by jcrowquill

Summary

What if Obi-Wan hadn't let Anakin burn on Mustafar? On the run from the newly formed Galactic Empire, Obi-Wan and Anakin must come to terms with the fact that they both still need each other, even if they don't know how to forgive each other for what has happened.

(Friday updates, working on illustrations.)
I. Mustafar

Every breath of the air on Mustafar smelled like sulfur and dried Obi-Wan’s tongue. More from the tension than heat, he could feel his strength flagging as he fought with his apprentice. Matched in skill and similar in technique, their steps and strikes flowed like a dance as they transitioned from walkway to tower to precarious platforms over a lava flow.

“Anakin, Chancellor Palpatine is evil.”

Anakin looked lithe and strong, as though the heat and the horror was an armor that energized him. His face was glossy with sweat, lit sharply from below, as he shouted furiously, “From the Jedi point of view! From my point of view, the Jedi are evil.”

The impact of the words was more devastating than a physical blow. Shocked and struggling to maintain his calm control of his mind and his blade, Obi-Wan retorted, “Well, then you are lost!”

“This is the end for you, My Master. I wish it were otherwise.”

The sith’s expression was hard to read, and harder still to reconcile with his words. To Obi-Wan’s ear, there was triumph and elation rather than remorse; as far as he could perceive it, the power flowing through Anakin overwhelmed any emotion that inconvenienced him.

Anakin jumped onto the platform, and they were once again matched, moving in perfect time. Thousands of hours of practice and the lingering remains of a deep force bond put their odds even and allowed them to anticipate each other. Tiring quickly, his thoughts turbulent, Obi-Wan felt that he could die here; this new incarnation of Anakin lacked restraint, where something in the older Jedi was still holding back.

Dancing back a step, he spotted a place where the bank of black volcanic sand came close to their path. With a lucky jump, he made it to the safety of solid ground and landed awkwardly as the sand shifted. Mastering his stance, he looked back to his former Padawan.

“It’s over, Anakin. I have the high ground.”

Incensed, Palpatine’s apprentice shouted back, “You underestimate my power!”

If Anakin had lowered his blade, Obi-Wan might have let him go; even now, he didn’t feel that he had the strength to end his life. Let us walk away, let us come back to this when I’ve made a plan. Anakin, don’t do this. Don’t try it.

“Don’t try it.”

Anakin did and Obi-Wan reacted instinctively, bringing his lightsaber up and around in defensive arc.

His stomach dropped at the the sensation of his light saber gliding cleanly through his former
Padawan’s limbs, severing bone and muscle as though they were as insubstantial as cobweb. In that fraction of a second, his heart caved in on itself, almost depriving him of the strength to stand. They exchanged a few emotionally charged accusations, but his eyes were only half-focused on the scene before him; all he could think about was how hot the ground felt through his soles of his boots and how it must have been burning Anakin’s skin through his dark robes.

The heat had already burned away Anakin’s thin glove, exposing his metal hand. He struggled to claw his way up the embankment with his only remaining limb, but he can’t find a solid hold. He slipped back again and again toward the lava and sweating, moaning in pain, tried to drag himself back.

“You were the Chosen One! It was said that you would, destroy the Sith, not join them. It was you who would bring balance to the Force, not leave it in Darkness,” Obi-Wan cried out in pain, his chest constricted so tightly that he wasn’t sure that he’d ever be able to draw a full breath again.

“I hate you!”

“You were my brother, Anakin. I loved you!”

As he shouted at him that he loved him, he thought of how wrong it was to say words like that now when he’d never said them before - not the times when the other man was falling asleep against his back, not when Anakin had wordlessly begged for an affirmation that his attachment was returned, not any of the times when they'd been alone with no excuses.

But he’d chosen now, when the only purpose was to hurt him with words that he should have said every time they parted ways and every time they met again.

And now was the time to walk away, to reaffirm himself as that perfect, emotionless Jedi that Anakin should have become. It was time to let the planet burn him up and swallow him into the lava flow; Jedi didn’t kill, after all, they just walked away and let happen what would happen.

It was the same thing, but with an element of chance that left their hands clean.

And now, with Anakin’s lightsaber in his hand, he realized that this was the last moment that mattered. It might be the last moment that would ever matter, the moment when Anakin wasn’t alone. When someone didn't leave him behind, when someone took his pain, his anger, his flaws, and his secrets and shouldered their weight alongside him. When someone forgave him, when someone carried him.

“Master, help me,” Anakin begged.

Against everything he knew and everything he had ever been taught, Obi-Wan turned back and lifted him into his arms. Anakin, blinded by a haze of pain, was still save for the bare metal hand that gripped his former master’s shoulder like five broken blades.

II. Polis Massa

As doctors fought to stabilize Anakin, who had gone into shock at the loss of his limbs, Padmé brought two babies into a heartbroken world.

Her spirit was buried under the weight of what had happened on her behalf - how could she live
knowing that her husband had sacrificed others to save her from something he may have imagined? That wasn’t her choice, but she had chosen him. She had known he was a murderer since the slaughter on Tatooine and she had married him anyway; she had made the choice out of love, but who would their children become with a father like him?

The weight was heavy and her body was weak; her throat had been crushed by his Force-grip and her lungs were burned by Mustafar’s acrid air.

Obi-Wan took her hand and spoke softly to her as she gave him the names she had chosen for her children.

“There’s still good in him,” she breathed, fighting sleep, “I have to believe that.”

Obi-Wan nodded, sighing, “I am so sorry, Padmé. None of this should have ever happened. I failed him and this is my fault.”

She smiled tiredly, looking across the room to where the doctors were tending to her babies. She loved them already, more than she had ever loved anything or anyone else.

“It isn’t. We all made our choices.”

He sighed, feeling little relief from her absolution. Across the galaxy he could feel the lights of his fellow Jedi being snuffed out and he knew that the danger for them had not passed; Palpatine would want his apprentice, and there was nothing to say that Anakin would accept his first master again in the face of his apparent betrayal.

“You should sleep. The road ahead won’t be easy. Palpatine will want him back for certain and… and possibly the twins as well.”

She turned her gaze to him only briefly before looking back to her children, “It would be best to separate us from him; we stand a better chance on our own.”

“Will you allow Anakin to meet his children, if he comes through this?”

Padmé didn’t look at him, but the fine muscles of her throat tightened and her desaturated lips pressed together firmly for a moment.

“Perhaps in time,” she said quietly, though her voice was firm.

He chewed his lower lip, then reached over to rest his hand on hers where it was encumbered by several IV tubes. Watching her and feeling the depth of her guilt and pain, Obi-Wan knew that once she left the ship, she would leave them all behind. It wasn’t his place to ask her to stay.

“Can I ask you to stay in contact with me, so that I can see that you’re safe?”

She didn’t mean it, but she scoffed almost reflexively. She gripped his hand as it turned into a painful cough.

“You’ll be busy enough keeping yourself safe.”

He sighed, unable to deny that.

“I can’t conscience sending you out on your own, Padmé. It isn’t that I don’t think you can handle yourself… only… it is a terrifying galaxy right now. The clones have turned on us, and there are millions of them at the Emperor’s command.”
She sighed, settling back again. She turned her answer over in her weary mind, end to end and back again. When she met his eyes, there was a different sort of kinship in hers, as though she knew the full extent of what they shared in Anakin. She felt as sad for his loss as her own and just as guilty. In that moment, they were wed to each other as much as their Sith lover.

“I’m tired, Obi-Wan… I want to sleep. This has all… this has all been too much.”

There was a note of tearfulness in her voice that Obi-Wan couldn’t ignore. He squeezed her hand lightly, then murmured, “You can rest. We’ll talk again when you’ve recovered. When… when you’re ready.”

She nodded, then turned her head to accept his kiss on the cheek. After a few moments reflection, he rose to face his next challenge.

However, it would be several days before Anakin would open his eyes, and several more before he would be lucid enough for conversation.

“Where is Padmé?” he demanded tiredly.

Even as exhausted as he was, mind dulled with pain and limbs grotesquely amputated, there was something terrifyingly powerful about the fallen Jedi.

“She’s resting… Recovering.”

The blond was still on the bed, dulled by painkiller but still practically smoldering in place with anger. Through the lingering shreds of the force-bond between them, Obi-Wan could feel waves of sorrow and anger. The emotions were making him stronger; they may have been the only thing sustaining his consciousness at that moment.

“I want to see her,” Anakin said.

“She isn’t ready to see you yet, Anakin.”

The anger flared brighter for a moment at the denial, giving him the strength to use his metal arm to pull himself up to sitting. He hissed in pain, losing the already minimal color in his slim face, as his eyes flashed yellow.

“What do you mean, she isn’t ready? I… did this all to save her, and she’s saved. I saved her!”

“You almost killed her,” Obi-Wan pointed out, fighting the urge to fall back a step at the force of his conviction. “You broke her heart, you terrified her… and she now feels as though your crimes are hers.”

“Don’t put words in her mouth, Obi-Wan. I know you’re against me. You’ve turned her against me-”

“You turned her against yourself,” the older man protested flatly, “And soon she will leave with your children.”

“She will not! She won’t leave!” Anakin said furiously, “She can’t leave, I won’t let her!”

Belatedly, Obi-Wan’s words struck him and the yellow light faded from his eyes again.

“Children?”

“Yes, Anakin, twins. A boy and a girl.”
“Twins,” he repeated in quiet wonder. “I didn’t even know.”

When Anakin’s expression wasn’t either slack and unconscious or twisted with hideous intent, there was an uncomfortable twinge of recognition in Obi-Wan’s chest. Looking at the fallen knight, he experienced a strange mixture of emotions that was difficult to dissect. At the forefront, he felt fear and revulsion; Anakin’s mutilated body was unnatural and jarring to look at, especially knowing his body as well as he had. More than that, the taint of the dark side was tangible and almost nauseating in its intensity. Even as broken as he was, Anakin was powerful.

Beneath the surface, Obi-Wan felt pity mixed with anger. Guilt ached at the sight of his truncated limbs and his ghastly pallor, and something within him demanded to know why he had saved him if only to suffer.

When his eyes were soft like this and his hair was mussed from sleep, he looked almost like the Anakin that he’d known before. He felt that Jedi, the old Anakin, creeping in and making him unconsciously look for justifications or ways back to where they had been. There was no return, though; his former Padawan had been the lynchpin in the plan that had destroyed their way of life, and the two had nearly killed each other. Had Anakin managed to secure the higher ground, Obi-Wan would have been dead.

“They’re beautiful,” Obi-Wan finally replied, forcing himself to stay in the moment and in the conversation.

“I want to see them.”

“I will ask Padmé.”

“I’m their father. I demand to see my children,” Anakin snarled, tiring already.

“I will ask Padmé,” Obi-Wan repeated firmly, meeting his eyes with a very slight lift to his ginger eyebrows.

He hadn’t expected the wave of energy that knocked him back against a bank of monitors and cords; the hard contact knocked the wind out of him so he was already gasping when Anakin, his garish metal hand extended furiously, jerked him back close by his throat.

The Sith apprentice dragged him almost close enough that he could have reached out and crushed his throat with his hand rather than the force. Even like this, Anakin could kill him.

His body largely immobilized in Anakin’s grip, Obi-Wan struggled to reach for his light saber. When the movement proved impossible and his vision swam from lack of air, he turned his dark, piercing eyes on his former Padawan.

Anakin drew a sharp breath through his nose and released him, exhausted. Obi-Wan dropped to his knees, coughing and gasping greedily for air, and did not rise.

It was difficult for Anakin to distinguish between his heady hatred for everything and his specific hatred for Obi-Wan; at the moment, all of his emotions felt the same, and his reaction to every stimulus was incendiary fury.

“You’re not in control of me! I should kill you for what you did.”

Eyes bloodshot and one vessel blown in his left, the Jedi looked at him balefully.

“You betrayed me,” Anakin continued, riled up enough to spin on without further input. “You
came to kill me without even considering what I was doing or why I had chosen what I had -”

“I didn't-” Obi-Wan coughed harshly, his voice a hoarse, forceful whisper. “I didn't come to kill you - I never wanted to kill you!”

Anakin laughed humorlessly.

“I saw Padmé on the ground. Should I have let you kill me too?”

“You should have come with me - you should have been beside me, you and Padmé! You should have questioned the Order and what they were doing to the Republic. That-that war didn't have to be everything, we were lied to. The Council lied!”

“*Palpatine* lied - he used you.”

“The Jedi used me. They used you too, but you're too blind to see it… look what they've made you do to me,” he said angrily, gesturing to his body with his damaged metal hand.

“I had no choice! Anakin, we were equally matched, it was a matter of who found an advantage and who struck first. You would have killed me!” he rasped passionately.

“Not if you’d listened - you never listen!”

“I have always tried-”

The force grip was tighter this time, but Obi-Wan was ready. Choking as his throat was crushed closed, he pulled his lightsaber and slashed the front two legs of Anakin’s medical bed. Unstable under Anakin’s uneven weight, it lurched and tilted at a sharp angle that left the Sith clinging to the railing to avoid falling to the floor tangled amidst a dozen IVs and monitor cords.

With Anakin deprived of his concentration, Obi-Wan sucked in a gulp of air and pushed himself back to lean against the wall beside the door.

“Fuck… fuck you,” Anakin gasped furiously, clinging to the bed with his metal arm. The change in position was painful and also highlighted his helplessness and lack of dignity. The blankets having fallen back, Anakin’s thighs, cauterized just above the knee, were on prominent display. “I kriffing hate you.”
Obi-Wan just watched him, panting silently with a curiously blank expression. He was waiting
him out, the way he would have when he was an angry little kid; Anakin had always been
someone who needed an ally, and even the worst arguments normally subsided when he became
upset that he and Obi-Wan weren’t on the same side.

It wasn’t long before Anakin was trying to scrabble back, trying to keep himself modestly
covered by the hospital gown.

“Are you just going to leave me here? Help me,” he said angrily, though his tone was more
petulant than anything else.

“Help you?” Obi-Wan croaked, still managing to convey incredulous hauteur.

“Yes! I… I need you to help me, Obi-Wan,” he said, looking away.

Making him wait just a moment longer, the Jedi struggled to his feet and walked over to tilt the bed
back to rights. He shimmed a rolling table under the damaged frame, stabilizing it easily. With the
bed approximately horizontal again, Anakin was able to pull himself up and hastily, awkwardly,
arrange the blankets around himself with one hand. Obi-Wan didn’t touch him and he didn’t help.

In frustration, Anakin smoothed and re-smoothed the blankets over the stumps of his legs, avoiding
Obi-Wan’s eyes. His focus remained fixed on a persistent crease in the fabric, which he tried again
and again to rub away. Alone, humiliated, and in tremendous pain, he drew a shaky breath and let
it out slowly.
“I thought I was doing the right-”

“Don’t,” Obi-Wan said warningly.

Anakin relaxed back against the pillows, sweating, pale. He didn’t have anything to respond beyond defense of his own righteousness and attacks on Obi-Wan’s blindness. Everything that his former master said made him want to finish what he’d started; the idea of Obi-Wan’s eyes dull and his smart mouth slack gave him a strange strength.

“Everyone we know is dead,” Obi-Wan managed. “The clones… our clones, they cut them down. Palpatine, you -”

“Don't you act like they were in the right, don't you-” he broke off with a breath like a sob.

Obi-Wan cast his eyes to the sterile metal ceiling. He tried to look within himself for the Jedi’s compassion, but the pain was as suffocating as his former lover’s force grip.

He took a deep breath, then spoke in a gravelly whisper. “You’ve had a hard life, I know. You've always… needed more than other Jedi. I knew that. I… let things happen that I thought could make you happy…”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes, then dragged that hand down over his mouth and beard.

“I… did fail you Anakin, as your master. I was too young, inexperienced, I didn't know what I was doing and you were so different. I should have been stronger, more observant… I should have seen what was happening. I should have asked for help.”

Anakin was silent, considering that and fitting it into his own internal framing. It was easier to blame Obi-Wan for everything than to think about the choices he’d made and the secrets that he’d kept. He’d always known his former master to be oppressively self-critical, accepting responsibility for chance or the failings of others in his pursuit for Jedi perfection. Rationally, he knew that he couldn't hold Obi-Wan responsible, but it felt good. Blame could be turned to anger, and that anger could make him stronger.

The rims of his irises shifted to red again, and he was about to speak when Obi-Wan broke the considering silence again with a confession.

“My greatest failing as a Jedi was that I loved you.”

The words hurt; Anakin, who had loved him even as he wanted to kill him, felt a quickening of pain that quickly turned to anger.

Obi-Wan didn't look at him as he continued, his voice tired and hoarse. “My greatest failing as a man was that I never told you.”

Anakin studied the lines of his face, noticing that the battle and their losses had seemed to age Obi-Wan years. His shoulders slumped minutely as his fury and pain warred with loneliness and need.

“And now?” Anakin asked, “Do you love me now?”

The older man was silent as he considered his answer; in that space of seconds, Anakin felt like he was inhaling the hot air of Mustafar again and choking on ash.

“I don't know. I don't know who you are.”
“I know who you are,” he answered reflexively, feeling Obi-wan’s lack of confirmation as a sharp rejection. “The hypocrite, the ‘perfect’ Jedi. I know everything and I hate you.”

Obi-Wan reeled from the statement though his expression changed little. His shields were firmly in place and the force bond that he had shared with Anakin for years was in tatters. He nodded stiffly.

“I accept that.”

It wasn't the response that Anakin wanted; he had wanted his mentor to be wounded and to beg for his forgiveness. At that moment, he needed to find strength in someone else’s pain to distract him from his own.

“No,” he protested weakly, “You’re just saying that.”

“What choice do I have? I can feel the hatred in you Anakin, the darkness. You would have killed me on Mustafar and you would kill me now.”

“Yeah? But I’m the one lying here without any kriiffing legs, without a weapon or a friend in the galaxy! I wish you had just killed me.”

“Jedi don’t-”

“Don't kill people? Yeah, they don't do a lot of things that you did,” he said bitingly.

“Anakin, please.”

“Why did you save me?” he demanded, if not for love implied in his tone.

Obi-Wan met his gaze again, resolute in this despite his confusion and guilt surrounding other details. There were certain things that he knew for certain.

“I didn't want you to be alone.”

Anakin looked at the darkening marks on Obi-Wan’s throat and imagined similar ones on Padmé. They were different than marks left by fingers, more solid, more blocky. Strangely regular. He swallowed hard, feeling a swell of panic at the sudden knowledge that the cracks in his control were no longer just that; he didn't know how to hold his temper or fight through pain without transmuting it into violence.

He took several deep, calming breaths and tried unsuccessfully to catch on to a line of the Jedi code for meditation.

Obi-Wan was outwardly calm and his words seemed almost over-rational. So Jedi. Through the force he could feel Obi-Wan’s quick pulse and he could almost see him leaning forward into Anakin’s next response, practically holding his breath. Maybe he wanted forgiveness, though that was not something that Anakin was going to give him. For certain he wanted Anakin calm, whether for his own self-preservation or for his former apprentice’s benefit.

That was so different from what Palpatine had wanted; he’d wanted Anakin angry and out of control. When he was just feeling and acting, he wasn't thinking. When he wasn't thinking, he wasn't questioning.

Should he have questioned? Should he have questioned why Padmé cried, what changed between when she ran to him and when she pulled away? Because of Obi-Wan? Because of what you did.
He stared, unfocused at a point beyond the other Jedi’s booted feet, lost in his thoughts. He could scarcely remember who had drawn his sword first. No, it was Obi-Wan, he knew that. But he had declared Obi-Wan his enemy first. Why couldn't his master have just renounced the Jedi? Obi-Wan had always sided with him before, he had been brushed over and disrespected by the council before too.

*I loved you!*

Had he? And Palpatine had felt it, seen their dependence on each other? He’d told him to leave Obi-Wan behind after the battle with Dooku; he’d said that Obi-Wan had been seen leaving a senator’s room in the early morning. Had the implication been that it had been Padmé’s, as though the two had been conspiring against him? And finally he’d split them up again, sending Obi-Wan to Utapau. It should have been Anakin, but it was the same end. Palpatine had wanted him isolated and afraid. Had those visions even been real, or were they the emperor's creation?

Obi-Wan’s last words to him before he left to Utapau, his last words before Mustafar, were branded on Anakin’s heart: *You are strong and wise, Anakin, and I am very proud of you.*

His chin slowly dipped forward as his head bowed.

Palpatine would never want him to feel peace or connection. His mind was roiling and chaotic, demanding comfort but unwilling and unable to accept even the barest gesture of kindness. It hurt as much as his physical injuries and he hated it.

“I need you to help me, Obi-Wan,” he said suddenly.

His voice startled the other man, who had wondered if Anakin had lost consciousness again during his long silence.

“What does that mean? Now?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I just… I can’t do this.”

The Jedi moved closer finally, tired. He was within arm’s reach, but neither reached out.

“I can try. I will try. I need your word - your word, Anakin - that you will try to fight the emperor’s influence, that you won't hurt Padmé.”

The words *I'd never* rose quickly to his lips, but he realized in the same second that he already had; in his rage, he’d almost killed her.

“You would take me at my word even now?”

“I need to believe I can. I need to believe what Padmé said, that there is still good in you.”

Anakin paused, caught in the middle of his wife’s faith, then nodded slowly.

“I will, then. I give you my word.”

Obi-Wan finally reached over and laid his hand on his shoulder. In surprise, Anakin felt the hot press of tears as his throat constricted almost painfully. It was the first contact he’d had in what felt like forever, aside from the clinical touch of doctors.

Chapter End Notes
I'm going to try for weekly updates, though I may update more often if I am inspired. I'm not sure yet how far this will go, or if it will become part of a bigger series. I'm just going to have fun with it and indulge myself with the things I want to see and the characters I love. :)

I am also firmly committed to not fridging or dismissing Padme - she will be back!

Thank you to wraithnoir for beta and feedback! Suggestions and feedback appreciated.
Chapter 2

III. Unconditional

Padmé would not come. It initially angered Anakin because anger was his first reaction to pain, but he immediately settled when he realized that Obi-Wan was carrying his daughter in his arms.

He fell silent, just watching as the Jedi took a careful perch on the edge of his bed. He looked at Anakin as though gauging both his emotional and physical ability to hold the baby, then carefully wrapped an arm around him and hauled him up to lean against the bank of pillows. Anakin drew a hissing breath between his teeth when one of his IVs pulled, but he quieted as Obi-Wan carefully helped him cradle his daughter awkwardly against his chest. His master stayed close, keeping an arm about each of them to steady them.

Anakin had a poignant, bitter realization that he wasn’t even capable of holding his child in his arms by himself. The strange emotion burned itself out out quickly; he was instantly, irrevocably in love with the little girl in the crook of his arm and the love left no room for self-pity.

“This is Leia?” he asked incredulously.

“Mm-hm,” Obi-Wan replied, making sure that the edges of Anakin’s metal hand were blunted by the baby’s blanket. He kept his own hand beneath her tiny head.

“She's perfect,” he commented, looking at her tiny fingers and her pursed little mouth.

“She is,” Obi-Wan agreed.

“Open your eyes, baby girl,” he breathed, looking at her dark eyelashes. It was difficult to believe in the completeness of her and how he could see both himself and her mother in her features, even looking at her like this, unable to tear his eyes away from her. Wanting connection that he couldn't get with his metal fingers, he tilted his head down and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She opened her eyes at the contact and blearily looked at him and through him, her new eyes unfocused and dark. He smiled broadly, his chest tight from the stretch of the love filling his heart.

“I’m surprised Padmé kept the names… Luke and Leia. I thought she’d name them something else now. Those were what we picked, top choices for either gender. We didn’t want to know if it was a boy or a girl… wanted it to be a surprise. I don’t know how I didn’t feel that there were two… I guess… I thought that they were one really bright little light. You know, like both of us together had to make something really great. Both of us, you know? Together. We didn’t do a lot together - Sky, I barely saw her. I saw her less than I saw you. I loved her so much, though, I figured something we made out of love would be better than anything else in the universe, you know?” Anakin mused, talking more for the sake of talking than because he needed a response. Talking kept him from lingering long enough to cry. “What’s their family name? Did she say?”

“Amidala. Leia Amidala.”

“Leia Skywalker,” Anakin corrected, smiling as Leia’s eyes seemed to focus for a moment on him. He immediately lost the fight with his own tears; unable to wipe at his face while holding her, an elated tear slid down his cheek. “She looks like a Skywalker, like my mom. Bet she’ll be a Force
user… a good one. She will be, and her brother will be. I know it doesn’t always run in family lines, but I can feel it… when she gets older-”

Sobering thoughts struck him again, and his smile faltered.

“But… Padmé is… Padmé is going to take her?” he asked, trying to keep his emotions in check. It was both easier and more difficult while holding Leia.

“Yes, to keep her safe. We’ve arranged a place for her to take the twins.”

“Where?”

“You can't know. You know that. If you know, the Emperor might find her. You don't want that, remember?” Obi-Wan said carefully, “We’ve talked about this before, and you agreed?”

“Yeah,” Anakin said quietly, leaning close to her again and inhaling the sweet smell of her hair. “But… now that I’ve seen her, I don't know how I can live without her.”

The Jedi, who had no children and had never known his own family, nodded without completely understanding. He could feel the Force turning and twisting around them, Anakin’s love and heartache making eddies in the flow.

He didn’t know how to help him.

“Everything after this will be for them. Making it safe for them.”

“I know. I have no choice, do I?”

Obi-Wan didn’t answer and Anakin didn’t press. There were a lot of hard truths to be faced, but right now he wanted to savor this moment of meeting his daughter; he could memorize it the way the masters at the temple used to make him memorize history. He could carry it around with him so that there was something in his heart that wasn’t dark.

Anakin rubbed his cheek against Leia’s, marveling at how soft her skin was. She was so new, so precious, and she was his. Even if she was a million parsecs away, she would still be his; no one could take away that he was a father as long as she was safe.

He finally asked, “You wouldn’t let me follow them even if I wanted to, would you?”

“No… Anakin, we agreed on this. It’s not safe for them or Padmé; the emperor would only use them to manipulate you if he found them. You understand that.”

“I do…”

Anakin sighed, focusing again on Leia to center himself.

“So am I your prisoner in the meantime?”

“Something like that,” Obi-Wan laughed good-naturedly, enjoying the relative quiet in the Force surrounding them. It was the first peace he’d felt since before the fall of the temple, the first warmth he’d felt in Anakin since before he’d left for Utapau. His smile was deceptively like one he’d seen before.

“Do you want to meet Luke?”

“Yeah, but I want a few minutes longer with her.”
The turmoil in the universe was intense - Jedi and familiar clones alike were dying, entire populations were being brought under Imperial control - but even without their former connection, the emotion Obi-Wan felt most keenly was Anakin's. It was a better emotion, a counterpoint to the misery.

He forced a bracing smile, tightening his arm around him slightly, “As long as you need.”

IV. Metal

He needed longer with both of them, but both children and their mother were gone by the time that Anakin surfaced again from anesthesia.

The loss hit him hard, harder still when he realized that a family to love was all he had ever wanted. Being a powerful Jedi and rescuing strangers, even wielding the “absolute power” that the emperor had promised, seemed comparatively meaningless; if he had simply taken Padmé and left the Order, he could have been happy. Obi-Wan would have likely followed, and maybe in time his wife and his lover could have understood that he needed them both. Maybe none of this would have happened, and Order 66 would have just been some unused coding on some microchips in about 4 million skulls.

Instead, their last meeting had ended with him choking her unconscious. And now he was more alone than he had ever been, trapped in the care of the man who no longer loved him. He was convinced that there must have been a reason why Obi-Wan was helping him, and he couldn’t imagine that it was for his own benefit. Deeply mistrustful, he restlessly focused on keeping his turbulent thoughts buried beneath the surface.

His newly fitted prosthetics were functional but inelegant; cut off from the rest of a Jedi Order, their funds were limited. Despite knowing the risks of making Anakin whole, Obi-Wan had spent a solid portion of what he had in his reserves to ensure that at least the new arm was a fine piece of machinery. More modern than Anakin’s first prosthetic, it was smooth and strong with well-oiled servos that moved without a sound. There was some sensation as well, though it filtered through Anakin’s nerves differently than the flesh that it replaced.

It was devastating to realize that he could never touch another person the same way again; his yielding fingers and warm skin were gone, replaced by hard, shining metal. He had crushing hands now - cold, cruel and murderous.

His new legs were slightly long in the calves, intended for a taller man. He was taller now when he stood awkwardly with Obi-Wan’s assistance. He was dimly cognizant of what was being said to him, reassurances that he would learn to walk and fight again, but he was unaware of anything beyond how dead they felt to him. There was no life in them; the Force seemed repulsed by his new limbs in a way that he’d never experienced in the metal hand he’d worn for years.

He realized that when he recovered he would no longer be dependent on Obi-Wan. There were several considerations related to that and several ways to move forward. The first possibility was simply killing Obi-Wan and making his way back to the emperor; Palpatine might take him back, but he might also kill him for his weakness. He could avoid the emperor entirely and track Padmé and the twins, but he knew that the Jedi was right; Palpatine would follow and his children would become pawns in this violent mindgame. There was also a deep, unsettling worry that overshadowed even those dark possibilities. Even if he could evade the emperor for the rest of his life, his own lack of control loomed over him like a grim specter, crushing him with both his past
failures and visions of a terrible future; unchecked, his anger could be deadly.

When he tried to recall Palpatine and what had happened, from the horror of watching the white-haired man cut down half of the Jedi Council to the moment when Obi-Wan had told him not to jump, there was a haze of red in his memories. It was impenetrable at times, like drowning in blood, and at others it was just a misting that made him wild and heightened his senses. The things he most wanted to forget were the clearest, but he sometimes felt like he was watching someone else in his body.

It would have been easy enough to distance himself and say that he hadn’t been himself, but he knew in his heart of hearts that every action was his own. He’d been in tears half the time, but he hadn’t stopped.

Oblivious to his thoughts, Obi-Wan asked him to give the new prosthetics time, and the wounded knight took a few stumbling steps before sitting heavily on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

He could feel that Obi-Wan had things he wanted to say, and his mind supplied all of the worst possibilities before his former master even opened his mouth. This is your punishment.

After a moment, Obi-Wan sat down beside him without touching him. They’d always touched before, whether it was a comfortable arm around the shoulders or the edges of their thighs just barely touching. This felt as artificial as his new limbs and it put him just as off-balance.

“There is… I believe there is a romantic notion in fiction and holofilms, that if someone does something wrong they can be redeemed by dying heroically for a cause,” Obi-Wan murmured, staring at something invisible on the wall across from them. “But I’ve never liked that. Redemption comes through living to make amends. Making better choices.”

Anakin slouched a bit, then said defensively, “I thought I was going to fix everything.”

Obi-Wan looked at him, trying to decide how he wanted to proceed. He was trying balance, trying to forgive Anakin and hold him accountable for what he had done; it was necessary to bolster the fallen knight and regain his trust, but there was no path forward without acceptance and atonement.

“I don't doubt that you had good intentions, but there's no arguing that you were lost once you let the dark side claim you.”

Anakin had a hard time arguing with what was probably true, but there was something in him that had always ached for the release of the dark side. It made it so simple to put it in terms of being claimed, being taken over, falling. It hadn't been a simple decision. It wasn’t just anger and destruction.

He remembered what it was like to passionately love Padmé - his whole body had burned with love for her and it had given him the strength to do things that would have otherwise terrified him. He loved Obi-Wan then too - he was allowed to love Obi-Wan, finally. For that short time between the Temple and Mustafar he’d dreamt about the Jedi proving his love for him by forsaking the Order. He wanted that kind of proof, rather than just relying on the wordless glow of affection through their now-defunct bond. Loving Obi-Wan that freely and thinking he might finally let go and love him the same way had been liberating. It was hard to think of giving up that self-honesty and that depth of feeling; Jedi restraint felt comparatively stifling. Dead.

“I still… I still feel it, Obi-Wan. It felt so good to finally let myself feel things; I don't know if I can really completely let it go.” Even as boldly as he spoke, he felt a flare of fear thinking that his
last shaky ally might abandon him for admitting that. He licked his dry lips, avoiding his former master’s eyes.

Instead, with some consideration Obi-Wan nodded. “You are changed, Anakin, and perhaps you need a different way. Perhaps it is time to consider walking the middle path.”

Anakin, like any other Jedi, had heard gray Jedi mentioned once or twice, but not in any detail; such individuals didn’t live within the structures of the Order and were rarely spoken of.

“Maybe,” he replied, still too overwhelmed to think about the future in that type of detail.

Needing some relief, he leaned his shoulder against Obi-Wan’s and felt the other man flinch. There was no link between them now and fabric of Obi-Wan’s heart seemed close-woven and impenetrable. Anakin straightened sharply, anger rising up intuitively in place of awkwardness or rejection.

Obi-Wan had all but admitted that he’d been at fault, and now he would deny him this small contact? As far as Anakin was concerned, they were both culpable sinners and practically the same. His anger flashed and he rapidly tried to select a biting remark.

Before he could speak, Obi-Wan reached out and put his arm around his shoulders, then pulled him up against his side again.

“Relax, Anakin, I was just surprised.”

The younger man’s shoulders slumped defeatedly as the quick fury that had suffused him with strength ebbed again. The simple touch was enough to unmoor him and quiet the dark voice in his head, extinguishing the lingering thought of simply killing Obi-Wan. He felt foolish for being so readily emotional, so quick to anger, but he didn’t know how to stop. It was exhausting. He tilted his head to rest his cheek on Obi-Wan’s hair, hating himself for wanting to.

V. Travel

They left the facility where they had been hiding before Anakin had fully recovered. Drained of color and relying heavily on a walking stick to balance himself, he made his way to a rickety ship that Obi-Wan had procured through a series of mind tricks, promises, and favors.

As he slumped into the cramped cockpit beside his former master, he promised aloud, “I’ll work on it when I’m up and about.”

He had similar plans to tinker with his new prosthetics, the same as he had with his original. He knew that they could be improved reasonably inexpensive, both in function and aesthetic.

“I don’t doubt that,” Obi-Wan agreed. “I’m sure that it’s taking all of your willpower not to reach for the tool kit right now.”

“Honestly, after just walking out here I think I’m going to die. It’s taking all my willpower not to fall asleep before we even take off.”
“You're doing very well.”

Their departure was reasonably smooth, owing almost entirely to Obi-Wan’s unacknowledged skill as a pilot. The ship itself rumbled around them and the turbulence felt like it was going to shake the hull apart, but the structure was sound and the hyperdrive was functional.

When Anakin was awake again, they wandered through conversation about their friends who might still live and the paths that they might pursue. There was a certain frank openness that had not existed between them before Mustafar, when they had both acted as though things would just be okay if they didn't talk about them. This felt like a time before there were so many secrets, when they were fighting in tandem to find their way without their mentor. It felt normalizing, and despite the topics at hand they could imagine that this was a problem that they could solve if they just broke it down into small enough pieces.

Anakin felt a thrill of warmth that felt like calm, an emotion that he hadn't known since before Palpatine had confessed to being a Sith Lord on Coruscant. He tried to hold on to that feeling as he glanced over at his former mentor. He looked tired, almost old. How had he aged so quickly since he’d left for Utapau? It was only a few weeks, but the circles under his eyes seemed almost opaque. He noticed that Obi-Wan’s lips were moving silently and he knew that he was reciting the Jedi code to himself; he always did that when he was stressed, like a mantra.

*Obi-wan is so good*, Anakin reflected with suddenly clarity, *And he’s never been able to see it.*

All Obi-Wan ever saw were his own imperfection and the distance he had to travel; he was a creature of perfectly masked anxiety who lay awake at night unwilling to let go of another day. There had been nights when Anakin had held him, pressed up against his back with his arms around him, and tried to match their Force signatures against each other like matching breathing during meditation. Even then, he’d only been able to take the edge off of his former master’s quiet panic.

He shifted in his seat to get more comfortable, slouching a bit as he tried to rattle off the code himself. Of course he knew it; it wasn’t as though he had forgotten. He’d been reciting it since Qui-Gon had taught it to him however many years ago. It just didn’t feel like it meant anything to him right now, not the way it did for the Jedi beside him. They were just words, remembered rhymes that felt like that should belong to a children’s game.

“There is no emotion, there is peace,” Anakin recited aloud, curious as to whether it would feel like anything at all. “There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.”

Obi-Wan glanced over at him, surprised, and continued along with him aloud the way that he had when Anakin had been his Padawan. The older man seemed to relax slightly, though his expression turned a bit sad, perhaps in memory of the hundreds of other times that they had said those words together and of all of the other Jedi who would never say those guiding words again. There was comfort in the idea that they had rejoined the Force, but there were still holes in the universe where they had been and Obi-Wan’s heart hadn’t healed in the slightest.

He reached over and lightly laid his hand on Anakin’s arm, right above the elbow, just for a moment before setting it back on the controls. Emotion was wrong, attachment was wrong, and it was why he felt no kriffing peace at all; even so, even horrified by Anakin’s crimes as he was, he needed him close now.

“Could you help me find that quiet again, if I tried?” Anakin asked impulsively. The code hadn't helped in the slightest, but his former master’s momentary calm had been infectious.
“I could only try. We can’t go back to that time, Anakin.”

“That’s not what I want. That’s not what I’m asking you for.”

Obi-Wan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “If you’re looking for someone to teach you, it isn’t me. I don’t feel peace. In technique, there is nothing I know that you don’t, Anakin. You have surpassed me in every regard.”

The other man laughed sharply. “Oh yeah, clearly.”

The older Jedi smirked, avoiding Anakin’s dark eyes. Perhaps his statements had been a touch dramatic, and perhaps they didn’t hold up to scrutiny. He sighed and started again.

“What do you want me to teach you?”

“Patience, control.” He paused, then said with some reluctance, “Honesty.”

“I’m hardly the person to teach you honesty.”

“Obi-Wan.”

The older knight sighed. “Let’s focus on staying alive for now, teaching you how to walk. We have a long way to go before we can hope to work together again the way we once did. We need trust before we can walk that path.”

Anakin knew that he was right. Even as he craved Obi-Wan’s forgiveness, he questioned whether it was true contrition or if he simply needed an ally. He certainly didn’t trust him. His emotions were strong and turbulent, complex and illogical even to himself. He wanted to choke the life out of Obi-Wan for what he’d done to him, but he also wanted to feel the warmth of the bond that had been severed; even sitting so close, Obi-Wan felt as remote as a star and as closed off as a corpse.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said simply, shrugging. He felt the weight and distance of the universe. Though his oversensitized perceptions, he felt an imbalance and himself as an aching wound in the Force. “It would be easier to die. It would be easier to go back to my new master.”

Obi-Wan’s hands tightened on the controls and there was a noticeable shift in the Force around him. “You promised me.”

“Do Sith keep promises, my old master?” he asked, leaning back tiredly. Honesty was always more painful to say and more painful to hear.

“I don’t kriffing care what Sith do,” Obi-Wan replied with surprising heat. “I would sooner crash this ship into a sun than let you return to him.”

“Then teach me. He taught me so little, master, and all of it hurt.”

The knight looked over at him, then said wearily, “Fine, Anakin. If you will pledge yourself to me against all temptation, I will try.”

“Didn’t Master Yoda always say ‘Do or-’”

“Master Yoda would kill you on sight,” Obi-Wan told him flatly, not having any of it. “It is only love - the memory of love! - for you and frankly terrible decision-making that is presently saving your life.”

Love. Anakin laughed bitterly in spite of himself, though he found surprising comfort in his
master’s quick, irritable quip. It was a tone he knew and had known since childhood, annoyance tempered with the last dregs of high-octane patience.

VI. Illumination

Obi-Wan kept his shields up close, he guarded his expression every time he watched Anakin lever himself painfully to his feet. His graceful, confident Padawan was gone, and left in his place was a scarred, twisted veteran of a seemingly perpetual war.

When they first meditated together, side by side in the shade of their ship on Tatooine, Anakin’s thoughts were so loud and his anger was so powerful that it surpassed the heat of the desert. Obi-Wan, unable to focus himself, reached over and grasped Anakin’s upper arm.

“Easy, Anakin, cool that pain into something else and give it to the Force,” he said firmly.

“I can't. There's so much.”

“Try.”

Anakin closed his mouth on his protests, but nothing changed in the aura surrounding him. If anything, the heat and darkness spiked up in its intensity. After a moment he pulled away from Obi-Wan and dragged himself awkwardly to his feet, then stalked off to the ship.

“You don't even know!”

Obi-Wan shuddered; his eyes had been a blazing yellow.

They set up a makeshift camp in silence. By the time they settled for sleep, it was only Anakin’s exhaustion that gave Obi-Wan any reassurance that he wouldn't wake up stranded, abandoned without ship or a weapon. In the morning, Anakin attempted to be sociable despite the night sleeping on the uneven ground having hurt his injured back and hips.

Obi-Wan tried to meet him halfway and forgive him for his outburst, but he was wary of the barely controlled power flowing through his companion. Settling beside him again to meditate, he felt an unaccustomed fear in the pit of his stomach.

Anakin failed again and again to center, and for the next three days he stormed off to battle his demons on his own, eyes open and vivid. The anger followed him, impotent strength with nothing to spend itself on beyond self-flagellation.

When he came around to share their meager supper, he said, “I can't do it, Obi-Wan. When I close my eyes, all I see is pain.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “You need to see that, though. You need to face it and take it into yourself, find your peace with it within the Force to find a way to make amends.”

“You don't even know what you're asking me to do.”

“I do.”

His calm, even demeanor infuriated Anakin. Already on edge, he turned on him and retorted, “You weren't there. You didn't see it or feel it - I didn't want to do it, it didn't make me stronger, it just-”
“It wasn’t what you thought it would be,” Obi-Wan said placatingly, without looking at him. The attempt was half-hearted, and Anakin had the distinct impression that his master didn’t sympathize with him at all. It was very much the tone of a man who was looking to mitigate a conflict, the Great Negotiator at work. “You thought-”

“Don’t act like you know anything about what I thought, or what it felt like - you don’t know, you don’t know, Obi-Wan!”

“Anakin-” he said warily, feeling the darkness and the hatred rising up around his Padawan’s heart.

“Why can’t you just say ‘Stang, Anakin, you were stupid and you lost everything-”

“Because it’s not you who lost everything!” Obi-Wan interrupted biting. “You came out of it with your life, with your wife and children alive. Our friends - a generation of Padawan, of Younglings-”

“Finally, you’re saying it,” Anakin spat. “I knew you knew, Padmé said you’d told her. You know everything and you’re here telling me to walk through it again, like thinking about it could change it.”

“You aren’t a kriffing victim here,” Obi-Wan said, finally letting go of what he’d been holding back for days. “You chose this!”

His words cut deep enough that it momentarily took Anakin’s breath away. He had thought that he was finding a way toward understanding with Obi-Wan, but obviously the other man remained solely interested in judgments. He growled like an animal and tackled the older Jedi, all hard metal and sharp edges. Snarling in hate and despair, he wrestled Obi-Wan onto his back and crushed his wrists to the sand in his steel grip as he straddled his waist to pin him.

“I’ve never had a real choice in my life!” he shouted, leaning down so that they were face to face. Obi-Wan stared back at him, his eyes wide in the firelight.

Obi-Wan cried out as emotion was forced through the channels of their broken bond - at first it was diluted, shapeless pain, anger, and loneliness. It took vague shapes and images - Anakin being taken from his mother on an unbelievable promise, being shaped and molded first by the Jedi, then by the ever-present darkness of the chancellor’s influence, then by the war. Rolling loss and tragedy, anger and helplessness, flooded Obi-Wan as in a matter of seconds he relived Shmi’s death, the loss of hundreds of clones, Ahsoka’s departure. He felt the constriction of fear around Anakin’s heart, the terror he carried at losing the only good things left in his life. He never felt he’d had a choice from the moment he’d learned what it had meant to be a slave. In some ways, he had never stopped being a slave.

He tried to block it out and stop the unwanted transference of memory and emotion, but Anakin knew him well enough to push through all of his defenses. This wasn’t a skill that Anakin had ever excelled at, and the pressure now was the result of power rather than finesse; it was blunt and inelegant, traumatic. Obi-Wan helplessly endured what Anakin had felt, the phantom slashes and blaster bolts and ensuing hollowness as nearby lives were extinguished by the war, the way he felt each clone die. The flare of pain, excruciating and close as he killed the Younglings. The terror and betrayal as he realized that it had compromised him rather than made him strong. He felt the horror and the loss of control as he saw those good things, those loved people, slipping away from him.

Anakin’s grip faltered when he recalled Padmé lying on the hot ground, - the moment when he
realized that neither she nor Obi-Wan could love him like this. In that instant, Obi-Wan finally managed to get enough of a hold on his own mind to throw Anakin off with a panicked push of the Force.

He rolled into his side, coughing and sobbing, then pushed himself up onto his hands and knees to throw up. He ached, and he felt overfull and burned inside. He had been wounded and betrayed afresh as Anakin had forced himself into his thoughts and made him know his soul.

He numbly wiped his mouth of the back of his wrist, disoriented and still nauseated.

“I see that every time I close my eyes,” Anakin sobbed harshly, too caught up in his own history to feel anything for anyone else.

Obi-Wan was on his feet in an instant, unsteady but adrenalized with his lightsaber cutting a swathe of blue through the dusk.

“Don't you ever do that again,” he hissed, his voice low and dangerous. “I taught you better than that—”

He readjusting his grip on his weapon and realized that his wrist was already bruising. Anakin’s strength, both mental and physical, suddenly terrified him; he had rebuilt a Sith Lord. He had mended the Emperor’s sword.

“I need…” he took a shuddering breath, keeping the blade between them defensively. “I need distance. I can't be around you right now. You will wait for me here - I will be back.”

“I just wanted you to understand--”

“If you're not here when I return, it will be the end of our friendship… and I will have no choice but to--”

“Please don't go, please don't leave me--”

“-to find you and kill you, Anakin. I would do it. I would.”

He swallowed hard, trying to convince himself.

The blond looked up at him defeatedly, his knees drawn to his chest and his arms wrapped tightly around them as though it was the only way that he could hold himself together.

“So just do it now.”

Obi-Wan stared back at him, then thumbed off the switch to kill his blade. It seemed unnaturally dark and the firelight seemed comparatively scarlet after the cool blue light had been extinguished.

“Just… Anakin, stay here.”
VII. A Return

It was a wonder that Obi-Wan hadn’t died in the desert the first night; he had a difficult time distinguishing between his reality and Anakin’s memories as he rode the small speeder across the sands. Numbly, every part of him drawn inward protectively, he checked into an inn at a nearby border town and didn’t sleep. Instead he played the events of the evening over and over in his mind until he became desensitized to the violation; it just became “something that happened.” It was an unhealthy coping mechanism that he had never confessed to any of his masters growing up, and he had therefore never been forced to correct it.

By the next morning, he was calmer. He moved on to recounting everything that had happened since he had left Coruscant, and then everything once again since they had touched down on Anakin’s home planet.

The most painful part of their last exchange hadn’t been the forced connection itself; Anakin knew better, but in the action Obi-Wan could see a childish need for understanding and solidarity. His former Padawan hadn’t shied away from the fact that it would hurt him, but it hadn’t been his intent either; Anakin had insinuated himself into his mind, but he had taken nothing from Obi-Wan’s thoughts.

What had broken Obi-Wan’s heart again was the confirmation that this was the Anakin he’d always known. Part of him had been laboring under the image of Anakin and Darth Vader as separate entities, as though a dark spirit merely needed to be exorcised. He had unconsciously simplified the problem to an equation, a simple if-then statement. *If I can turn him toward the light, I can have my Anakin back.*

The reality was that Anakin had always been someone with the capacity for this darkness, and in desperation he had chosen it to try to save what mattered most to him. His darkest actions had been motivated by overwhelming love and that was very much the Anakin he’d always known.

Anakin looked worn and tired when Obi-Wan returned, as though he hardly had the strength to rise in greeting. Summoning every ounce of compassion that he could draw from the deepest reserves of his heart, Obi-Wan enfolded his taller friend in his arms and the two held each other tightly for a long moment.

“I wasn't sure you'd come back,” Anakin whispered earnestly against his ear.

“And yet you waited,” Obi-Wan said, his voice muffled by Anakin’s tunic. “What a well-behaved Padawan.”

The other man laughed as he pulled away, though there was no humor in the sound. The emotion in his voice jangled on Obi-Wan’s nerves.

“I brought back some supplies. I don't know how long we’ll stay here… I heard in town that there's a bounty on Jedi,” Obi-Wan continued, determined to brush past the awkwardness for now. They would face what had happened and their new revelations after breakfast.

“Tatooine is likely as safe as anywhere.”
“Yes, but two strong Force users together,” he said, not electing to refer to either of them as Jedi, “are bound to be felt. I’m afraid that we will need to keep moving in order to evade capture.”

Walking through their modest accommodations, Obi-Wan could see the evidence of a violent outburst. Anakin had clearly torn their camp to the ground in a fit of grief or fury, then attempted to reconstruct what he had damaged. There were hastily mended seams on their tent, scuffed edges on some of their kit, and a noticeable, foot-sized ding in the walkway to the small ship. He didn't comment on it, already knowing intuitively that Anakin was embarrassed by it.

“Have you been eating?” he asked, glancing at Anakin.

“Not as I should have been, Master.” The honesty was almost as unsettling as a lie would have been. Obi-Wan frowned but continued.

“Drinking?”

“Enough.”

Obi-Wan nodded and opened his pack. “We’ll settle breakfast, then we can talk about the things we need to talk about.”

“I suppose that’d be a good idea, though I’d rather talk now and get it over with,” Anakin replied uncertainly. He walked over to fetch the small water tank from the ship’s reclaimer, then returned to sit beside Obi-Wan as his companion began to parcel out their nutrient block as well as small portions of hard bread and dried meat. He recognized the real food as an offering; meals had always been an invitation to closeness.

“I’ve decided,” Obi-Wan said with a definitive nod as he sat beside the burned-out fire pit, “That we need to be open with one another. You have already, ah, made your thoughts known to me--”

“I’m sorry, Master, I was--”

“I’m wounded that you would use our former closeness that way, as a means to force that connection… but I recognize - I felt - your desperation. I’m not angry, only recovering,” he said simply, dismissing and forgiving the trespass even though part of him wanted to hold on to it and use it against the other man forever. He let it go though, or tried; he pushed those feelings out into the Force the way a good Jedi should. Revelations were more important than the means, and he was determined to move forward.

Anakin wasn't sure if that made him feel better or worse; he felt less anxious, but more guilty. It was like when he'd been a Padawan and Obi-Wan had been “disappointed” rather than “angry.” Anger could be met with anger, but disappointment could only inspire better behavior through guilt. Guilt was an unproductive emotion for Sith and Jedi alike. He nodded, avoiding his eye.

“I don't want to linger on the means by which I came to know your heart… I want to address what I now know.” Obi-Wan took a deep breath, then used a mouthful of water to swallow a vitamin tab. “There was a lot. For all that we’ve talked nearly constantly for the last thirteen years, there were a lot of things I hadn't known,” he admitted. He bit back the reflexive apology rising to his lips, knowing it would derail this conversation and give Anakin a foothold for denial.

Instead, he cleared his throat then said, “Before we go further… I know that you mistrust me, and you worry that I am helping you now as a means of using you.”

“Master, I-”
Obi-Wan lifted his hand to gently silence him.

“I know you feel this way. I want to tell you that I am not… I have never consciously tried to use you. You were my closest friend and I've never wanted anything other than your happiness.”

He briefly flicked his dark eyes to Anakin’s, catching and holding his gaze for just a moment before looking away. He could feel Anakin’s intense eyes on him longer.

“However… I had always believed that you were the chosen one… and I think that in my desire to help you become that, to prove Qui-Gon and myself right, I pushed you in ways that may not always have been the best for you. There was… undoubtedly some pride in my actions, though I did not see it.”

Anakin looked over at him for a moment, then nodded slowly. He’d learned to consider his words in the past few years, though anger could make him fire them off like blaster bolts. Now though, in the quiet of the morning, he was able to say things after a moment’s reflection. Obi-Wan’s admission was something too large to completely work through right now. He’d seen pride in Mace Windu, pride in Master Yoda, pride in the Supreme Chancellor. He’d felt pride himself. But he had never felt it in Obi-Wan. Never anything so self-serving.

“And what about now? Why are you helping me now?”

Obi-Wan sighed. “I have spent the last few days trying to answer that question… and it is not a simple answer, Anakin.”

“Tell me.” You must tell me , his mind repeated imperiously, but he kept himself quiet.

“I need you,” Obi-Wan said quietly. “For myself, for my own selfish reasons.”

“Let me decide if they're selfish.”

It was just as painful to admit as it had been to swallow down Anakin’s memories. He focused his attention on the cracked, rough bread in his hands, trying to distract himself as much as focus. It was deeply important to put this out into the open, as much for himself as for Anakin.

“I failed, with you. I did my best and you still fell, you were…you were led astray in my absence. I should have been there for you, if not physically then in spirit; I should have listened, I should have noticed. You should not have been faced with that dark manipulation on your own.” He took a short, sharp breath. “I failed. I can't live with that, and I feel that I need to set things right to be… to be who I thought I was. To be any kind of Jedi at all.”

“That is selfish,” Anakin agreed, though there was a notable lack of judgment in his voice. “What other reasons?”

“I need an ally… I need… I need my friend. I don't want to fight alone, Anakin. I don’t think I can.”

“Also selfish. This is pride and attachment, Master.” Anakin’s mild tone was a child speaking from a primer, the things he was supposed to feel rather than simply learn by rote.

Obi-Wan nodded, shrugging one shoulder almost casually. “They are the truest words I can give you. What you choose to do with this knowledge is--”

“I accept it,” Anakin said, shrugging right back. “Now we both can see you're just a man.”
There was a dark humor in his voice that cut Obi-Wan as much as it unburdened him.

“Indeed,” he said, taking a quick sip of water. It was difficult to swallow. “I also feel terribly guilty for cutting off your legs. So there.”

Anakin snorted, recognizing the comment as retaliation but treating it as an unaccepted apology, “Good.”

They ate in silence, both looking at the cool remains of their fire pit and half-ignoring each other.

Anakin finally spoke. “What about the rest? I gave you everything.”

Gave, Obi-Wan thought with bitterness that surprised himself. He needed to let this go, but for the moment he could just pretend. As though that was some kind of gift.

“The rest is a lot, Anakin. I told you what I did because I wanted you to make an informed decision as to whether or not you trusted me to-”

“I do.”

“The rest... just showed me what I needed to see. I understand now, that there is no separating who you are now from who you were before. And perhaps this change wasn’t as sudden as I had thought.”

Anakin found himself wanting to argue opposing things - he wanted to say that he was who he’d always been, but he also didn’t want to admit that he had always been a man who would kill someone else’s children to save his own. He was still the same man who had saved lives, the same man who had led armies, the same man who’d learned to sing Mando’an war songs from the clones, the same man who had fallen asleep in Obi-Wan’s arms, the same man who had won Padmé’s love on Naboo.

He sighed.

“Obi-Wan, I’m just… I’m still me.”

“I know. That’s hard knowing, it’s hard realizing that there was so much I didn’t know. You’ve done things that I don’t know if that I can forgive-”

“So have you.”

“Tell me,” Obi-Wan said, looking over at him intently. “Tell me what you can’t forgive.”

“You…” Anakin closed his eyes, trying to find the words without the fury, “All of the failures that you said already. You didn’t hear me, you didn’t help me. You didn’t… you wouldn’t have followed me. You didn’t love me enough to even try. You never let yourself love me. You didn’t try to understand, even after knowing me most of my life. It was all just... code. An ideal was more-”

“You murdered children.”

“That isn’t what you said. It was all Palpatine and the order and the Sith. Duty. You would have killed me out of duty.”

Obi-Wan knew that his former student was still not facing his darkest moments head-on; like a child, like a Sith, Anakin was focused on his own pain and how he had been wronged. It was
frustrating, but he knew that it was rooted in the fact that something had been fundamentally broken by Palpatine and by the infusion of the dark side’s power.

He nodded slowly, trying to keep Anakin’s sincerity in his mind. His denial wasn’t an act, nor was his pain or mistrust.

He could also feel the unspoken assertion. *You never loved me enough. You didn't want to.* He knew Anakin thought that was true, but he was completely wrong; he hadn’t *shown* Anakin that he loved him enough. Perhaps in Anakin’s mind it was the same thing; he had always known the other man to deal in honest emotions, even when he was lying about other things. Obi-Wan lacked that emotional honesty, for all of his other virtues.

“Anakin, I loved you more than anyone I have ever known. If there was ever someone I would have fallen for, it would have been you. If I hadn’t known what you had done at the Temple, I might have left everything behind to join you. But... knowing that, watching you strike down Padmé and your unborn children... I just... I couldn’t find you. I couldn’t feel you. On Mustafar, I considered you - Anakin, my Anakin - dead.”

Anakin pressed his mouth, trying to keep from an outburst that would drive them further apart again.

“It’s only now that I know. You can hate me for that, but you must understand...” Obi-Wan said, finally looking at him, “I didn’t go to Mustafar to kill you. I wanted to bring you back. The way we had Quinlan Vos.”

Anakin was stunned by that revelation. Even as he wanted to call Obi-Wan a liar, he knew that it was true; he had still felt their bond on Mustafar, and he had felt the exact moment when it had been broken. It undermined some of his arguments and changed the flavor of the anger he felt toward Mustafar; it introduced, again, that feeling of foolishness for not believing in the faith or love of others.

Still, it was too much to deal with and Anakin wasn’t yet able to accept responsibility for the lethal violence of the fight that had crippled him. He spread his mechanical arms. “And here I am.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “And here you are.”

VIII. The Past

They sat cross legged in the sand, side by side, feeling the warmth radiating up from the ground even after the suns had set.

“We’ll start this the way we did when you were a child. Let's focus together, Anakin. Close your eyes with me and take a deep breath. Feel me breathing, feel the Force moving around us and through us.”

Anakin was acutely aware of the Force; hypersensitive and overemotional, he felt everything. To his annoyance, he didn't feel any connection to Obi-Wan; the Jedi was locked up tight, hiding behind his mental shields even as Anakin was laying himself bare and preparing to flay back his own skin.

He fought the sting of rejection and the instant, automatic anger, breathing it out in a short huff.
“Breathe with me.”

“I can hardly feel you,” he groused, bumping his metal knee against the side of his former master’s leg.

Something between them eased slightly, and Anakin slipped into the currents between them. There was a satisfying quickening, though it rapidly faded into the background.

“Breathe, Anakin, focus.”

“I am focusing.”

“No, you're arguing with me.”

Anakin huffed again in irritation.

“Breathe in time with me and try to clear your thoughts. I want to go through everything and find our way to now.”

The Sith apprentice let his guard down and accepted the gentle suggestion that flowed from his master’s consciousness, drawing him back into consideration of the past.

He was ten and the other children were questioning him. They were Younglings rather than Padawan at his age, and he was different from them because he was already traveling with a Master without ever having belonged to the crèche. Their questions weren't innocent and they weren't kind - Why are you going with Master Obi-Wan? Do you need more help, so you can't just learn in the group? He didn't really pick you, you know. You’re too young. You’re not really a Padawan at all if he just took you because he had to. Bet he doesn't want to. I heard Qui-Gon only made him a knight because he wanted a new Padawan. Maybe he was bored. Bet that made Obi-Wan mad when you took his place. How he could like you?

At home he would have pushed them down and blackened their eyes, but here he didn't fit and he didn't know the rules. If he misbehaved, they wouldn't let him be a Jedi, and even if this was hard it couldn't be worse than being a slave. All the same, he felt trapped as he deflected them as best he could with answers he didn't have; when he hid in one of the practice rooms to cry, he felt how tethered to the ground he was and how big the universe was.

His view shifted to a less substantial, hazy memory of Yoda scolding Obi-Wan for Anakin’s attachment to him. His young master, his short hair still growing in awkwardly from his Padawan style, was arguing with the council member; he could feel that Obi-Wan was scared even as he talked back. Anakin is different - no, he's not too old, you can't deny that he's learning! He’ll be caught up to the other children within a year, we can do this. He can. I can. I just need some guidance, Master. I don’t know how to do this. I know I’m young, Master. No, no, I don't want someone else to take him. I just need some guidance.

Obi-Wan found him and scooped him up into his arms - he carried him a lot when he was that age, didn't he? - and told him that he'd had enough of the Temple for awhile.

“This isn't relevant,” Anakin managed, though his throat was tight at the new knowledge that Obi-Wan had stood up for him then.

“You showed me this, so it's clearly on your mind,” Obi-Wan said evenly.

“You said to go back.”
“Show me where this started, then.”

“I don't know,” Anakin murmured, frustrated. His concentration slipped and his anger flared up again. He felt Obi-Wan’s hand on his leg, right above the joint of his metal knee. He tried to focus on that point of contact, the fact that he was alive and that he wasn’t alone. That he was real despite things that had happened.

“You’ve been buried in fear for some time, Anakin. When did that start?”

“Qui-Gon,” Anakin answered, opening his eyes briefly and looking out across the sand.

Obi-Wan nodded, considering that apart from his own feelings. He’d never completely recovered from the shock of hearing his Master’s name. “You hardly knew him, but he had such faith in you…”

“He promised me a better life and he said I wouldn’t be a slave… and he was going to teach me to be a great Jedi. And then he died and the council didn’t want me, I didn’t know if you would.”

It surprised Obi-Wan somewhat to hear Anakin so self-focused with regard to Qui-Gon’s passing. He’d always imagined the older Jedi as a brief, influential father figure to Anakin. He wondered if he had always been so unaffected, or if it was a feature of his new outlook.

“Anakin, there was never any doubt that I would take you when he passed.”

“I didn’t know that. I was away from everything I ever knew, Master, and I thought I might just be out on my own. I was a little kid. I didn’t know if I could even get home.”

The Jedi sighed quietly. “That must have been very frightening for you… but surely that fear passed?”

Anakin sighed, trying to focus again.

“Yeah… if you're wanting me to say you did fine, you did. It was everybody else, you know? I was never really good enough no matter what I did.”

“That's not true.”

“The council was just waiting for me to mess up. They didn't even want me to be a Jedi… much less any kind of ‘chosen one!’ Especially Master Windu. I think he hated me.”

Anakin’s imperfect relationship with various council members was something that they had discussed before. It had been a theme of Anakin’s frustration - sometimes even enveloping Obi-Wan himself into the group of people who were “holding him back”- that they had spend a lot of time evaluating and dissecting. Obi-Wan nodded uncertainly, wondering what this iteration would include.

“I know that you had mentioned you felt he disapproved, but what-”

Tentative images came through Obi-Wan’s mind again. Their meditative bond was two-sided this time and brought through shared focus, though the clarity was still only that of a decrepit film from the archives.

Anakin was thirteen and the Masters were testing his written comprehension and recitations of important texts. Where most Padawan his age had been memorizing these passages since they were small children, Obi-Wan had been drilling him on these texts and histories for less than a
They were boring to memorize and even more boring to recite, if possible.

Ki-Adi Mundi was content to accept pure memorization; Master Plo even complimented him on memorizing so much so quickly. Yoda demanded slightly more by asking a few questions to confirm his understanding. Windu, however, steepled his fingers and remarked critically that it was as though Anakin was bored and did not care about their history in the slightest, or the culture he had become part of.

The boy looked over at Obi-Wan, who was at that point wearing a beard and longer hair in an effort to look older. His Master widened his eyes very slightly, trying to subtly encourage him to keep going.

He passed the exam with adequate marks, but Master Windu took both Obi-Wan and his Padawan to task after for the importance of history and respecting the way that things were done. Nothing was explicitly said, but Anakin felt like he was in trouble and he deflected Obi-Wan’s suggestion of a celebration.

Anakin was sixteen and Master Kenobi was watching his lightsaber forms. He danced through the movements, confident and light on his feet, proud of his execution of the varied moves. There were many things he didn’t know, but he was confident and strangely content with a blade humming in his hand.

From the edge of the floor, he heard Master Windu comment, “Form V is a good choice, especially for someone of his… temperament.”

He was obviously referencing some of the control and discipline issues that a few of the masters had noted in recent evaluations of Anakin’s progress; the blond youth had an undercurrent of anger and a different sense of fair play than many of the senior members of the council. Anakin felt his movements turn slightly stiffer and his grip tighten. Both his master and their guest noticed the change in him, and both of their expressions changed subtly.

His own master commented mildly, “It was a comfortable style to teach him, being based in my own beloved Form III. But in these uncertain times, I think the additional focus on offense is only logical. Look at how confident he is, how precise his movements are, the exact angles of his blade; it’s almost perfect form.”

Anakin relaxed slightly, knowing Obi-Wan well enough to recognize the bite in his words.

Anakin was twenty and on errand for Obi-Wan, even though the other Jedi was no longer his master. He thought about his master and secretly doted on him far more than he should, but he knew that neither his attachment nor his attraction was returned. As he carried a card containing battle schematics that the librarians had researched for field use, he heard voices in the corridor ahead.

“He’s different since getting that prosthetic. It’s unnatural. He’s… it’s as though there’s something less human about him.”

He knew immediately that the man in question was talking about him. He was wounded and infuriated - he was fighting their war for them, risking his life on the front lines of the Clone War, and they were concerned about a metal hand?

They didn’t know him at all. Maybe the change was because his mother had died in his arms after being tortured to death. Maybe it had something to do with killing an entire village of Sand People. Maybe it had something to do with lingering anxiety after watching - feeling - dozens of
Jedi cut down on Geonosis. Maybe it had something to do with losing a hand to a fallen Jedi, the one who trained his first master. Maybe it had something to do with loving Padmé and having something to fight for. Maybe it was worrying constantly when he and Obi-Wan were fighting in different places.

It sure as Sith had nothing to do with whether there was bone or metal inside his glove.

*Kit Fisto’s* round, warm voice replied, “I can see the concern, but I do not feel it myself.”

Anakin turned the corner to see *Mace Windu*, the owner of the first voice and the heavy judgments.

“There were a lot of moments like that, weren't there?” Obi-Wan mused.

“He never trusted me. He wouldn't let me run the campaign to Utapau even after the Chancellor suggested it.”

“It was likely *because* the Chancellor suggested it. You know that the council mistrusted him, apparently with good cause-”

“He seemed surprised when I told him that the chancellor was the Sith Lord. He didn't trust me even after I told him. He wouldn't let me go with him...”

Anakin trailed off as his mind raced ahead. Obi-Wan felt a shift in him, a tension in his body and a slightly panicked increase in his heartbeat.

“What are you thinking about, Anakin?” he asked carefully.

“That's… that's where I… that's where I decided,” he said, opening his eyes. “Palpatine told me… he told me that if I learned from him, I could save Padmé. I said no - I really did - but I just… I came in…”

He broke off, fighting not to think about what happened after.

“Show me,” Obi-Wan invited. “We’ll face it together, take it apart…”

Anakin took an unsteady breath and, without thinking, took Obi-Wan’s hand in his. The cold startled the Jedi, but he turned his hand in his hold and gently gripped the unyielding metal. The pressure and warmth filtered through Anakin’s artificial nerves and he released an uneven breath.

“Show me, Anakin.”

It was easier to open up with more physical grounding points; the fact that he had been right on top of Obi-Wan the other night had certainly aided the unwanted transference. This time his master was receptive and his own considerable mental skills were engaged in reaching out to him.

Even so, Anakin closed his eyes a bit unwillingly. There were things he actively tried not to remember, things that he’d have given anything to give up into the Force, leaving a black, empty space in his memory where they’d been rather than the way they were burned into his mind with fire he could still smell when he inhaled during the night.

*He was afraid. As he took the elevator up to the Chancellor’s suite of rooms, a flash of pain cut through his chest, followed by a burn of loss. He grabbed at his heart, realizing without knowing that Master Fisto, Master Tiin, and Master Kolar were dead. Anxiety rose in him, adrenaline flooded his belly and shot through his legs.*
He didn't feel fast or steady, but it seemed like only seconds before he was watching Mace Windu preparing to kill the Chancellor.

He had been wrong to cut down Dooku, and Mace would have been wrong to kill Palpatine without a trial. An unarmed, feeble-looking man, now disfigured, hardly seemed like a threat - how much of a threat could an aging Sith Lord be anyway? How could a council member be willing to put aside code for convenience?

If it had been Obi-Wan, he wouldn't have questioned it. If it had been Master Plo, who had always been reasonable and even-tempered, he would have stood aside. But Mace Windu - even Obi-Wan had commented in private that Master Windu seemed to like the power that accompanied the council’s connections with the Senate. The look in his eyes and the terror on the Chancellor’s face seemed to come together into a gross mockery of justice.

There was so much at stake, he hardly heard his own voice as he begged Windu not to kill him. And the Chancellor’s fear, his assertion that this was Windu, that this was the Jedi rising up, that they were making a grab for power - it fit too neatly with Anakin’s own growing mistrust and his own views of the council’s dishonest espionage. Padmé had worried about the Chancellor and the Senate, but perhaps they had been afraid of the wrong people.

Padmé. The visions of his mother had been real and he'd been too late, told over and over again that they were only dreams. Palpatine was the only one who could help him to save her.

“I need him,” he cried as he lunged forward, hardly feeling like himself at all as he swung his blade.

His sword slid through Master Windu’s wrist like it had encountered nothing at all. The older man howled in pain, his face a mask of shock-that-wasn’t-shock and betrayal. Within a heartbeat, the intense voltage of force lightning zinged through the Jedi, before he was bodily thrown from the shattered window.

It wasn't what Anakin had wanted, it hadn't been what he'd expected. He hadn't known that it would go that way, or that the Chancellor - the Sith Lord! - was so powerful. He had a flicker of a thought that Palpatine could have certainly saved himself without his assistance, but it almost immediately faded into the background. He hadn't thought, he had just acted. His path was chosen, his allegiance committed through this act; there was no way to go but forward. He barely heard the conversation but he recognized his own voice saying “my master.”

“Anakin…” Obi-Wan breathed, reeling from the revelation he'd just witnessed through Anakin’s eyes. “Oh, Anakin.”

Even as close as they were, the Sith apprentice couldn't gauge his reaction. He opened his eyes, his grip on Obi-Wan’s hand tightening as though he was afraid he'd pull away.

He licked his dry lips, trying to find the question to ask. Instead, he said, “I didn't… it wasn't…”

Obi-Wan met his eyes as though seeing him for the first time.

“It was such a deep deception,” he said quietly. “And so flawlessly orchestrated, over such a long time…”

He took a deep breath, fitting these images together, as well as dozens of slights by the council, to create a roadmap to betrayal. There were other memories, seemingly unimportant at the time and half-formed, Palpatine’s conversations with the young Padawan (so young), with the young Knight
(so tired of fighting). And the rest of them? It had been so easy, almost as though they had been working directly with Palpatine. The council had acted with fear, Yoda out of old-fashioned mistrust of new ways and Mace out of fear of losing power, and Palpatine had made just the right comments at the right times throughout Anakin’s life. He had positioned himself with the expertise of a politician and the cunning of a Sith; he had seduced his angry, aching Padawan, grooming him since childhood to fall.

The plan - and the plan for the Jedi’s thorough destruction - was breathtaking in its scope and detail.

“I don’t know where that leaves me,” Anakin said, uncertain in the face of Obi-Wan’s stunned silence.

Obi-Wan was rapidly trying to assimilate what he now knew and ascertain what he could deal with. Watching Anakin render Mace Windu defenseless, leading directly into the older Jedi’s death, was a new suckerpunch. He compartmentalized that as he had so many other things, focusing instead on this moment and on Anakin. His fall seemed so logical and so choreographed that he couldn’t help but feel even more foolish for having been blindsided.

He struggled for a foothold on conversation.

“How do you… how do you feel about what happened with Master Windu?”

“The way I did about killing Count Dooku-” he answered honestly. As he spoke, he realized that Palpatine had goaded him into Dooku’s execution as well. It gave him a strange, uncomfortable tightness in the pit of his stomach.

“So you feel guilty?”

“Yeah… I do. I really… I shouldn’t have done it, but… I’m sorry I did it, but I’m also… I don’t know… I’m not sorry he’s dead.”

Obi-Wan nodded, appreciating that Anakin was continuing to be honest with him, even though he wasn’t saying anything that he really wanted to hear.

“I think that perhaps we’ve gone deeply enough into meditation for tonight,” he said.
Knowing the extent to which his friend had been manipulated made it easier to find his way through the tangle of events, but it didn’t make it easier to deal with Anakin’s deep anger or the magnitude of his crimes. Obi-Wan still could not entirely consider Anakin a victim and he still hated what he had done, but the judgment no longer fell solely on Anakin.

His own failure seemed even greater.

They did not meditate the next day. Instead, Obi-Wan focused on the physical aspects of Anakin’s new reality.

The blond had adapted reasonably well already to his new prosthetics, as he had to every other change in his life. He used his new hand with the same confidence as his other; the knowledge of its hardness and strength translated easily from the prosthetic he’d lived with for years already. The main difference was that there was no longer a soft set of fingers to default to for more delicate tasks; while the change frustrated him, he had no choice but to adapt. Fortunately, his fingers were dexterous and the wrist jointing was well-engineered. Obi-Wan was certain that he would relearn the quick, close movements of Form V if he returned his lightsaber to him.

However, he had not crossed that line of trust; the Jedi wasn’t sure that he ever would.

Anakin was doing an admirable job of walking and of doing the medic-ordered stretches that would help keep his muscles limber as he continued to heal. He still hurt and needed to rest often. He had only fallen twice on the shifting, uneven sand, unaccustomed to the flexion of his new ankles. His gait was unsteady and he often went to bed with pulled muscles, but his mobility was improving by the day.

“Today we’re going to practice open-handed techniques… maybe a few of the lower forms,” Obi-Wan said as they ate breakfast.

The suns were high and hot early in the day, so they had naturally shifted their schedule to sleep and rise later. Breakfast fell closer to what many would consider supper time, and after that they would go scavaging for pieces of broken ships and droids that could be traded in town. Within an hour, the temperature had dropped enough that they could practice without getting heat stroke. Already, they were becoming accustomed to the desert heat. Several days of sunburn had mellowed to a pinkish tan for both men; Anakin’s hair had lightened visibly and Obi-Wan’s was threaded through with red-gold in addition to the highlights of white.

They were perpetually dusty and their lips were rough and chapped.

They made their way onto a flat where the ground was firmer, dominated by once-arable soil beneath a shallow layer of sand.

Anakin sighed.
“Of all of the places to come home to.”

“You must admit that the Emperor is less likely to look for you here.”

The younger man snorted, then peeled off his shirt and tossed it atop his bag and his outer cloak. He was self-conscious about his new body, but he also knew that the sight of his recent amputations made Obi-Wan guilty; the self-hatred and the petty damage his master suffered when he saw him just about evened it out. Besides, it was hot and it felt better to be bared to the waist.

Obi-Wan had stripped down to his trousers and his undertunic, which was already damp with sweat and dusty from the day. Looking at his mentor, Anakin noticed how uncharacteristically disheveled he looked. He had always known Obi-Wan to be secretly vain and fastidiously tidy, his beard perfectly trimmed and his hair just right even on the battlefield. Presently, his hair was long over his ears and his beard was dusty and only smoothed by his fingers.

Seeing how far the knight had fallen didn't give him the satisfaction he'd wanted, and the way Obi-Wan glanced at him as though he was still fully clothed made him feel unseen. It had not been long since the other man would have obviously and unashamedly looked him over from top to bottom, his dusky gray-blue eyes lingering on all the right places.

“All right, stretches first. On your own, focus on your hips and shoulders,” Obi-Wan instructed as he bent neatly at the waist to touch his toes.

“Don't have much else,” Anakin replied dryly.

The other man rolled his eyes, but said nothing as he began to move through his own practices, an almost meditative routine of stretching his limber body and preparing for heavier exercise. Anakin, who had watched him run through this preparation hundreds of times, found himself oddly comforted by the outward normality and the almost sensual lack of sexuality that came with Obi-Wan’s athletic focus.

Anakin himself grimaced and stumbled through a modified version of his own customary stretches, avoiding Obi-Wan’s eye.

“Stances and steps,” Obi-Wan said after a few minutes, moving to stand to his left as they faced away from the suns. “First...”

Anakin stepped into an evenly weighted stance with his feet shoulder’s width apart. Obi-Wan did the same, looking over at him to check his position.

“Second,” he said, and they both stepped forward left, raising their hands into an open guard.

“Third.”

They each shifted to deepen the stance slightly, turning the back heel and putting more weight on the front. Anakin wobbled a bit at first but held surprisingly steady.

“Fourth.”

They turned in synch and dropped into a deep, bent knee stance, keeping their backs straight. The knee bend was both easier and more difficult for Anakin. The balance was tricky and the connection point between his thigh and his prosthetic ached at the stretch, but his knees bent smoothly and held perfectly.

“Fifth.”
They straightened and shifted their center of balance onto their back legs, bending their front knees to rest only a small portion of their weight on the balls of their feet.

Anakin trembled with the effort and discomfort of the position, and Obi-Wan quickly moved to the next without drawing attention to it.

“Sixth.”

They stepped outward again into a narrow stance that turned their toes inward slightly and shifted their guard.

“Seventh.”

As they moved into their final slance, an upright posture with an open guard, Anakin exhaled a sigh of relief.

Obi-Wan smiled at him encouragingly. “Wonderful, Anakin. There are corrections-”

“Yeah, of course there are-”

“But you made it through all seven.”

He was annoyed that his old teacher had immediately pointed out the need for correction, but that faded quickly when he realized that Obi-Wan was proud of him. He smiled involuntarily.

“Well, yeah. It's just some stances….”

Obi-Wan smirked, knowing he was downplaying his pleasure. He clapped him lightly on the shoulder, then said, “Of course, you're right. It’s hardly a feat to be able to do that with three new limbs.”

“Of course!” Anakin laughed.

“Let's go through them again more carefully and look at what may need adjustment.”

Feeling slightly more confident, Anakin followed his master’s calls for the first two stances, then paused as Obi-Wan stepped around beside him and gently adjusted his feet. It was harder to stand with his feet planted correctly, but he managed.

“Back straight… how is the flexibility in your feet?”

“Passable, could be better,” Anakin replied, making a face as Obi-Wan laid his hand against the small of his bare back and shifted his posture.

“Are you able to balance this way?”

“Yeah, though it's going to take some practice…”

“Show me your third,” he said, keeping his hand on Anakin’s back to guide him through the step and shift.

“I'll show you mine if you show me yours,” Anakin laughed, distracting himself from his embarrassment at the difficulty of simple movements by making crass remarks.

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes, steadying him easily and otherwise ignoring the comment. He frowned slightly and said, “I think we’ll need to find a modification for this one - the balance will be tricky
“Or I can modify the prosthetics, we just need parts.”

“I don't doubt you have the skill, but we lack adequate funds at present.”

Anakin scowled, memories of being a poor slave on Tatooine coming back immediately; it had been a long time since he'd really had to go without the things he needed.

“We can probably scavenge for most of it. We've been finding a lot of good pieces.”

“We could try, but for now let's focus on this. Shift your hips forward slightly and your shoulders back… does that feel more stable?”

“Yeah, but it's really unnatural,” Anakin complained, rolling his shoulders and pulling away a bit from his mentor's hands.

“Just try it for awhile and see if it becomes more natural,” he suggested. “If it doesn't, we can try something else.”

They made similar adjustments to several of the key stances, also noting that there was one that they would likely just minimize in use. It hurt Anakin’s already aching pride, making him increasingly short tempered, but Obi-Wan didn't give him an opportunity to start a row. Instead, he moved him smoothly from stance to stance, then through the footwork of an introductory Youngling form.

Anakin’s body tightened with his frustration as he shakily moved through the simple movements; he found himself pushing harder and moving faster, motivated by pride triggered by what he was increasingly viewing as condescension. He gritted his teeth, hating Obi-Wan for how easily he moved and how fluid his steps were.

“Anakin, focus on your breathing; I need you calm.”

“I am calm.”

The ginger man looked over at him, eyebrows raised.

“Don't tell me how I am,” Anakin said pointedly.

Obi-Wan sighed.

“I'm tired. Let's stop for supper; it's still half a klik to walk back,” he said, attempting to spare his companion’s pride by taking responsibility for the early end of their practice.

Before, such an admission, even if Anakin recognized that it was being done for his benefit, would have netted Obi-Wan a laugh and a playful jibe about his age. Obi-Wan hated being referred to as “old man,” but he recognized that it was affectionate and largely sarcastic.

“You're not. You don't think I can do this,” Anakin said petulantly.

“I'm tired, Anakin,” he replied flatly, looking over at him with an expression that gave little room for argument. “I was tired before we even started.”

Looking at Obi-Wan, Anakin could see that his master was exhausted. His keen eyes seemed dull and his face, which had always seemed boyish beneath his dignifying beard, seemed slightly gaunt. He wondered how long it had been since Obi-Wan had slept, how much longer since he
slept well. Recognizing weakness in the other man wasn't as empowering as it should have been, but he didn't feel sympathy for him either. At the moment, all he felt was frustration with himself, with Obi-Wan’s instruction, and with the isolation he felt. Even standing side by side with his former Master, he felt no connection to him. Denying the dark side but unable to open himself to the light, he felt heavy, slow, and half-blind.

“Fine. You head in, then. I’m going to keep going.”

For a moment, Obi-Wan looked like he was going to protest. Instead, he just shrugged and broke form to walk over and pick up his robes and his outer tunic.

“I caught a sizable snake in one of the traps overnight; I'm going to skin and roast it to have with the remains of the bread. I'll try to time the meal to sunset, if you'd care to join me.”

Anakin nodded and turned away from him, resetting himself to the beginning of his exercises.

He didn't watch Obi-Wan leave, but he could dimly feel him getting further away as he began to slowly run through the first form. The movements were familiar, burned into his body’s physical memory. He could hear Obi-Wan’s voice reciting the timing of the step. One, one-two, one-two, one-two… three. He was running slower, but the cadence helped him to center.

He'd first learned this exercise when he'd been eleven. He'd had boundless energy and talked a constant blue streak; his master, only in his mid-twenties then and completely unprepared to be responsible for another sentient, had used these practices as a means to require a few minutes quiet and to thoroughly exhaust his young Padawan. He would have Anakin practice as quickly or as slowly as he could, just calling out the timing, which was proportionately fast or slow. One, one-two. One-two, your left foot, Anakin. No, your other left. Just start over. There we go. One…

He stepped neatly to the side, moving his guard in a slightly circular sweep. His balance wiggled, his ankle unsteady due to the stiff arches of his feet, but his stance held. It messed up the timing though, so he moved back to the starting position.

“I hate this,” he said aloud to no one in particular as he bowed to the open desert ahead of him.

Tiring, his movements were less precise on the second pass. Trained to the same neurotic standards that Obi-Wan held himself, he sighed and started over again. This was barely difficult enough to challenge a ten- year- old, but his human body’s limitations and his mind’s distractions made perfection impossible. He started over again, feeling empty and angry.

“I hate you,” he said to Obi-Wan, casting the comment in the direction of their camp.

He stumbled on his next step and took a dive in the sand. It torqued his hip and bruised his thigh on the metal edge of his calf, drawing a hiss of pain. The throbbing ache made him feel nauseated and brought frustrated tears to his eyes.

He lifted a hand to wipe them, then took a choking breath at the jarring sensation of his own smooth, steel fingers.

“I hate you,” he said aloud to himself with much greater sincerity.

The half klik to camp seemed like a very long way. If he took long enough or if he reached out for help, he was sure that his mentor would be there in just a few minutes. Pride and anger, however, forced him to just gather himself to his feet and unsteadily make his way on his own.

If he were a true Sith, he could have traded those negative emotions to the force for power and
strength. But his abortive training hadn't taught him how to truly balance that dubious gift... and in any case, he was holding on to the anger too tightly to surrender it. To the contrary, turning it inward as he was only sapped his strength.

It was just dipping into darkness when he limped into camp. Avoiding Obi-Wan’s eye, he took a seat beside the fire, his sweat night-cool on his skin, and silently took the offering of food.

X. Resolve

It took several days of intensely emotional meditation before Obi-Wan was able to get Anakin to face what he had done at the Temple. At first they approached it at the outskirts, the feelings Anakin had toward what had happened, the journey to the Temple, the instruction he received before, the places he went after. It was as though there was a point in his memory that was too dark to illuminate.

For his part, Obi-Wan dreaded a more detailed recollection of the Temple slaughter than he had already been given; he had seen the security footage and he had experienced shadowy, minimalist views through Vader’s eyes. The more he learned, the harder it was to keep hold of his own emotions. He kept himself cool and distanced, approachable but not accessible; during these explorations, he was Anakin’s mentor and his ally, but not his friend.

Finally, though, there came a point where they couldn’t put off the inevitable any longer; Anakin, having worked through everything else before and many of the things that came after, was tired of avoidance and craving the release of confession. He couldn’t pretend that he hadn’t done it or that Obi-Wan didn’t already know, but saying the words aloud and revisiting the darkness of that time scared him.

“It was—it was just one... just one quick strike. For each. I didn't want them to even feel it, couldn't...” Anakin choked on a sob that he hadn't allowed himself at the time, “I wanted them to stay whole...”

Obi-Wan, staring in a dissociative silence, just nodded. His hand was being crushed by Anakin’s frantic grip, but he hardly felt it.

“It's...” he drew an uneven breath and managed. “We know what happened... and you are responsible. You've...you've accepted that. You need to...”

He couldn't continue for a moment. The different aspects of his grief were choking the air from his lungs. Maintaining his composure was taking all of his strength; he had intentionally left his lightsaber at camp, knowing that he could be moved by devastation to kill his companion.

He was thankful that his hands were empty.

“You need to tell me now, clearly, why it happened.”

“I was wrong. He said- he said that,” Anakin stopped completely and took a deep breath. He knew how to focus and Obi-Wan had already centered him several times; the movement within himself was becoming more familiar again.

“He said that it would make me stronger, that every Jedi who died would strengthen the dark side. He said it was necessary, and that the Jedi were traitors to the Republic... that the Younglings
would… they would grow up to be adversaries as well. He said that,” he took a short, sharp
breath. “It would feel like dying… but then I would get stronger, and that power could be used to-
”

Saying it aloud was so painful; knowing the depths of his own desperation and having to admit
those crimes to the Force was humiliating. Having to remember what he had done - which he had
compartmentalized and divorced already from his identity - reawakened his guilt and his grief over
the loss of the children that he had loved as part of his Order. Children who had trusted him,
children whom he had hoped to teach after the war ended.

He had lost Ahsoka for reasons outside of his control, but he had murdered his future Padawan.
Everyone’s future Padawan.

“Say it, Anakin.”

“I could use that power to end the war and save Padmé and my baby,” he spat bitterly, pulling his
hand away from Obi-wan and covering his face.

He sobbed brokenly, feeling his mouth twisted and his face contorted in sorrow.

“It didn't make me str-it didn't! I just wanted to die. I kept doing it, waiting - I was so stupid, so out
of control, I couldn't see anything- I can't even believe that I… I can't believe that was me.”

Obi-Wan had his eyes closed and his lips pressed tightly. He was listening, but he was also
repeating the Jedi code on loop, increasingly quickly. Increasingly panicked. He had to maintain
control.

"This isn't news. I knew they were dead. I knew Anakin did it. I saw it. There is no emotion only
peace. I need to just accept this, let it go. There is no ignorance, only knowledge. Now at least I
know he tried to make it painless. Kriff. Pain. Force, this hurts so much and there's no end to it.
Breathe, come on. There is no passion, there is serenity. Kriffing hells, I can't do this.

He took a shuddering breath, then nodded sharply, frantically.

“You understand what you did - you accept it as part of yourself.”

Anakin nodded tearfully, unable to manage words.

“Tell me what you can do to make-”

“Nothing! There's nothing I can do… I can't take it back. They're dead! Master, they're-”

“Tell me what you will do-” Obi-Wan said more firmly.

“I don't know! There’s nothing-”

“Force-kirff it all, Anakin!” Obi-Wan snapped, opening his eyes and staring him down fiercely.
“There are Jedi dying right now. There are Force- sensitive children that-that the... that Palpatine
could kill before they ever even become Jedi!”

Anakin was slightly startled by the departure from soothing, even-tempered Obi-Wan. He
deserved it, he deserved worse, but the combination of the words and fire behind them shocked
him out of his own spiraling grief.

“N-no… I won't let him.”
“You won’t?” Obi-Wan pressed, leaning forward slightly. “Tell me what you’ll do, Anakin.”

“I’ll stop him. I’ll fight him.”

“And you’ll protect the remaining Jedi and the future Jedi?”

“I’ll protect them,” Anakin repeated earnestly, suddenly feeling a shift within himself as the sorrow turned to something else. It wasn't anger because it was softer, warmer, but it gave him the same strength that pain had as a Sith.

“Will you? Do you give your word? Not just to your own children, but all Jedi?”

“Yes.”

“Then… I want you to… turn this… shame, this grief… Let it become determination. Let it be love, Anakin. Breathe… center… come on, we can get through…”

Taking his hands again, Obi-Wan pulled Anakin’s frantic breathing into time with his own. Gradually, he forced himself to relax and slow his breathing and his pulse. Slowly, they came down. The heat and pain evaporated, though it wasn’t forgotten. It was the heat of Mustafar finally behind him.

Anakin felt himself surprisingly and suddenly calm. He’d felt hints of this before, at the edges of his consciousness when he walked alone and watched the sands shifting. He’d felt it watching the tired sag of Obi-Wan’s shoulders when he knelt down to meditate before lying down to sleep. He’d felt it, strangely, when he’d turned and looked outside to see the twin suns setting in a crimson sky. He’d felt the flare of it in his chest for the first time, a light that was warm rather than burning, when he’d felt Leia’s soft down of hair against his lips. There was no absolution now, but his head felt clear and his path seemed obvious. He couldn't change what had happened, but he was powerful and driven; he could direct that outward again into the force, rather than frantically clinging to what he had. His attachments felt distant; Padmé and the twins were far from him, and even though they were face-to-face, Obi-Wan was completely closed to him. He recognized this distance as being closer to how he should have been all along, though it felt like a lonely ideal.

He opened his eyes to look at the other man, realizing that he had never seen him so shielded or felt him bound up so tightly. It felt like his friend was drawn in on himself, compact even though his posture was relaxed and his eyes were dry. He could hardly sense his presence at all.

“Obi-Wan,” he began uncertainly. “You need to let go as well.”

“I’m fine, Anakin,” he replied quietly. After a moment of skeptical eye contact from his former Padawan, he said, “Though I am quite thoroughly worn out… I hope you wouldn't be terribly offended if end this session early?”

“I had some parts to repair before you go in to trade tomorrow, so… so, yeah, we can head in.”

He knew Obi-Wan well enough by now to know that the older man wouldn't share anything unless he wanted to; there was no point pushing, prying, or coaxing, especially now that he very clearly lacked Obi-Wan’s trust.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet, then offered Obi-Wan a hand up. The Jedi looked at him consideringly for a moment, then wrapped his palm across Anakin’s metal one and pulled himself up. Anakin was very aware of how hard his hand was. He was equally aware of the fact that Obi-Wan didn’t flinch away.
They didn't talk much for the rest of the night. Anakin tinkered with various projects until dark, feeling more level than he had in weeks. He was introspectively sad, but surprisingly peaceful in the face of the new sense of his new purpose.

XI. Darkness Beneath

At the opposite end of the spectrum, Obi-Wan felt like there was a scream of pain or a feral bellow of fury sitting just below his Adam’s apple.

Analytically, he knew that he was handling his emotions completely wrong, but he still couldn’t seem to correct himself. He was not offering his pain, anger, and remorse into the Force and letting it go; he was simply trying not to feel or react. He was trying to act as normal as possible. There was a strange catch in his mental repetition of the code. *There is no, there is no.*

He realized that he hadn’t actually allowed himself to really process what had happened and what was continuing to happen. The initial gut-punch of death had hit him immediately, but he had pushed it away because he couldn't slow down or stop moving. He hadn't actually allowed himself to cry over what had happened or given himself the opportunity to process his emotions - he had instead intellectualized his pain, picked apart the situations and separated them from his feelings, then deferred it all till later because everything else was more pressing. Even when Anakin's forced memory transference had left him sobbing, it had just been giving voice to the rawness of Anakin’s experience. His own emotions were locked away tightly.

He had almost lost control in his meditation with Anakin. Confronted with the details of the Younglings’ deaths, it had suddenly made everything else real. His entire way of life, everything he’d worked to learn and build, was gone; having been taken from Stewjon as an infant, he knew no other home or family. The depth of his grief was staggering and his helpless anger had no accessible target; for all of Anakin’s treachery, the blame wasn’t solely his. This plan had been in motion since before he was even born and he had only been a pawn.

The only thing Obi-Wan could really do was keep going.

Force users weren't built for repression, though; Jedi gave up emotion and Sith used it the way that a starfighter burned fuel. The weight of Obi-Wan’s emotional trials was beginning to affect the way that he interacted with the Force and the way his body functioned. He hadn’t really slept since before they left Polis Massa, when he had been bone weary and ignorant of details. Since Anakin had flooded his mind with images, he had alternated between lying awake and falling into nightmares of things he hadn’t done.

His movements in practice turned stiff and graceless, which in turn frustrated him further and set him on edge. Movements that were normally effortless took his full concentration. His limbs felt like they were full of sand and jointed to his body with rusty steel hinges. He was simply shutting down.

It was impossible for Anakin not to notice his companion’s decline, but he lacked the skills or the emotional bond to help. He could see the darkening circles under his eyes and the way that his cheekbones were becoming sharper. The rim of bone framing the lower edge of his eye socket had become visible and Anakin had to look away if Obi-Wan turned toward him unexpectedly.

It had been a two weeks since they’d landed on Tatooine, and they had fallen into a routine.
Sitting in the shade of a shelter that Anakin had constructed from part of a damaged life raft, they each worked on their own respective projects. Obi-Wan was taking inventory of the items they’d scavaged to trade and separating them out into piles of what he could repair, what Anakin could repair, and what they might be able to sell as scrap. Anakin was sitting cross-legged and tinkering with the arch of his left foot.

“Obi-Wan,” he said thoughtfully, breaking the reasonably companionable silence, “I would like you to sell my lightsaber.” The sentence was simple but carefully constructed, each word spoken precisely.

“Oh?” the older Jedi asked in surprise, looking up from his contemplation of a currently unidentified piece of circuitry.

“Yeah… I know you don’t trust me with it… and we could really use the money. We’re not going to be able to stay here forever, and we’re going to need fuel, food…”

Obi-Wan watched Anakin, who hadn’t lifted his gaze from the precision tools in his hands. It was hard for him to read exactly what was going through the other man’s head without so much as eye contact; with their bond silent and his own sensitivity to the subtleties of the Force dulled, he didn’t intuitively know where they stood.

“It’s… it’s not really appropriate to sell a weapon of that strength, Anakin. That crystal is yours, that blade is one of the finest that I’ve ever seen. The handling is flawless, the construction is…”

“It’s been misused,” he interrupted simply. “I’m surprised the crystal didn’t just shatter.”

Kyber crystals were unique stones in that they were naturally aligned with the light side of the force; Sith could bend them to their will, though it injured the crystals as though they were living creatures. When Anakin had turned to the dark side, a part of himself had been focused on keeping the crystal from just blowing out the hilt of his saber; he had felt it groan, hum, and vibrate as it had fought his control. He hadn’t wounded it enough to stain it red, but the crystal’s integrity was likely fragile enough that it would take a true light-side Force user to wield it properly.

“Mm, I’d wondered about that myself… but in any case, Anakin, it’s a very distinctive lightsaber… and my selling it would certainly draw attention to us. I don’t think that we’re in a position right now to sell,” Obi-Wan mused, turning his attention back to a large resistor panel that he thought might fetch a few credits.

“I guess. Maybe when we’re getting ready to move on. You could sell it, say it belonged to Darth Vader… and… that Vader was killed on Mustafar.”

“Was he?”

Anakin sighed, then screwed in a narrow set of tiny, jointed metal panels that would allow the arch of his foot to bend more naturally. He didn’t have a good answer for Obi-Wan, especially since he wasn’t even entirely sure that the question wasn’t rhetorical.


“I’m sure we’re all relieved to hear that.”

His former master’s salty tone pricked Anakin’s pride; he was aware that his list of crimes was extensive, but if Obi-Wan wasn't willing to even try to forgive him, what was the point of any of this? He sighed, feeling annoyance prickling up the back of his neck, and started working on the opposite foot to push his irritation back down. “I am trying, you know. I don’t know what to do.
other than try.”

Obi-Wan sighed, closing his eyes for a long moment and just focusing on the slight movement of the hot air and comfortable way that the sand had sunken under him. He reminded himself that they were all right, and that there was still hope as long as there were Jedi in the universe. They had enough to eat, enough to drink, and a ship that could manage hyperspace jaunts.

“You’re doing well, Anakin. I’m just tired, my apologies. I don’t mean to be short with you.”

“You’re really…” Anakin paused, looking for a good word, one that was descriptive without being insulting. The last thing he needed was to start another fight. “You’re really tired a lot of the time. Have you been sleeping?”

“Enough, I think,” he replied calmly.

“You don’t look like it.”

“I’m fine.”

“You keep saying that, but you’re not doing very well,” Anakin said carefully.

“So we’re planning to sell your lightsaber before we leave Tatooine? That leaves you unarmed in the event something happens to me.”

Anakin felt powerfully frustrated with his long-time companion. The juxtaposition of these two lines of conversation was a glaring reminder - as if he’d forgotten - of how little his friend trusted him. The openness that they’d had on the ship was completely gone, as was the raw confessional conversation from when Obi-Wan had returned following his three day absence.

“You said we were going to be more open with each other,” he said, ignoring Obi-Wan’s unsubtle subject change.

Obi-Wan sighed, not looking up at him. “I’m fine, Anakin.”

“You are not!” Anakin half-shouted, exasperated. “You’re all closed off and shielded, you aren’t sleeping, you’re barely even breathing.”

“Maybe I’m just closed off to you,” Obi-Wan said bitingly, looking up at him with the same unnatural calm that Anakin had felt disconcerting for several days.

The younger man set his jaw angrily and re-focused on modifying the instep of his foot.

“Yeah, maybe.”

He was going to just shut up and let it be, figuring that Obi-Wan could just sulk if he wanted to, but he found himself getting more and more frustrated in the tense silence.

“Or maybe you’re cutting yourself off from everything, which is why you can barely even struggle through basic forms.”

Without looking at him, Obi-Wan warned, “Anakin…”

“Don’t ‘Anakin’ me,” he retorted, mimicking Obi-Wan’s distinctive pronunciation of his name. After all these years, he did a very accurate impression of his former Master’s speech mannerisms and accent. “You’re not taking care of yourself. I don’t care if you never forgive me - well, yeah, okay, I do care - but you can’t just act like you’re okay when you’re not.”
Obi-Wan drew a sharp breath through his nose, wishing for a moment that he was in a position to pull rank and tell Anakin to just shut his kriffing mouth. He didn't feel like getting into this with him, but there was also something in him that was spoiling for a fight. Anakin had attacked him twice since Mustafar - first in the medbay and then in the sand - and he had turned the other cheek both times because of necessity and because it was the “right thing to do.”

“Anakin…” he said, raising dark gray-blue eyes to his companion’s tanned face. “In the last month, there were three times that I literally should have killed you. Let’s not push for a fourth, hm?”

The blond was pleased to see some fight in his eyes.

“Why not? I think you need to get angry, for once-”

“Says the Sith-”

“I’m not a Sith now. Come on, you need some outlet, you can't just be General Holier-than-Thou indefinitely. Get off your ass and come spar with me, Obi-Wan. It would be good for you.”

“All of your striking surfaces are metal,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “I'm not an idiot.”

“Come on, I'm a guy who's still learning to walk again. I'll go easy on you,” he said, trying to be conversational about it. ”The movement would be good for you.”

“No.”

“What, are you not motivated enough?” Anakin asked, goading him on. “You don't want to hit me?”

Obi-Wan attempted to ignore his tone though his shoulders were tense and the muscle at the corner of his jaw was taut.

“You've wanted to hit me since I was an obnoxious seventeen- year- old. Come on. We’ll spar, roughhouse a bit, and you can blow off a bit of steam. Maybe just… I don't know, let yourself feel something.”

“I'm not interested.”

“Come on, old man. Haven't you lost enough to justify letting go a bit? You said we were going to be open. Are you a liar now too? Liar and a loser?”

“I know you're baiting me. It won’t work.”

Anakin rolled his eyes. “Not exactly being subtle here. Come on. You need to give up on this… self-induced emotional constipation-”

“Emotional - enough!” Obi-Wan snapped. “I’m not engaging with you-”

“Come on, I can say more to get you riled up. I could bring up any number of sad or unfair things-”

“That sort of cruelty is not needed. Respect that I don’t want to talk, I don’t want to let go right now. Loss of control would be dangerous. I don’t feel like dragging everything out again when I’ve already-”

“-got it packed down good and tight, I know. Seriously… Master, this isn’t good for you. How
long are you going to hold on to these things? Have you cried over any of them? Satine, Master Plo, Master Fisto, Master Secura... Master Mundi, Master Windu... Yoda... Master Vos..."

Obi-Wan knew he was right, though he didn't know how to face the enormity of what he'd lost. In his right mind, Anakin's post-meditation calm would have been a victory; however, in his current mood it just made the older Jedi angry. This murderer, traitor, failed savior, he could sleep at night, but he himself was plagued by memories and dogged by a deep depression. The injustice of it all was too much to deal with at that moment, and hearing their names from his mouth broke something in him.

Before he knew it, Obi-Wan was on his feet. He tackled Anakin, half Force and half fists, and wrestled him onto his back. He gave his former Padawan several hard punches to the stomach and ribs, one of which was hard enough that he felt the sickening lurch of bones shifting under his knuckles. Anakin, startled, took several seconds to register what was happening. He shouted in alarm as unexpected pain bloomed from his side, then scrabbled back, trying to get the smaller man off of him.

Obi-Wan was vicious, though, and his grip was fluid and tenacious. Anakin wasn't pinned, but he was restrained by the knowledge that he could hit Obi-Wan and break his bones with a single punch of his metal fists; instead, he was on the defensive, just trying to evade the furious Jedi's blows. Obi-Wan excelled at precision and speed, and he landed several blows to his stomach, chest, and shoulder joint before the pain of the previous had even fully flared up from the site of contact. He pursued as Anakin tried to push himself up and throw him off, this time punching him hard in the face. His fist skinned along Anakin's cheekbone, narrowly missing his eye. A second punch split his lip.

"Stop-!"

Obi-Wan snarled, "I thought you wanted this--!"

Anakin twisted and managed to get out from under him, then rapidly, gracelessly, tried to crawl out of striking range. Obi-Wan grabbed him and twisted his arm behind him, then applied his hand to the back of his head to shove his face down into the sand. He didn't know why, but he wanted to force the coarse grit down his throat and pack it into his nose and eyes. He wanted to let the weight of the planet crush him and bury him, where they should have left him the first time. Tatooine could have him. As it was, he was half-suffocating him in the hot sand, smothering him under the weight of his body.

The blond pushed himself up and dragged in a choking breath, sputtering and spitting out sand. The coarse grains were stuck to his mouth and to a smear of blood from his nose that tracked down his chin; half-blinded by the sand in his eyelashes, his eyes had teared up and crusted lines on his cheeks. When he twisted his head to look at the other man, he hardly recognized the wildness in his eyes, his twisted mouth, and his mussed hair.

"Master, don--"

Don't krieffing call me 'Master,' Obi-Wan thought furiously, twisting his arm several degrees further until Anakin cried out again in pain.

"Please!"

It wasn't Anakin's voice, the sight of blood, or any recognition of the wrong in his own actions that stopped Obi-Wan. Instead, it was a movement that Obi-Wan caught out of the corner of his eye. He was on his feet in an instant, though he didn’t pull his blade; there were all sorts out in the
desert on Tatooine, but the biggest threat to humans were the bands of Tusksen who still roamed the sands and attacked colonists and travelers alike. They normally attacked in reasonably small groups, though they still managed to be reasonably lethal even with fairly primitive weapons.

“Get up, Anakin,” he hissed, dragging him up to his knees by his grip on his elbow.

Almost immediately, six of the heavily robed figures were on top of them. Unfortunately for them, Obi-Wan was able to simply redirect his aggression into his fight with the Sand People around them. Through a combination of the Force and his own physical prowess, Obi-Wan managed to steal a heavy club from the head of the small band; with that, he fought back in earnest, nearly crushing the skull of one of their attackers as he silently, frantically forced them back.

Anakin was less quiet and considerably more vicious despite his imperfect coordination and his empty-handed fighting. He was shaken, but having a clear, familiar enemy was grounding; it made it easier to ignore that he had panicked, stalled out and forgotten that he had the kriffing Force and could have just thrown Obi-Wan off. He could have gotten killed, all because he had been baiting a man who still obviously wanted to kill him. He wiped his bloody nose on the cuff of his tunic, hating the grit of the sand as it scraped across his upper lip and cheek.

He wondered how much their attackers had seen; had they watched his humiliation at Obi-Wan's hands? Had they seen the Jedi's disgraced "Chosen One" getting his face rubbed in the sand? Red-faced and emotional, he fought harder as though trying to regain his dignity.

In this fight, though, there were no further complications; they were fighting for their lives. As Obi-Wan had pointed out earlier, most of the fighting bits of the younger Force-user were made of metal; he ruthlessly punched and blocked with his nearly unbreakable fists and forearms, somehow managing to stay on his feet despite taking a few solid body hits himself. When he had the opportunity, he recovered one of the fallen Tusken weapons so that he could fight from a safer range.

The fight was quick and wordless; fighting together, even bare-handed or using weapons stolen from their opponents, felt natural. In the heat of the moment, the two Jedi were back in the Clone Wars when their prime concern was keeping the other safe. It was a strange juxtaposition to the grappling of only a few moments before, but unsurprisingly, their attackers didn't stand a chance.

The sunlight flashed when it caught on Obi-Wan’s lightsaber where it was clipped to his belt. A startled cry of Jedi came from the leading Tusken, though it was difficult to distinguish among the furious braying shouts and grunts of exertion as the masked sentients fought.

Knowing they were caught out already, Obi-Wan ignited his blade and brandished it warningly. True to what he had told Anakin, the loss of perfect control could easily lead into complete chaos; at that moment, he felt a frustrated bloodlust that startled him.

Possibly sensing the danger of the situation, maybe seeing something telling in Obi-Wan’s eyes, the six Raiders retreated quickly.

Anakin groaned, looking around at the wreckage. Their tent was damaged, as were some superficial elements of their ship. Their small speeder looked to be in working order, but he wandered closer to check an open panel.

Still breathing hard, Obi-Wan started taking his own inventory of the damage. “They’ll likely be back, with a bigger attack party.”

“Great,” Anakin said uncertainly, wondering if Obi-Wan was just going to continue on as though
nothing had happened between them. He was still bloody and shaking, dragging in small sobbing breaths that weren't completely related to pure exertion. He wasn't going to let Obi-Wan see how deeply affected he was; he wouldn't be out-cooled. “Well, I suppose we have two opt- Kriffing hells, looks like they took a club to the reclamer…”

“That's going to be an issue,” Obi-Wan sighed. Water was their most important resource; it remained one of the most important resources in the galaxy. “Is it fixable?”

“Yeah… I think I've got the parts,” Anakin said, frowning as he leaned around to look at where the device and its tank were built into the hull of the ship. The distraction was grounding, but he was on edge knowing that Obi-Wan was carrying that degree of lethal anger just below the surface; before he had been antagonizing him in the hope that he would open up, but now he wasn’t sure if his companion was riled up enough to go off again at random. “Tank’s fine… supplemental tank is cracked.”

Obi-Wan made a face. The supplemental tank was the one that they normally removed and used around camp; until that was fixed, they would have to draw water directly from the main tank. It's loss was more of an inconvenience than anything, but they had few conveniences so they both keenly felt the loss.

“I suppose that I should sell your lightsaber, then, and we should plan to depart within a day,” he sighed, rubbing his hand over his scruffy beard.

Actually faced with the thought of permanently parting with his blade, Anakin felt a pang of sadness. He nodded, though, not wanting to argue.

“Yeah… it's too late for you to make it to town and back before the market closes… so I guess you can try to get camp in order and I'll make my priority the reclamer.”

“The main tank is pretty full, so we’ve got a few days if we ration it,” Obi-Wan mused, looking at the slashed side of their tent. He frowned; he hadn’t realized that there had been bladed weapons. He paused, then looked over his companion, noting blood spreading through his tunic right above his elbow. He pointedly ignored the swelling starting at the corner of his eye or the blood on his lips and chin. He couldn't focus on that without wanting more. Something about seeing Anakin knocked down, dirty and bloody, awakened something dark in him. Something that found the blood attractive and Anakin's fear desirable. Something in him was straining forward, craving the other man's pain and humiliation, and he had to shove that back down.

“How badly are you cut?” he asked quietly.

“It's not terrible… I, uh, deflected the blade but it skimmed up the metal and caught my arm.”

“Take off your tunic-”

“There's the Obi-Wan I know!” Anakin said with joviality that he didn't feel. There was a vaguely panicked quality to his voice.

“And let me take care of it. That much blood and you may need stitches.” Noting Anakin’s wayward glance at the reclamer, he added, “Blood loss is going to affect your mechanical ability. Come on, come sit down.”

Anakin sighed as though this was a massive drain on his time, but he did shrug out of his tunic, then gingerly shrugged off his undertunic. Without knowing where Obi-Wan’s thoughts were, he was afraid to refuse. And now that he was admitting he was injured, the wound was simultaneously
throbbing and stinging. He rubbed the tip of his tongue against the split in his swollen lower lip, wincing at the tenderness and the taste of blood. The crunch of sand between his teeth and the taste of copper made his insides knot.

Obi-Wan numbly reached over and turned his arm. “It's reasonably superficial... let’s just clean it and stitch it up... I think I have a bacta bandage or two in my kit on the ship.”

“We should save those for more serious injuries.”

He shrugged. “Let's wait on that decision until we see this clean.”

Anakin marveled sometimes at how thorough Obi-Wan was with triage. All Jedi knew basics of first aid, and most of the Jedi who had been in the war had accumulated more hands-on knowledge from the battlefield medics. Anakin had learned several tricks from Kix that had proved useful in a pinch, though he'd never excelled at the healing side of the Jedi arts. Obi-Wan lacked that rare skill as well, but his ability to clean a wound quickly and reasonably painlessly was notable, as was his skill in rapidly placing tiny, precise stitches. Anakin’s own hasty whipstitch left much bigger scars than his Master’s careful needlework.

He watched as Obi-Wan tended to his injury, thinking how strangely normal this was. It was almost surreal, as though they had gone back in time to before this afternoon, before the fall of the order, before Utapau. For all that they'd been peacekeepers, they'd spent a large portion of their lives fighting.

As he worked and the adrenaline drained from his limbs, the older man relaxed slightly, seeming almost peaceful. He felt himself surfacing from that deeper, darker place; it wasn't love in his movements, exactly, but it was opposite of his earlier impulses.

Obi-Wan gently turned Anakin’s arm to inspect his handiwork, then commented, “I think we could skip the bacta, unless you're in a lot of pain.”

“No, I'm okay...” he replied. “I'm going to work-”

“Carefully,” Obi-Wan reached up and dusted off a smear of sand that had stuck to the now-dry sweat on Anakin's cheek.

“I'm going to work carefully on the reclamer,” Anakin said, knowing that in this instance Obi-Wan wanted him to take care with himself rather than the reclamer. It was a strange mixed-message and he felt off-balance again.

Obi-Wan nodded, then commented, “It might be safer to sleep in the ship tonight.”

“I'd personally rather not be inside something that can explode. We can just take turns sleeping. Shouldn't be a problem, since you don't sleep anyway.”

That earned Anakin an almost painful eye roll before they parted ways to handle their respective tasks.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry I'm a little late. Happy Thanksgiving!
Mending several long gashes in the weather-resistant canvas of the tent had taken Obi-Wan a few hours, even sacrificing craftsmanship for speed. He resisted the urge to resew the repairs that Anakin had made a few days prior after his temper tantrum, knowing that it would just add unnecessary time. He was feeling a mix of accomplishment and frustration by the time he moved on to tidying up the rest of their minimal camp.

Their food stores - both protein block and the small stock of traditional bread and dried meat - were safe, if a little sandy. It seemed that the Tusken Raiders’ main victories had been Anakin’s injury and the extensive damage to their moisture reclaimer.

Amidst occasional profanity, Anakin had explained that the attack and the nature of the damage were pretty typical; the Sand People believed that all water on Tatooine belonged to them and was sort of their sacred gift from the planet. Most colonists in outlying areas were in danger from the primitive humanoids, but the moisture farmers and their equipment had it the worst.

His expression hardened, and Obi-Wan knew that he was thinking about how his mother, a moisture farmer’s wife, had been captured and tortured to death. He didn’t say anything because he didn’t need to; they both knew how Anakin felt and they both knew that nothing Obi-Wan could say would bring him any comfort. They also both knew what Anakin’s rage against his home planet’s scavengers had meant last time he was on Tatooine. Silence seemed safer, all around.

They avoided talking about their own fight with a diligence that bordered on neurotic; both felt the new rift that the afternoon’s violence had torn between them, but neither addressed it. Anakin, who hadn’t truly even feared his master on Mustafar, was skittish and untrusting. Obi-Wan was numb and avoidant, doggedly running through stilted, forgetful recitations of Jedi code and history in order to avoid thinking of anything else.

They finished their respective tasks just after sunset, when Obi-Wan sent Anakin to rest before his watchdog shift. Afraid of Obi-Wan but hoping that proximity would encourage camaraderie, the blond preferred to doze by the fire, wrapped in his Jedi robe. He said that it was so that he could be close at hand in the event of trouble; it earned a bit of grousing from his former master (“Why did I mend the tent if you’re just going to sleep here?”) but Obi-Wan secretly didn’t mind. Having the other man nearby and silent, he could imagine that they were in a more comfortable place emotionally than they were. He could imagine that he hadn’t lost control that afternoon.

It didn’t last, though. Against his will, he began relentlessly replaying the events of the day in the theatre of his mind. Over and over, he saw himself slamming his fists into the other man’s ribs and chest, shoving his face down in the sand. He had honestly wanted to kill him. That scared him, but what scared him more was how strongly he had heard the whispers of the dark side. Something in him had wanted to do more than smother him; he had wanted to use Anakin’s own trick against him and choke the life out of him using the Force. He had felt an evil temptation and it had not scared him at all at the time.

If they hadn’t been attacked, he wasn’t sure what might have happened. As it was, he had been able to direct his energy into something less personal. The Tusken had suffered for it, though he didn’t feel guilt for that. He had not used lethal force, but there had been strength enough in some
of his blows that he had likely broken bones. He could have killed one of them with that stiff crack to the side of the skull; it was lucky for the Tusken in question that he had been wearing his headgear, because the slight padding might have saved his life. It had been a matter of survival, but he did wonder if he could have done better as either a warrior or a peacekeeper.

He looked down at Anakin, looking at the bruise blooming along his cheekbone from his own wayward punch. Even from this angle he could see the swelling at the corner of his eye and the middle of his lower lip. That afternoon, seeing Anakin run his tongue over the gash where he'd cut his lip on his teeth, Obi-Wan had felt a dark, heady surge of arousal that embarrassed him now.

He felt the distance between them again, and found himself wondering if he would feel relief or frustration if he touched him. Before this fight, there had been almost no contact between them outside of focusing touches or pokes and prods to improve his form during practice; he had embraced Anakin exactly once on Tatooine, though his humanity craved comfort and physical contact. It wasn’t something that a Jedi should have wanted; it would have been less complicated if all he needed was a quick kriff to alleviate tension. Jedi were allowed that, as long as there was no attachment.

Obi-Wan was secretly terrible at resisting attachment.

If I’m really honest, I’m quite a terrible Jedi.

He sighed heavily, almost tired enough to sleep. He reached over and tentatively smoothed Anakin’s fair, dusty hair, then dragged his fingers gently across the fresh bruise. It was slightly grounding, better for the fact that the fallen Jedi was asleep and was therefore not making any judgements. As complicated as things were during the war, that time seemed comparatively simple now; they had a home on Coruscant, an Order to belong to, and they had each other.

Now, they didn’t have anything except a shitty ship, a lightsaber and a half, and a tense, unyielding relationship based on a mutual need not to be alone in the universe.

“You’re thinking really loud,” Anakin said, though he had no idea what Obi-Wan was thinking about. He did, however, feel his fingers in his hair and the tension in the Force around him. It didn’t feel threatening, but it was unexpected enough to put him on edge.

Obi-Wan pulled his hand back guiltily and clasped it in his lap with the other.

“Sky, Anakin, go to sleep.”

“How ‘bout you take your turn? I’m awake and you look like you’re flagging.”

“I don’t really feel like sleeping.”

Anakin looked up at him consideringly; they had been sharing a tent since coming to Tatooine, during which time the Jedi had woken him a handful of times by making pained sounds or calling out in his sleep. Partly out of awkwardness and partly out of misguided pettiness, he had let Obi-Wan sleep until his panic woke him naturally.

“Because of your nightmares?”

Caught out, Obi-Wan turned it back on him as a slightly biting retort. “Yours, actually.”

“Mm,” Anakin hummed in agreement, sitting up and keeping the robe wrapped around himself like a summer blanket. Without making any excuses or asking permission, he leaned against Obi-Wan’s legs and looked into the fire. “They suck, huh?”
“Yes. Thank you for sharing.”

Anakin shrugged, “Any time.”

They both stared, Obi-Wan blank and Anakin rapidly assessing the situation to find a course forward. He needed things to normalize, and sudden, thick silences like this only bred longer silences.

When he spoke again, he tried to make his voice more gentle. “Tell me about them.”

“No…” Obi-Wan said, shaking his head. “It won’t help.”

“Please?”

“Why?”

“I want to help you.”

Obi-Wan felt an immediate, unkind impulse to jab back with a searing judgment, a complete rejection of anything Anakin could offer now or ever. He wanted to demand reasons the way the other man had days before, and he wanted to pick apart those reasons and deem them unacceptable.

He realized abruptly that this unforgiving mode of thinking was unlike a Jedi, and, more importantly, not like himself. It fell more in line with the behavior that had scared and shamed him earlier that day and it needed to stop. He needed to regain some control and remember who he was. It didn’t matter if the only person around to see was a Jedi who really couldn’t even call himself a Jedi anymore. Glass houses and stones, all around for both of them.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to find himself deep within the vitriolic armor that he had constructed to protect himself. It was as difficult as it was to find Anakin within his horrible actions; where Anakin had acted out all along, Obi-Wan had kept the violence in his mind until today.

“You… don’t have to talk about it,” Anakin said uncertainly in his silence. “I know I’ve never been able to get you to talk when you decided that you didn’t want to, but maybe it would help. We’re, uh, kind of all we have right now.”

“I know,” Obi-Wan admitted quietly, a little too quickly. He looked over at Anakin, who was watching him in the darkness with a surprisingly open expression. He sighed and smoothed his hand down over his beard.

“I shouldn’t have hit you today, Anakin. I apologize for that; it wasn’t right. It wasn’t… me at all.”

“Let’s not… I don’t know how to deal with today,” he said with sudden honesty.

“It scared you, didn’t it?”

“Yes.” The response was immediate and for a second, Anakin wasn’t sure if he should have said that. Honesty hadn’t always helped him in the past.

Obi-Wan considered that, putting it into the context of Anakin’s usual fearlessness.

“It’s just… it’s very difficult, Anakin. You know me very well, and you know that I am deeply flawed—”
“You're probably the least flawed Jedi I've known.”

Obi-Wan laughed a little at that, doubting his sincerity in the face of what had happened a few hours before. When he spoke again, his voice was slightly resigned. “I'm not fishing for compliments, I'm confessing. I have always been this way, since I was a Youngling. From time to time, Qui-Gon would intentionally force me to a breaking point - through endless repetitions, through exhaustion, whatever - and actually force me to shout or to cry. He knew that I worried, that I held on to sadness…. Endlessly … and he tried so hard to to make me let it go, or to keep me in the moment, where I belonged.”

“I know. I've always known that.”

The older Jedi sighed, remembering things that Anakin had said from the time he was young to try to comfort him or ease his sense of responsibility. He thought he was being subtle, but he never was. It's okay if you don't know the answer, Master, we can just ask Master Yoda when we get home. This is okay. By the time he was older and their relationship had changed, Anakin just tried to distract him or comfort him without words. He had always thought that he did a masterful job of masking his constant anxiety and self-criticism, but he was painfully aware now that his friend had always seen through it.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then said, “I know. It’s just been a very long time since I’ve allowed myself to feel so strongly and I just couldn’t control it. I shouldn’t have done that; you didn’t deserve it then, you were just trying to help me.”

“It’s all right, I mean… I was sort of inviting it. And I know you’re still mad. I can’t feel it, but I know it.”

“I haven’t forgiven you, though I have rationalized everything that happened. I know why it happened, how… the path to this point is so clear now. I want to move forward and start again, but I just can’t seem to let go.”

Anakin turned that over in his thoughts, feeling a surge of despondency at the thought that Obi-Wan might be unable to forgive him. There was only so much a man could ever do. Would it make Obi-Wan feel more forgiving if Anakin let himself be sacrificed on the altar of Palpatine’s power? What did he want from him? He fought to pull himself out of his own Sith-like self-focus so that he could objectively talk to his wounded friend.

“I want you to forgive me,” Force, I would take any Jedi’s forgiveness but yours is the one I want, ”but that wasn't the point of what I was asking. You know that. We’re talking about you.”

“I know. You know me, though.”

“Maybe not as well as I thought… but I do. You're a good Jedi, Obi-Wan, and a good man. A really good man,” Anakin repeated as though the enormity of that statement had just struck him.

“You can't carry the weight of this yourself. You can't really even, ah, blame yourself for my part in it. Misled or not,” Anakin continued in a soft mumble. “I was taught to make my own choices… and that was a good lesson, you know? I made the wrong choices… realizing that and trying to be better in the future is the only way to set it right… I get that. I understand why you can't move past this, though.. because me saying I'm sorry doesn't make anyone get back up.”

Obi-Wan lightly laid his hand on Anakin’s shoulder, and the younger man reached up to rest his on top of it, feeling his chest tighten. He wanted to touch Obi-Wan with his real hand, with fingers that were flesh and human.
“I’m trying,” Obi-Wan said, “It’s just… there were certain lessons that I could never completely live by. I have been… deeply… romantically attached to several people, all of whom except you have died in my arms. All of my friends are dead or will be if this new empire finds them, the clones who became my friends have had their free will taken from them… I hadn't realized how connected I was to those around me, how much I... loved being a Jedi despite the war, until everything was suddenly upended. I was so blessed by the Force, Anakin, despite my secret weaknesses…”

Obi-Wan always spoke so carefully, as though he was speaking to an unseen audience or dictating the passages of a speech. Dramatic phrasing didn’t indicate lack of sincerity for the older Jedi; Anakin could hear the emotion in his voice now despite the linguistic formality. It made him feel a warm protectiveness toward his gentleman master.

“I'm sorry. I ruined all of that.”

“No. It's hard to admit… and it's been hard not to just lay all of the responsibility on you… but it would have happened with or without you. The Supreme Chancellor put the chips in the clones fifteen years ago, when you were just a child. When I was a Padawan. That was just one element of this, even. He spent years shaping the government, organizing both sides of the war… Order 66 was bigger than any one Jedi... and the Council, myself included, was blind to the deception.

“I should have questioned more, trusted my own concerns. How many times did I worry about the ethics of a clone army? Anakin, the nights I laid awake wondering how Jedi could use sentients the ways the Separatists used droids! What a fool and a follower, how proud I was to lead the whole of the Third Systems Army. You never knew me to be proud, but I was as proud as the Masters that you hated…”

Anakin frowned, “I know you're angry with yourself, but this isn't your fault… if it isn’t even all my fault, it couldn’t possibly be all yours.”

“I know… I just… if I had questioned why Sifo-Dyas would create a clone army… and how… where did that money even come from? And how-”

“Master… Obi-Wan… you were raised by the Jedi, you had been… indoctrinated into the Order. When they start you that young, it’s almost like brainwashing--”

“Anakin!”

“You know it is! You never had any reason to believe that a council member would have done something unethical. You can’t just-”

“I should have-”

“Obi-Wan! You didn’t, and you can’t change it now. You need to move forward. You need to sort through everything that’s happened and let it go, the way you made me. You need to grieve for everyone… everything… and you need to decide on a direction,” Anakin said forcefully. A lesson learned should be a lesson shared. Hadn't Obi-Wan said that to him time and time again when he was young? They’d been learning together, really, the too-young Master and too-old Padawan. Now they were the outcast learners all over again.

Obi-Wan smirked, hearing his own words in the other man’s voice. He shook his head, resigned. “I don’t know where to start.”

“The beginning.”
“Where is that?”

“Qui-Gon. You said you loved him.”

Obi-Wan wanted to argue that it was Anakin’s beginning, not his. However, it was undeniable that something in him had changed when he had lost his master and murdered a Sith Lord. He looked down at the blond who was leaning against him, then pulled him up to sit beside him like an equal.

“I did. Looking at it as an adult…. it was inappropriate. I know that. I fell for him when I was a teenager and after a time, he began to indulge me. I wasn’t a child - I was likely around seventeen or eighteen, lest you worry - but I was still his Padawan. I was completely infatuated with him, I loved him. I was always trying to figure out if he felt anything for me, or if he really was completely unattached to me. He never said a word, he would remind me of our responsibilities to remain detached even when he kissed me. He was so cool, always. But when he died, just for a moment I could feel that he loved me… and it was suddenly worse. I felt like I had lost everything. And I had you to take care of, and I had to do it right, for him… well, and for you, but I didn’t know that yet.”

He sighed, avoiding Anakin’s eyes.

“I know what it’s like not to know if someone loves you, Anakin. I never wanted you to feel the way I did… I just… I always tried to let you feel that I loved you, I never shielded my love for you when we were alone.”

“I know… it should have been enough,” the younger man said, sighing. Knowing Obi-Wan’s history with Qui-Gon made certain parts of their shared history make more sense; Obi-Wan had ignored his flirtations until well after he had been made a Knight, and he had only accepted his later advances after a great deal of persistence. Anakin had always assumed, apparently rightly, that he had gradually won his Master over, but with this revelation he realized that Obi-Wan had also been trying to avoid repeating the inappropriacy of his own Master-Padawan relationship.

“I don’t know what I was trying to prove,” Obi-Wan admitted. “There were a lot of things that I did wrong. I just felt like if we didn’t talk about things, it would be okay… and as soon as it was in the open, we would need to have rules, disclosure.”

“So, how long did you know about Padmé?”

“Awhile. At first I thought you’d just slept with her on Naboo… it took a bit longer to figure out that it was much more serious.”

“Is that why you were always saying we had to stop?”

Obi-Wan laughed, surprised. “No… it was because I knew we were too attached to one another… and it wasn't how I was taught to behave.”

“Mm,” Anakin hummed thoughtfully. “So you didn't care you were sleeping with someone else’s husband?”

“It wasn't my lie,” Obi-Wan said with a shrug.

“I see.”

“I had a lot of struggles in being with you, my friend. You can't imagine how strange it is to kiss someone who you carried on your back as a child. I never thought of you in any way other than as
my student and my Padawan… and then you grew up. I didn't see it until I was looking at you again after the battle of Geonosis. Blood, loss, and battle had been your rite of passage, more than any knighthood trial….” he said, trailing off.

He shook his head, thinking of everything that had transpired between when Anakin and Padmé left for Naboo and when Anakin was officially knighted a little later. He brushed past that and continued, “Even so, if you hadn't been so persistent and so ready to counter every argument I had, I'd have still felt I was taking advantage.”

Anakin smirked at the memory of their first few heated kisses in a freezing tent on Arkania. Obi-Wan had apologized the next day for behaving inappropriately, suggesting that they attribute it to poor judgment and opportunity, but Anakin had wanted none of that. He had relentlessly pursued his former Master, wanting him as he had wanted Padmé and finally feeling just as able to win him.

“I wasn't going to give up unless you said you didn't want me. Funny how that was never one of your excuses.”

Obi-Wan smiled a little unwillingly, glancing over for just a moment, “No, it wasn't.”

He turned his attention back to the fire, feeling a bit of the tension ease again between himself and Anakin. Some of his anger had mellowed to a bittersweet sadness as he remembered what he had loved in the other man: his fire, his humor, his loyalty, his passionate readiness to give all of himself. All of these attributes were what had primed him to fall, all of these things had made him so warmly, lovingly human.

“I should have taken you and Padmé, and we should have left.”

Anakin looked at him, surprised.

“She knew too, Anakin. She told me before she left for Mustafar, but she’d known for awhile. She looked at me and she said ‘You love him too’ and I knew that she didn’t mean as a brother or a fellow Jedi.”

“It was all of our secret then, I guess…” Anakin said quietly, stunned by the knowledge that they had both known and both had still loved him. He had been burdened and terrified by secrets, afraid of being left alone, and either would have stepped up to comfort him if he had trusted them enough to be honest.

“It was,” Obi-Wan confirmed.

“It was wrong of me to want to keep both of you, without telling either of you. I just… I loved you both so much. I still do, and I’ve lost you both,” Anakin said in a rush.

The silence between them at those words was not heavy; they both knew that they had lost the love that they had, and saying it aloud didn’t make it any more real or any more painful. He didn’t expect Obi-Wan to reassure him. It was just something that Anakin was admitting aloud, giving up into the night air and the nebulous energy of the Force.

He took a deep breath, then said, “But we’re talking about you.”

“I suppose we are,” Obi-Wan mused, leaning forward and poking the fire with a stubby stick that was really too short for such a task. “And I should confess to loving Satine, which I had since even before I was with Qui-Gon and did until the moment she died. I would have left the order for her if she had asked, but she never would have and I knew it. I wasn’t strong enough, I suppose, I didn’t love her enough to come unasked. I have always regretted it and I likely always will.”
He met Anakin’s eyes again, somehow surprised that they were so close, “I deeply, deeply regret never giving in to love, Anakin. Not for you, not for Satine, not for Qui-Gon. I was given these three opportunities, and I never said the words aloud when it mattered.”

Anakin leaned closer to him and rested his forehead against his former Master’s, feeling his breath against his lips. His eyes were closed, and he could imagine many nights when they had sat just like this, sharing the air and feeling the static charge of their Force signatures crackling between their mouths.

Obi-Wan didn’t pull away. He rested his hand on top of Anakin’s, closing his eyes as well. He spoke again, his voice low.

“And Quinlan… I love him still, though differently. I can feel that he is still alive, somewhere. I worry that he will succumb to darkness again without the Jedi, without me. I can’t help him here… the way I couldn’t help any of the friends I’ve lost, or the friends who are still fighting to survive. I can’t repair the damage done to our clones… I am trapped, waiting… I have lost so much, Anakin, and I am poised to lose more still. Waiting is almost as bad as knowing…. and I can’t let it go because it hasn’t happened yet.”

“Obi-Wan… okay. I want you to hold the ones you’ve lost in your heart… okay? I want you to remember them and let yourself love them just for right now, and then I need you to breathe it out and try to let it go. We might have to do this a few-”

A quiet whimper slipped past the older man’s lips as he turned his head, pressing his face into the curve of Anakin’s neck. Surprised, Anakin put both arms around him, noticing how much weight his former Master had lost, and clumsily pulled him close. The closeness was more than Obi-Wan could take, and something in him broke, finally, differently from that afternoon. He sobbed as the pain and the realization of his own loss broke over him again and again in waves.

At some point, his voice reached an searing, wordless crescendo; half-shouting, his throat raw and his chest aching, Obi-Wan recalled every moment that he had fought so hard to repress. He remembered the pained tension in Satine’s body as she had looked up at him, and then the boneless way her head had lolled to the side when the light went out in her eyes. He remembered the way that Anakin used to laugh, the way he wrinkled his nose when he grinned. The warmth of his body up against his back, the flush in his cheeks when they made love. He remembered Qui-Gon’s fingertips on his jaw, how much he had hated that his last words were about Anakin. He had wanted so badly for them to be words of love or some kind of confession, words for him alone. He remembered the security footage of Anakin at the temple, and he remembered the way his heart had twisted but not broken yet. We can still save him. He remembered seeing the bodies of the Jedi that the Supreme Chancellor had killed, but being unable to safely retrieve them to give them the rites that they had deserved. Kit’s dead black eyes, filmed over like a fish at the market. Plo murdered by his surrogate sons, Plo’s Bros, the Wolfe Pack. He was shot down from behind, but he must have known, just as Aayla had doubtlessly had one final instant of knowledge before the first blaster bolt struck her down. They had kept shooting until her blue body was a bloody, charred pulp, but they had left her beautiful, horrified face. Maybe Anakin had spared the Younglings that death, perhaps he was more merciful than the overzealous firing squad that had swept in behind him. There was Luminara, whose body was still missing. Luminara, who remained secretly scarred to her death by her Padawan’s betrayal. He thought of Quinlan fighting the dark side on his own, far from everyone and struggling for both his heart and his life, Quinlan, who had talked with him late into the night since they were Padawan being hushed to sleep by their indulgent, frustrated Masters. Quinlan who had been the only person who could goad him into talking when he didn’t want to, who could draw the stress or fear out of him and leave him hollow, then fill him with wit and confidence. And Anakin again, who was holding him now, Anakin
whom he hardly knew now in this strange new reality.

He gradually wore himself out and just let Anakin hold him as he came down from his hysteria. He felt hollowed out, but he also felt as though it had made room for air; he could finally breathe. He drew a shaky breath, realizing that he had never cried that way or let anyone comfort him quite that way before; in some ways, it was one of the most intimate experiences of his life… and of all people, he had spent it with someone who he had nearly tried to kill just hours before. He wiped at his eyes with his tunic sleeve and pulled back self-consciously, avoiding Anakin’s eye.

His companion was not going to be denied, though. He kept his arms around Obi-Wan loosely and looked him over, noting how different he looked now from any time that he had ever seen him before. Where Obi-Wan had always been perfect presentation and a mask of confidence and dry wit, the man in his arms was shaking, mussed, and exhausted with red eyes and blotchy cheeks. He was undeniably human and remarkably real; if he hadn’t been so literally ugly at that moment, Anakin would have probably described him as beautiful. He found himself falling in love again with the Jedi, though it was not a romantic or even appropriate moment to feel that way.

Obi-Wan was having no such romantic thoughts; his head was pounding, his eyes felt swollen, and his nose was stuffy. He pulled back again, but found Anakin’s grip was firm so he just gave up and let his companion keep him close.

“Better?” Anakin asked quietly.

Obi-Wan shrugged.

“‘Better’ is really subjective,” he said with a watery laugh.

Anakin snorted, but he felt more at ease. He could feel Obi-Wan again; the other man’s shields were down and the Force was moving through him the way it should be. It wasn’t like the stagnation of the last weeks, where there was something very dangerous lurking just below the surface.

“It’s your turn to sleep, old man,” he said with an answering laugh, finally turning him loose.

Obi-Wan wanted to argue, but he was exhausted.
XIII. Death Follows Him

In the morning, Obi-Wan prepared to make the trip to the marketplace in the nearest town intending to sell Anakin’s lightsaber. There were a few new considerations this time that made this markedly more dangerous than previous excursions. For a start, they had almost definitely made a new enemy of the nearby tribe of Sand People, which meant that leaving Anakin unarmed in the middle of the desert was a bad idea. There was also the fact that Obi-Wan would likely be identified as a Jedi once he was associated with the weapon he was trading, which meant that numerous hopeful thugs would be tempted to cash in on the well-known bounty.

One possible way to deal with all of these issues was that they both go into town. Two skilled Jedi could take on a whole village if needed, but that would leave their camp vulnerable to attack; if they weren’t there, the Tusken’s would certainly ravage their ship. If they brought the ship, then they could be tagged or associated with it, which would make them trackable as they moved throughout the galaxy. If Obi-Wan took both lightsabers, Anakin would be left with only a few low-end, half-charged blasters that had come in a package deal with the ship. If Obi-Wan left his lightsaber with Anakin, he would be left unarmed after selling Anakin’s.

By the time Obi-Wan came out of the ship, his hair and beard had been trimmed and neatly combed. His hands and face were clean, and he’d obviously taken a bit of extra care with his tunic to press out some of the wrinkles and make sure it was sitting exactly right, the front folds sharp and sure. He wasn’t exactly the figure he had been before, but he looked more like the Obi-Wan that Anakin had known before Mustafar.

Anakin stared for a moment, then smiled a little and said, “I’m going to pack up the rest of camp while you’re gone… then we’ll be ready to go as soon as you’re back. You can just load the speeder.”

“That’s a sound plan,” Obi-Wan agreed. He paused awkwardly as he loaded his satchel onto the speeder, standing with both hands on the straps. After a moment’s deliberation, he unclipped the lightsaber from his belt and held it over to Anakin.

“I can’t leave you unarmed against a whole tribe of Sand People,” he said by way of explanation. When the other man didn’t immediately reach for the weapon, he jiggled it as though he was trying to engage a child with a toy.

“You’ll be unarmed, then,” Anakin pointed out. He was struck by the change in Obi-Wan since the previous night; before he wouldn’t have even given Anakin back his own lightsaber, and now he was giving him his. He wasn’t sure if it meant that Obi-Wan trusted him or if it indicated that Obi-Wan had turned suicidal.

“I’ll have your lightsaber until I trade it… and as you may recall, I am extremely skilled with the mind trick.”

“As long as there are no Toydarians or Dagoyan, yeah,” Anakin said, making a face.

“Anakin, please. It’s kind of you to worry, but I am more than capable and you will likely need to
be armed far more urgently than I will…” Obi-Wan said mildly. Seeing how Anakin’s bruises had darkened and watching the ginger way he moved, he knew that his companion was more vulnerable; however, even limping, tired, and only half-coordinated, Anakin would be able to defend himself if he had a lightsaber in his hand.

And it was easier to consider that this morning. Today he felt calm and resolved. Around them, he could feel the movement of the Force almost as clearly as the light desert winds; distantly, he could sense the bustling, varied sentients moving through the town and the sands. The Tusken weren’t pinging on his senses, though he knew that it didn’t mean that they weren’t coming; he was clear and perceptive, but not omniscient.

Anakin sighed and accepted the lightsaber, then clipped it onto his belt uneasily. It felt unnatural, unlike his own though he had handled it numerous times before. Obi-Wan had stubbornly forbidden him to make adjustments to it, either for aesthetics or performance improvement, and as a result it simply wasn’t as beautifully refined as his own blade.

He’d always been told that one’s lightsaber was one’s life and he was moved that his companion once again trusted him enough to allow him to hold his. However, accepting the weapon was accompanied by a strange anxiety, as though he was letting go of the man himself.

“Just… promise me you’ll be careful,” he said, catching Obi-Wan’s eye and holding the connection.

Surprised, the older Jedi smiled and nodded. “Yes, I promise. I haven’t left you alone yet, have I?”

“No…” he said with an unintentional, answering smile. He felt an uncomfortable twinge in his chest; there was still something in him that responded intuitively to his former Master’s smile. Now that he had admitted aloud that he still loved Obi-Wan, he was more aware of how much he missed being loved in return.

“See, then. You can just relax and make a leisurely afternoon of packing,” Obi-Wan replied, clapping him on the shoulder. After a pause, he added, “Though your leisure is not to involve any modifications to that lightsaber.”

Anakin grinned. “Oh come on.”

Obi-Wan snorted, then walked over to make sure that everything was securely packed into the small storage of the speeder. “I mean it, Anakin. I believe the phrase is ‘over my dead body.’”

“So I suppose you’d better make sure to come back then.”

“I will haunt you,” Obi-Wan warned, pointing an accusing finger. “I know how, don’t think I don’t.”

Anakin laughed, brushing past the strange choice of words. “Yeah, yeah. Just hurry back, okay?”

Obi-Wan nodded, though there were a few considerations that he knew that they should discuss more. There were certain contingencies that he knew that Anakin would not agree to, and he wondered if it was even worth mentioning aloud that there was any possibility that he wouldn’t make it back to camp.

“If I’m not back by dark, there is enough fuel to make it a few parsecs; go to Pzob and wait for me for two days. If I do not rejoin you after that time, you should set your own path and look for our remaining allies. Don’t argue with me,” he said, lifting a hand to silence the protest that he could already feel coming. “Pzob is disorganized enough that you should be able to hide safely for a
“short time and resupply.”

“Obi-Wan, I’m not going to-”

“We’re not discussing it. I will hopefully be back within a few hours. Be safe and stay out of trouble.”

Without waiting for a response, he climbed lightly into the seat of the speeder and kicked off with a scattering of sand. He waved, giving Anakin a grim smile, then zipped out across the dunes.

Anakin wanted to yell at him, though it wasn’t entirely out of anger. He felt uncomfortably powerless, even though he was the one fully armed and reasonably in control of his emotions; he knew that his fight against the dark side wasn’t over, and he was acutely aware that it was easier to fight when his mentor was by his side. It was always easier when he wasn’t alone. Perhaps if they hadn’t been separated before, he never would have fallen. Obi-Wan had once joked that Anakin required constant adult supervision and even now, Anakin wasn’t sure that he was wrong. He simply hadn’t been made to be alone, and Obi-Wan knew that better than anyone.

He threw his energy into packing up their meager belongings and making his final checks on the ship. The lightsaber on his belt knocked against his thigh as he moved, reminding him almost constantly of Obi-Wan’s continuing absence. His nervous energy made him jittery so that he imagined shadowy movements on his peripheral vision; he half-wanted the Sand People to attack so that he could put them down and strike out for town, secure in the knowledge that their ship would be safe for a few hours longer.

As the afternoon progressed with no activity at camp save his own, his restlessness grew. At one point, he flopped down in the sand and tried to meditate, trying to reach out through the tendrils of the Force to feel his friend and their adversaries. Though he was certain that he was connected to the world around him, he didn’t feel much of anything. Irritated, he finished packing and went to sit in the slightly cooler cockpit of their small ship.

By the time the suns were balancing on the horizon, he was angry again. It was easier to be angry than worried, so he was up and about prowling the small fire pit and waiting for any sign of either his former Master or their desert attackers. He hated being the only thing moving as night drew nearer. His thoughts were turning toward more destructive, less-Jedi solutions.

_Do you want me to leave you behind, old man? Is this your way of getting rid of me? Well, you just wait, when I find you…_

His injuries from yesterday’s altercation ached a constant reminder of the other man; his face hurt, his shoulder was sore, and he was pretty sure that Obi-Wan had at least bruised one of his ribs. When he inhaled, there was that familiar, uncomfortable catch that made him wonder if the ribs in question were actually cracked. The stitches in his arm pulled when he moved, but he stubbornly stayed active through the dusk. Every throb of pain was Obi-Wan’s name.

The pain fed into his anger and gave him frustrated strength.

_I’m supposed to go, but how can I? What if they’ve caught him, killed him? What if he’s dead, or he needs my help? If anyone’s hurt him, I’ll kill them. This dirty planet deserves to be wiped clean. I kriffing hate Tatooine._

He wished that they were anywhere but here, but he was hesitant to leave. How was Obi-Wan supposed to meet him within two days if he left him behind without a ship? He knew that he was dead without his friend; or worse, he would fall to the dark side just out of grief for his last ally.
There wouldn’t have been any “right” time for the Tuskens to attack, but they chose exactly wrong. By the time that the sky had darkened to a violet bruise tone, Anakin had worked himself up into a desperate whirlwind of worry and accusation; there was little patience in him and no mercy at all.

It was at that time that the band of around twenty men came up slowly to surround the small camp.

He felt them before anything else and it gave him a strange, backwards delight. *Oh, you just creep right on closer*, he thought as he rose to his feet and stretched innocently, glancing skyward for a moment. Travelling the breadth of the galaxy had given him a different appreciation for the sky; it wasn’t just a flat color interspersed with little lights, the way he’d imagined it as a child. It stretched on for infinity in all directions with only the barest notion of up or down. Some of the bright dots in the sky were planets like Geonosis, and others were suns of entire systems. Unlike when he’d lived here, he wasn’t trapped and he would never be anyone’s slave ever again. The universe was so much bigger now.

He sighed. How he wished he were flying.

Sensing that his attackers were almost upon him, he drew Obi-Wan’s lightsaber with a dark smile but didn’t ignite the blade. His thumb moved over the ridges, seeking to know the lightsaber as more than a weapon. He could sense the crystal inside, how it hummed along his nerves. There was no reason to be hasty when you could feel the ebb and flow of the galaxy. Instead, he just waited until their head warrior howled the strangely distinctive hooting war cry, urging the pack of primitive fighters to attack.

From that moment, Anakin’s body moved in response to reflex and muscle memory. Obi-Wan would have been impressed by his balance and form, though there were occasional stumbles and imperfect techniques. The glowing blue plasma blade cut through bodies as cleanly as it sliced, humming, through the cooling evening air. Anakin didn’t control his bloodlust; he let his desire to survive and his anger with the universe guide the blade as he easily, almost effortlessly, cut down the entire group. The dark side took him and let him make his new body his own, gifting him with an effortless grace. Falling into the Force felt so good, so welcome; the dark side was there in these moments, moments when negotiations hadn’t failed, they’d never been an option.

It wasn’t all clean, either; a few of the warriors - the ones he could feel were older, ones who had the darkness of death on them, ones who had likely killed colonists and stolen children to sell - he allowed to first suffer dismembering blows, non-fatal stabs, and shallow slashes that burned and sent their minds spiralling into shock. Somehow, in his dark fury he knew exactly what would kill and what would only wound, and he used pain to punish as much as he used lethal force to defend.

In the falling twilight, he was a storm of blue light and glowing yellow eyes. The bodies, and the pieces of bodies, littered the sand almost bloodlessly, the wounds cauterized by the heat of the saber as quickly as they were formed. There was only a brief, sudden scarlet steam at each pass of his sword that made contact and the screams of the wounded and dying. It was familiar and uncomfortable, but he couldn’t seem to stop. All he wanted was to see them dead and know that their camp was safe for a few hours so that he could go in search of the other Jedi. There was an ambient, genocidal sense of revenge, but there was also a logical purpose that kept him grounded: *when I’m finished, I can go.*

When he reached the final raider, he hauled him roughly to his feet. The Tusken was gasping and shuddering, barking some kind of plea that Anakin only half understood and didn’t care about at all. He had cut off the man’s right hand a few minutes before and punched him hard enough with one of his metal fists to break half of his ribs, but otherwise left him intact and vulnerable. Pulling
him face to shrouded face, he hissed, “You listen to me.”

His eyes blazed dangerously, inhuman and previously unknown in the dark deserts of Tatooine. “I am no Jedi. I am Skywalker. I am a spirit of vengeance in the form of a man. I have come here before, I have razed one of your villages to the ground, leaving no man, woman, or child alive. You know of it. You tell your kind that I will strike down anyone who threatens the villages or the farmers. Any of the outsiders. I am not to be challenged.”

The language was grandiose, but it suited his mood and his message; he had been on enough foreign planets and listened to enough high priests spouting off ancient curses and wartime propaganda to know how to craft a good, believable threat that sounded credibly supernatural. He wanted the Tuskens to know him and he wanted a form of closure that could only come through fear.

He gave the man a firm shake, then threw him back down, “Now go. Get out. When you come for the bodies, I will be gone.”

The Tusken laid among the corpses for a horrified moment, processing what he had been told. Many Tuskens knew of the village that had been slaughtered several years before, though the lack of survivors had left them to create stories to explain the burned lacerations. Some had blamed Jedi, but others believed that it was the work of a desert demon. This man now knew that the name of the demon was Skywalker, though he had heard it as words rather than a name. Skywalker, a demon who protected the desert colonists and the moisture farmers who had also once come from the sky.

Anakin nudged him with his booted foot and he cried out in fear, then struggled to his feet. Stumbling, his body suffering pulse-damaging shock, he retreated, leaving the bodies of his tribesmen behind; he had been given an implied permission to return to bury them, but he wouldn’t come alone.

The Sith killed his blade and looked around at the corpses in the dim illumination of the fire. He gave them a cursory examination, but he knew already that there were no survivors; their lives had been extinguished on his blade; he’d felt each one and it had made his anger burn brighter. Now, though, drained of adrenaline and left with the aftermath of the violence, he felt hollow and ill. Had that been necessary for his survival? He could have argued that it was too dangerous to let any of them live, but there was no justification for their suffering beyond pure hatred and a need to reaffirm his own power. He could have killed them more cleanly, more quickly. He drew a shaky breath, horrified with himself and in absolute dread of what Obi-Wan would think when he returned to camp.

He reached up and rubbed at his eyes, which were suddenly teary, with the heel of his palm, then released a shivering half-sob.

Even in his turmoil, he was pragmatic. The unequivocal victory left him free to leave their camp without fear of sabotage. He knew where Obi-Wan had gone, and on foot in the cool evening, it would likely only take him an hour to walk.

What if he’s dead? he thought as he walked, his outer robe drawn about his body like a shield against the universe. What if he just didn’t want to come back, and he’s expecting me to leave without him?

He didn’t allow himself to consider which was worse.

He knows I wouldn’t leave. He has to know that.
As he came closer, he could see the lights of the town reflecting across the sand and throwing impossibly long, dark shadows. It was only an outpost, not a proper town at all; it boasted only a small marketplace and likely saw only a handful of regular traders. With his ginger hair and his easy charm, Obi-Wan had no doubt immediately stood out as an outsider; that could have drawn a dangerous degree of unwanted attention.

“I’m coming,” he assured him, though he knew that they had never communicated well through the Force and were even less likely to do so now that their bond had been broken.

Keeping his head down but knowing that he too was already marked as an offworlder, he wandered through the town, using Obi-Wan’s Force signature as a guiding beacon. He gritted his teeth, his eyes narrowed and all of his senses alight with the sights and sounds of the evening.

Though only a fraction of the size, this town wasn’t very different from the one where he’d grown up. He was certain that there were slave owners and gamblers, prostitutes and travelling merchants. There were slaves and mistreated droids, scrap and property of sentients who had scrambled up just a little bit and now maintained their hold anyone who was unfortunate enough to remain below them. He remembered when he was a little kid and he had wanted for the Jedi to free all of the slaves; he had specifically wanted Qui-Gon to free his mother, but he wouldn’t. That wasn’t what Jedi did, he’d learned. Jedi kept the peace, and slavery was apparently peaceful enough in certain contexts.

He wondered if anyone he knew was still in bondage, and how hard it would be to free all of the slaves. There were “kind slave owners,” but that didn’t mean anything, really. Owning another sentient was never kind, even if the slaves were well-fed and well-dressed. It was never kind to treat someone else as property or to make their choices for them. Even his stepfather fell into this judgment; he had thought of his mother as below him when he’d bought her, and if she hadn’t been so kind or so lovely she would have likely remained his slave. Who knew, really, if she had truly loved him or if she had only been shrewd enough to find her own freedom.

His conversation with Obi-Wan had also put other thoughts into his head about the meaning of slavery, and how captivity could masquerade as “duty;” he had been complicit in the oppression of the clones and he now felt the same guilt as his former Master had confessed the night before. When he killed Palpatine, he was going to release all of the clones from their obligations. He would have all of their chips removed, and he would try to make up for their short lifetimes of Republic and Jedi ownership.

Though motivated by a need to help, his thoughts were violent. Despite his lingering horror over what he had done in the desert, he felt as though he was projecting a looming, angry phantasm twenty feet tall; he could feel that he was angry, and he could hear the whispers of the dark side reminding him that anger was something he could use. He’d already used it tonight to great advantage. If he turned his anger toward his mental search, he could probably reach further and find Obi-Wan more easily.

“Anakin?” Obi-Wan asked from somewhere to his left.

The Sith’s head whipped around in his direction, his eyes flashing yellow in the dark for just a moment.

“Sky, Anakin…” his friend breathed, reaching over and taking his arm casually. He leaned his head close to Anakin’s and reminded him, “You’re not supposed to be here. Tell me you didn’t bring the ship into town.”

“I… didn’t bring the ship into town.”
“So it’s just out in the desert, unguarded? What about the Sand People?”

“I took care of them.” Obi-Wan took a moment to parse that, and in the pause Anakin rushed on, “What happened? Why are you so late? Are you alright? Are you hurt?” Were you leaving me?

“There are some very dangerous people in town. Not the locals… the sale went just swimmingly, really, the buyer was very friendly when I said I’d killed the weapon’s owner. Opened right up. Apparently there have been a number of bounty hunters through town and to the north… they heard that a certain General Skywalker was from Tatooine and came sniffing about,” Obi-Wan said in a low, faster whisper as he guided him through the darkened street. “The bounty hunters liked to drink, liked to talk. Anakin, many of our records - sealed records - are now public. And there is a very high bounty on certain Jedi, particularly council members and former spies.”

“Like Vos,” Anakin murmured in immediate understanding.

“I had to try to contact him so that he knew. I had to try. Getting access to any kind of decent relay took a little bit of time,” the older man licked his lips and looked away, “I couldn’t just…”

“It’s fine, come on…” Anakin said, shaking his head. He didn’t want to think about other Jedi, especially his master’s agemate and occasional lover. Quinlan knew enough about the dark side to be able to smell it on Anakin, and he was certain that the other man wouldn’t hesitate to pry into his secrets and tear him apart. He pushed him out of his thoughts. “Where is the speeder?”

“It’s here,” Obi-Wan said, relieved not to have to explain further. He would have openly told Anakin everything, but he simply didn’t want to give voice to his concerns or admit aloud how foolish he had been in sending a message out. They were leaving immediately, but it didn’t change the fact that the message he’d sent, if intercepted by the right people, would put a timestamped confirmation on the fact that he was still alive and still willing to fight.

“I’m sorry, Anakin,” he added as he pulled his friend into the alleyway where he had tucked the speeder that afternoon. “I took advantage of the knowledge that you wouldn’t leave immediately. It was--”

Anakin climbed up and dragged his friend, still talking, onto the speeder behind him.

“It’s fine. Really. I’m… uh, I’m glad you knew I wouldn’t leave.”

“You’ve never been very good at following orders.”

“You’re not in charge of me,” Anakin laughed quietly.

Obi-Wan moved up close behind him and wrapped his arms around him to hold on as the speeder hummed to life. He was warm against Anakin’s back, his thighs on either side of Anakin’s hips like a full-body embrace. The comfortable closeness settled the Sith and cooled his eyes completely blue as he effortlessly recalled a simpler time, a time when his companion would have taken him back to camp and curled up with him under the stars to talk until the fire burned down. They would have tucked themselves close under their robes, using the worn fabric and their shared warmth to stave off the cool snap of the the desert night. It wasn’t what was going to happen tonight, but the thought gave him a strange comfort. He drew a deep breath, feeling himself coming back to a center balance.

It they could just have this, he could be satisfied. It could be enough just to be friends, if they could be close like this.

As they rode across the desert, the air crisp and dry on their faces, the anxiety of the evening’s
slaughter began to creep back into his thoughts. He had been able to put it out of his mind while he was focused on another objective, but now with nothing but the stars overhead and a score of corpses waiting at camp, it was impossible to ignore that there would be a consequence for his actions. The bodies themselves seemed more like torn up toys, swathed in thick fabric and heavy masks, so it was easy enough to pretend that it was somehow unreal; it was more concern for his companion’s reaction, his judgment specifically, that made his stomach knot.

“Is there anything I should know before we get there?” Obi-Wan asked, his breath warm against Anakin’s ear.

“Uh…” Anakin said uncertainly, realizing suddenly that he was probably projecting his unease with embarrassing clarity. This close, Obi-Wan would feel his quickened heartbeat and the cold sweat that had broken out at the thought of another argument.

“Will I just see when we get there?”

“Yeah.”

The trip was only a quarter of an hour, though their fire had burned down completely in the time Anakin had been away. The warm coals cast the barest illumination, but the headlamp of the speeder lit the garish, almost bloodless carnage in high contrast.

Obi-Wan climbed down and looked over the bodies in shock, then looked back to Anakin with a visible line in his brow.

“How many were there?”

“Count the arms, legs, heads. Divide by five,” Anakin said gruffly, switching off the light and guiding the speeder into the loading bay of their ship. He didn’t look at Obi-Wan, not wanting to see his face. Obi-Wan needed to leave Tatooine so he didn’t worry that his friend would turn back to the town, but he would have to reassure him and cement his loyalty before they reached their next port.

“And… was this necessary? Tell me it was necessary.”

“Would you rather I told you it was necessary or that I tell you the truth?” he asked, acting as though locking the speeder into its place inside the ship took a great deal of concentration. His heart was beating fast like a rabbit’s, though he was outwardly still and calm. Just like a Jedi, he thought ruefully, willing his pulse to slow and his adrenaline to fade.

Obi-Wan didn’t answer right away. He looked over the bodies, assigning a measure of the blame to himself for not having been there to keep Anakin centered. He had been irresponsible to linger in town with no communication back to camp, even if his reasons had been desperately important; he knew Anakin well enough to know that he would have panicked, and that his overprotective fervor would have rapidly coalesced into a powerful weapon to be leveled at the first adversary to cross his path. He had seen his eyes gleam yellow in town; he had known what he would find here.

The question was if he could accept it.

To his surprise, he could. He couldn’t expect that Anakin would be cured overnight; releasing his anger and striving to set things right was only one step. Quinlan had told him once, not long ago, that the battle against the dark side was constant once you’ve felt its release. Anakin was a work in progress, and while he was not comfortable with the obvious relish with which the Tusken had
been mutilated, they were enemies who had come in considerable numbers to kill him. Even if Obi-Wan had been there, how much would his presence have mattered. Their adversaries had intended to outnumber them more than ten to one. It could have never been a fair fight, though the Sand People had clearly expected the numbers to work in their favor. He didn’t want to consider what they would have done to Anakin if he had been unarmed.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, offering his sadness to the Force in all of its simplicity. He released his tension and fear over Quinlan’s safety, telling himself he’d done what he could. He mourned Anakin’s loss to today’s struggle for control. He thought something reasonably charitable for the fallen and their families, though it was more an obligatory habit than a sentiment he felt strongly.

He kept his relief though. He held onto the warmth when he’d recognized his friend in town and the surprise he’d felt when Anakin had understood without argument. Anakin rarely accepted anything without questioning it or arguing over it, even when he played it off as a joke; Obi-Wan was becoming aware that he hardly knew who Anakin was becoming or who he would be if he managed to find balance on his own.

“I do appreciate your honesty, Anakin,” he said quietly, pressing his hand lightly at the small of Anakin’s back. “We can talk about it more later… but we should go, before anyone comes looking for us.”

“Yeah…” Anakin said, relaxing slightly at the touch. He sighed quietly and carefully skimmed his fingers back through his hair to push it out of his face, then reached down and unclipped Obi-Wan’s lightsaber from his belt. He pressed it into the other man’s hand, then said, “You should hold on to this.”

Chapter End Notes

"Count the arms, the legs, and heads, and then divide by five" is a lyric from the The Mighty Be Giants song "Certain People I Could Name." It's a great song and it was in my head when I was writing, so Anakin borrowed the line. :)

I'm a bit behind in writing (usually I'm two sections ahead of what I post), but I will still hopefully be able to update on time next week, though I might be a little late if I can't catch up. It's been a rough couple of weeks and I'm feeling a little discouraged, which is always a bit rough on the muse. _._.
Chapter 7

XIV. New, Clean, and Unfamiliar

The sale of the lightsaber was lucrative, even at an outpost in the middle of nowhere. Kyber crystals alone fetched thousands of credits, and a functional blade was rare enough that most potential buyers would beg, borrow, or steal not to miss the opportunity. For Anakin and Obi-Wan, this meant that their pockets were well-lined for the first time since their flight, though their consciences were still struggling with the ethics of putting a Jedi weapon out into the wild. Still, with the number of fallen Jedi and the ready bounty on those remaining, the rarity of unmanned blades was going to drop considerably. And for them, it meant the chance to leave.

Though the ship rattled mightily, it bore out the hyperspace jump without so much as a popped fuse. They were pushing the reserves of the fuel in their ship’s cells to go further than the bare minimum to resupply, knowing that anyone looking for them would look closer to Tatooine; nearby Pzob, their intended destination, was no longer safe.

Obi-Wan had other plans, vaguely mentioning a space station called Dhirrod that had once been owned by a crime syndicate that had briefly tried to challenge the Hutts. Following their fall about sixty years ago, the station had been taken over by vagrants who had turned it into a neutral, thriving market for anyone who was smart enough not to start trouble. Anakin was curious about the concept of a place that wasn’t owned by anyone and wondered how long it could stay neutral in this new Imperial galaxy.

He glanced over at Obi-Wan, who was taking his turn piloting the ship because he had slept more recently. He could tell that his companion was deeply immersed in his thoughts, but he didn’t know the subject or mood of his musings; he himself was trying to sort through whether or not he trusted his former Master’s cool acceptance of his extreme violence in the desert. It was hard to imagine that his pristine, idealistic companion was completely comfortable with twenty corpses, but he didn’t know how to press.

“So,” he began, breaking the silence, “What’re you thinking about?”

Obi-Wan, already knowing the source of Anakin’s discomfort, looked over at him thoughtfully.

“Just the way forward, I suppose. What happened on Tatooine.”

“What part of it?”

“The Tuskens,” Obi-Wan said with unusual directness.

“Oh.”

Obi-Wan smirked, “I am trying to make every effort to be open with you, Anakin. I think this is something that bears discussion.”

“They would have killed me,” the younger man replied readily. “It would have been really nasty. Twenty to one is really bad odds, Master. They’re not into a fair fight.”

“I know…”

“And it just… I got really pulled into it. Like they just kept coming, and I just kept taking them down. It was so easy but it felt so endless…. Though you know, it couldn’t have taken more than a
few minutes. It was…” Anakin took a deep breath, struggling to find a word that would sum it all up when he could barely explain it to himself in a way that wasn’t complicated and a bit like an open wound. “Brutal.”

“Yes, I can tell you were in a sort of battle fog…” This time it was Obi-Wan’s turn to hesitate, but he pressed on in the name of honesty. “And I did see your eyes flash yellow when I met you in town. You were definitely relying at least in part on the dark side for your victory…”

“I know… I just… I hate them, Master. I hate them so much, every one of them. They’re so cruel and cold, like animals.”

“I know, Anakin. You have a very personal reason to hate them… and I can’t fault you for that, just as I know that you can’t just let it go. Losing your mother even to natural causes would have been hard for you,” he mused, looking thoughtfully at the control panel as he considered his next statement. “But it broke your heart to lose your mother the way you did, knowing what she had suffered. It would have been inhuman to feel nothing.”

Anakin was surprised by that admission; from Obi-Wan, who valued the Jedi Code above most else, it was akin to blasphemy. He nodded wordlessly, watching his friend’s profile and casually admiring the slope of his nose in lieu of getting too emotionally invested in his words. He didn’t want to think too hard on his mother, whose death still caused that black tar in his insides to rise up and choke out his sense of reason.

Recovering from his own statement, Obi-Wan continued. “Most younglings join the crèche before they have had a chance to become devoted to any one person… and they are passed about between Masters and Padawan so constantly, doted upon and trained so cooperatively that all relationships begin to feel the same to them. For you, you already knew love and those bonds were impossible to break… and impossible to go without. I think that you began your training too late to truly learn how to avoid attachments.”

“Yeah? And what’s your excuse?”

Obi-Wan snorted, his eyebrows flicking up in a telling way. “Touché.”

Anakin chuckled smugly, feeling the mood lighten incrementally. He didn’t really expect him to go on, but his former master shook his head, smiling slightly.

“I was just a lost cause, I suppose.”

Wrinkling his nose, Anakin retorted, “You’re just human. And you have to admit, it doesn’t make sense anyway. It’s like, the Jedi are like ‘no love, no attachment’ and the Sith are allowed to feel everything, but it seems like it’s all tied up in the negative emotion. What kind of Force users get to feel the good side? And why would it be wrong?”

Obi-Wan considered that, lifting a thoughtful hand to stroke his beard, a gesture which he had resumed now that his beard was appropriately groomed. He had always both appreciated and dreaded how astute Anakin could be when it came to dissections of dogma; his former Padawan was intelligent enough to understand the concepts and unflinching in his willingness to criticize. He voiced comments that Obi-Wan scolded himself for even thinking.

He found his thoughts returning to Anakin’s comment about “indoctrination.”

“I don’t know. I wonder if there are differences in the early days of the Order that made it more permissible… and the teachings were altered in response to trespasses to the darker side-- Anakin,
we’ve become sidetracked. We were discussing the Tuskens.”

“Yeah, but this is important too. I want to be the kind of Force user who is allowed to love people.” Almost belligerently, he added, “I can’t stop.”

Obi-Wan blushed slightly. It was very hard to resume discussion of a gruesome murder binge when Anakin was talking about love. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Anakin, I am starting to think that you will be whatever sort of Force-wielder that suits you at the time… but it doesn’t change the fact that you are, and have always been, very powerful… and you have a responsibility to control yourself.”

“I’m trying. I just feel things very strongly,” Anakin huffed shortly.

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement with that understatement.

“I know you do. But I am concerned by the way that you just… massacred an entire attack party. I’m not a fool, I could see that there were unnecessary injuries, amputations. I can see that you took pleasure in it, and that there are things you’re not telling me about it.”

The younger man looked out at the stars, wanting to avoid thinking about it.

“Maybe at the time… at the time, yeah. I felt powerful and I felt like I was doing the right thing. Protecting people, keeping them from hurting other people… I don’t know, maybe it felt like I was getting something back for the people they’d hurt already. What happened to my mom… it wasn’t like it was the first time something like that happened. Everyone knows that it’s better if they just kill you right away, if they keep someone… well, that person’s lucky if they can find a way to kill themselves quick.” His expression darkened, his brow furrowing and his nose scrunching in concentration. “But… Obi-Wan, but afterwards I just felt sick! It wasn’t what I meant to do.”

Obi-Wan processed that all, knowing that there were lost luggage offices with less baggage than his companion. He sighed. “I know. And I know how you feel, and you’re not wrong to feel that way… but… you also just said that you regretted what you did, that it wasn’t what you’d wanted. We need to re-learn the control that it takes for you to stay in the moment and control your actions.”

Anakin felt strange knowing that Obi-Wan was telling him that his anger wasn’t wrong. His anger had always been wrong, which was why he’d learned to disguise it so well and to crush it down tight so no one could judge him for it. The knowledge that he could be angry, and that was acceptable as long as it was controlled, seemed revolutionary and freeing. He wasn’t sure if this was new, or something he’d somehow just never learned during his entire time as a Jedi.

“So… you’re not going to leave me the first chance you get to find another ship?”

The ginger Jedi glanced over at him with a long-suffering look. “No. Anakin, this is part of your way forward.”

“Oh.”

Obi-Wan made a face and mimicked. “Oh.” He set the ship to autopilot for a few minutes on course to their dodgy destination. Twisting in the seat to fully face Anakin, he met his friend’s intense eyes with a smile that managed to be both grim and welcoming. “Now, what are you not telling me?”

Anakin’s expression shifted, letting some different form of shame through. “I… uh… I may have
let one of them go. And posed as a… kind of… desert… deity. And told him to tell everyone to leave people alone or I’d be back to finish them all.”

That wasn’t at all what Obi-Wan had expected; he had thought that Anakin would admit to some sort of blasphemous technique perpetrated using the borrowed lightsaber - Force, maybe it was broken - or that there had been some children’s bodies hidden among the rest. Maybe that Anakin had killed some villagers on his way to find him, thinking he’d been taken captive.

What he’d said instead was both horrible and morbidly humorous. Lately life had been fairly uniformly horrible, so he couldn’t help but react to the humor component. Against his will, he snorted aloud.

“Is that all? Threepio would be proud of you.”

Anakin reddened, caught off guard. Obi-Wan was surprising him at every turn tonight. Of course, he had also omitted the less-hilarious detail that he’d removed one of the man’s hands before sending him stumbling off into the darkness with broken ribs and, most likely, some degree of internal bleeding. But as far as wartime gallows humor went, it was sort of funny. He laughed self-consciously, looking down at his metal hands where they were clasped in his lap.

“Yeah. That’s about it… and… I don’t know… I don’t know if it matters, but I was really worried while you were gone. I thought something might have happened to you, or that you’d wanted me to leave you behind on purpose…” It was an old fear, something fiercely independent young Anakin had felt when he’d been told to sit and wait. Qui-Gon had told him to stay put, and the next time he’d seen the tall Knight had been on his funeral pyre, leaving Anakin in a limbo he could barely put words to when he tried to reason away that uncomfortable feeling in his belly. That he would be abandoned, that Padmé would leave him, that Obi-Wan would leave him.

The intense pain of Mustafar while his body and soul waited to burn, watching Obi-Wan with desperate eyes, wishing he would kill him rather than just walk away from him.

Obi-Wan’s smile faded. “You need to stop worrying that I’m leaving. No matter what else happens, I won’t just leave without saying anything.”

“I know. Logically, I know.”

He knew a lot of things, but it didn’t stop him from feeling otherwise. Particularly with Obi-Wan, who often played his cards close to his chest when it came to his attachments, Anakin always felt like he was reacting rather than being in control. In a few recent outbursts, he had pushed past to dominate his former master, but somehow Obi-Wan always rapidly turned things back to his favor. He had nearly killed him on Polis Massa and Obi-Wan had humiliated him; he had forced him to feel his emotions, and Obi-Wan had walked out and left him waiting alone for days. He still couldn’t even wrap his brain around Obi-Wan beating the kriﬃng tar out of him. It felt like Obi-Wan held all of the power in their relationship, in a different way than he had even when Anakin had been his Padawan.

Anakin licked his lips and attempted to put all of that into words. Just like before, his vocabulary couldn’t cover it all. “I just… I don’t know. Nevermind. I’m trying.” The words were short, the sentences were short, clipped and slightly frustrated.

Obi-Wan wanted to put him at ease, but there was no way to do it that was sincere. He reached over and clasped his hand. “Please trust me.”
squeezed his hand and then pulled it away, feeling no Force-connection in the touch.

“I'm trying.”

Obi-Wan nodded in acknowledgment, recognizing with sudden clarity that he needed to re-earn Anakin’s trust as well. He had been so focused on his companion’s trespasses that he had forgotten the obstacles he had to overcome on Anakin’s behalf. If nothing else, the fact that he had grasped a metal hand instead of one of warm muscle and bone was his fault. He had mutilated and permanently disfigured his friend, and he honestly didn't know how to address that or settle the complex feelings that Anakin must have been carrying. Anakin would overcome the disability and could even become a stronger warrior still, but he would never be able to touch someone the same way again.

“I've never broken a promise to you,” Obi-Wan reminded him softly.

“I believe you once promised me a lothcat kitten if I would shut up and go to sleep,” Anakin retorted with a laugh, not wanting the dark mood or the guilt between them.

“I never said when I would get it for you, I can make good on that when we land if you wish…”

“Oh, nice try!”

Obi-Wan grinned, looking momentarily boyish as he cast his eyes in Anakin’s direction.

“You have a frustratingly good memory, my young Padawan.”

Anakin smiled smugly. “I do.”

As they made their slightly bumpy landing, Obi-Wan silently thanked the Force for getting them there on their remaining fuel. The port seemed unusually crowded, and he could only speculate that Dhirrod was acting as a safe haven for anyone who wasn’t on the right side of the Empire. There were busted up smuggling freighters as well as more refined fighter-class ships, some of which wouldn’t have normally been found in a place like this. After maneuvering through the landing zone and tucking their ship between several larger, more impressive ones, Obi-Wan sighed and sat back in his seat.

“First we find a place to stay and rest up,” he said as he unclipped his safety harness. “Then we resupply and see what we can learn from other travelers…”

“Then we figure out how to find Ahsoka,” Anakin said, rising to his feet and setting some of the biolocks on the console.

Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

“Just because she's not a Jedi doesn't mean she's not in danger. I think anyone who knew me is probably in danger.”

While Obi-Wan couldn't deny the truth in that statement, he didn't know the wisdom of gathering the galaxy’s most wanted into one place. Nonetheless, he nodded; he had every intention of ensuring that his surviving favorites were safe, so he was hardly in any position to forbid Anakin the same.

“After we eat and rest.”

Anakin nodded, surprised by the lack of resistance.
There was a curious feeling of safety in port, as though everything dangerous was on equal footing. Everyone avoided extensive eye contact, with the exception of the sex workers, and it was very clear that people were making a point of keeping to their own business. Anakin didn’t remember ever being in a place like this, but Obi-Wan seemed as though it was at least somewhat familiar; if nothing else, the older man had chosen the destination, so he obviously knew something about it.

Anakin found his gaze wandering to some of the prostitutes. His attention gravitated primarily toward humans and near-humans, but didn’t discriminate further between genders. He had never paid for sex because being a good-looking young man, he was never hurting for company if he wanted it. More often, though, he simply didn’t want it. He wasn’t interested in baseless physicality; if all he wanted was to get off, he could do that on his own.

At the moment, though, he wanted some kind of connection with another sentient. He was also curious about his new body and other people’s reactions to it. Clothed and wearing gloves, he looked like anyone else. However, beneath his robes he was half-metal and covered with scars from years of battle; he didn’t know if anyone would want to be near him, or what it would feel like to touch someone else with these hands. His fingers were always cold now.

He felt oddly self-conscious and looked away, turning his attention back to Obi-Wan.

“Have you been here before?”

“Once, a year or two ago. It is an interesting place, the very definition of the phrase ‘honor among thieves,’” Obi-Wan mused, glancing around the market. That was actually what the station’s name meant, he’d heard; it was some strange amalgamation of languages. “As long as you harm no one, no one will harm you. What happens here, stays here.”

Anakin nodded, pulling his bag up a bit on his shoulder as they walked.

“We will need to get new clothes… we look like Jedi,” Obi-Wan said, looking at a supplier’s stall as they passed.

Following his gaze, Anakin looked over the armors and leathers. It was strange to think of “looking like Jedi” when Jedi literally came from all species and every corner of the galaxy, yet their clothing and carriage were distinctive and oddly ubiquitous. Even on Tatooine where most of the locals had worn pale, multi-layered garments, Obi-Wan’s Jedi clothing and outer robes had been distinctive. Even dressed in a mixture of Sith robes and cast-offs from Polis Massa, Anakin had unconsciously crafted an outfit that resembled what he had worn as a Jedi.

He nodded slowly. “Yes… I suppose you’re right.”

Obi-Wan paused at the stall. “Find something new, Anakin.”

A half hour and a generous handful of credits later, and they were leaving with several new sets of clothes that were entirely different from what either had worn in recent years. Obi-Wan had dressed in fluid, pale-colored robes and soft boots since childhood, sometimes augmented by plastoid panels for battle or heavier coats for colder climates. He felt simultaneously exposed and armored in the sleek leather trousers and low boots, a thin, soft gray shirt and quilted jacket. The thick belt on low on his hips still carried the same food stores, but his lightsaber was now sheathed more discreetly within a large-caliber blaster holster. He wore darker grays with some dull browns, and he felt darker and duller than ever before. Everything he wore was somehow stiffer and more constricting while feeling more revealing; he was far from prude, but he felt strangely naked despite being quite modestly dressed.
Anakin was dressed primarily in black leather and synthetics that hugged the right places and obscured the metal jointing in others. He couldn’t help but notice how much smaller Obi-Wan looked without his voluminous robes.

Obi-Wan couldn’t help but notice how well Anakin’s new trousers flattered his muscular thighs and backside.

“Satisfied, Master?”

“You probably shouldn’t call me that,” Obi-Wan pointed out mildly, shouldering his pack again. It was now full to the point of looking slightly inflated, thanks to the addition of his Jedi robes. He wasn’t quite ready to let them go, despite that he knew it would likely be some time before he could safely wear them again.

“Yeah,” Anakin agreed grudgingly, disliking the loss of the comforting epithet in tandem with Obi-Wan’s classic appearance. It seemed like a lot at once, though he logically knew that it was silly to be so attached to something so superficial. There were really numerous reasons why he shouldn’t be calling Obi-Wan that, most of which had nothing to do with the bounty on Jedi.

“We should find lodging. I think we’ve probably been up more than a full rotation at this point.”

“Yeah… You know of anywhere, or is that the next big adventure?”

“I’m not especially knowledgeable, no. I think we could likely rely on price as much as anything else; it seems like it would follow that the more pricey a venue, the smaller the louse in the sheets.”

Anakin snorted, walking beside him comfortably.

“It might be better if we could see them coming.”

“Only if they’re paying room and board.”

Anakin felt like they had spent half of his life walking through seedy ports and illicit marketplaces; there were still so many parts of the galaxy that were violent and wild like this. They were colorful and fascinating, so naturally Anakin loved them. His favorite part of many of his travels had been shopping in the local markets, especially knowing that his Jedi’s living stipend meant that he could sometimes afford small luxuries or curiosities.

“We passed somewhere that seemed fairly legitimate,” Obi-Wan added after a distracted moment. “The Skyworthy Smuggler.”

“That’s a pretty legit name,” Anakin said with an approving nod and a lazy smile.

“Almost poetic.”

Despite the mid-act costume change, Anakin was surprised by how normalizing it was to be among other people. In the desert, there had been nothing but the two of them, their violence, and their awkwardness. It was as though the universe had been distilled down to nothing but Order 66 and its fallout, like the world had ended entirely. Here, surrounded by a strange, outcast swathe of sentients, it was suddenly very obvious that the worlds were still turning even without the majority of the Jedi order.

That realization, that other people could just go on with their lives while they were both experiencing so much pain, was surreal. It made them want to lose themselves in “normal,” but it also reminded them of how disconnected they felt from everyone else. As they walked, Obi-Wan
drifted slightly closer to Anakin until their knuckles brushed.

Anakin wanted things to be the way they had been. He wanted Obi-Wan in his full, layered tunics and robes that made him enticingly soft when he hugged him around the waist; his friend seemed vulnerable without the excess fabric. He chewed the corner of his lower lip, looking over at the Jedi curiously.

Obi-Wan booked their room, freeing Anakin from the obligation of speech. The tiny suite of rooms was shared, but they had separate beds and doubles of the writing desks and chairs. Anakin had half-hoped that they would have to share a bed so that he could accidentally move close to the other man while they slept; surrounded by people, he was once again aware of how lonely he was and how starved for contact.

Once they were settled, Obi-Wan pulled his Jedi robes out of his pack and laid them out on his bed to mend any small tears or pulls in the weave of the fabric. Satisfied with their condition, he just looked them over for several long moments, then smoothed the cloth lovingly with the flats of both palms. His expression was difficult to read as he finally straightened and began to neatly, tightly, fold his robes into the smallest shape possible.

He knew that he should throw them away; they were primarily a liability. He was too nostalgic and he knew it. The people who had woven this fabric, measured his height for the robes, and sewn the meticulous seams were almost certainly dead; though he knew how to draft and sew his own clothing, like all Jedi, there were certainly Jedi arts and skills that would be lost entirely within his own lifetime.

Anakin watched him, guessing rather accurately at the cause for his introspective silence. Not knowing what to say or how to comfort him, he excused himself to the small refresher to clean up.

It was the first time he’d washed his entire body in weeks. Roughing it in a desert climate with only a single, hard-working old moisture reclaimer meant that they had been frugal with their water usage; aside from drinking and keeping their camp in order, they had primarily only spared enough to wash their hands, faces, and assorted injuries. Standing under the shower spray, Anakin took a deep breath.

The water soaked his uneven curls, plastering his hair to his head and sending little rivers down the back of his neck and over his chest and shoulders. It was wonderfully hot and surprisingly well-pressurized, though occasionally the temperature went warmer or colder based on the water usage of their surrounding neighbors. Even so, it felt like a miracle. Anakin scrubbed his hands, cleaning the dirt and grime out of the joints, then focused on his face. He gradually worked over his entire body, mindful not to hurt himself with the strength of his own steely fingers.

He looked over his long, naked body and his mismatched mechanical limbs, realizing that it was the first time he’d really seen himself completely naked since before Mustafar. It was a lot all at once, between his old scars, his new injuries from Obi-Wan, and his extensive mechanical additions. There was nothing beautiful about the prosthetics or the way they joined with his natural body; the work had been done well, but for all of the galaxy’s technologies that could cloak ships and transport beings millions of miles in seconds, there was nothing that could replicate the grace of a living human limb.

Padmé had made a point of accepting his original metal hand, never shying away from holding it or letting it touch her skin, but Anakin had always known that it was a conscious effort. He loved her more for that, and for her willingness to accept the parts of him that were new or that he didn’t always want. Obi-Wan had gone a step further and simply treated the new hand the same as his
other, kissing both palms the same way, holding whichever was closer. He never avoided discussion of the replacement, as Padmé sometimes did to avoid awakening negative memories or drawing a comparison; to him, the injury was just something that had happened and the gold-toned, unnatural-looking prosthetic was just a part of him. Anakin never felt self-conscious around either of them.

He felt self-conscious now. He wondered how she would have reacted to his new hand, which was chrome-silver and smooth, shaped more like an organic hand than the other, more mechanical one that he had worn longer. If the conditions had been different, would Padmé have been able to accept that he had no soft fingers to stroke through her hair, that he couldn’t make her moan with just his hands? Would she have let him touch her? Obi-Wan had held both of his hands in the desert, but there was no love in the contact. Would that ever change, or would the cool silver fingers just always remind him of Anakin’s betrayal?

He sighed, closing his eyes and forcing himself not to think about his inelegant feet and calves and how they felt against the hard shower floor. Instead, he just vigorously washed his body and made sure that the prosthetics were clean and dry, with no lingering sand in the joints.

Clean and still damp, he towelled himself off and looked at his face in the mirror. He was still swollen, with a dark, slightly puffy bruise below his eye that spread down to his jaw and split lower lip. It was fortunate that Obi-Wan hadn’t broken his nose, really. Or knocked out his teeth. Nothing could have improved things more than two blackened eyes and a busted nose. The bruises on his chest were dark and livid, colorful against his unevenly golden skin. He could see where his clothes had left tan lines, despite the time he’d spent shirtless. His hips and thighs, though hidden by the towel he’d wrapped around his waist, were still a sunless white.

He knew that Obi-Wan’s zones of tan and pasty, freckled white were even more obviously demarcated; aside from his master’s face, throat, forearms, and hands, he was likely pale all over. The thought made him contemplate Obi-Wan naked, which brought his thoughts back around to his own ghastly face and damaged body. He lifted a hand to the broad bruise on his ribs, remembering what it had felt like to be hit and how much Obi-Wan had seemed to hate him in that moment. He couldn’t imagine him ever loving him again or wanting him in this body. He was nearly certain that Obi-Wan hated this body.

More out of curiosity than anything, he left the refresher wrapped only in his towel and moved to dress in their shared room. He could feel Obi-Wan’s eyes on him, though only for a moment before the Jedi politely looked away. Anakin chewed his swollen lip as he pulled on his new trousers, trying to gauge what that meant. He wanted Obi-Wan to watch him, even if nothing would ever come of it.

By the time he was dressed again in his shirt and trousers, he was thoroughly self-conscious and hungry for attention. There was a strange tension in the room that came from his nudity and their history; before, being alone together with more than a half hour to spare meant that they would end up in bed and that Anakin would need a second shower. Obi-Wan would have been all over him. They both knew this and the fact that they weren’t really even looking at each other just made it more obvious; whether or not they actually wanted a kriff, there was a situational pressure that was almost tangible.

After a restless moment, Obi-Wan rose to his feet and reached over to touch the ends of Anakin’s hair. It was a casual, non-sexual gesture, but the situation charged the contact to a point where Anakin almost jumped.

“Let me trim this for you, Anakin,” he offered quietly.
The younger man nodded and answered with an actively casual tone, “Yeah, it could use it.”

Obi-Wan had often trimmed Anakin’s hair when they were together, knowing that otherwise he would enlist a disinterested clone or an astromech to assist him with the job. For some reason, it never occurred to Anakin to see a barber or a stylist, or even a droid that specialized in that sort of thing. Fortunately the older Jedi was surprisingly good at it, even with med-kit scissors or sewing shears; after all this time, he knew how Anakin’s hair curled and how to mitigate the inevitable bad hair days.

“Back to the refresher, then,” Obi-Wan said, pausing to rummage in his own small bag of toiletries. He ushered Anakin in to the cramped, humid little room and gestured for him to sit on the edge of the sink.

He hadn’t showered yet, so he paused to wash his hands before touching his clean companion. Obi-Wan focused on the warm pressure of the water and the way his dry skin hungrily absorbed the moisture. He thought of the comfortable temperature of the room and the way the steam of the shower made the air thick and heavy, how good it felt to inhale the humidity after weeks in the desert. He noticed the smell of soap lingering on the air and the awkward hotel-bathroom-on-every-planet-in-the-galaxy lighting that made everyone look sick and old. He made a point of not thinking about Anakin’s body or the marks he’d left on him, the way one eye was swollen into a different shape, the way it would feel to kiss Anakin with a split lip. He’d kissed him that way before, but never when he’d been the cause. He focused instead on what it felt like to be barefoot on tile.

Anakin’s heart was beating strangely fast. Obi-Wan was close to him again and he could feel the other Jedi’s Force signature and the warm hum of the galaxy around them; he knew that the other man felt the tension between them and he wished that their new “openness” included talking about whatever there was remaining between the two of them.

He held very still as Obi-Wan first combed his fingers through his wet hair, gently working through the tangles. His fingers caught a few times and caused some little, painless tugs before he picked up a comb and dragged it carefully through his hair. He could tell that Anakin had cut it himself most recently, before everything had happened; there were long pieces and uneven cuts, strands that just stuck out longer than any others nearby.

He smirked, then set the comb aside and reached for the travel scissors he kept for trimming his beard. They were small but perfectly sharp; while hardly the tools of a master hairdresser, they would work for a simple trim.

“Do you want it a lot shorter, or similar to how you’ve worn it recently?”

Anakin considered that; just as Obi-Wan should have thrown away his robes, Anakin should have told Obi-Wan to cut his hair short to better mask his identity. However, especially with his highly visible bruises and his uncertain identity, he wasn't ready to feel so exposed.

“Ah, about the same, I guess,” he mumbled, knowing it was probably the wrong answer.

Obi-Wan nodded, then began the slightly tedious task of cutting and evening out Anakin’s unruly, uneven curls. His hair seemed to grow at different speeds all over, though Obi-Wan logically knew that probably wasn’t the case. Still, the way that some pieces stuck out more than others couldn’t be completely attributed to styling.

Anakin forced himself to lower his taut shoulders and relax. He had always liked this sort of care in the past and he recognized it now as another small peace offering from his former Master; now,
he wasn’t certain if it was a specific apology for hurting him or a more general invitation to resume their friendship. Not knowing made him ambiently anxious, but he knew that this particular moment was positive so he let himself enjoy the careful attention and the gentle contact. For all he knew, that was all it should be; maybe Obi-Wan’s precise nature just made it impossible to continue to spend time with a traveling companion whose hair was that much of a disaster.

The clean, sharp sound of the scissors was strangely cathartic. He watched the drying hair fall on the floor and counter, belatedly wondering how they were going to clean up after. He shrugged mentally, figuring that Obi-Wan already had a plan; that was what he did. He closed his eyes and tilted his head forward when Obi-Wan directed him to, shivering at the touch of the cold scissors at the nape of his neck as his companion evened out the bottom of his hairline. Within a few minutes, Obi-Wan worked his way forward again to tidy up around his ears.

He let Obi-Wan lift his chin, keeping his eyes closed though he could feel the other man’s eyes on his face. He licked his lips self-consciously, then lightly bit the split in the middle of his lower lip; the difference in sensation and an oddly addictive tenderness made it hard to leave the raised line alone. He felt Obi-Wan run his thumb over his lower lip, tsking, and he quickly released his hold and smiled awkwardly. Obi-Wan continued on to trim his long bangs, then catch some of the stray pieces that he had missed earlier.

After a moment, Obi-Wan set the scissors aside and fluffed Anakin’s hair with his fingers. He parted it loosely, then combed it back from the younger man’s face. Anakin finally opened his eyes to watch, noticing again how close they were. Obi-Wan was looking at his hair rather than his face, his eyes deliberately not meeting Anakin’s as he calmly cared for him. His Master felt the tension between them as well, but he wasn’t going to acknowledge it right now; he couldn’t allow the normalcy of the situation to encourage him to make poor decisions. Even if the setting felt familiar and the space between them felt inviting, they were no longer lovers. Even if he normally would have stepped up into the space between Anakin’s knees and kissed him to end their session, that wasn’t appropriate now.

Finally, he met Anakin’s eyes and gave him a quick, warm smile.

“Take a look and tell me if it needs anything.”

Anakin twisted where he was sitting up on the counter, then tilted his head to either side to see how his damp hair moved. It was clean and noticeably shorter and it moved naturally to fall around his bruised face. The shorter front tumbled over his brow, parted on the side, to mask the scar over his eye.

“Nah, it’s good. Thanks, Obi-Wan.”

“Of course. Any time.”

Anakin keenly felt the lack of further contact as Obi-Wan turned away to clean up. He watched the other man’s reflection in the mirror, feeling foolish for wanting their old routines, for wanting Obi-Wan to ruffle his hair and kiss his cheek. He slowly let out a long-held breath through his nose, then slid down off of the countertop.

“You should wash up. I can’t even tell you how good the water felt.”

Obi-Wan nodded as he swept the fallen hair into a tissue with his fingers then flushed it down the toilet. He was focusing on menial tasks and trying to ignore the urge to act as they always had. It wasn’t the way things were now, and he couldn’t allow himself to fall into old habits. They could be friends, he hoped that they could rebuild, but for now he needed to remember that they were
starting from somewhere new. Even if Anakin wouldn’t have objected to affectionate contact, it
didn’t have the same meaning now. Everything needed to be redefined and started fresh.

“That’s next on the list for me. I’ve unpacked and put things away… I think a shower and then
sleep is the way to go. I’m too tired for food right now, astonishing as that may sound.”

Anakin smiled crookedly. “Well, I’ll leave you to that, I guess. Thanks again for fixing my hair.”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “It was driving me crazy.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t cut it in my sleep.”

“What would you have thought if you’d woken to me crouched over you with a pair of scissors?”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XV. I know

The next two days were quiet as they recovered from their travel and their time on Tatooine. Surrounded by civilization again, they realized how hard it had been to be so isolated and to forego so many of their basic creature comforts. So they slept as much as they needed, they ate real food rather than supplements, and they enjoyed losing themselves in the crowds of travelers and transients. There was something strangely comfortable about Dhirrod; as Obi-Wan had explained initially, there was a sort of mutual cease-fire and an unspoken rule of non-violence in effect at all times. It was like resting in the eye of a stationary hurricane. Despite being a haven for many of the galaxy’s most wanted, it was one of the safest places in neutral space.

They both relaxed somewhat, though the hard-edged tension remained between them as they adjusted to their new normal. There were still moments when one or the other would suddenly be overwhelmed by an awkward similarity to a past experience, though they had each worked to adjust their way of thinking. Anakin still wanted Obi-Wan’s attention, but his mind had switched to a much longer end-game; Obi-Wan was still on guard against excessive familiarity, but he had relaxed to a point where he was no longer overcompensating for his conditioned urges.

On their third day, with no alarm set and no schedule planned, they slept deeply until midday. Groggy in the curtained darkness, Obi-Wan just listened to his former Padawan’s deep, even breathing. He was accustomed to it from weeks sleeping in the tent and years of shared accommodations before that; there was something comfortable about this moment, an intimacy that had everything to do with familiarity and carried no expectations. Before, Anakin would have been draped across him or spooned up against his back, but the new normal was just like this - nearby, close but not touching. In this case, Anakin was curled up on the edge of his bed closest to Obi-Wan’s, and Obi-Wan was on the side closest to his with the chasm between mattresses safely separating them.

He sighed tiredly, wondering what time it was and what the day would hold. He realistically knew that they couldn’t stay here for too long, but he was also loathe to leave the relative comfort and safety of their current lodgings. The previous day they had started their search for Ahsoka by bribing a specialist to hack into Republic travel records to find her last-known location, but beyond that they had accomplished little; surviving Jedi and known sympathizers were deeply hidden as they struggled to survive sweeps by Clones and repurposed droids.

After a few minutes, he sat up slowly and perched on the edge of the bed in the dark. He was still a bit groggy, though he knew that it was later than it felt like it must be. After a moment, he leaned over to look at the glowing face of the chronometer, then he oozed to his feet and slipped into the refresher to wash up and start his day.

By the time he finished with his morning routine, Anakin was up and out into the port. He had left a minimal note, which Obi-Wan destroyed as a matter of habit, that briefly laid out his day’s plan. It started with food, moved on to further research into Ahsoka’s movements, laid out a few slightly seedy ways to use the Force to cheat street gamblers to make a few credits, and ended with an invitation to meet for supper at a dodgy little cantina that they had spotted the previous night. Obi-Wan wished that he could have seen Anakin before his former apprentice had set off for the day, but he knew that his admonitions about proper uses for the Force would have fallen on deaf ears.
anyway; now, as before, Anakin was guided by a very specific internal compass.

He sought out a cup of caff and a soft, steamed roll filled with meat and egg. Like most of the sentient he passed, he avoided eye contact and didn’t linger anywhere too long. There were vendors carrying on spirited conversations on the streets and locals calling window to window above him, but otherwise most of the sentients walked about as though they were the only ones there. It was strange to Obi-Wan to be so unseen, but it was oddly welcome; he was unacknowledged as a Jedi because all passers-by were anonymous, not because he had left his identity behind.

He carried on his own research into his missing allies, but searches of Imperial data led only to ghosts of useful information. There was no solid data on who had survived, only who was still unaccounted for. He found death certificates for several friends, but not others. He found numerous graphic photos that made him go pale and need to recite the Jedi code over, and over, and over. He found estimates for numbers of Jedi still at large, both in terms of full knights and padawan. He was distressed to find that the Empire, and Palpatine specifically, now had access to holocrons concerning uncontacted, Force-sensitive children.

He learned that Cody had lived and was now deep within the Empire, primarily answering to CC-2224. Several high-ranking commanders, including Anakin’s own Captain Rex of the 501st, were marked as missing and presumed dead, their chips unactivated in Order 66.

His feelings about the clones under Republic control were not complex. Though Cody had tried his best to kill him, he hadn’t been given any choice in the matter; his personality and everything that had made him Cody rather than just CC-2224 had been switched off with a single command. The Jedi had never stood a chance, but that wasn’t the fault of their soldiers. He couldn’t actually imagine how his men would feel if they were suddenly restored to themselves and forced to face what they had been made to do.

Perusal of hijacked files took several hours, especially when he had no choice but to abandon his search and start over when the systems detected his presence and booted him out. He knew that what he was doing was very dangerous and that there was risk even working with the underground hackers and intelligence conspiracists, but he had a hard time disconnecting and heading back into the market on his errands.

With a satchel full of supplies, he finally walked into the tiny, noisy cantina where he was to meet Anakin. Absently, he smoothed his hand over his beard, then dragged his fingers back through his soft, clean hair. A good-looking girl behind the counter gave him a once-over and he gave her a charming smile. She smiled back, her pale pink eyebrows lifting invitingly as she lifted a hand to beckon him over.

As he approached, she leaned across the bar and lightly laid a hand on his forearm. She licked her glittery white lips, then murmured, “What can I get for you, sugar?”

Obi-Wan always enjoyed flirting; it was a safe way to connect with people just a little bit, just enough to get that warm, comfortable confidence boost and to appreciate how attractive other sentient could be. He’d been a terrible flirt since he’d been a Padawan travelling with Qui-Gon. He didn’t really mind much as long as he felt a spark at someone’s personality and a reasonable level of comfort with their biology. He did generally prefer a similar configuration of limbs even if the number didn’t exactly match, a human-or-higher intelligence, and a humanoid facial structure. He liked species who liked to kiss. He liked humans best, but interspecies differences fascinated him.

This particular girl was Near Human, likely some mixture of primarily human genetics with a bit of
Twi’lek mixed in way back; she had soft hair to her shoulders, but she also had an unusual ear shape and the vestiges of very short lekku that were almost hidden under her hair. Overall, she was a soft, pale pink that seemed to glimmer in places, though her skin had a more human gold-beige undertone. Obi-Wan couldn’t help but find something very welcoming in her appearance, so he leaned over to mirror her movement.

“Do you know how to make L’lahsh?” he asked. One problem with ordering in unfamiliar bars was that local ingredients varied wildly, as did the knowledge of the bartenders. Obi-Wan often ordered L’lahsh as his go-to for casual drinking because it was safe for humans and most bartenders knew of it.

“I do, but we’re out of Alderaan wine until the next time the boys from Blackroot Freighters come in with a shipment… how about I mix you up something as close as I can?” she asked, tilting her mouth toward his ear to be heard over the music and the loud conversations around them.

He laughed, then nodded turned his head to reply against her pointed little ear. “That would be marvelous, thank you…”

He jumped, straightening when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder. He looked over to see Anakin smiling at him in a familiar way that he had recognized in recent years as being slightly possessive. His companion had been subtly jealous over his flirtations since he’d been an older teen, though Obi-Wan hadn’t really realized it until much later when they were sleeping together; as a matter of politeness the older Jedi didn’t tend to flirt with others around his lover, though without open acknowledgement of their relationship there had never been a place for discussions of exclusivity.

“Hello there.”

Falling back on old habits, he offered Anakin an apologetic smile. He immediately felt a surge of irritation with himself for it; it wasn’t as though he had any reason not to smile at a pretty bartender, and he had just been ordering a drink innocently enough. But there was Anakin with that judgmental I wasn’t even late! look on his face, as though he’d caught Obi-Wan swapping room numbers.

“Hey,” Anakin said by way of greeting, smiling warmly at him. He moved just close enough to send a message to the girl behind the counter, though Obi-Wan wasn’t sure if he was even aware that he was doing it or if that too fell under the heading of “old habits.”

“You drinking?” the bartender asked, turning her attention a bit less personally toward the blond.

Anakin nodded. “Dorian Quill for me, thanks.”

She nodded, then turned away to fetch their drinks. Once her attention had been diverted, Obi-Wan asked, “How did your afternoon go?”

“I made a few credits,” he replied smugly, leaning his forearms on the counter and giving his friend a winning smile that somehow, just for a second, reminded Obi-Wan of Quinlan Vos. As a result, Obi-Wan reflexively lifted his hand to rub the bridge of his nose.

“What did you do?”

“Just a little bit of chance-gaming… I’m just really lucky. You know that.”

Obi-Wan groaned. “I do hope you were careful.”

“Of course,” Anakin insisted as though he was deeply offended. “I know how this works. I grew
up in a gambling town, remember? I know the rules. Never win too big or too often. I’ve got this.”

“Right. As long as you’re careful.”

“Well, it’s not like we can scavenge much here for extra credits. Aside from bounty hunting, the only other really anonymous option is probably prostitution,” Anakin joked, glancing around the cantina to check out what kinds of sentients had wandered in. “You’d do okay at that.”

“I’d do great at that,” Obi-Wan said with a self-deprecating laugh. Their humor was getting darker by the day, he reflected.

The bartender set down their glasses and, catching the last lines of their conversation, laughed and chimed in with her bell-like voice, “You would!”

Anakin bristled, though he laughed as well. Obi-Wan could hear that it was a bit awkward and smirked to himself as he paid for both of their drinks, realizing belatedly that doing so probably erroneously confirmed the signals that Anakin had been throwing to the bartender.  We are not together, Anakin.

Obi-Wan lifted his glass in acknowledgement to the bartender and winked at her devilishly, then took a sip. The flavor was different but strong, nuanced and rounder than a typical l’lahsh. It was the first alcoholic beverage he’d had in some time and it felt good; the burn on his tongue and the warmth that slid down his throat was settling and familiar. He couldn’t remember a time when something so simple was so welcome, and he made a mental note to be mindful of his consumption; the last thing he needed was to be drunk in a dangerous starport with a former lover.

Anakin made a face at him, then took a healthy swallow of his own drink. If it was strong or burning or bitter, his expression didn’t betray him. He leaned slightly closer to ask, in a voice just loud enough for Obi-Wan to hear, “What did you find out?”

“This isn’t the place to discuss it,” Obi-Wan replied, shrugging one shoulder lazily. He still wasn’t used to how he could feel the movement of his stiff jacket, particularly the short, open collar. He reached up to tug at it, disliking how it felt against the back of his neck, then continued. “Not to get your hopes up too quickly, but we may have a direction to start looking for your young friend.”

They had decided that they wouldn’t speak any Jedi names in public, particularly anyone who might have ended up on a wanted poster. From their research, they had learned that Ahsoka had a fairly heavy bounty on her head; they didn’t dare speak her name, any more than they would have discussed Yoda at the bar.

Anakin nodded, passing his glass from hand to hand by sliding it on the slick surface of the bar. His expression was unusually closed as he stared at the amber-colored liquid sloshing in the cup. He knew that Obi-Wan was the only other Jedi in the bar, but other Force-sensitives would have been able to pick up his agitation if he didn’t keep his thoughts so guarded and his shields up around himself.

“Well, I’m guessing our time on Dhirrod is going to be fairly limited. Once we’ve got what we need, we can move on… yeah? Have we picked our next jump-stop?”

“I’ve been asking around where’s safe,” Obi-Wan mused. “But it’s hard to get the right answer without specifying what kind of safe we’re looking for.”

“There’s a lot more unsafe than safe. This whole Empire thing isn’t going over too well in some
places. I heard there’s a bunch of worlds that aren’t too happy about the changes to the constitution…” Anakin mused as he lifted his gaze to meet his companion’s eyes.

Not for the first time, Obi-Wan was surprised by how intense his stare could be and how strongly it affected him; Anakin was terribly charismatic and always had been. As a child everyone in his town had loved him, as an adult his clones had admired and adored him. Wherever they went, people seemed to appreciate his earnest delivery and his unpolished sense of fairplay; people trusted him intuitively. Aside from his military enemies, the only people who had ever mistrusted or truly disliked him had been members of the Jedi council.

They hadn’t been wrong, but they could have been. If he hadn’t had to fight constantly for their trust and recognition, it was entirely possible that Palpatine would have never had a foothold to take control of him. The term ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ came to mind, though its meaning was manifold where it came to Anakin.

Obi-Wan nodded, taking a longer swallow of his drink.

“A lot of the former Separatists in particular.”

Anakin shook his head. “That’s a weird thought, that maybe they were right all-- sss.” He took a hissing breath through his teeth, jumping a little and jerking his arm forward. Making a face, he twisted his shoulder to try to look at the back of his arm.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. My arm just stung for a tick. I guess it’s one of those stitches; maybe I pulled it weird.”

“Perhaps we should go so I can redress it,” Obi-Wan suggested, frowning.

“I’m okay,” Anakin assured him. He took another sip of his drink as though to steady himself, then continued his earlier thought. “Maybe the Separatists were right. Padmé had said something about it before… and it sort of made me mad at the time. Like, you know, we’d been fighting for so long and she was saying maybe we were wrong…”

Obi-Wan nodded, leaning on the counter a little tiredly. He didn’t feel the exhaustion he’d been experiencing before, when he had been repressing his emotions so tightly that it had actually impacted his ability to use the Force; however, the activity and the constant stress were difficult to bear with so much bad news, even now.

“She always had a different view of things than we did, being a politician and staying primarily on Coruscant or Naboo,” he said evenly, deliberately not thinking too hard about Padmé or where she was now. Like Anakin, he knew that his thoughts could be vulnerable if he focused on them too much. Though strangely enough, Anakin was his biggest concern when it came to Padmé’s location.

“I miss her,” he said with a sigh, slumping forward slightly.

“That’s understandable, she was very important to you.”

“Is,” Anakin corrected, closing his eyes in a long blink. He tilted his head forward, his soft hair falling around his face. He missed Padmé terribly but, to his surprise, he missed his children even more. He was used to being away from her; a few weeks away wasn’t really even that long at all for them. The babies, though… he had been trying not to think about them, but for some reason all he wanted at this moment was to curl up in his bed with the twins tucked into the pillows safely
beside him. They could nap together and it would be warm and safe.

There wasn’t a lot right now that felt safe. Obi-Wan was friendly, but still not what Anakin
considered warm. There had been small moments where he could feel the distance between them
becoming smaller, but he didn’t feel like they could ever be what they had been. He was trying to
focus on being something new, but it was hard not to miss the innocence of their relationship
before. Even with all of their secrets and not-really-secrets, it had been so much simpler and there
had been so little pain between them. There were other things that hurt, and sometimes they hurt
each other without meaning to, but before this there had never been anything that they couldn’t talk
through.

He wasn’t sure that they could move past this enough to start over, if Obi-Wan would let him.
Why wouldn’t Obi-Wan put their losses on level, think of the things they’d both taken from each
other, and move forward? The man had cut off his kriffing legs.

He lowered his head to the bar, feeling the cool metal against his nose and forehead. He felt weak
and tired suddenly, and all of his emotions seemed intense and overwhelming.

“Anakin?” Obi-Wan said from beside him.

He felt Obi-Wan’s hand on his shoulder, then his friend’s fingers pressed up into the hollow below
his jawbone to feel his pulse. Immediately after, he heard a sharper demand to the bartender. *What
was in his drink?*

The bartender seemed a bit confused as she answered that it had just been straight Dorian Quill.
He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard the sound of her plunking the bottle down on the counter
for Obi-Wan’s examination.

Someone else was slipping an arm around him and pulling him back, away from the counter, and
he felt himself just going along docilely. There was no reason to argue, really, which felt nice in
and of itself. He’d been fighting the galaxy for his entire life. This gentle pressure kept him moving
and he didn’t care the direction. A voice murmured indistinctly in his ear, “I felt what you did
earlier, *Jedi* …”

With those words, Anakin realized that the prick he’d felt had been a hypodermic needle. Force
suppression was a tricky deal and the restraints to accomplish it were costly and highly illegal;
most people planning to get the jump on a Jedi tended to rely on less precise methods, usually
involving simply altering their adversary’s mind enough to make Force-wielded focus impossible.
Given that he could barely think and was just allowing himself to be pulled back onto the packed
little dance floor by the rear exit, he was reasonably certain that the Force was not going to be very
helpful…but he was proud of himself, vaguely, for figuring it out.

Even in this hazy state, he knew that he shouldn’t call out Obi-Wan’s name. It was distinctive
enough and *valuable* enough among certain circles represented here that it could put them both in
danger. Obi-Wan was a highly wanted Jedi, and the desperate people nursing their financial woes
would likely infer that the younger man he traveled with was also rather valuable.

Groggily, stumbling a little, he managed to call out, “*Ben!*”

Almost immediately, he felt Obi-Wan’s hand close around his wrist. In that instant, he felt the
thrill of a *connection* between them, a surge of fierce, protective warmth. Obi-Wan had only been a
step behind him the whole time. That knowledge hit him strangely hard in his drug-induced
emotional state - Obi-Wan wasn’t going to let anything happen to him.
He found the energy to twist his head to see who was pulling him away. He recognized the tall, sturdy Nikto bounty hunter as one of the players who had been gambling in the alley; though they had never rolled against each other or pulled cards from the same deck, his subtle use of the Force to increase his luck had obviously caught his attention. The man stood very still, his tongue flicking out to taste the air as his reptilian eyes focused on Obi-Wan.

They had all stilled in the middle of the floor, not wanting to be noticed. The first rule on Dhirrod was *Never be the aggressor*. Obi-Wan had made it clear to Anakin the day they’d arrived that any hostility, any trouble, was immediately put down by onlookers. Mobs formed and dissipated in seconds to handle troublemakers with no prior coordination, and these bursts of group-imposed order were deadly in their efficiency.

Amidst the crush of bodies though, no one seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary; to a casual onlooker, it looked like Anakin simply couldn’t hold his liquor and he was being tended by his two companions.

“What did you give him?” Obi-Wan demanded lowly.

The Nikto laughed in his strange, dry-sounding way. He didn’t answer, instead just shrugging elegantly and pulling Anakin closer. The drugged Jedi could feel something pressed against the bruise on his ribs, though his focus had slipped far enough again that he didn’t feel any real concern.

“It doesn’t really matter. He’s tired and he wants to come home with me. To rest,” he said after a moment, nodding down to the silenced blaster that he had subtly pressed up against Anakin’s chest. The threat was obvious; if Obi-Wan put up any fuss at all, he would shoot his former apprentice and slip out in the ensuing confusion. A suppressor like that would likely dull the bolt flash as well, so no one would even know why Anakin was suddenly crumpling to the ground. It would likely look like a continuation in the ongoing drunk-drama.

Obi-Wan lifted a hand and murmured, “You will give him to me and leave.”

The bounty hunter’s tongue flicked out again and he cocked his head to the side a bit unwillingly. “I will give him...” His eyes sharpened and his grip on Anakin tightened defiantly.

“You will give him to me and *leave*,” Obi-Wan repeated firmly, his voice unusually cold and his blue eyes focused.

“I will give him to you and leave,” the bounty hunter repeated, his clawed fingers slowly losing their hold on Anakin’s arm.

He looked to the door, seeming confused, then back to Obi-Wan. He was no longer even touching Anakin, who was slumping now into his master’s arm, and he felt a hazy surge of anger. He was a strong-willed creature who had borne up under the strain of hundreds of parsec’s travel and thousands of hours of violence. This ginger Jedi was not the first of his kind he’d met, nor was he the first to try to use this trick on him. He was Force-sensitive himself, even if no one had ever trained him. It would take more than a stuck-up Force user wiggling his fingers to make Slant Rayfall lie down and give up.

“You... mind games won’t work on me...” he breathed with some effort. “I know you. I *see* you, Jedi. *Two Jedi* .”

“You haven’t seen any Jedi,” Obi-Wan told him flatly, narrowing his eyes.
“I haven’t--” he broke off, shaking his head. He tilted his chin down and told Obi-Wan in a sharp hiss, “Stay out of my head.”

Anakin felt Obi-Wan pulling him up close against his front, his arm about his waist to support him. He groggily reflected that it felt good, even if Obi-Wan was shorter than him. The Jedi was warm and solid against his back, so he let himself fold inward a bit. Obi-Wan’s beard brushed against his jaw as the other man murmured in his ear, “I know you’re tired, but help me, Anakin…”

He knew what Obi-Wan wanted, though he didn’t think that he had the focus. Especially with Obi-Wan’s warm breath against the shell of his ear, and his voice that low, husky whisper. Nonetheless, he lifted his hand tiredly, fingers curled slightly, and breathed, “You haven’t seen any Jedi.”

He heard Obi-Wan saying the words along with him, and he felt a quickening pull, that connection again. All at once, just for a moment, he felt a sharp clarity and a commonality of purpose. In tandem, they exerted the power of the Force on the Nikto man.

He resisted, of course.

All Jedi were taught to use the mind trick with care because it was not natural to impose their will on another sentient. It was possible for more than one Master to focus his mind on altering the thoughts of an individual, but it was always dangerous; there was always a possibility that the mind in question could be destroyed. Cad Bane had famously held up against Anakin, Obi-Wan, and Mace Windu all at once, but this man was not Cad Bane… and neither Anakin nor Obi-Wan was exercising that sort of restraint. Anakin felt his resistance, but he also felt the instant that it gave out. It wasn't sharp like glass breaking, more like the side of a cloth tent that had gone slack when one of the support ropes came undone.

“I haven’t…” he repeated, then trailed off. He looked around with an expression that seemed to indicate an overwhelming uncertainty as to where he was in the universe. He blinked several times and put his hand up to his mouth, then tapped his fingers against his lips. The focus in his eyes was gone, as though he was trying unsuccessfully to see through the steam on a mirror.

Without saying anything else, he turned away and wandered off.

Anakin’s brow furrowed, though he only half-understood what had happened. He let Obi-Wan support him, trying to wander through what had happened; really, it had all happened very quickly. It had only been a moment or two since he’d been at the bar.

“Come along…” Obi-Wan said quietly, shifting his grip to the crook of Anakin’s arm.

There were a number of questions that Anakin wanted answers to, but the most pressing thoughts on his mind had to do with his own health and concern over what he had been given. He had been drugged before, but it didn't stop this experience from being stressful and distantly terrifying. He had used the Force a moment before, but not on his own steam; Obi-Wan had been directing the Force through and with him. Left to his own devices, he could barely stay on his feet. That felt unnatural; using the Force was as natural as breathing, so he felt clumsy and stifled by its absence.

He leaned heavily on Obi-Wan, who was playing the incident off as overindulgence in alcohol. He felt a flare of annoyance at the sympathetic smile the bartender shared with his Master, but he couldn't maintain his focus long enough to really care. All that he was consistently aware of was the warmth of the arm around his waist and the nebulous but undeniable connection he felt to Obi-Wan.
Perhaps Obi-Wan was less aware of it, for he wasn't shielding his thoughts as he normally would; perhaps he thought Anakin was unable to comprehend or connect in his current drug-induced state. In any case, Anakin could feel that his companion was upset, though the causes were more ambiguous, made up of feelings and vague images. He was worried for Anakin’s condition and possible exposure for certain, but he was also simply angry that someone would have dared to drug his former Padawan. He was fiercely protective, though he didn't have a way to direct that emotion at the moment; there was an element of frustration. Beneath it, there was also a rising feeling of guilt and questioning that Anakin couldn’t quite place at the moment.

He stumbled along and somehow made it to the hotel, though he didn’t remember most of the time between the cantina and the door of their room. Every step felt heavier, and with every step he felt more willing to yield to anything anyone asked of him. If Obi-Wan had told him to throw himself out the window, he would have mounted the energy to break the glass; if he had asked him anything, no matter how embarrassing or personal, he would have answered.

As Obi-Wan guided him to sit on the edge of the bed, Anakin felt strangely confessional. He pressed his soft mouth, knowing himself well enough to know that he shouldn’t talk. Instead, he just watched as his companion knelt down to unzip his boots, smiling at the slight tickle of the vibration up the inside of his calf. Obi-Wan gentled the boot off of his mechanical foot, flexing the ankle carefully. He set the boots neatly beside the bed, then looked up at Anakin appraisingly.

“How are you feeling?”

“Cold,” Anakin replied groggily, tilting his head to the side. It felt impossibly heavy.

Obi-Wan reached up to brush a strand of hair away from where it was caught at the corner of Anakin’s mouth, commenting, “Well, let’s get you in bed so you can sleep this off.”

Anakin caught on to his friend’s wrist and dazedly pressed his cheek against the back of Obi-Wan’s hand. He stared down at him, his dark eyes intense despite their slight lack of focus; the intent was there.

“You’re very impaired,” the older man reminded him, though he didn’t pull his hand away. He watched Anakin carefully, trying to gauge how intoxicated Anakin was and how long this would likely last.

“Yeah,” Anakin agreed, closing his eyes and turning his face to smush his nose and mouth against Obi-Wan’s hand.

It made his companion laugh, though he knew he shouldn’t. Smiling slightly, he turned his hand in Anakin’s hold and squeezed it gently before pulling it out of his loose grip. Kneeling up, he helped Anakin out of his jacket; as limp as his friend was, the movements were cumbersome and took more time and more effort than Obi-Wan had expected.

“You should sleep with me,” Anakin said, eyes still closed as he tilted his head back.

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan scolded, looking away as color crept into his cheeks.

“Next to. Nex’to me. M’cold, Master,” he said, feeling the little flare of awkward panic that ran through Obi-Wan at the misunderstanding. He knew that what he was asking was inappropriate too, but he couldn’t seem to stop. He consoled himself that what he was really asking for was better than what Obi-Wan had initially thought.

Obi-Wan sighed quietly and rose to his feet, then eased Anakin down onto his back with a firm
hand on his shoulder. He tucked Anakin’s feet up into the bed, noting absently that they weren’t any heavier than his natural legs had been, then pulled the blankets up over him. Perched on the edge of the bed, he considered his former Padawan and his current vulnerability. He still felt the same drive to protect him, and seeing him laid low again made him feel an intuitive need to take care of him….even if it was really his own fault for drawing attention to himself, and even if he was trying not to think about how much he had damaged the Nikto in the cantina to protect their identities.

That was a bit dark, wasn’t it?

He pushed it out of his thoughts, resolving to think it through tomorrow when Anakin wasn’t fighting off a bounty hunter’s intoxicants. Maybe he would even talk to Anakin about it and sort out what had happened, what should have happened, and what he could do to set things back to balance. If Anakin even remembered any of this.

He stood and stripped out of his own jacket, boots, and belt, leaving him clad in his soft leather trousers and slim-fitting, long-sleeved shirt. It seemed safer to remain fully clothed; this was his second chance and despite the choking tension, he wanted to do right by Anakin and the Code this time.

Obi-Wan slipped into the bed beside Anakin, who immediately moved closer to him. He was feverishly warm and slightly damp with sweat, but even shivering and feeling phantom prickles at each touch the younger man was looking for physical contact. He tucked himself up against Obi-Wan’s front, almost crowding him off of the bed.

Sighing, Obi-Wan draped an arm over him comfortably. This was all right; better, really. Anakin had always reacted well to physical contact, and perhaps it would put him at ease now and help him to sleep. Though he wasn’t extremely tired, Obi-Wan closed his eyes and leaned his brow against Anakin’s as they had during his confessional discussion in the desert, the way they had for years. Obi-Wan pulled the pace of Anakin’s quick breaths in time with his own slower, deeper inhalations. They just breathed slowly together, in perfect time with each other. Like music, like planets turning about the same star.

Anakin was comfortable to hold even now, even with his many metal components. There was a familiar drape to his limbs that was accommodated by the soft, firm-foam mattress that cradled their bodies and somehow helped to erase the spaces between them. Obi-Wan rubbed the back of his neck soothingly.

Obi-Wan felt when Anakin lifted his chin, heard the brush of his smooth cheek against the pillowslip. Their mouths were close; Obi-Wan could still smell the alcohol on his breath. The younger man eased forward minutely to close the space to kiss him, soft lips parted just slightly. Invitingly. Without thinking, Obi-Wan exhaled a relieved breath and leaned into the contact just for a moment before pulling back quickly, realizing what he had allowed.

No, not allowed. Done. Anakin wasn’t responsible; Obi-Wan was the sober one, the clear-thinking one, the one who was supposed to guide them back to the right path.

This was a bad idea and he’d known it, but he’d done it anyway; he never should have put himself this close. Regardless of what he’d known, all he’d known, the weight of all of this on them both, and he’d done it anyway. At the end of the day, he hadn’t healed enough to be detached; he still felt his treacherous heart’s pull to Anakin and a part of him still craved his earnest kisses and the feeling of his long, strong body against his. Part of him hadn’t stopped loving him despite his resolve to be a better person and a better Jedi. Were those two things the same? He wasn’t even sure. Feeling a bitterly unpleasant rise of self-judgment and doubt, he sat up and hurriedly swung
his legs over the edge of the bed.

“Obi-Wan…?” Anakin asked, propping himself up on his elbow.

“Go to sleep, Anakin…” he said softly, slipping into his own bed and retreating under the covers. He used them like a shield to ward off Anakin’s hurt judgment, letting the scratch of the cheap fabric weave ground him in reality. Reality where Anakin had tried to kill him, reality where he had irreparably wounded Anakin, a reality where it was completely inappropriate to be kissing an inebriated murderer. A solitary reality, a Jedi reality. Their new reality.

“I love you,” the blond insisted tiredly, closing his eyes to keep from crying. His emotions were so close to the surface all the time now, and the drugs had dragged his loneliness to the forefront. He was tired and scared, and worse and more eternal than that, he was afraid that he would be tired and scared by himself for the rest of his life because of his mistakes.

“I know,” Obi-Wan replied a bit helplessly.

Anakin drew a pained gasp of breath when he felt that delicate bond falter, cutting him off from the other man once again. He curled inward, pulling his blanket tightly around himself like a shroud. He let his breath out slowly, shaking hard and feeling completely exposed.

“Go to sleep,” Obi-Wan added firmly.

Chapter End Notes

Even posted a little early, Merry Christmas! Have some angst. :) Finally a kiss, though.
In the morning, Anakin woke with a splitting headache and the ardent wish that the drug he’d been given was amnesiatic. Instead, he remembered that kiss - the one he shouldn’t have stolen, the one that Obi-Wan had let him take - and the rejection that had followed. It hurt less this morning than it had the previous night, but he still felt hollow inside. He decided that ‘hollow’ was the wrong description. He’d felt hollow after he’d released his anger on Tatooine and pledged his life to the Jedi - it had felt liberating, like he had room again in his heart for something other than fear. This was different, more like being cut open and packed with cold, crystalline salt, then being sewn back up and having to act like it didn’t hurt. He ached, he burned, and he had nowhere to direct his frustrated affection.

So he pretended that he didn’t remember, and Obi-Wan seemed relieved. Which was familiar and typical. His former Master moved carefully, almost gingerly, to bring him a glass of water and a sizeable painkiller tablet. It was as though he was afraid that any sudden movement might startle Anakin’s memory back. Obi-Wan’s thoughts and emotions were shored up so tightly that Anakin couldn’t even get a hint of what the other man was thinking.

That kiss.

Obi-Wan had hardly slept, focused on his mistake from the previous night. He never should have let it happen. Thankfully, Anakin didn’t remember, but it was stamped indelibly onto his own memory. He reached up and absently touched his own mouth with his fingertips, then remembered himself and dropped his hand back into his lap.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m alright, killer headache though,” Anakin laughed tiredly, noticing Obi-Wan’s gesture and feeling a bloom of curiosity. He reminded himself it was more like a sudden unfurling of the banner of wishful thinking. “I don’t even remember getting back here last night… I think I faded pretty quick. Last thing I really remember was when your mind trick didn’t work.”

“Oh course you’d remember that,” Obi-Wan said with a roll of his eyes, taking the empty cup back from his former Padawan. He sat on the edge of his own bed, watching Anakin with his head cocked to the side. “He was Force-sensitive, so he was resistant…”

“Yeah, must have been how he figured out I was cheating, too. Otherwise… I mean… I promise you I was being super careful, Master!” He heard the fourteen-year-old insistence in his voice and couldn’t help it.

Obi-Wan smirked, commenting, “What is that old adage - cliche? - adage, we’ll say adage? ‘Cheaters never prosper?’”

“Well, cheaters apparently get stuck in the arm and dragged off the dance floor,” Anakin replied cheekily, his eyes sparkling merrily despite that it felt like someone had shoved a spiny Nexu behind his eye sockets. “Man, I wish he’d tried that on the other arm, woulda broken his kriffing needle!”

“I think that you should take it easy today and rest,” Obi-Wan mused, watching as Anakin sat up in
The blond rolled his shoulders, the movement of his muscles visible through his shirt sleeves. He yawned hugely, then said, “I’m okay, I’ve just got a headache. It’ll go away if I get moving.”

“I’m not so certain… we can’t even know what was administered. It was obviously intended to suppress Force usage, but beyond that… it may not even have been safe for human use. You should rest and hydrate.”

“You sure like to fuss.”

“I’m being responsible, Anakin.”

Anakin chuckled in a self-satisfied way, looking away from his friend. The tension between them had died down somewhat, but at the moment he could practically taste Obi-Wan’s awkwardness. He was leaning forward just the very slightest bit, as though he was unconsciously inviting another kiss. That was how Anakin read his body language, anyway.

He wanted to lean in and meet him halfway just to see how he would react when there were no questions of drugs or taking advantage, but he didn’t have the fortitude for a second round of rejection. As it was, he was acutely aware of the lack of a Force-bond between them again. He hadn’t realized he’d missed it so much until he’d felt it again; it felt like how “going home” looked in the holofilms, when the hero came back from war and felt like he belonged somewhere again. It was something that he had never had with Padmé despite the depth of their love; only another Jedi could reach him that way, and Obi-Wan remained the only Jedi who Anakin had ever wanted.

It made him a little angry to know that Obi-Wan had that power over him, that unique privilege to come so close, but he was obstinately refusing. Still, he reminded himself that his endgame was permanence; if that meant that all that they could really sustain was friendship, then that would have to learn to be content having the Jedi as a friend. He tried to tell himself to be satisfied with the warmth he’d felt last night, and he tried to have faith that their bond could be rebuilt. It was hard to tell yourself to be content with memories only though, with nothing bright in the future to guide the way.

He chewed his lower lip, noticing that the split had healed completely. That was something, at least. Aside from the lingering ache in his ribs, his bruises were no longer quite so tender and he felt more like himself when he moved around. He assumed he’d feel the echoes of the injuries for a few weeks, but he was eager for the visual reminders of their fight to vanish. Pain was a soldier’s oldest friend, but when he saw the marks on his body, he remembered the hands that had put them there.

He climbed out of bed to dress, knowing that Obi-Wan would politely turn away. As always, he wished that it wasn’t the case. However, stretching his arms over his head, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror across the room and instantly hated how he looked; perhaps it was better that Obi-Wan was looking away. Maybe that was why he was looking away.

He hurriedly pulled on his shirt, commenting, “How much longer we planning to stay here? Did last night cut our stay short?”

Behind him, Obi-Wan sighed. “I believe that we’ll be safe for a short while longer. He won’t be coming after you again after what… ah, after what we did to settle the issue last night.”

“It’s a bit foggy for me… what actually happened?” Anakin asked, looking over his shoulder at his companion. Obi-Wan met his gaze, pointedly avoiding looking at anything else.
“We, ah… we overpowered him. He is at least temporarily disabled, mentally… it may pass, but…” He looked a bit uncomfortable, eyebrows lowered and mouth twisted slightly. “There was no other way that I could think of at the time. If we had fought him, we could have been killed… and if we’d just let him go, he would have certainly spread the word about us.”

The meaning was slightly ambiguous; was Obi-Wan saying that he had intentionally damaged someone's mind, or was he just saying that the mind trick had been the only idea he’d had? Anakin wasn't sure that it mattered much to the bounty hunter, though he was fairly sure that it was weighing on the other Jedi. Anakin nodded as he buckled his belt and moved to sit on his own bed, facing Obi-Wan closely enough that their knees bumped in the narrow space. He looked at his friend for a moment then reached over and rested a light hand on Obi-Wan’s thigh.

“We have to survive; we’re probably the only ones who really stand a chance of taking down Palpatine. We can’t let some dodgy sleemo put that at risk.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t argue with the logic of that, though Anakin’s familiarity put him slightly on edge. He felt the air between them charge again, though he was determined to act normal. He reminded himself that it had only been a bit over a month since their fight on Mustafar and things were still settling; despite the intensity and the concentrated contact, they were still trying to find their way through their new life together. He couldn’t expect that things would just suddenly be okay, or that he wouldn’t still be looking backwards longingly to what they had been.

Determined to be less awkward, he rested his hand on Anakin’s chrome fingers. He would have held Anakin’s hand before they were lovers, so there was no reason to avoid that touch now. They were trying to be friends, and friends weren’t afraid of glancing contact.

He smiled quickly, then said encouragingly, “That is a good way of looking at it… very pragmatic.”

Anakin couldn’t completely understand or anticipate why Obi-Wan reacted the way he did at any time. The changeability threw him and made him untrusting, uncertain as to when Obi-Wan would withdraw his affection again. All the the same, he felt a surge of relief at the return of his touch; it felt good not to be ignored or shrugged off.

“Pragmatic’s kind of important right now… there’s a lot going on.”

There was something important on the tip of his tongue. He had learned things the previous day that he had wanted to tell Obi-Wan, but their evening had gotten thoroughly derailed and the new information forgotten. He struggled to recall the specifics.

“I just remembered I had something I wanted to tell you last night when we got back… but I was really out of it. Something I learned…” he said slowly as he worked back through the memory. “It’s probably not… it’s definitely not something you want to hear. But Jedi properties and land rights are being seized… Palpatine said he’s going to take the temple on Coruscant for his own…”

Obi-Wan felt a surge of dizziness at those words. The Temple had been where he had been raised, where he had been taught, where he had lived, where many of his friends had died. It was the only real “home” he’d ever known, having otherwise lived a traveler’s life. The idea of the self-proclaimed Emperor, a Sith Lord who had undone everything Obi-Wan had ever known, walking through those halls and gloating over the fall of the Jedi filled him with a unique despair. He pressed his hand to his chest, unable to breathe.

“Well…” He struggled to keep his thoughts from turning into an incoherent wash of emotion. He focused on stringing words together into statements that made sense and didn’t betray the depth of
his sorrow, but it was impossible to keep his voice perfectly level. “It’s… no one would really oppose him, would they?”

He closed his eyes for a moment, his chest tight enough to trigger tremors though his limbs.

“No…” Anakin said, turning his hand to hold his friend’s. Their pain was shared, though it resonated differently through each’s own experiences and guilts and reflections.

“It’s… it’s kriffing disgusting, Anakin…”

Obi-Wan thought of all of the milestones he’d passed at the Temple and the people he’d known. He had studied with Qui-Gon in the gardens, he’d snuck into his Master’s rooms and been sent back to his own. He had practiced forms with Quinlan in the big, empty studios on the first floor; he knew exactly how the wood floor of the south practice room felt against his back, he could recall with perfect clarity the feeling of bare feet on the sun-warmed grass in the courtyard. He thought of the people who were the constants in his early life and where they fit into life at the Temple. He could map out the entire complex in his mind and walk through it with unerring precision, his memory as clear as reality.

Of course, it had only been a few weeks since he’d been there. He had just been at the Temple.

Jedi weren’t allowed possessions, but he had a few precious things that he had been made to leave behind when they fled. None hurt him so much to think about as Qui-Gon’s lightsaber, which he had used for several years after his Master’s death. The idea of a Sith Lord finding it and profaning it made him feel nauseated. Already he knew that the Empire was collecting lightsabers - they were what bounty hunters turned in for credit, at which point they were linked to their owners and names were crossed off lists. Like Grievous on a much grander scale, Palpatine was amassing a disgusting collection of lightsabers from fallen Jedi.

“What about Ilum?” he asked suddenly.

“I don’t know anything specific… I just heard it in the news broadcast,” Anakin admitted quietly, shrugging. “Probably? I mean, if it’s all Jedi properties… probably… but… I don’t know… what use do they have for kyber crystals anyway?”

“They’re very powerful, if you can harness the energy…” Obi-Wan said distractedly. “Most people don’t know how… because it takes a Force-sensitive sentient to feel the proper way that the energy needs to be expressed…”

With his free hand, he rubbed tiredly at his face.

“We have to go there. If you’re ever going to have a lightsaber again, we’ll need to find a crystal that will work with you…”

Anakin felt a bolt of adrenaline shoot from his belly to just above his knees. A crystal that would work with him. What stone would willingly share itself with him, without coercion or cruel Force handling that would leave the stone wounded? What if they went and none called out to him? The connection with each crystal was personal, and the crystals naturally aligned themselves with the light side. They weren’t exactly sentient in a way that anyone had been able to quantify, but they weren’t inanimate either. They could be hurt, they could bleed, they could shatter in protest of dark forces. They called them living crystal for a reason. He could leave the caves empty-handed and heartsick.

It was a confirmation that he didn’t need yet.
He swallowed hard, trying to think of a way to postpone the trip until he had pulled himself closer to the light.

“Ah… is that really a good idea? It’s bound to be overrun with troops…”

Obi-Wan cocked his head to the side, knowing that Anakin wasn’t afraid of much. He himself was not eager to engage with the clone army now serving the Empire, knowing that he would be pitting himself against both lost friends and terrible odds. All the same, the caves were important enough that he felt that it was worth the risk.

“The location of the entrance won’t be guarded; that is passed on through oral tradition, not written record… they won’t know where it is. We should have enough time to get in and out without being seen.”

“It just seems really dangerous.”

“It’s important,” Obi-Wan insisted.

Anakin sighed. There were a lot of reasons he didn’t want to go to Ilum, and Obi-Wan’s safety was one of them; he wasn’t ready yet to risk his friend’s life that way. The idea of putting the older Jedi in front of a battalion of clones who wanted to kill him was harrowing, to say the least. He took Obi-Wan’s hand in both of his, feeling a twinge of unhappiness at how the metal joints moved.

“It’s just a weapon.”

“It’s more than that and you know it. Come on. What are you afraid of?”

The response that came immediately to mind was Everything, but he didn’t want to go into it, really; he knew that Obi-Wan had set his mind on their next destination and there was little point in arguing. He didn’t know what point there was in answering Obi-Wan’s question at all in light of his former Master’s stubbornness.

He looked for words to express his fears in the simplest, most honest way possible.

“It’s just… it’s a lot of risk when I might not even find anything, you know? If we went and you got hurt or killed for nothing… I don’t know. It just doesn’t seem like it’s worth it,” he said finally, meeting Obi-Wan’s eyes with an earnest intensity that caught the other man off-guard.

Obi-Wan looked down at their clasped hands, knowing that this was just one example of why the Jedi Council had established that attachment was dangerous for them and why he should be working to maintain some distance. He wasn’t sure of the best response though; Anakin would react badly if he pulled away from him. He didn’t deserve to have Obi-Wan pull away when he had said nothing wrong. He hadn’t deserved for Obi-Wan to pull away the night before either, but Obi-Wan had panicked. He could justify to himself that romantic advances were too much- unwanted - and that Anakin had been suffering from impaired judgment that would have made that sort of contact unethical anyway. Today, though, Anakin was just expressing a very human concern and an equally human attachment. Love and affection were both emotions that reflected the light side of the force; they weren’t wrong for Anakin, even if Obi-Wan was still committed to denying those feelings for himself. It was a new way of thinking for the Jedi, but he was trying to commit to the idea of Anakin walking a different path.

He didn’t pull away this time; instead, he just returned his friend’s stare and tried to put as much forceful, willful sincerity into his response as Anakin would have.
“We’ll be safe and careful. The two of us together can manage.”

Anakin liked the idea of the word *together*. He did still believe that he and Obi-Wan were an unstoppable team when they were allied, and he liked thinking that Obi-Wan felt the same way. He smiled slightly, crookedly.

“You’re totally playing me, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan laughed a little and squeezed his hard, unyielding metal hand. “I am doing no such thing. I am just trying to put you at ease because this is something that is happening. In fact, I am going to get dressed right now and go stock up on supplies, and we will leave by dark.”

Anakin laughed, shaking his head. “Wow. Okay. So I really have no choice in this.”

“None whatsoever. You’re going to be on that ship when I take off, Anakin.”

The exchange felt deceptively normal. Sitting face-to-face with his former mentor, joking-but-serious, it felt like a different time. He felt an impulsive urge to tackle him onto his back and kiss his face all over until the older man, laughing and sputtering, ordered him to get off. He leaned forward slightly, but remembered himself and quickly sat back with a little smile.

He didn’t miss that Obi-Wan leaned forward as well, though his facial expression didn’t change at all.

“I see…” he said, releasing his hands and standing up. “Well, I guess I should finish getting dressed, then, shouldn’t I?”

“You should… and then pack up your things. I'm going to fetch some last-minute supplies. Do you want to pack up everything and meet me at the ship in an hour?”

“‘Want?’” Anakin queried with a telling lift of his eyebrows.

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said, patting his leg in mock-approval.

Anakin groaned and flopped back against the comforter. He arched his spine as he stretched his arms back over his head, making a face at the uneven ceiling. He had hoped to have another day or so on Dhirrod to research and prepare to find Ahsoka, but he felt Obi-Wan’s sudden urgency.

“Bring breakfast. Something *good*,” he said imperiously, deciding it was a decent trade for having to pack and carry all of their things.

“It’s already well after noon, Anakin. Eat some fruit for now, and I will bring a good, solid meal for supper…” Obi-Wan replied breezily as he exchanged his shirt for a fresh one. The trousers still had several more wears before they would need to be washed, so he let them be and just hunted up a pair of socks.

Belatedly, he remembered that he had ordered Anakin to rest for the day to recover from the drugs that were probably still in his system. Grimacing, he forced himself to backtrack. “That is, if you’re up to travel. If you need to rest today, we can go tomorrow…”

His companion’s agitation was palpable, even without a Force-bond between them. Anakin looked over at his friend, then blinked slowly, thoughtfully: Obi-Wan did care. He must have cared an awful lot to stall their departure for him. He nodded, shrugging. “Yeah, M’fine. I mean, even if I’m kinda tired by the time I finish packing *all of this junk*, I’ll just make you fly.”
Obi-Wan rolled his eyes, smiling slightly. “Well thank the Force that you’re so adaptable.”

“Whatever would I do if you were as stubborn as your old Master?” Anakin added in his best imitation of Obi-Wan’s accent and cadence, sitting up a little to see his friend’s face.

It was exactly the reaction he’d wanted - just like when he’d pulled the impression out in front of a some of the 212th and Obi-Wan had caught him. He could tell that Obi-Wan had wanted to be irritated, but it was a very good impression, and Anakin really was very funny at times. And Obi-Wan had always had a soft spot for him when he smiled, and Anakin was certainly smiling now. Just as it had then, Obi-Wan’s mouth pressed into a tight little line that quirked up unwillingly at the corners.

Knowing he was winning, Anakin continued in his Master’s voice. “‘You really are an exemplary companion, Anakin. You’re just talented with everything, and so very good looking, really--’”

Obi-Wan laughed outright. “I see you’re fine. Get up and get dressed, you miscreant.”

Smiling to himself, Anakin climbed back out of bed and reached for his clothes. Ugh, he hated falling asleep in his outside-clothes when he was sleeping inside. It was like every bit of grime turned scratchy overnight and every seam of his clothing simultaneously stamped a pink, indented line into his skin. Wearing socks overnight was the absolute worst. Standing, he felt a surge of weariness and distraction that made him very aware that the drug was still in his system.

A shower didn’t clear the sensation, though a basic test proved that he was capable of moving objects around with the Force even if his execution was a little bit sloppy. He didn’t think he was up to doing anything difficult - no Force-trick nonsense, no exciting lightsaber techniques, no animal friendship. He was mostly going to just pack up their bags and make two trips to the ship to load up for departure.

The first trip took him a bit longer than he’d expected, owing to his lingering fatigue. He pushed himself to make it back to the room faster than he’d trekked to the ship, though when he was carrying things again on his second trip, he was fairly sure that he was going to die before he could set everything down. Still, he soldiered on, then just lingered on the stretch of port road outside of their ship with his arms crossed and a surly expression to mask his exhaustion.

As he waited, he found himself tiring just from the effort of remaining upright. He hoped that Obi-Wan had the good sense not to send him crystal hunting in his present condition; his senses felt dull and his limbs seemed impossibly heavy.

Come on, Obi-Wan, he thought restlessly, letting the life of the port flow and breathe around him.

All at once, he was aware of being watched. Just as immediately, he recognized that the observer wasn’t his errant companion, though he could perceive a sense of recognition in their gaze. With the hair prickling at the back of his neck, he glanced around in search of a familiar face.

Almost immediately, he spotted the green face of the Transdoshan bounty hunter, Bossk, staring at him from several ships down. Once they had made eye contact, the other sentient cocked his head to the side in acknowledgment. They had never met, but they knew of each other unfavorably through mutual acquaintances. His Padawan had subdued the bounty hunter once, Obi-Wan had met up with him while under deep cover. Boba Fett had teamed up with him to try to kill Mace Windu. Maybe that made them allies too now, as Anakin had a direct part in Windu’s death.

There was a distinct lack of aggression in the other sentient that was very telling to Anakin; it said “You are not on my list.” It was not entirely surprising, as Obi-Wan had discovered their first day
hacking Imperial files that Anakin was not listed on any wanted poster. They'd gone back and forth on it, debating whether he was assumed dead or wanted alive in stormtrooper custody. Their final guess was the latter, as Palpatine would want him back if he suspected that he had survived Mustafar; he wouldn’t leave any aspect of Anakin’s recovery to chance at the hands of a careless bounty hunter or reward-seeking enthusiast.

Bossk looked away.

Anakin blinked slowly, tiredly. As long as Bossk lingered by his ship, there was a strong possibility that he might see Obi-Wan approaching. Unlike Anakin’s free pass, his Master’s capture was a top-dollar venture; even if the bounty hunter didn't bother him as he passed, he would certainly pursue them off-planet. Their ship wasn’t built to outrun bounty-hunters, and daring maneuvers were both ineffective and dangerous at the moment.

The easiest option would be to kill him. He could Force-choke him without even looking at him, his hands in his coat pockets and his gaze fixed on the ships coming and going from the port. No one would ever know; it could be a fast, clean solution that Obi-Wan wouldn’t even need to know about… and it wasn't as though offing a murderer was going to make his own soul substantially darker.

Except that it would and he was hoping to find a willing kyber crystal within hours.

There was also the realization that he didn't want more secrets from Obi-Wan. Already he regretted his lie about his incomplete memories of the previous night; if he had been honest, he could have confronted what had happened and sought answers this morning. Maybe he could have cut through some of the tension between them by breaking the silence about the taboo topic of what they were now if they weren’t lovers.

In this moment, ticking through his options and his reservations, he also realized that his mind was still hazy and his technique could be imperfect; however, the dark side was always easier to draw upon in weak moments like this. Just at the thought of violence, the whispered suggestions called to him from somewhere beyond the back of his skull, reassuring him that his power was sufficient and that the sacrifice was justifiable.

Sighing, he closed his eyes and focused, reaching out for Obi-Wan. He could sense that he was very close and his time was running out.

With a sudden burst of resolve, he reached for Bossk with the Force. However, instead of targeting his throat, he caught on to his fist and dragged it up with powerful momentum before slamming it into a passing Toydarian’s jaw. The smaller creature went down in a flurry of wings and dazed cursing.

Then the mob mobilization that Obi-Wan had warned Anakin about whirred to life. Seemingly from nowhere, several passers-by and dock attendants turned on the Transdoshan, who put up his hands in protest, then defense.

Anakin knew enough of Bossk to know that he would make it out, but the ensuing struggle, which soon had the bounty hunter pinned on the ground with a burly Falleen hissing warnings into his ear, was enough to keep his full attention. Obi-Wan appeared at the end of the docking area, then walked straight for Anakin without looking at the scuffle.

He caught onto the younger man’s elbow as he passed him, hooking his fingers in the sleeve of his jacket and sweeping him along. In a low voice, he murmured, “That looked like your work, and I assume I should be thanking you?”
Anakin laughed, casually resting a gloved hand on Obi-Wan’s as they walked briskly up the bridge to their ship.

“I have no idea what you're talking about. Bossk just threw a punch, picked a fight with a random Toydarian…”

Obi-Wan looked up at him, expressive eyebrows lifted skeptically. He was smiling slightly though, feeling a strange, elated sense of pride in Anakin - he had chosen a clever, Jedi-like trick rather than simply killing the bounty hunter. There were numerous reasons to rejoice in that simple fact. He’d protected him without resorting to maniacal shows of desperation, showing both a fierce loyalty and sense of moderation.

By way of thanks, he squeezed his friend’s arm before breaking away to take his seat at the control console. Once Anakin had slumped into his own seat, Obi-Wan handed him a sturdy brown sack.

“I suppose you earned the dessert I picked up for you.”

Anakin grinned jubilantly as he opened the bag. Obi-Wan had brought him a sweet, fruit-filled roll that was completely crusted over in large, blue Ryloth-import sugar crystals. It was still warm.

XVII. Deeper Still

Ilum was further away than Anakin remembered, though near and far always seemed very relative when it came to hyperspace travel. He felt the kick of the engines pressing him back into his seat, the very light strain on his heart and lungs. He absently reached over to adjust the oxygen levels in the cockpit, lazily lolling his head to the side to watch Obi-Wan fly.

He enjoyed the calm, utilitarian style that he had always associated with his former Master. There was nothing adventurous or showy about the way he guided their ship, even when they were in open-space; there was instead an economy of movement and a strange elegance that mirrored everything else about Obi-Wan.

There were still residual traces of the previous night’s drug in Anakin’s system, even after a few hours’ flight. It wasn’t enough to prohibit reasonably proficient Force-wielding, but he did feel his focus dulled and his mind eager to wander. Looking at Obi-Wan, he couldn’t help but think that his beard came to a very pleasant point and the creases around his eyes were very friendly. Thanks to a hypodermic of Force-knows-what, he was still acutely aware of how much he wanted his friend’s affection and how frustrated he was by the loss of that bond from the previous night. He wondered what it would take to revive that. Time? Closeness? What would happen if he just asked for that kind of connection? Would Obi-Wan ever just give him something like that just because he asked outright?

He sighed softly through his nose, which made his companion glance over at him questioningly for just a moment. When he didn’t say anything, Obi-Wan turned his attention back to the starfield ahead.

Yeah, you just act like there’s nothing going on. You kissed me back last night. You know you did.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back tiredly. He found his thoughts returning to how good it had felt to be pressed up against Obi-Wan with the older man’s arms around him. He’d felt thick-chested and nauseated and he hadn’t had full control of his mind, but it had seemed so right and so
safe. It was where he’d wanted to be, with his surprisingly protective former lover holding him like he still loved him. He wanted him to love him, and he was pretty sure that he did. How much did that matter, though? If Obi-Wan denied it hard enough, was it any different than if he didn’t love him at all?

He could still feel Obi-Wan’s strong arms and his uncustomarily thin body in his thoughts. He could imagine what it would have been like if he hadn’t pulled away, if he had kissed him the way he used to and flattened him back against the mattress. He could imagine what it would have felt like to have Obi-Wan on top of him, those long, strong fingers roving over his ribs and hips, down over his thighs. He could imagine his quickened breaths as they moved against each other, still clothed but wanting. He knew what Obi-Wan’s moan would sound like against his mouth, and what his sharp hip bones would feel like against the insides of his thighs. He could imagine what it was like to grind against each other in these unfamiliar clothes.

What he couldn’t imagine was how he would touch Obi-Wan back; his fingers would have been cold against his skin, inorganic and jarring. He was dozing, but the thought of his new inadequacy pulled him out of his fantasy and roused him awake. He felt a jolt of embarrassment at the realization that he had been engaging in those kinds of thoughts while Obi-Wan was sitting right next to him, but it wasn’t enough to keep him awake; within a moment, sleep overtook him completely.

It didn’t feel like much longer before the bump of an imperfect landing in a rickety ship woke him with a start. He heard Obi-Wan mutter a surprisingly earnest “Sorry, sorry” before the ship rolled to a stop on the uneven, snowy terrain.

Anakin took a deep breath, then looked over at Obi-Wan. He sighed and jerkily pushed himself up from his uncomfortable slouch and rolled his shoulders, then tilted his head from side to side stiffly.

“How are you feeling?” Obi-Wan asked, smiling at him uncertainly.

“M’fine,” he replied groggily. “Just need to get moving again… I’m good. How long did I sleep?”

“About two hours?”

“Mmm…” the blond groaned, arching his back and then flopping forward bonelessly as he fumbled with his harness.

“Anakin… do you need to rest longer? We can if you need to. Are you up for this?”

“If I said I’m okay, I am,” he replied, giving Obi-Wan a quick, cheeky smile as he threw himself animatedly to his feet.

Shaking his head, the Jedi followed him out of the ship and out onto the cold surface of the planet.

“Are there many ships in the area? Unfriendlies?” Anakin asked.

“No. Development… or whatever they’re going to do here… it doesn’t seem to have started yet. They may not even have solid plans yet… or even considered the crystals,” Obi-Wan said appraisingly as they made their way to the half-hidden mouth of the caves. “If they’re looking to make light sabers, Ilum grows them perfectly… but if they’re looking for something bigger… well, they may be focusing on Jedha…”

Anakin nodded, wrapping his arms around himself against the cold. Somehow, despite travelling the galaxy for more than half of his life, he had never learned to truly withstand cold. He used the
Force to moderate his body temperature like a good little Jedi, but he was still tired and the cold bit right through his clothes and chilled his prosthetics enough that rubbing his arms with his cold hands was counterproductive.

Obi-Wan walked up to his right, blocking some of the wind with his body. He could see that his tired companion was cold and weak; he wouldn’t force Anakin to rest - really, the sooner they could get in and out of the caves, the better - but he would give him whatever small comforts he could. Anakin glanced over at him as they walked into the walkway that would branch out into the grand inner cathedral of the crystal caves.

The sight still took his breath away - the glittering ice and the intricate carvings that stretched up several stories to the darkened cave ceiling. He remembered his first trip here to find his crystal and how easy it had been; it had felt like the whole cave was singing, as though every crystal in every wall had wanted to press itself into his hand. Now, though, it felt little different than the sands of Tatooine or the firescape of Mustafar. The planet was alive and moving beneath the surface, but the stones were silent beyond the soft, ambient thrum of their collective consciousness.

Obi-Wan looked around thoughtfully, his throat tight.

“Are you… absolutely sure, Anakin? We can wait a little while, a few hours, if you need to res--”

“I’m okay,” Anakin replied tersely, feeling a deep trepidation at the Force-silence he felt from the stones. His uncertainty made him snappish and jittery; he wanted nothing more than to take on this challenge and face whatever reality was waiting for him within the caves. No matter how tired he was, he wasn’t willing to postpone the devastation if this didn’t work. The thought of the anxiety eating away at him was worse.

“I just… it’ll feel more normal as I go. I just need to meditate and move and it’ll come.”

“You don’t… you don’t feel anything, do you?”

“Of course I do!” he snapped defensively, rubbing his cold hands together pointlessly. The sound of his gloves rubbing against each other was familiar and comforting, in a strange way; it settled him even though the gesture itself accomplished nothing.

Obi-Wan’s eyebrows flicked up slightly, but he nodded.

The enormous, hundred foot high ice wall that separated them from the caves was thick and solid, barring their entry; the single rotation where it melted and reformed was likely several days away yet. Obi-Wan remembered his fear of getting trapped in the caves as a child, thanks to Yoda’s scare tactics; in reality, they just didn’t want to wait around while children played in the snow. Smirking, Obi-Wan pulled his lightsaber from the holster on his belt and sliced their way in.

Anakin walked ahead of him, then asked, “You’ll wait here?”

“Yes…” Obi-Wan said quietly, looking around the entryway.

“I’ll be fine.”

The older man nodded, not looking at him for a moment. He was feeling regret for his haste and insistence in the face of Anakin’s obvious fatigue. He paused, then said, “Promise me you’ll call if you need me. I’ll be listening. I’ll come.”

Anakin had a sudden flash of memory of the previous night, of the moment when he’d realized that Obi-Wan was right behind him when he needed him. It touched something deep within him just
for a moment; he smiled uncertainly, looking down at his scuffed boots.

“Yeah.”

Obi-Wan seemed for a moment as though he might reach for him, but he instead just nodded and tucked his gloved hands into his coat pockets.

“I will wait for you here and guard the entrance.”

“Y-yeah… I’ll be back soon,” Anakin replied, wanting Obi-Wan’s company or his affection. He would have settled for a touch or even a reassurance aloud, but Obi-Wan was reserved once again.

_You kissed me back last night_ , he thought at Obi-Wan meaningfully, knowing that the other Jedi wasn’t listening.

Behind him, Obi-Wan called, "May the Force be with you."

He chose a path from the branching caves tunnels and set off blindly into the half-darkness. Unfortunately he wasn’t trading Obi-Wan’s closeness for greater clarity; the crystals remained quiet and unlit, out of sight and out of his perception even as all other distractions dropped away. He tried to clear his mind and just feel using the Force, but he found that it wasn’t poor sensitivity. He could tell where they were. He could feel the veins of crystal running through the cave walls, but they weren’t reacting to him. He could have easily ripped unwilling stones from the walls, pried them out with his strong fingers or reaped them with his small knife, but they would have been useless to him.

Instead, he tried to reason with them, first silently, then in a quiet whisper.

_I’m sorry for what happened. I’m trying. I’m really trying. I want to be someone who is worthy of one of you. Please, just give me a chance. I can’t change what I did, but I can’t make it better without help. I just need a little bit of help._

Nothing seemed to change, though.

As he wandered, he felt his frustration rising. He wasn’t ready to be here, he wasn’t _good_ enough yet to be here. Of course the crystals didn’t want him; he had killed a dozen Jedi children a month ago, he had tried to kill his best friend, he had strangled his wife and nearly killed his own twin babies, he had slaughtered twenty Tuskens just a few days ago. Letting Bossk live this morning was nothing compared to that; why would he have thought that it mattered? Why had Obi-Wan thought this would work? Obi-Wan hadn’t even forgiven him, and couldn’t love him. Padme probably hated him.

His frustration was turning to anger, despite harsh reminders to himself to remain in control. The stones nearby seemed to react and reflect the emotion back to him defensively as though it hurt them to be so close to his personal pit of darkness.

He was so tired. His limbs felt heavy, dead.

“Please,” he begged quietly.

He needed something to restore his faith. He needed something to believe in him in a tangible, undeniable way that couldn’t be revoked. He needed a bond that wasn’t going to be broken or just taken away on a petty whim.

He steps slowed to a gradual stop before he crumpled to his knees, exhausted and lightheaded. His
vision swam and then washed with an opaque red, then faded to black as he slumped into the thin snow.

The lightsaber in his hand was blazing blue and humming miserably. It was his own blade, the one they’d sold, and he could feel the crystal in the hilt vibrating and threatening to shatter. Through sheer force of will, he kept it contained though he could feel that he was wounding the delicate stone. Soon, maybe it would bleed and stain the blade red. The thought didn’t hurt him; the certainty of control was a strange comfort. Even out of sync with the crystal, it felt so good to have it back; it somehow made his arm whole again.

Obi-Wan was lying face down at his feet, his legs cut off just above the knees. He was dressed in slim-fitting trousers and his muscular thighs looked thin, his hips too narrow. There was no blood, but the flesh visible through the open, severed legs of his trousers was scarlet, cauterized by a savage swipe Anakin’s blade.

He pushed himself up on his arms weakly and looked over his shoulder at Anakin, his eyes unfocused with pain and his face a sweaty, sickly, green-toned white. His breathing was labored and painful, his chest heaving.

“A-Anakin, don’t - please - y-you don’t have to do this... please...”

He heard himself laughing, as he brought his blade down to hover over Obi-Wan’s left arm, just above the elbow. It was a mirror of where the older man had cut him, and he could feel his own arm aching in memory at the artificial joint.

“I want to.”

“You don’t...” Obi-Wan breathed in disbelief as he tried to defensively draw himself up. There were scars on his shoulders and ribs exposed by his torn shirt that Anakin didn’t recognize, but he wanted to reopen.

As he looked over his former lover’s body, he realized just how much he wanted this. He wanted to cut him apart, let him feel the horror of being helpless. He wanted to watch his body jerk as he screamed, as Anakin reduced him to a mindless animal of pure pain. He wanted to steal the smart words from his mouth and replace them with incoherent cries. He couldn’t even completely wrap his mind around the things he wanted to do, the ways he wanted to break him. The darkness inside him called for Obi-Wan’s complete ruin, a complete purge of every touch of light that Obi-Wan had ever tried to press into his soul. He wanted to hurt him back for every kindness and every denial.

He slowly pressed the blade down, severing Obi-Wan’s arm with torturous deliberation as the man screamed.

It was grotesque, but cathartic in a way that nothing else ever had been.

Sweating and pale, Obi-Wan collapsed and didn’t move again. He was blind with pain and barely conscious; unable to think beyond the heart-jarring shock, there were no quips or beautiful verbal barbs to use as armor.

“This looks so familiar, Master. Call out to me, ask me to help you. I could pick you up, take you with me.”

He laughed coldly and Obi-Wan was silent, though Anakin wasn’t sure if it was because he’d gone into shock or if he was simply being stubborn to the end. In annoyance, he kicked his fallen Master
in the ribs, once and then again and again until the fury subsided again.

Once that outburst had passed, he was simply filled with a calm rage. He stared down at Obi-Wan hatefully before dropping down to his knees beside him. He dragged the man up onto the stumps of his thighs with one hand, earning a breathless whine of pain. He pressed up against his back, melding the remains of Obi-Wan’s broken body up against his front. His light saber, still on, was laid horizontally just in front of the other man’s belly. It singed the fine knit of his thin shirt and forced Obi-Wan to press back against him to avoid being burned.

“You never loved me. You didn’t want to.”

“I did,” Obi-Wan panted, confirming that he was still, on some level, capable of speech.

“You wouldn’t say it. Ever. You wouldn’t even say it now to save your own life. Say it, Obi-Wan. Say it now and I’ll let you live.”

It was a sick thing to ask and he knew it, but he was delighted by the opportunity. Wasn’t that what had happened on Mustafar, in the desert? Just one impossible grab for redemption from a man who had no power to absolve him of his sins? Hadn’t Obi-Wan been forcing him to beg for his acceptance, his care, his love? What had he bartered away to try to please this impossible, self-righteous liar?

Obi-Wan had so many of his own sins to answer for.

How good it felt to be the one making the ultimatum; either way he won. He could feel Obi-Wan shaking in his arms, his heart pounding hard enough inside his ribs that Anakin could feel it reverberating through his spine and into his own sternum. The older man could barely breathe. There was a strange connection between them now that let Anakin draw power off of the other man’s pain. He liked it; he wanted to consume all of Obi-Wan and take him in until there was nothing left, turn him into a strength that he could use.

Obi-Wan was silent.

“Just because I’m not going to let you live doesn’t mean that I’m going let you go easy,” he spat, thumbing off the blade. He never let anything go easily and they both knew it.

He heard Obi-Wan sob, though he knew that he was trying to be perfectly silent.

He heard Obi-Wan sob, though he knew that he was trying to be perfectly silent.

The proud bastard.

Anakin woke with a sickening start, curled up on the icy floor of the cave. He was momentarily disoriented then confused. Had that been a dream or a vision? It had been too clear and too specific to be a dream, but there were so many strange details that seemed inconsistent with a vision based in their reality. His emotions were confusing and contradictory; when he’d had visions of his mother being tortured or Padme dying, he’d woken shaking and crying.

That wasn’t how it was now. His heart was racing painfully, but his eyes were dry. He was aroused, half-hard from the violence of his vision. What he’d seen hadn’t scared him at the time, though it scared him now. The image of Obi-Wan’s mutilated body and the sounds of his pleading sobs rent a fresh wound in his heart, but he was acutely aware that the version of himself that he had seen had wanted to hurt him. He’d wanted to break him completely into his component parts, then consume him until there was nothing of Obi-Wan left at all.

In horror at the realization, he pressed a hand to his mouth and drew a shaking, sobbing breath. He
curled inward on himself, his body cold and stiff, and cried harder than he had since Obi-Wan had left him alone that night in the desert.
XVIII. Red Crystal

The only good thing about his violent, visionary catnap was that it seemed to have cleared the remains of the drug from his system. By the time Anakin managed to gather himself to his feet, he felt like himself again. His horrible, miserable, aching self. He felt old in that moment, but not in a human sense. He felt as though he’d been alive and unhappy for hundreds, maybe thousands of years.

As he wound his way back to the entrance of the cave and his waiting Master (he hoped he was still waiting), he tried to compose himself and shove down the lingering guilt over what he had seen. He was disturbed and afraid of himself, repulsed by the capacity for darkness that he had glimpsed in his vision. It was impossible to accept, but it was impossible to deny completely. He was only himself.

His guilt and his fear echoed off of the cave walls, as though the mood of the stones had turned from casual disdain to open judgment. He felt like they knew. He was suddenly self-conscious about this facet of himself, nauseated by the image of Obi-Wan’s severed limbs on the snowy ground. He could still smell Obi-Wan’s sweat and feel his shaking body in his arms, what was left of it. He remembered what it had felt like to slowly slice through his flesh and watch the arm lose support and collapse under the older man. He could hear the thready desperation in his voice.

Of course the crystals knew.

He set his jaw, limping as the cold of his metal limbs stung at the connection points anchored in his organic thighs. He didn’t know if he could make it, or how he could face Obi-Wan empty-handed.

He didn’t know how he could face Obi-Wan at all.

Nonetheless, he reached out for him the way a drowning man clawed for the sky to orient himself. He hadn’t gone far, but he was completely turned around within the half-light and the dimly reflective surfaces. Finally, he could feel the steadying glow of his friend’s centering Force signature at the fringes of his perception. It pulled him like a welcoming beacon to the mouth of the cave; despite his lingering shame over what he had seen, he was relieved to feel Obi-Wan close and eager to see him safe and entire.

He wasn’t prepared for the sight that greeted him, though.

Obi-Wan was crouching carefully, knees splayed and his bare hands stretched out to either side for balance. His fingertips made delicate movements, guiding a cloud of colorless crystals that were floating around him in the crisp, still air. Obi-Wan, without even entering the caves, had called several dozen kyber crystals to himself and they were hanging in the air about him like glittering insects. They glowed faintly and emitted a low, slightly haunting chime that resonated dissonantly like otherworldly music.

Anakin couldn't even call one.
He set his jaw and tried to will back the resentment that rose in equal parts with his childlike awe. It was everything he wanted and Obi-Wan was doing it effortlessly. Obviously, this had nothing to do with him, but he couldn't help but feel as though the Force was rubbing his nose in his failure. Even looking at this display of wonder, he felt dark and cold.

“What are you doing?” he asked, though his voice came out much sharper than he'd intended, verging on accusatory.

“I asked them to come. I explained that the Emperor might take them otherwise, the Sith… and they wouldn’t have a choice, then. And they let me take them.”

Anakin nodded, his throat tight.

“What…” Anakin swallowed hard, trying to master his emotions. “What will you do with them all?”

Sensing Anakin’s defensiveness, Obi-Wan answered carefully. “They’re not mine.”

“What will you do with them?” Anakin pressed.

“There will be other Jedi, Anakin… Younglings we haven't yet met, Jedi we know already who will need new lightsabers… maybe…” Obi-Wan opened his eyes and met his gaze uncertainly, belatedly concerned that his next statement, however sincere, would be overstepping an unspoken boundary between them. “Maybe Luke or Leia will be Force-sensitive…”

The names cut through the smoke masking his mind, snapping everything into a crisp, glistering clarity. Everything changed when he remembered what it felt like to cradle his daughter in his arms, to nuzzle his son’s cheek with his lips. It had never occurred to him that they could be Jedi as he had been, or that there might be no opportunity for them to follow the call of the crystals on their own. Obi-Wan had thought of it; pragmatic and faithful as ever he still believed that Anakin’s children could be something wonderful. Suddenly, his terrifying vision and his own failure didn’t matter because it didn’t feel real - he loved the perfect Jedi crouching in the shallow snow, he loved what he was capable of doing. He loved the way that this childless man was providing for his family when he himself was only fixated on his own pain.

Obi-Wan felt the shift in Anakin and he heard the cold creak of the snow under his boots as he moved toward him. He forced himself to hold his breath and have faith; Anakin was dark and wounded, red-eyed and obviously empty-handed, but he had to have faith that he wouldn't lash out at him. He willed himself to hold still, without reaching for his lightsaber or lifting his hands to defend himself.

Immediately, Anakin was on top of him, almost rapturously dragging him into a tight embrace. Obi-Wan’s precarious balance faltered and he fell back, arms windmilling before he caught himself on his hands; he gasped at the cold, sharp sensation of the uneven ground against his palms, but he didn't pull away. Anakin was pressed solidly against him, his body fitted between Obi-Wan’s knees and his arms around his neck. With Obi-Wan’s concentration disrupted, the kyber crystals rained down onto the snow around them, tinkling like a shattered window.

“Anakin-!” he scolded.

“That’s… incredible. Amazing,” he said, ignoring his Master’s tone and instead looking at him with an intensity that stole the older man’s breath. It immediately quieted any further protest; Obi-Wan could almost see the movements of the Force around him, the voice of the universe that still spoke through Anakin’s soulful eyes.
The Jedi stared disbelievingly, captivated by his charisma. The chosen one, the balance in the Force as he leaned one way to the other, wrenched between the dark side and the light.

“I am so in love with you,” Anakin concluded forcefully, unwilling to be denied. Even if Obi-Wan hated him for saying it, the depth of his own feeling would have drowned him if he didn’t give it voice.

Quick color rose to Obi-Wan’s pale cheeks as his heart flooded with emotion at the words. Suddenly, the futility of his own denial hit him as tangibly as if he had been slapped in the face. He loved Anakin. For all of his faults, for everything he’d done, he was deeply, uncontrollably attached to the younger man. Being a heartless, loveless Jedi hadn’t truly been an option for years, not since the first time Anakin had kissed him, and then smiled because he wasn’t supposed to and then kissed him again.

It would have been so easy to just say so and ease the imbalance between them. His mouth wouldn’t move, though. A paralyzing fear gripped his throat; if he said those words, he could never take them back. He would be accepting everything, even the things he hadn’t learned how to forgive yet. The Great Negotiator always knew the strength of words, and he sometimes feared them.

He lifted his hand to frame Anakin’s jaw and dragged him close to kiss him. He could give him that; he could be the one to reach for him first. He opened up to him all at once, his affection for him and the depth of his need for closeness blazing through the new Force-bond between them.

Anakin gasped softly at the emotional transference as he pursued him for more. He opened his mouth into the kiss, desperate and clumsy for his attention. How many thousands of times had he kissed Obi-Wan? How could he be so artless now, when it felt so important? Doing this exactly right had never seemed so important. His lover’s own eager, needy touch put him at ease instantly - he realized suddenly this wasn’t his smooth, worldly former Master. At this moment, his companion was as wanting and afraid as he was himself. It was new and terrifying in its intensity; Anakin felt anchored to reality, but not bound by any of its constraints; at this moment, with Obi-Wan’s shaking fingers curling into his hair and his warm yielding body beneath him, he felt as though the universe was something he could command.

After a moment, Obi-Wan broke away to breathe, knowing that this wasn’t the time or place. Eyes still closed and his mouth curved into a slight smile, he rested his forehead against Anakin’s cheek and let out his breath in a short sigh. There was an unaccustomed sense of peace that had enveloped them for this moment, like a pocket universe that was just big enough for the two of them.

Finally, almost overwarm, Obi-Wan lifted his gaze to Anakin’s face. He gasped and scrambled back a bit, startled by a livid swipe of blood smeared up the side of his friend’s thin cheek. Not comprehending, Anakin’s face fell; the crushing, instantaneous assumption that Obi-Wan was retracting his love was written clearly, heartbreakingly on his features. He gripped Obi-Wan’s upper arm, not letting him completely withdraw.

“What?” he demanded, his own eyes wide.

Obi-Wan disjointedly looked at his own hand, which had been pressed to Anakin’s cheek just moments before, and was surprised to find that his palm had been cut when he’d caught himself on his hands. Exhaling slowly, he held his hand up for Anakin’s examination.

“There was blood on your face… it startled me.”
Anakin let his breath out in a rush, closing his eyes and easing forward against Obi-Wan again in relief. He knew that he shouldn’t have been happy that Obi-Wan was hurt, but it was selfishly preferable to his companion being horrified by him.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Obi-Wan nodded, rubbing distractedly at Anakin’s face with the dark cuff of his jacket to try to clean off the drying blood. “Yes…. yes. We should get back to the ship… help me gather up the crystals, Anakin…”

The younger man was loathe to let Obi-Wan go, but he knew that he was right. He lingered close for a moment, leaning in to steal another kiss. Obi-Wan let him, and he felt such an indulgent surge of happiness that he broke out into a grin before pulling back and sitting up.

The two of them took a few minutes to pick up the small shards of crystal. Almost colorless, they blended in with the snow and large grains of sparkling ice. Anakin knew that not everything he was hastily scooping up was stone, but it would sort itself out on the warm ship. He was happy at that moment, despite the physical cold and everything that had happened during his wanderings. Being accepted by this Jedi Knight felt like it was the start of things turning around for him.

Obi-Wan had kissed him back. Obi-Wan had bonded with him again. Obi-Wan loved him.

He hadn’t said that though; when Anakin had declared himself he hadn’t said a word. The realization was like a slap in the face that settled him slowly back into reality, where his metal prosthetics were radiating cold up into the cores of his femurs, like being impaled on ice. It brought back the uncomfortable images of his vision and made him doubt himself and Obi-Wan once again.

You wouldn’t even say it to save your own life.

“Obi-Wan,” he asked carefully, pausing to watch the other man on his knees as he sifted through the snow for the fallen stones.

“Yes, Anakin?”

Anakin chewed his lip, looking for the strength to ask and the composure to endure a denial or deflection. He had never been brave enough to ask him directly for a confirmation; before, he had always sensed that the topic was forbidden. Since then, the answer had always seemed obvious: Obi-Wan loved him in the past tense.

But that wasn’t how it had felt a moment before when Obi-Wan had kissed him and breathed life into his cold body. The other man had exposed himself by laying his emotions bare, and even now he could feel that Obi-Wan was practically bleeding out inside for him.

“Do you love me?”

Obi-Wan’s shoulders tightened for a silent moment, his fingers stilling in the snow, then he nodded without looking at him. When he spoke, his voice was barely audible.

“Yes.”

Anakin let his breath out in a rush.

“Say it then. Tell me.”
“Why?”

“I need it,” Anakin said earnestly. “It’s important. You can’t just… I need to hear you say it.”

Obi-Wan perceived Anakin’s need and his desperation through their bond, which was fierce and communicative in its newness. He knew that Anakin was hiding something from him, and that particular “something” was intensifying this strange, sudden desolation. He didn’t press for it right now, deciding once again that faith should guide him; all that he could do was trust Anakin’s sincerity and yield to his need. He was asking him openly for the first time and that had to be enough.

It was still difficult. For someone who talked so much and chose his words so carefully, the simple statement seemed almost insurmountable; he had fought attachment since he was a teenager. When he couldn’t truly control how he felt, he had decided he would tighten his control on the language he used and the behaviors he allowed himself. He hadn’t permitted himself the words; he had only ever talked about love for himself as though he was describing characters in a novel. Past tense, names without details. Attachment was his greatest weakness as a Jedi, but he could be a Good Jedi, a Strong Jedi, a Perfect Jedi. He could be someone who was worthy of the air he was breathing and the gifts he’d been given if he could just keep his control.

Telling Anakin that he loved him would be letting go of a piece of his very identity. He sat back on his heels, rubbing his cold, stinging hands restlessly on the tops of his thighs.

“I do love you, Anakin,” he said quietly, unable to lift his eyes from where they were fixed on an unusually large shard of kyber resting atop the snow.

The blond seized him enthusiastically and kissed him, elated even without knowing exactly what that admission had cost.

It was enough just to hear the words and know that the Obi-Wan loved him. The violence in his head hadn’t been a vision. It couldn’t have been, not with that discarded lightsaber. Not now that Obi-Wan had said that he loved him. It had been a nightmare brought on by the unnatural currents of the Force in the cave, a pocket of dark energy that had needed to be examined and excised. He was being tested by the Force.

“You’re the one who wants me, huh? The one who sees I hurt people when I love them, and you want me anyway. Well, maybe we go together,” Anakin thought as he rubbed the blood and snow off of the small, pale gray crystal. It glowed spectacularly when he touched it, just for him.

Obi-Wan watched, fascinated as Anakin peeled off his glove and used the delicate, powerful tips of his mechanical fingers to gently pry the stone from the ground.

“I believe we have what we came for,” the other man breathed thickly, uncertain after all of this what emotions he was actually feeling.
Anakin stitched up the centimeter-long slice in Obi-Wan’s palm more carefully than he'd dressed any wound in his life, taking the same meticulous care that Obi-Wan would have taken with him. Part of him wanted there to be some scar, like a permanent kiss, but he didn’t want the other man to carry any pain from what had happened between them; he wanted distance from the version of himself that wanted Obi-Wan to suffer to prove he loved him. Instead, the only mark would be inside both of them and eventually in the hilt of his new lightsaber.

With the cut cleaned and carefully bandaged, they tucked their ship safely between the shallow canyons in the mountain ridges and let the snow mask over the dull gray hull of their ship. Cloaked, they would be safe here for one night.

The sleeping quarters, which they had not yet had occasion to use, were little more than capsule bunks, double-wide with a Wookie’s arm’s length of headspace. Both of the bunks were slightly musty, but the bedding was clean and reasonably soft. Without discussion, they both dragged their exhausted, cold bodies into the lower capsule and curled up close together without a word.

Neither knew where to go from here; they both knew that there were things they needed to discuss, but they didn't know what to say or who should speak first. Obi-Wan had never openly loved anyone before, and Anakin was jaded enough already to know that love alone wasn't enough. All the same, the lack of tension made it easy to settle in for a quiet night.

It felt natural to have Obi-Wan wrapped protectively around him, even after time apart; the older man was smaller, but somehow Anakin had always felt like he could keep him safe from anything the galaxy could conjure. Maybe was just the lingering hero-worship he'd had for him as a Padawan, or maybe it was just Obi-Wan’s calm, confident consistency. He loved the scratch of his soft, well-kept beard against the back of his neck and the warmth of his breath in his hair.

He was content with this closeness and the diffuse undercurrent of thought that he could feel buzzing through his lover’s quick mind. Obi-Wan stroked his side from rib to hip and back up, the contact steady and confident even though the contours under his hand had changed since he’d last touched him. They had confirmed on Dhirrod that two of those ribs were cracked.

Anakin turned onto his back and pulled Obi-Wan up to drape across him, bringing them face to face again. He tilted his chin up and kissed him deliberately, confident at last that his affection was allowed. The older man leaned into him invitingly, lips parted.

Anakin eagerly chased the kiss, sliding his tongue against Obi-Wan’s though his lover kept the pace languid. He lifted his hand to rest his fingers against his jaw, then jerked his hand back when he remembered how cold his fingers would be on his skin. He didn’t know how to touch his companion or how to be close to him yet; he wanted so much more than he knew how to take.

Obi-Wan didn’t have the same reservations; maintaining eye contact, he slid his fingertips across the healing stitches on back of Anakin’s arm, over the transition between metal and flesh, then skimmed down the smooth metal back of his forearm and over the rounded joints at his wrist. He curled his fingers between Anakin’s, then lifted his hand to his mouth to kiss his cold, hard knuckles.

Anakin felt his breath catch for a moment as he remembered the first time that Obi-Wan had kissed
the palm of his other hand, the first time they’d made love. His ginger lover had taken all of him the same, flesh and metal alike, and he had made Anakin moan and arch against the mattress on the transport as though he, a married man, had never been touched before.

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. Was he willing to accept what he was now, did he want him even with the story of their battle permanently written on his body? Would he let him trace his metal fingers over his vulnerable skin? What offers were being made now, and how much did Obi-Wan love him?

Obi-Wan didn’t give any real answer, either aloud or through any unspoken means. Instead he nudged him into another kiss, affectionate and tentative, then settled his head beside Anakin’s on the pillow. He closed his eyes and exhaled slowly.

“So this is okay?” Anakin asked softly.

“I believe so.”

“Just like that?”

“I don’t know, Anakin… this is all quite a lot. I can’t fight it anymore.”

“That is really not romantic,” Anakin pointed out, kissing his forehead.

Obi-Wan made a face without opening his eyes. “Unlike some people, I haven’t been carrying on a romantic, secret marriage for the past few years. I have no idea how to love you or how to-”

“Come on now, don’t be like that,” Anakin laughed, surprised that he wasn’t offended. Normally a statement like that would have felt like a rejection. Instead, he could sense the affection radiating off of his companion through their bond, and he could read the lazy trust of his limbs against him. Obi-Wan wasn’t going anywhere right now; he wasn’t pulling away from him or withholding anything. He dragged him closer, pressing their bodies seamlessly together from hip to shoulder.

“You’ve loved me for years. You know exactly how.”

Obi-Wan smirked, then leaned close to press a surprisingly sweet kiss to the corner of Anakin’s mouth. He was surprised by how much more confident his lover was now. Though he had never consciously tried to keep a superior position in their relationship, in retrospect he could recognize how he had controlled their interactions and held Anakin at a safe distance.

Even so, Anakin had never been afraid to open himself up to Obi-Wan and make himself vulnerable, probably hoping that the older man would meet him halfway.

He never had.

The sensation was new to Obi-Wan now, both gratifying and terrifying; he was aware of the danger of putting his heart between Anakin’s teeth and how easily he could be hurt. Yet he allowed the exposure and almost welcomed the release.

Maybe it should have always been this way. Maybe things would have been different if they had been.

He wondered what he was now. He was strong and focused, more attuned to the light side of the Force than he had felt in some time. He was awake and faithful; he was undeniably Jedi, despite his trespasses against their code. The code felt mutable and his interpretations were in flux. Dressed like a rebel rather than a member of a religious order, lying in his lover’s arms, he wondered what a Jedi would be in this new world. Maybe this was it, and they were both a perfect
expression of a new form.

He could feel the pouch of crystals humming in the cabinet mounted in the wall. Just as they had judged Anakin in the caves, they now considered and reflected the emotion that they perceived from the two men in the bunk as diffuse light.

The younger man sighed, turning onto his side and hauling Obi-Wan flush against his chest. Resting his chin on the top of his former Master’s head, he smiled comfortably. For the first time, he felt as though he was really being seen and felt; in addition to being new, this was finally real.

It made it easy to dismiss the vision from caves; there was no need to tell his lover about what was obviously just a bad dream. Comfortable and unafraid, he closed his eyes and felt all of his muscles relax.

Chapter End Notes

I'm thinking of trying to do some illustrations to go with this fic... I didn't get this week's done, but maybe next week.
At some point in the night, after not nearly enough sleep, a communication frequency lit up their tiny ship as though it was a tuning fork. Obi-Wan jerked upright as the vibration buzzed through the hull, knocking the back of his head against the low ceiling of the capsule bunk before he remembered where he was.

A great static *hummummm* droned for a moment longer as Anakin scrambled to prop himself up on his elbows, eyes wide in the half-light.

“General, *move*. You’re spotted,” came a gruff voice across the static, so loud that it was almost hard to distinguish the words from the rattling of the janky metal panels of the hallway.

Obi-Wan slid gracelessly from the side of the bunk, groggy and vaguely disoriented as his bare feet hit the deck floor. He quickly moved to the side, already recovering, so that Anakin could follow.

The transmission ended just as abruptly, leaving them both half-deaf with ears ringing in the sudden silence.

“Sounded like one of the clones,” Obi-Wan remarked, leading the way quickly down to the cockpit.

“Yeah, it did.”

Anakin moved past him and took the captain’s seat without a word, knowing that they would need his piloting skills. He was tired, but his head was clear and the Force was practically charging the air around him; if they needed to make a daring escape, he was going to be the one to do it. Obi-Wan, always strategic, didn’t even think to argue as he slid into the copilot position and rapidly engaged the systems to begin de-icing the exterior of the ship. Sleep still clung to the interior of the ship, to the sandy feel of their eyelids and too-heavy eyelashes, but neither moved any slower for it.

As they prepared to depart, Anakin pulled up a cursory scan of the airspace above them and surrounding Ilum. From what he could see, there was no commanding fleet preparing to capture them; whoever was coming was either heavily cloaked or still out of range. Knowing hyperspace and how ships just seemed to appear at random, he wasn’t reassured at all by the current silence; any of this could change in seconds.

He glanced over at his companion, then ignited the engines. The ship hummed to life again, sending eddies of snow swirling through the dim morning light. When Obi-Wan made no protest, he assumed that they had already liquified the thin shell of ice that had no doubt formed over the last few hours. If they didn’t know how to escape as a team by now, it was like all those near misses during the war had been for nothing.

“Where are we going?” Obi-Wan asked, hands hovering over the console uncertainly.

“It’s safer in the Outer Rim,” Anakin said. “We should try to hide in one of the trade routes. We look enough like smugglers.”
Obi-Wan nodded, keying their destination into the ship’s computer and hoping that it was ready to do some tight computations. For a second he was tempted to make a comment about that, about two Jedi Knights appearing so like smugglers that it was the first escape plan Anakin had thought of, but his nerves were too otherwise occupied to let him make it. He felt hypersensitive and adrenalized, though he also felt foolish for being so ready to jump just because a familiar voice had called one of them “General.”

The ship hefted itself vertically, dripping melted ice and snow. After they had cleared the altitude of the mountains, Anakin accelerated smoothly to the break in the atmosphere where the sky immediately darkened to the black, starry void of open space.

A large battle-class cruiser materialized in front of them, dropping into space and hanging on the air uncomfortably. Just as abruptly, a handful of smaller fighters appeared and kicked off toward them.

“Kriff-” Anakin hissed, shifting quickly to a defensive strategy that kept them out of the range of blaster fire.

Strangely, though, they weren’t being fired upon; they were being herded.

“They’re after you, I’m afraid,” Obi-Wan said with a grimace, not needing to explain how he knew. Obviously, their pursuers were taking care not to damage Anakin; had Obi-Wan been the true target, they would have been dodging bolts left and right.

“Yeah, yeah - where we going?” Anakin asked, retreating back somewhat as he waited for the ship to confirm their erratic path through hyperspace.

“Sullust, via Mataou.”

“Showy.”

Obi-Wan snorted, then jumped when a warning bolt skimmed the side of their ship. Following the same angle almost instantaneously, a tractor beam grazed the side of the ship without managing to catch. Anakin jerked the controls in a practiced way to flick the edge of the ship out of range, then dipped the nose and sped forward.

Anakin was suddenly aware of a lightheaded rush, a chill influx of ozone through his sinuses that made it hard to focus. His hands faltered on the controls briefly before he tightened his grip and shook his head to clear his thoughts.

“How is it not ready?” he demanded of the ship computer. “It’s a major bywa--”

As if protesting his tone, the computer beeped and spewed a confirmation onto the screen. As he started to engage the hyperdrive, Anakin felt a familiar touch on his mind. It smoothed back from his cheekbones like someone soothingly stroking his hair, coaxing him to slow down and relax. All at once, his adrenaline level dropped and the world around him slowed to a preternaturally focused crawl.

_Everything will be fine_ , the mental contact seemed to say. It was familiar, wordless and verbal at the same time. _Don’t go._

“Anakin-” Obi-Wan said sharply, though his voice was indistinct in the younger man’s ears. “Make the jump!”

Anakin couldn’t quite throw the influence of the other presence in his thoughts, but he intuitively
closed himself off and hid behind his mental shields. The effort of holding tight took more of his focus than he could spare; his vision swam and his chin dipped forward toward his chest before he jerked his head back up.

When one of the tractor beams lashed the wing, Obi-Wan flicked an override switch to transfer control to his console; he didn’t know what was happening to his copilot, but he knew that their escape was unfortunately hanging on him. With a quick prayer to anything favorably disposed toward them, he kicked off the hyperdrive and jerked their vessel out of the grip of the enemy’s ship to send them hurtling toward the hyperspace interchange at Mataou.

Before the stars bled into an almost solid field of streaming white, he caught one last glimpse of Ilum. He didn’t know why, but he knew that it was the last time that he would see it this way; if he ever made it back to the quiet, frosty planet, it would be profoundly changed by the abuse of the Empire. Like the destruction of the temples and the Jedi themselves, Ilum would disappear as a mystery and a wonder of the Force. He had never had the gift of future sight, but he knew it with a certainty that felt like a punch between his shoulderblades. Ilum faded forever from his vision, thousands of miles gone.

Once they had a few parsecs almost-instant distance, Anakin came out of his daze and slumped back against the seat, shivering. He looked over at Obi-Wan uncertainly, then back to the monitor readouts. None of it made sense to him; his mind was still foggy, though free. He moved his hand over the controls, experiencing a shot of panic in his chest when he saw his metal hand exposed. It felt new. It wasn’t. He swallowed and closed his eyes again.

Obi-Wan impulsively changed his mind on their destination, freshly uncertain as to the safety of the information. He had felt the disturbance in the Force and watched Anakin’s consciousness waiver; knowing the strength of his companion's mind and his unusual power, he could only assume that something had gone very wrong.

He would have preferred to have Anakin pull off this maneuver, but there was already less time to act than it would take to explain.

The strategy hinged on the fact that Mataou was a jumping point between the Corellian Trade Spine and the Ison Trade Corridor; anyone pursuing them would likely expect that they would skip on through from one hyperlane to the next to cover as much distance as possible. If they could drop out of hyperspace and hook back around to land on the planet itself, keeping a tight radius that would minimize fuel usage and avoid exposure, they would likely throw anyone who was chasing after their original route.

They came out of hyperspace neatly, though their ship’s handling left a bit to be desired as they slingshotted back past Mataou’s solitary moon. Relieved to be alive and far from the Empire’s sudden appearance, Obi-Wan laughed uneasily.

Anakin groaned. “Where are we?”

“Mataou.”

“Got it,” he said, understanding immediately despite feeling off-center.

That didn’t often happen, just as he hadn’t really gotten travel-lagged since he was very young. Jedi were trained to place themselves within the Force to orient themselves, both in terms of time and space; the fact that the blond felt almost nauseated by the jump spoke volumes to the state of his mind. He rubbed his temple with his first two fingers in a circular motion, hoping that it would ease the sensation of being lost in the galaxy.
He felt even more disoriented mentally. Palpatine’s intrusion into his thoughts had happened far too easily, but unfortunately the Emperor already knew the contours of Anakin’s mind. It wasn’t as though he could come and go freely, but there were certain defenses that Anakin had never learned to keep up around him. He felt a spike of concern that he could have stolen something of value from his thoughts, either on the ship or in the caves. The fact that Palpatine had been close enough to touch his thoughts scared him; he would have been confident in a physical confrontation with a dozen commandos, but he knew that he would struggle against the Sith Lord’s perfect dark side reasoning if Palpatine turned his attention on him again.

He took a deep breath through his nose and let it out slowly, then opened his eyes and nodded to Obi-Wan in acknowledgement.

“So what happened there?” Obi-Wan asked after a moment, transferring control back to Anakin’s console.

“Palpatine…” Anakin murmured, reaching up and pushing his hair back out of his face uncomfortably. He focused on the task of guiding the ship through the planet’s atmosphere, rather than thinking about his other master’s voice in his thoughts. The Sith had taken a deceptively gentle tack with him; in many ways, he had been superficially kinder and more welcoming than Obi-Wan when it came to returning to the fold.

“He wants me to come back.”

“Well, that’s no surprise.”

“It was really hard to keep him out of my head,” he admitted.

“He’s been manipulating you since you were a child,” Obi-Wan pointed out, watching his companion’s narrow face. “Unfortunately, after all this time he has a fairly good idea how to get in.”

The Jedi had a lot of things to say about Palpatine and about any possible flickers of doubt that Anakin might be experiencing, but he kept them to himself. Over the course of their many conversations, he was reasonably certain that he had enumerated just about every evil of the Sith Lord; reiteration would likely only waste air and make Anakin defensive. Obi-Wan was consciously making an effort to let Anakin heal and move forward.

Even so, he had a tendency toward overkill (especially when there was some sort of snappy rhetoric involved) and it was very difficult for him to hold his tongue.

“Did you tell him anything?”

“No…no. I don’t think so.”

“No, or you don’t think so?”

“No.”

Obi-Wan nodded approvingly as he turned his attention to a little notification that had just lit up on his screen.

To his annoyance, Anakin realized that he wasn’t sure where things stood with the two of them this morning. If they had been given the opportunity to start the day at a more leisurely pace, he could have tested the waters with kisses and light touches then gradually worked his way up to conversation. He knew intuitively that the other man was going to try to slip the snare at least
once; any forward movement in their relationship had always been immediately chased back several steps as Obi-Wan systematically panicked and tried to re-establish order. It usually came in the form of witty brush-offs or contradictory laments of “we really must stop doing this” with his lips hovering over the pulse point in Anakin’s neck.

They’d never even talked about love before, so he could only imagine the mental acrobatics that Obi-Wan must have been doing now; he could almost feel him analytically endeavoring to rebuild some of the barriers that had been stripped down between them. He knew him well enough to appreciate that it was anxiety rather than lack of feeling, but he wasn’t willing to give up any ground this time.

Or maybe he was imagining it all and Obi-Wan was just fine. He had no way of knowing when his normally verbose companion was so closed on certain topics, though he could still feel the Force-bond between them.

He also realized abruptly that this wasn’t the time to be thinking about something so trivial.

After a centering moment, he commented, “That was some tricky flying, Obi-Wan.”

The older man smiled crookedly. “Just by necessity. I’d far rather leave the fancy maneuvers for you.”

“Well, I am really good at them.”

“And so modest.”

Obi-Wan laughed tiredly as he switched between a few screens and helped him to guide the ship. His adrenaline had spent itself and he was entering into a half-dazed state of lethargy.

_That was a very difficult way to start the day, he thought. Thank the Force we didn't have sex._

He couldn't help but think how much more awkward it would have been to hit the deck naked; they’d never have gotten off-planet in time if they’d been sleep-fogged and scrambling for their clothes.

That was as far as Obi-Wan had gotten in terms of thinking about the changes to their relationship. Unlike Anakin, he was doggedly focused on the task at hand; though he let his companion do most of the piloting work, he was already thinking ahead to the steps that they would need to take as soon as they landed.

“The ship is basically scrap. We need to put distance between it and ourselves,” he commented, sitting back in his seat.

Anakin groaned, knowing that he was right.

“We got enough to buy a new one?”

“Something small, yes. Especially if we scrap this one out, we should have enough to get something.”

Anakin nodded. “Okay. So we’ll land, ditch the ship, start in on finding a new one… though you know, we could also just see about refitting this one a bit. I mean, this planet’s mostly criminals and farmers… with a new paint job and a couple of re-reg chips to change the ship’s signature, we could probably get by and no one would think it was too weird.”
Obi-Wan knew that his companion knew more about life on Hutt-owned and formerly Hutt-owned planets; in addition to his early life experience, Anakin also seemed to slip more seamlessly into the criminal underworld than Obi-Wan ever had. The younger Jedi’s rougher edges blended more easily than Obi-Wan’s polished diction and straight-backed posture. It was entirely likely that Anakin could accomplish more on their budget, faster and quieter than he himself could manage.

“If you think that would be more effective, I bow to your judgment.”

While Obi-Wan had always been the master, they traded power easily between based on the needs of their situation. When a silver tongue was needed, Obi-Wan always stepped up; when a slick pilot or a speedy hothead could save the day, Anakin was the obvious choice. That morning, Obi-Wan had already deferred to his companion’s flight skills, and he had already stepped up and stepped back again when Anakin was temporarily disabled. Letting Anakin handle the criminal element and the scrapyards was just as natural.

Anakin looked over at his Master again. There was a certain amount of relief in his eyes - he had something to focus on, something to do. “Yeah… I can handle that, if you want to try to find a safe place to stay the night? Maybe check out the town and see what news there is to be had. I mean, we’re in a different area, different people… maybe we can find out something different… new…?”

“That sounds entirely reasonable,” Obi-Wan nodded agreeably.

With their adrenaline spent and a full list of tasks to accomplish before they could settle again, they set down on Mataou with a sense of weary resolve.

XXI. A Dark Flash

The extremely casual ship junker assured Anakin that the changes could be made to their ship within a few days; for the price, he also promised a new refresher and an upgrade to their hyperdrive. Anakin’s careful use of the mind trick accomplished this feat for a reasonable, but not suspiciously low cost; as he walked back to the town center to meet Obi-Wan, he couldn’t help but feel that his former Master would be proud of him.

The rotation length and timing was different from Ilum, or from the artificial light cycle on Dhirrod. Anakin wasn’t certain how long they’d been awake consecutively now, or what their sleep pattern should be going forward. The sun was mid-way through its uneven arc across the sky and the other sentients seemed as though they were settling in for a period of rest, but Anakin wasn’t sure if there was a cultural mid-day nap, or if a rotation was too long to be tied directly to a human sleep cycle; in any case, he was starting to tire and he was eager to have a locked door between himself and the rest of the galaxy.

Obi-Wan was sitting on the edge of a large fountain where they had parted company earlier, his eyes open though he was obviously in some light form of meditation. The bright sunlight struck a warm copper off of his hair and tucked deep shadows into the creases of his clothes. Anakin watched him for a moment, enjoying the opportunity to observe him without being observed himself. His posture was relaxed and the Force was flowing naturally about him as he watched the market move around himself; Anakin almost imagined that he could see a shimmer on the still air, though he knew that it was just his imagination.

He wandered closer, raising a hand in greeting.
Obi-Wan slid to his feet, asking, “How did it go?”

“Couple days. They need to get the parts in, but there’s a shipment tomorrow. It’s not going to break the bank, thankfully - we’ll definitely be better off this way than scrapping and starting over… and it’s probably less suspicious, too.”

“Good, good,” the older man commented. He shouldered his bag and balanced himself against its weight, then started off in the direction of their lodgings knowing that Anakin would follow him.

“You find a good place?”

“I believe so. Hardly a Coruscant pleasure palace, but it’s clean, quiet, and no one seems to ask a lot of questions,” Obi-Wan laughed mildly.

His bag bumped his friend’s arm, reminding Anakin that they hadn’t had any physical contact at all since they bolted out of bed that morning.

“Really? I’d been hoping for a pleasure palace. Or at least a spa where I could get my nails done.”

Obi-Wan smirked up at him, “All I need these days is a good mattress and consistent water pressure.”

“Where have your gentleman’s standards gone?”

Anakin felt gratified when his companion reached over to swat him, though he ducked out of the way with a broad, answering grin. He nudged him with his shoulder amicably, then made a surprised sound when Obi-Wan lightly elbowed him in his still-tender ribs.

“Oh-” Obi-Wan breathed in belated memory. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he said, shrugging with a quick smile.

The reminder of his injury struck Obi-Wan strangely. He was still struggling to keep up with the pace of the changes in their lives, from the utter destruction of the month before to their rapid departure from Tatooine, then Dhirrod, then Ilum. It hadn’t even been a full standard week since he’d nearly broken Anakin’s nose and tried to smother him in the sand; though Anakin’s bruises were fading quickly, the injuries and their cause were still fairly fresh. Things were just moving so quickly, so constantly, that there was no choice but to live by the rules of the current moment. Anakin seemed to be meeting it all with a set jaw and two fists. Obi-Wan, who thought too much about everything, was more concerned about getting lost in the momentum.

He was struck by the disorienting sensation of having no idea what he was doing. Their relationship was completely dysfunctional and he was suddenly overcome by guilt. The situation in the desert had been real; his anger had been justified. How could he be flirting with someone - declaring love to someone - who had betrayed him and their friends the way that he had? It wasn't something that he should have been able to move past; why was he abandoning his conviction of just days ago?

But even recalling the crushing depression and anger from that time, he couldn't ignore how he had felt the previous night. He had felt so right and so sure before, when he had felt like the was the way forward. How could it be both?

Anakin felt the conflict in him and immediately reached over to rest his hand at the small of his back.
In a low voice, he told him, “Stop. It’s okay.”

Obi-Wan took a quick breath, though he didn’t pull away.

“The inn is a few minutes away,” he said stiffly. “It’s just off of the main thoroughfare, so it should be quiet.”

Anakin kept his hand against the curve of his lower back for a moment, as if physically reinforcing their emotional connection. He sensed Obi-Wan’s unrest as clearly as if he had been holding him in his arms and trying to match their breathing; even knowing everything he did, he still didn’t entirely understand why his friend fell so completely into his anxiety. Some of it was the undeniably the product of training and the Jedi’s high expectations and some of it was definitely this extenuating circumstance, but some of it could only have been the man himself.

He wished that he could put him at ease, but if he hadn’t been able to do so even during much simpler times he wasn’t sure what hope there was now. The only thing that he could do for sure was keep his lover moving forward and give him every reason to believe that things would be all right for them.

“We can settle in and take it easy for a little while… go over everything. I need to go wander around a parts shop tomorrow and see if I can find the stuff I need to approximate a ‘real’ casing… the circuitry won’t be hard, but I’m gonna have to to figure out how to contain everything and direct the energy safely.”

Obi-Wan recognized Anakin’s tactics and knew that he was trying to keep him talking to draw him out. It was just something that his younger Padawan did, that he’d always done. Even during the worst, most frustrating period of his apprenticeship, Anakin had been highly attuned to his Master’s moods. As he’d gotten older, he’d gotten more “subtle,” and his single-minded focus had grown to include making efforts to help him without embarrassing him.

Now, the familiarity of Anakin’s technique was actually more comforting than anything that he was saying. It once again tied his timeline together, reminding him that this was the same Anakin he’d always known.

“I’m sure you’ll manage somehow… the oldest weapons were remarkably primitive, hardly more than a crystal and an on-switch wrapped in some twine,” Obi-Wan replied.

“When you were a kid?”

Obi-Wan snorted in surprised amusement.

“What, did I never show you the oil painting of my first lightsaber?”

Anakin laughed, feeling the other man relax slightly. He followed Obi-Wan up the steps into a respectable looking inn that didn’t seem to have a name, just a brightly lit “vacancy” sign.” The staff was friendlier than at the hotel on Dhirrod, though they still seemed unusually keen to respect their privacy.

Both men were surprised by how pleasant the room was. A broad window with a semi-sheer curtain cast hazy afternoon light over a room that was a flat, surprisingly warm white. Unlike many of the places where they had stayed, the walls were stone and plaster and there was a conspicuous lack of brushed steel or ultra-light alloys; it seemed like a place where real people, rather than bustling peacekeepers or transient criminals, would stay. Anakin wasn’t sure why, as there was little on Mataou since the Hutts had moved on, but if the owners wanted their inn to feel
cozy, he certainly wasn’t going to complain.

He sighed comfortably and dropped his bags, then flopped down atop the homespun coverlet on the bed closest to the door.

Obi-Wan watched him for a moment with a very slight, indulgent smile, then responsibly set about unpacking and putting away his things. He let the task consume him, clearing his mind as tucked his clothes into the chest of drawers.

Standing beside the window without pulling back the curtain, he commented, “Anakin, I think it’s time we picked up some short-range communicators… we’re normally together, but when we move on to bigger cities and busier planets, I do imagine we’ll split up more often. I’d really rather know if you encounter trouble, or if you find anything interesting.”

When Anakin didn’t reply, he glanced over to find that the blond had dozed off.

He watched him thoughtfully, taking a familiar comfort in the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. Obi-Wan was still as he warred with himself over whether he would lie down beside him or take the other bed. He had enjoyed falling asleep in his arms that morning, or whenever that had been with respect to now. Staying close had seemed appropriate then, when they’d fallen into bed together out of habit and exhaustion, but now he wasn’t so sure about anything.

As he often did, he imagined and planned responses for conversations that would never happen. He tried to imagine how he would justify his love to the Jedi who had fallen, what rhetoric he would choose and what code or lore he would cite. Attachment was forbidden, but forgiveness was a founding tenet of their order; surely that would carry some weight even if he had no justification for the depth of his attachment. They may not have let him call himself a Jedi, but they wouldn’t hate him for loving someone. The issue wasn’t even so much that it was an attachment, as that it was an attachment to Anakin. How would they have looked at him if they knew that he loved a traitor? Would they believe that Anakin could change? Would they have wanted him to do as Master Yoda had ordered and avenge their deaths against the brother who had betrayed them?

He didn’t know, but for everything that had happened he did not regret letting Anakin live. Seeing the light in Anakin now, feeling how the Force moved with him, and knowing that a crystal had called to him, he knew that forgiveness was what had been needed on Mustafar. Looking at Anakin, asleep on his side with his arm tucked under his head, he could justify that love what was needed now.

Yoda would have disagreed, but he realized abruptly that his own thinking had never been in line with the rest of the Jedi Council. Though Yoda had been one of his many teachers and an influential advisor during his knighthood, he didn’t actually care what he thought right now. The small, detached Master had seen glimpses of this future and had passively watched the Jedi fall, then exiled himself to the quiet safety of a Force-heavy planet; he didn’t live in this world anymore and couldn’t understand the complexities of Obi-Wan’s new life. He was caught in an idealized, antiquated viewpoint of the Jedi and the Force; Yoda’s world had no room for redemption or rebellion, and his own world had no room for his judgment.

He thought instead of Qui-Gon, whom he sometimes spoke to aloud even now. He could hear his Master’s voice in his thoughts, warm and level, telling him something entirely different. Qui-Gon had seen everything differently; he had seen the best in Obi-Wan, he had seen the light of the Force in Anakin without seeing him as a weapon to be used.

Resolved, he took off his boots and settled beside Anakin on the bed. The depression of the mattress disturbed the sleeping Jedi, who made a sound of protest and gratefully moved closer
before wrapping his arms around him. With his eyes closed, Anakin kissed him sloppily, missing twice before pressing his mouth chastely to the very center of Obi-Wan’s lips.

He was asleep again in a moment, leaving Obi-Wan with his thoughts.

Even lying there with Anakin peacefully asleep beside him, Obi-Wan couldn’t seem to settle. His thoughts spun off in different directions, from guilty browbeating to optimistic fantasies of finding a hidden clutch of Younglings or a resistance group of Jedi. He let himself daydream, though he seemed to keep wandering back to darker thoughts of his own weakness and selfishness. The conflict that rolled through him was exhausting, but he still couldn’t seem to sleep.

Anakin sighed wearily beside him.

“You need to stop,” he murmured, catching Obi-Wan’s chin in his hand.

He deliberately turned his companion’s head to the side, exposing the long, freckled expanse of his throat, then began pressing open-mouthed kisses from his Adam’s apple up to the depression beneath his ear.

Obi-Wan’s heart skipped at the warmth of his mouth juxtaposed against the cool hardness of his fingers on his jaw. He could feel the firm pressure of Anakin’s teeth behind his soft lips, a reminder of strength backing his gentle touch.

“Anakin,” he warned, trying to ignore the familiar warmth in the pit of his stomach.

Anakin chuckled. He knew that tone. That was not a “no;” that was a “we have an early day tomorrow” or a “put on trousers if you’re going to leave the curtains open” tone of voice. He smiled and bit lightly above the pulse point on his throat, knowing how it had always affected his lover. Obi-Wan drew a sharp breath between his teeth, then dipped his chin down to catch Anakin’s mouth in a surprisingly eager kiss.

Anakin’s cold fingers skimmed boldly up his sides and snuck beneath the short hem of his t-shirt, chilling and ticklish all at once. Obi-Wan’s stomach tightened at the cool contact, though he could feel an aroused flush creeping up his neck and down onto his chest. He wondered what it felt like to Anakin to touch him, if he felt much more than warmth and pressure on his mechanical fingertips.

His mind wandered for just a moment, imagining what it would feel like to have one of these smooth new fingers inside of him. The image passed quickly - it was too much right now, too soon, and he was still too guilty - but he couldn’t help but moan into Anakin’s mouth at the thought. Though he was embarrassed at the sound, it seemed to give his lover new boldness; he broke away from the kiss for a moment to wrestle Obi-Wan out of his soft shirt, then pulled Obi-Wan up on top of him.

Obi-Wan was simultaneously overwhelmed and aching for more; he had gone from rejecting a simple kiss to having lewd thoughts about Anakin’s hands in less than two rotations. His body was eager, but his heart was hesitant; his common sense said absolutely not, but his common sense rarely won out when it came to Anakin Skywalker. It was easy to want, especially when he subconsciously longed for a physical closeness to match the emotional bond that they had shared the previous night.

He slid his tongue against Anakin’s, then pulled away, tugging his lover’s lower lip lightly between his teeth as he did. Feeling a little too naked to be alone, he sat back a bit and grasped the hem of his shirt to pull it up over his head.
To his surprise, Anakin quickly caught his wrists and breathed a quick, fervent “no.” He tried to soften it by saying “no” again more gently, then by pulling Obi-Wan into another kiss; Obi-Wan released the fabric, eyes open for a moment as Anakin kissed him almost frantically. He intuitively understood that his lover was self-conscious about the way his body was put together now; between old scars and new prosthetics, the younger man was marked almost head to toe. And knowing now that the Council had treated him as though he was less human after his original prosthetic, he could only imagine how he judged himself now that every limb had been replaced.

Wanting to put him at ease, Obi-Wan pulled away enough to reassure him - “It’s all right” - before kissing him again in a more measured, almost soothing way.

Obi-Wan rather deliberately slid his fingers up his lover’s abdomen under his shirt, tracing the raised contour of each scar as he moved up his torso. There was a smooth line along his side from a blaster bolt skim, then a smaller one at a slight angle from when Anakin had fallen out of a tree as a Padawan. He gently rubbed his thumb against his side where he knew that the rib was still cracked from his own blows.

He felt the fine tension in Anakin’s body as he touched him, though there was curiosity mixed with his lingering fear of rejection. As he continued to caress him and kiss him, acknowledging the scars and scrapes on his skin, the younger man eased into his hands and returned his kisses with more passion and less panic.

After a moment, lightly flushed and nearly gasping, Anakin pushed Obi-Wan away and peeled off his own shirt. His eyes almost frantically sought Obi-Wan’s, looking desperately for his approval.

Obi-Wan made a point of thoroughly looking him over as he hadn’t in recent days, taking in the prosthetics he already knew, the rangy chest and shoulders that he had kissed for years, and the new, chrome limb and where it joined inelegantly with his organic arm. He tilted his head to the side appraisingly, then pulled Anakin back into his arms to kiss him deeply.

The instant relief hit Anakin like Spice, more heady and intoxicating than any emotion he’d felt as a Sith. He forced himself close again, as though he was trying to climb inside of him and occupy the same space. His kisses turned hungry and raw, claiming Obi-Wan as he pressed him back and flattened him against the mattress. Rising and strengthening from the depths of his heart, he felt an echo of the emotion from his vision, the desire to consume Obi-Wan to keep him entirely for himself. He wanted to steal his ability to reason through pleasure rather than pain, but some of that same dangerous intensity resonated through his possessive kisses; he heard Obi-Wan moan and he greedily swallowed the sound, his metal fingers wrapped around his hips. The older Jedi was focused on him now; for once, as he kissed him hard and deep, he had his full attention. He wanted to be the only thing Obi-Wan was thinking about. He would be the only thing.

Obi-Wan felt the dark turn in him without knowing why; like any creature aligned with the light, he retreated behind his shields despite that he almost craved the feral, controlling touch. Even as his body reacted to the almost bruising grip on his hips, even as he returned his kisses with an uncharacteristic lack of restraint, he was guarding himself and fencing Anakin out. The blond felt immediately when his lover closed himself in and it ignited fear and accusation in him; he pushed hard against the boundaries of the Force-bond between them as though he could find a way back in if he just kissed him longer or harder.

“D-don’t push me out,” he whispered against his mouth, laying his hand against his jaw again and subtly holding him in place. His words were begging, but his voice carried the sharper, growling edge of a command.

“It’s too much…” Obi-Wan breathed, his volume matched to Anakin’s. He swallowed thickly, his
pupils dilated wide. With his lover’s heart closed to him as he said it, Anakin knew what he meant, what was too much. Obi-Wan had accepted his body - he didn’t doubt the sincerity of the gentle, almost worshipful touches or his heated kisses; he knew Obi-Wan would have probably fucked him right then just on adrenaline and arousal. But *fucking* wasn't what Anakin wanted and never had been; he wanted a connection that he could drown himself in, a closeness that they had only even met part-way during their prime in the Clone Wars. He wanted all of him, but Obi-Wan was still pushing him away. *He* was what was too much.

Anakin couldn’t help but think that he was still too rough, too raw, too emotional for antiseptic, pristine Obi-Wan Kenobi. He probably always would be. He released the older man, his heart beating quickly and his mouth suddenly dry, and laid down miserably beside him.

Obi-Wan didn't move, still flushed with his heart racing. He was completely aware of the fracture that his apparent rejection had caused and knew that he needed to say something, but he didn’t know what. Not sorry, exactly. He couldn’t be completely sorry for following his intuition; there was something dark in the way that Anakin had loved him at that moment, something that could have gone much too far.

He realized belatedly that he wasn’t even sure what that meant or why he had reacted the way that he had; he backtracked and tried to reason through whether Anakin had done anything wrong, or if this was just his own irrational avoidance of emotional intimacy. Kriffing hells, he didn’t even know *how* someone could love someone else in a ‘dark way.’ What did that even mean?

He could feel Anakin practically glowing with desolation beside him, the waves of slightly over-dramatic heartache emanating off of him like heat off pavement.

Obi-Wan slowly, uncertainly eased his guard down again.

Anakin felt him unfolding and he could appreciate the effort that it took; as far as he was concerned, he was the only one who could really read the older man. As Obi-Wan’s shields came down, he could almost taste the conflicting mixture of emotion that the older Jedi was experiencing; he was exposed and defensive, anxious and craving closeness.

He could feel the raw edge inside of him still, soft and frayed like torn silk. His friend carried such deep wounds and such heavy guilt, even now. But, he reasoned, so did he, only his own broken insides were sharp like glass. Before he never would have wanted anything that wasn’t freely given; pride and love would have made him wait eternally for confirmation. Now he had so little that he couldn’t bear the thought of losing anything at all; He defensively justified that he had spent his whole life fighting and he had next to nothing to show for it.

So he wanted someone to want him the way he was. Didn’t everyone? What was wrong with that? This wasn’t about sex, it was about how Obi-Wan kept offering him closeness and then taking it back. He knew that couldn’t force a connection again, but he couldn’t stand being led on.

He took a deep breath, trying to let go of his want and his undeserved resentment. He couldn’t be angry. He could be disappointed, he could be self-conscious, he could be embarrassed, but Obi-Wan didn’t owe him anything. He exhaled slowly, looking for some kind of verbal icebreaker.

“Thanks for getting in bed with me…” he said awkwardly. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

“You looked so comfortable, I thought that you must have picked the better bed.” Obi-Wan
shuffled one shoulder, trying to feign a casual ease.

Anakin rolled his eyes, though he smiled slightly.

“I can move to the other, if you’d like… leave you this one?”

“That’s quite all right… I’m comfortable now,” he replied, turning on his side and pulling Anakin back into his arms.

The blond was stiff for a moment, but he yielded and let his long body conform to the lines of Obi-Wan’s.

“That’s pretty much what I thought.”

Obi-Wan kissed the back of his neck, cradling him against his chest protectively. In the gesture, Anakin could recognize his former Master’s desire to care for him and make him happy; it was obvious that Obi-Wan hadn’t been trying to hurt him. Knowing that Obi-Wan was trying to connect with him now made him feel less awkward, but no less isolated.

He sighed and settled completely, struggling to release the tension in his limbs. Somehow doing so made his lower lip tremble briefly, as though letting go of that fierce grip on his body was just too much. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on how close they were now and how good it had felt to kiss Obi-Wan before, and how good his hands had felt on his body. How wanted he had felt, how normal things had seemed.

He still wasn’t sure what he had done wrong, or why Obi-Wan had just shut down.

“Hey, Obi-Wan? You did mean what you said in the cave, didn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t lie about that, Anakin.”

He scowled, frustrated, and snapped, “You can never just say ‘yes,’ can you?”

Obi-Wan drew a short, audible breath between his teeth. Intentional or not, sometimes Anakin just managed to prick his pride or rub him exactly the wrong way; it was why they had been like rocket fuel and fire through most of Anakin’s teenage years, and why they often bickered even as adults. Obi-Wan closed his mouth on a petty, unnecessary response, deciding that it was not the sort of thing that one said to someone whom he professed to love.

He counted to ten, which served the double-purpose of giving him time to cool down while letting Anakin stew in the uncomfortable silence following his irritated comment.

He couldn’t ignore the seed of darkness that he still felt in Anakin, but he reminded himself that normal people weren’t purely good or bad. Though the Force made any blur between sides more perilous, Anakin didn’t need to be perfect; perfection was unnatural. He couldn’t take that message to heart for himself, but he needed to accept that there would always be something wild, dark, and dangerous about his fallen friend.

Finally, he kissed Anakin’s shoulder, then the side of his neck to up his cheek. When the younger man finally turned his head to accommodate him, he lightly kissed his mouth.

“I did mean it. And I do still.”

Anakin turned in his arms so that they were face to face, trying to gauge his sincerity. He wanted to hear the words themselves - he wanted to hear them over and over, casually, euphorically, when
Obi-Wan made love to him, when Obi-Wan was falling asleep, when Obi-Wan was just sitting comfortably beside him in an eventual peace - but right now, he wanted for this smaller affirmation to be enough. He tried to shove down his need and compress his love to fill a smaller part of himself so that this could satisfy him. He tried to need less, but the words still came.

“I just… if something’s too much, you've got to tell me to back off instead of just shutting me out.”

Obi-Wan continued to be surprised by how direct - and sometimes downright mature - Anakin was now. Before Mustafar, he never would have made that sort of demand, even though it would have been within his right. Before, he would have probably just let Obi-Wan hold him until they fell into an awkward peace. Lying here with Anakin looking boldly into his eyes, Obi-Wan realized that there was no room for avoidance or half-truths and that of the two of them. Anakin wasn’t being unreasonable or childish by asking, leaving several corresponding judgments on Obi-Wan.

To his own annoyance, he looked away briefly before he forced himself to look back to Anakin and hold his gaze.

“I don’t mean you have to share everything…” Anakin continued, uncertain in Obi-Wan’s silence. “I mean, I get it. It’s not normal to be open all the time… but… when you’re pushing me away - like, because you mean to, not just because you’re being private - when you’re pushing me away, I feel it. It’s awful.”

“I don’t ever mean to push you away,” Obi-Wan said, lifting his hand to trace the line of the scar that cut through Anakin’s brow and cheek.

He remembered when Anakin had gotten it, though to this day Anakin had never admitted how it had happened. He had just showed up on the Negotiator with several sticking plasters on his face to try to mask his own terrible patch-up. It had been angry and swollen, needing bacta and antibiotic, and despite that Obi-Wan had coaxed Anakin into letting him pick out the coarse stitches and redo them, the damage had been done and no tidy, perfect stitches could prevent him from scarring.


In this calmer moment, Obi-Wan couldn’t explain what emotion had prompted him to retreat. There were no words for the destructive, predatory vibration in the Force that he had felt with Anakin kissing him as though it was the only thing keeping him alive. It had, just for that moment, filled him with an unnatural sense of terror. There was no way to say that now, though, when this blond seemed to only want his love; even with his silver tongue, he had no way to describe the sensation.

All he could say was what he knew to be true. “I’m not trying to take it back. I don’t want to take it back.”

He couldn’t tell if Anakin believed him, but he settled. The sharp edges of his Force signature softened, and he leaned close to kiss him.
XXII. Colorless

Obi-Wan was generous with his affection over the next few days, though their intimacy didn’t progress past what had happened the first day. He didn’t say why exactly, but Anakin was fairly sure that it was some sort of arbitrary “slowing down” that the older man had decided upon to assuage his lingering guilt. Anakin could kiss him all evening, his hands could wander, but he was left longing. Amidst maps and hacked intelligence reports from their seedier excursions into the underbelly of the city, he found his thoughts drifting pointlessly to memories of their time together during the Clone Wars.

By the time they had given into their attraction, their time together had become more limited as the war had intensified and their respective units were operating in different parts of the galaxy. With an attentive, judgmental Padawan and thousands of clones milling about, it was difficult to find time or privacy; while Anakin snuck in to Obi-Wan’s bunk at any opportunity he could, they were often too exhausted to do anything other than sleep. Too often they had to be satisfied by letting their hands brush when they walked beside each other, stealing kisses in the armory, or fucking with their clothes still on. Sometimes, circumstances allowed them a rare opportunity to travel alone, usually on diplomatic missions or reconnaissance, and they would make up for the time they’d missed; Obi-Wan was slow-burning and thorough, where Anakin tended to ignite bright, fast, and passionate. His former Master could outlast him, and through careful, aching persistence, he could completely break him down to a shaking, begging wreck over the course of an evening. Anakin stored up all of these memories in his secret heart and held them tightly, protectively, as though they were physical possessions that someone could take away.

He craved the kind of release that only came after hours of Obi-Wan’s gentle torture; he longed to surrender himself to someone else’s control and have his mind wiped blank.

It was just the way he was; Obi-Wan had commented on it once, telling him that he had never known any other Jedi who needed so much. No matter what he was given, there was an empty space in him like a black hole that needed to be filled. It seemed now like it took love or fury, and even then there was always the capacity for more.

Despite his ever-present desire, he was surprisingly content. During the day they ran errands and cautiously researched their missing friends, and by night he tinkered with the body of his new lightsaber. The component pieces were coming together, despite their often strange origins, but he was unerringly specific when it came to his weapon; while he could probably have cobbled together a passable hilt the first day, this stone and the circumstances surrounding its retrieval were extremely close to his heart. With the small toolkit from the ship and numerous gutted electronics and found objects, Anakin was trying to create a weapon that could live up to his own impossibly high standards.

Obi-Wan was quiet at the moment, poring over a file that he’d loaded onto a cheap holopad. He was leaning comfortably against the headboard, propped up on all of the pillows from both beds, with his long legs stretched out. Not knowing what their immediate future held, he was determined to be as comfortable as possible until they had to move again.

Unrelated to his reading material, he commented, “I am beginning to feel as though we are being
“I don’t believe that it’s someone who is trying to hurt us,” Obi-Wan mused, looking up at him.

“No?” Anakin’s raised eyebrows gave his feelings on Obi-Wan’s hypothesis.

“No. It’s just… we have people who we are trying to locate, allies… and it’s possible that those same allies are also trying to find us. I find myself wondering at the clone who warned us that the Empire was coming to Ilum…”

Anakin paused, his screwdriver poised over a detail on his lightsaber casing. While lightsabers were traditionally assembled with a lot of spirituality and mystically hovering pieces, these weren’t specifically lightsaber parts and there was a lot of nitty-gritty precision work that was easier to manage with hand tools than the Force. If he could have picked out pre-sized pieces from bins at the Temple, this entire process would have been different.

“That could have come from within the Empire, though… I mean… maybe there are clones in the Empire who aren’t against us, and they heard that we’d been located and wanted to give us the heads up.

“Possible too, though you must remember that our men didn’t turn on us because they wanted to - any clone who is with the Empire has a chip in his skull telling him that he’s with the Empire. If someone within the Empire’s ranks is on our side, it could only be because he snuck back in there later… and it just… I don’t know. Perhaps I’m being overly optimistic, but I just have a feeling that perhaps we have allies we simply haven’t found yet. There are a number of clone commanders from our units who aren’t accounted for in any of the records I’ve accessed. Your Captain Rex is MIA, assumed dead… as are Commander Wolffe and a handful of others.”

“You didn’t tell me Rex was MIA,” Anakin commented, brow furrowed slightly as he set aside his tools and tested how the saber hilt felt in his hand.

“I believe I found out the day that you foolishly managed to get yourself drugged.”

“Sure, blame the victim.”

Obi-Wan snorted.

Pleased with the girth of the grip and the length of the handle, Anakin resumed wiring a separate internal component that would house the kyber crystal.

“You know, maybe it’s Cody. He’s there.”

“Cody tried to kill me,” Obi-Wan reminded him, frowning at the memory. “I believe his chip is completely functional, if he is alive.”

Anakin made a sympathetic sound, though his attention was focused on the pieces that he was fiddling with.

“Yeah… well… if we are being followed, I hope it’s someone on our side… we’ve still got at least a day or two until our ship’s ready to go. It’s so weird being grounded like this; it’s been forever since I couldn’t just get in a ship and take off if I wanted to.”

“It is… I can’t say that I like it, though I suppose there’s nothing to be done for it. The ship will be
ready when the ship is ready.” Obi-Wan nodded, absently watching him work for a moment longer before turning his attention back to his holopad.

His eyes moved restlessly over an advertisement calling for recruits to the new Imperial army. Several academies were being established in the core systems to train new soldiers; the marketing was very clean and very sharp, and it looked as though the recruitment drives would be very successful. Propaganda was an elegant machine, particularly in the hands of a Sith Lord who had literally thought of everything.

Obi-Wan found it very depressing to see the bold, minimalist posters calling sentient into service. The anti-Jedi sentiment had dropped as more comprehensive news of the Order’s thorough extermination began to spread, but the media remained tightly controlled; the rising outcry against the obvious genocide was largely suppressed in favor of pro-Empire broadcasts. He had to look up from the screen, had to focus on something else. His eyes lit on Anakin and his intense concentration. Sometimes he thought Anakin would have been happiest left to himself like this, a man with a quiet life of ingenuity dedicated to machinery.

“This design is different from your past lightsabers…” Obi-Wan commented after a moment.

“Kind of. Aesthetically, yeah… but inside it’s hopefully going to be a lot like my last one. That was just a good design… I spent a lot of time on it, you know?”

“Between you tinkering with that lightsaber and your arm…” Obi-Wan laughed.

“Yeah, yeah… I know. And I’m going to work on these new prosthetics too… already the feet are a lot better, working on the shock absorbers in the ankles next. You know, though, the knees are pretty good already…”

“You walk very naturally on them… I would say you’ve almost regained your old swagger.”

“Swagger?” Anakin chuckled to himself, pinching a tiny screw between his fingers and trying to get it lined up with the hole that he’d pre-drilled. It popped out of his hold, but he irritably caught it with the Force and positioned it with a wave of his hand.

“Yes, swagger. You definitely have a swagger and have for years.”

The younger man laughed outright. “I’ll bet it looks good on me,”

“It makes you look like an absolute brat.”

“So you love it, is what you’re saying. It gets you hot under your tunic.”

Obi-Wan chuckled, shaking his head without bothering to reply. A moment later, heard Anakin set down his tools, and just after that the blond was plucking the tablet out of his hands and climbing into his lap.

Half an hour later, shirtless and flushed, Anakin resumed work on his lightsaber while Obi-Wan settled in to meditate. The blond remained as keyed up as before, just differently; the kissing and light petting had simultaneously stoked the fire and taken the edge off of his mounting sexual frustration. The silence was surprisingly comfortable as Anakin ignored his persistent erection and wired the tiny knob that adjusted the length of his blade, then tested all of the circuits twice over. Jedi training at its finest.

Making out with Obi-Wan was a good way to stall finishing his saber anyway. The hilt was essentially finished, but he was hesitating to install the crystal and turn it on.
He realistically knew that the worst that could happen would be a misfire that wouldn’t burn his metal hands and couldn’t harm the crystal. He might have to redo some of the circuitry if that happened, possibly pick up some replacement pieces. That wasn’t the reason for his hesitance, though; at this juncture in his life, he was restlessly craving something that was perfect. Struggling with his identity as a half-metal semi-Jedi, missing his estranged wife and his stolen children, and awkwardly negotiating his relationship with Obi-Wan had left him needing something that went right on the first try.

It was a lot of pressure for a lightsaber. Anakin was scared to fail, afraid that his crystal wouldn’t like its new home, or that it would change its mind about him. This wasn’t just mechanics.

He glanced over at Obi-Wan, who had transitioned at some point from meditation to lightly dozing, and smiled slightly. He had a softer look when he slept, less guarded and less worried. His beard was slightly mussed as though he hadn’t smoothed it after their little session, which Anakin knew was impossible. Anakin imagined that everyone looked sweeter when they slept, but he couldn’t help but find his former Master adorable at the moment. He knew that elegant Obi-Wan would hate that particular descriptor, which thoroughly thrilled him.

He also felt better about testing his new blade without an audience.

Taking a deep breath, Anakin picked up the crystal where it was resting on the desk and examined it afresh. It was small, but every one of its vertices was crisp and sharp, devoid of chips or imperfections; unlike many lightsaber crystals, it was double-terminated with perfect, cathedral-like points at either end. The only thing that might be considered less than ideal was that it had not chosen a color in Anakin’s company; where his previous stones had been a soft, loving blue, this stone glowed a colorless, dirty-ice platinum gray.

He closed his eyes and kissed the stone for luck, the way a gambler might kiss his dice, saying a quiet prayer to…. something. The Force. Whatever. Whenever he prayed to the Force, he always imagined his mother. If anything in the universe was on his side, it was Shmi Skywalker.

He released the stone, letting it float in his Force-grip as he lifted the lightsaber hilt the same way. Closing his eyes, he felt for the perfect alignment of the pieces; he drew out the inner chamber and guided the stone into its custom-fitted core, then slotted the core into the hilt and capped it off with the flat, slightly broader pommel. He could feel that the sword was in perfect alignment, and that from a technical standpoint the lightsaber was complete.

He reached out and took it in his hand, then opened his eyes to examine it in its entirety.

The hilt was standard length, though slightly thinner than his previous lightsaber. The exterior was smooth and shiny, with matte gray controls and screw heads; he had buffed what he could and sanded other pieces slightly to dull their surfaces. The combination was uniquely modern, and the lines of the grip were utilitarian and customized to the dimensions and slightly strange touch of his hands.

He held the sword out, then ignited the blade.

A thin, rapier-like blade, so concentrated that it almost looked like it was made of something else, glowed to life. Like the stone itself, it was curiously colorless. Even so, it was clearly not white; it had a cool metallic gray resonance. It was unique and hauntingly beautiful, like a ghost. The thing that Anakin noticed first, however, was that it hardly made a sound when he turned it on.

Curiously, he brought the blade around in a careful arc. With movement, the familiar hum cut through the air, jolting Obi-Wan awake. Without thinking, he immediately grabbed for his own
lightsaber where it rested on the beside table. He brandished it, unlit, wide-eyed, before he realized that Anakin’s posture wasn’t threatening.

He sighed tiredly, just staring at his lover’s sword.

“That is a stunning blade, Anakin,” he said, dropping his arm and relaxing back against the pillows again.

“Thanks,” he murmured, making a few more passes with it. “It moves really smooth… no resistance at all…”

“It’s so focused… it looks completely solid,” Obi-Wan said groggily. He yawned, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth for a moment before continuing, “And I’ve never seen one that color. Very unique.”

Anakin smiled fondly at the blade, genuinely pleased that it had come together so perfectly. He thumbed off the switch, then held it out to Obi-Wan proudly. As he did, it registered for him that his lover had grabbed for his own lightsaber defensively; his brow furrowed for a moment at the slight sting to his heart, but he tried to let it go without saying anything. If anything, he held his own lightsaber out a little more emphatically. It wasn’t just his lightsaber Obi-Wan might have been thinking of. There were other beings out there in the galaxy with plasma blades that had been trained on Obi-Wan before.

The Jedi took it and turned it over in his hands, giving it the full focus of his attention. Anakin recognized that it was only half out of genuine interest and that the rest of the intensity came from wanting to acknowledge and congratulate his former Padawan’s work. He knew that when Obi-Wan gave his assessment, it would be thorough and well-balanced.

He liked how his lover handled the lightsaber as though it was something precious, as though it was an extension of Anakin himself. His touch on the hilt was appreciative and almost caressing; he thoughtfully smoothed his fingertips over the smooth outer casing before he sat up and carefully ignited the blade. There was no fear though; he didn’t touch it like it was venomous, like it was something dark that could taint him.

As he stared at the thin, hard-edged column of light, he commented, “The hilt is very nice, Anakin… though I can tell you’ve designed it for your hand rather than mine. The design is very elegant, much more refined than your prior lightsaber even. What really strikes me, though, is the blade itself. It's… I hesitate to say flawless, but… flawless. There isn't a single rumble of static or a discoloration along the entire length of it… and the tip comes to a beautiful point.”

He turned off the blade and politely handed it back to him pommel-first.

“In a different life, maybe a galaxy without a war… if Huyang had ever chosen to retire, you would have been a perfect professor to guide younglings to building their sabers.”

It was probably the wrong thing to say, but it was said with the best intentions. He hadn’t been intending to draw attention to the fact, again, that Anakin had killed younglings… but it probably seemed that way once the words were vibrating on the air. He realized the awkwardness belatedly, wondering how he - the Great Negotiator! - had made a comment like that.

Thankfully, Anakin took it in the manner that he had intended. His companion grinned at him.

“I’d probably be horrible. I’d get so into the mechanical stuff that they’d get bored and probably zap themselves with their crystals or something.”
“Quinlan dared me to lick my crystal before I put it in the saber.”

Anakin looked delighted and scandalized. “Did you? What happened?”

“Nothing. It… doesn’t work that way, fortunately. I did think I might die, but I couldn’t… not take a dare from Quinlan Vos. Dying would have been better than giving him reason to be so smug.”

Anakin had known Vos since he was a young Padawan and he had often envied his relationship with Obi-Wan. He himself had no close friends among Jedi his age, having skipped the crucial bonding years in the crèche in favor of travelling about with his too-young Master; by contrast, Quinlan was just a year or two older than Obi-Wan and their history seemed to include a lot of shared misadventures and inside jokes. Though they were as different as possible and they argued and sniped at each other often, they obviously both liked each other a great deal and tried to keep up steady communication despite distance.

Early on, Anakin had thought that Quinlan was hopelessly cool, with his yellow tattoos and easy grace. His feelings about him became more complicated as he got older and he became more aware of his flirtations with Obi-Wan. Initially he disapproved because it seemed to be against the code that he was being taught; later, when he caught the two of them sharing a kiss by the fireside while he was struggling with his own crush on his Master, he decided that the situation was downright unfair.

As he got older and he learned more about the type of work he did, it made him doubt the Jedi Council’s ethics and impartiality even more; to his mind, using Vos the way they did seemed very political, and their willingness to discard him after he yielded to the dark side now seemed almost like foreshadowing for his own fall.

Now, the thought of Vos gave him an uncomfortable mixture of contradictory emotions; he wanted him to be alive, but he didn’t want Obi-Wan to find him. While he didn’t think he could compete with Vos in terms of his Master’s affection, his greater concern was that Quinlan would know what he had done in intimate detail. They had nothing with them now that could be used to read visions of what he had done at the Temple, but touching Obi-Wan’s lightsaber would be enough for Vos to see Anakin’s humiliating, painful defeat at his Master’s hands, using his unique Force ability to sense that memory through his palms.

If Quinlan found out what he had done - and Obi-Wan might just tell him - he might try to kill him. He might convince Obi-Wan to leave him or finish what he’d started on Mustafar.

Those stressful thoughts flashed through his mind in about an eighth of a second, and they were enough to briefly dull his smile. He made sure his grin was that much brighter after a moment. “He got you in a lot of trouble, huh?”

Obi-Wan noticed the brief flicker in Anakin, but didn’t know to what he should attribute it. He let it slide, shaking his head with a smile.

“All the time. Though to be fair, I occasionally got him in trouble too. He graciously took the blame for the handful of things that I started… it was best for both of our reputations.”

Smiling a little more genuinely, Anakin looked down at his lightsaber again. He turned it over in his hands distractedly, then said, “Yeah, well, you were always the good one, huh? Perfect Padawan and all… perfect knight…”

The way he said it, there was no malice behind it at all. Still, Obi-Wan couldn’t help but recall
some of the less kind things that Anakin had said recently on that theme, practically spitting similar words at him. Giving Anakin the same benefit of the doubt that his companion had given him just a moment before, he laughed.

“Well, I had them all fooled, I’d say.”

Anakin smirked. “You were good. You still are.”

Obi-Wan stretched his arms over his head in a quick stretch then reached for Anakin’s hand and kissed his knuckles fondly. The younger man felt a comfortable glow of warmth in his chest at the brush of his former Master’s beard and the softness of his mouth. He wanted so much more and only half-understood why Obi-Wan was keeping him at arm’s length.

“Would you train with me tomorrow?” Anakin asked. “I want to try out my new lightsaber… I spotted a huge warehouse on the edge of town where we could have space and privacy.”

The question surprised Obi-Wan. Though he wasn’t completely comfortable with the idea of facing off against Anakin even in a practice setting, he had to simply trust that it was safe to do so; really, if his companion had wanted to kill him, he had already passed up numerous opportunities. He could have easily killed him in his sleep or handed him over to bounty hunters as early as their landing on Tatooine.

And Anakin loved him; he had no doubt of that.

“Of course… if you’ve found a place that is safe to do so. We do need to continue rehabilitating you as a swordsman if you’re to stand a chance against the Emperor.”

“That’s not… I mean, obviously if it’s not safe, we won’t… but… I just really want to do it. I want to try this out and I want to practice with you. I always liked practicing with you, you know.” Anakin could feel the same clumsy emotions clogging his voice that had bothered his speech when he was younger and his crush had seemed too much to bear.

Practicing with you, sitting with you, laughing with you, kissing you. He could have gone on, but Obi-Wan was already smiling and swinging his legs off the edge of the bed, the clear signal that the conversation was about to move on. The older Jedi touched his arm lightly.

“Then we’ll plan on it. Come on. I’ve finally realized just how hungry I am. Hungry enough to try out that green stew downstairs.” He smiled and walked to the door.

Anakin longed to clip his lightsaber to his belt and feel the familiar weight against his hip, but it wasn’t time yet. He crouched to wrap it up in the working cloth he’d had on the floor, then tucked it into the back of a drawer. It would wait, and so could he. Smiling, he joined his Master.

“I told you, I had some earlier. It’s good.”

Their conversation continued down the hall, light and easy as they got into the lift.

“You say it’s good. I’ve seen you eat bugs, Anakin.”

XXIII. Competition
The ship wasn’t ready the next day, or the day after that; Imperial activity in various parts of the galaxy were affecting smuggling routes, which was having a profound impact on the supply line for numerous dodgy dealers and chopshops, including the one that was doing the work to re-register their own vessel.

It was the third day after Anakin asked that they finally made their way to the warehouse that he had mentioned. It was normally used to house farming equipment prior to sale, but the same interstellar traffic that was affecting illegal trade was slowing down legal enterprise as well; demand had outstripped supply, leaving the warehouse almost empty.

The open, uncluttered area was very large, easily the size of a sports field or a gladiatorial arena and several stories high. The echoing, cavernous space, only sparsely lit by a combination of dirty floodlights and high, small windows, had an otherworldly, agoraphobic mood to it; Obi-Wan felt as though they had stepped into a dark pocket of another time or place.

Anakin had no such reservations; he thought it was moody and fitting. He was excited to play-fight with his friend and lover. He knew that Obi-Wan would go easy on him because of his still-healing injuries and his unnatural limbs, but he felt confident that he could prove himself; in his fight with the Sand People in the desert, he had felt the Force make him whole. His legs still felt Force-dead, but he knew how they moved now and he intuitively felt the ground beneath him and the air around him. He would impress Obi-Wan and make him fight like he meant it, the way they had trained together for years.

And then they would discuss the fight and meditate, and Anakin could steal kisses and distract himself from how lonely he felt. How he loved the idea of crowding Obi-Wan up against the wall and kissing him until the older man was hard and wanting against him. How good it would feel to be wanted.

That wasn’t what he was supposed to be thinking about, though. Grinning as they walked to the center of the open space, he only said, “Here we are.”

“Indeed,” Obi-Wan murmured, looking around cautiously. Reaching out with the Force, he felt nothing; the space was empty, save for the two of them, and the only security cameras were fixed on the exits. It was a safe enough place to be Jedi, if only for a little while.

He still felt so strange in his rebel clothes, his form-fitting trousers and his stiff-collared, quilted jacket. He wasn’t sure yet if he would move or fight differently without the ease of movement afforded by soft, loose cloth; if nothing else, this was a better opportunity to learn than when they were surrounded by hostile forces.

He rolled his shoulders, then pulled his lightsaber out of the blaster holster strapped to his thigh. He rubbed his thumb in a familiar way against the hilt, then flicked the switch to extend the blade. Watching the blade for a moment, he felt a surge of trepidation. This was different from the open-handed forms they had practiced in the desert or from the thousands of hours that they had trained together before the fall of their Order; it was potentially deadly and the trust wasn’t there quite yet.

Anakin, feeling Obi-Wan’s uncertainty, said, “We don’t have to do this if you don’t trust me.”

It was a manipulative statement, and he knew it as soon he heard it aloud. He pressed his lips, annoyed with himself for saying it but uncertain he could retract it or give his lover an out if he was truly uncomfortable, whatever the reason.

“I mean…” he tried, lacking Obi-Wan’s spoken grace. “We just… if you don’t want to, for any reason-”
“It’s fine, Anakin. We just need to set our rules and boundaries.” He met the younger man’s eyes in a way that was almost challenging, his chin tipped up slightly in his proud way, “I know you won’t hurt me.”

Anakin’s cheeks warmed slightly, knowing that Obi-Wan was calling out his foolish mistake. The older Jedi was still so self-possessed; with everything that had happened, he had always made it clear that he was the master of his own choices. He was fairly certain that he couldn’t make Obi-Wan do anything that he didn’t want to.

It was reassuring to know that Obi-Wan wouldn’t act out of fear or simply the desire to placate him, but somewhere in the back of his mind it was also a challenge. There was a dark little part of him that wanted to make his proud former Master yield, though he wasn’t always aware of it.

Now he just nodded, trying not to overcomplicate something that was messy enough already. “Yeah, it’s just sparring.”

“And you’re in control,” Obi-Wan confirmed, holding his gaze. It wasn’t a question; he was telling Anakin that he was in control of himself.

“Yeah.”

“Then just… let’s begin with the paired forms, one through seven.”

Anakin nodded, then pulled out his own lightsaber and ignited it in one smooth movement. He grinned at Obi-Wan, his face lit from the side by the moody gray blade. “Thanks for practicing with me, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan softened a bit at his genuine enthusiasm, wondering if his anxiety was unfounded. Just because the last time they’d crossed swords had been terribly traumatic didn’t mean that this would be.

“You’re quite welcome. Now, first time through, you’re defense. Slowly first, for form.”

They moved to the imprecise distance of two sword-lengths apart, then bowed to one another formally. Smoothly, almost in a perfect mirror of one another, they stepped out into the guard positions for their respective styles.

Though each lightsaber form had a different series of movements for each of the paired sequences, they were all seamlessly compatible in offense-defense pairs. As Obi-Wan murmured the numbers of each combination, one through seven, they walked perfectly through the fight choreography as though it was a dance. They had practiced together so many times that their movements were perfectly fluid, almost effortlessly synchronized. The blades hummed and crackled in a metered give and take as they circled about one another.

“Good, good,” Obi-Wan said with a smile. “How did the lightsaber feel?”

“Amazing. Like nothing at all.”

“Good. Now I’ll take defense, still for form.” It was his calm teacher’s voice, and like the Padawan he’d been, Anakin responded to it positively, eager to please.

They reset to their starting positions, this time with Anakin making the calls to guide them through the exercise. Neither was more natural than the other on offense or defense as their training had always emphasized the importance of both sides. The grace of their movements and the easy way that they coordinated with one another, knowing each other’s timing and style, was a testament to
just how intimately they knew each other and how long they had trained.

Anakin was proud of how smoothly he moved after everything that had happened in the past two months. He didn't feel as strong or sure as he had been, but he was certain that he could be; training with Obi-Wan, he remembered recovering from the loss of his dominant arm and how insurmountable it had seemed at the time. He had overcome that disability, and he was confident that he would learn advantages to this new body that he couldn't even visualize yet.

“Ready to do it full speed?” Anakin asked brightly.

“If you are. You can keep offense.”

They took their positions again and went through the formalities before rapidly, precisely repeating the previous practice at a battle pace. Performed briskly, the choreography looked like a real fight but maintained the safety of a training exercise. They moved in close and broke away again, circling, striking, and defending; even with Anakin’s heavier step, the similarities in their styles were obvious when they were side by side.

“You look good,” Obi-Wan complimented, his breathing only slightly quicker as they finished the forms.

“Yeah? Thanks!” Anakin said, slightly more winded than his former Master. Exertion still hit him harder as his health fully recovered.


The younger man absorbed the accolade as he always did, needing it just a little bit more than he probably should. Thankfully, for all of Obi-Wan’s grousing and judgments, he never withheld praise or encouragements.

He smiled back, then asked, “How about a bit of freeform? Maybe a one-minute match or two?”

That made Obi-Wan slightly less comfortable, but he nodded. His hesitance now came less from present-tense fear of Anakin and more from a lack of desire to revisit the emotion of their last unchoreographed duel; stepping through familiar paces, even parsecs away from Mustafar, was bound to trigger terrible memories that he wasn’t really in the mood to dredge up.

Except that it didn’t.

As they set up the friendly duel and then moved through the careful attack and defense, they confirmed their usually set of rules. Points were assigned when a strike would have connected, though they both kept a tightly controlled distance. It was as safe as it had ever been, and there was not even a hint of darkness in Anakin’s Force signature. If anything, Obi-Wan’s former Padawan was content and excited.

“Okay, how about some friendly wagers?” Anakin asked with a laugh.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Loser makes the bed till we leave, then... packs the bags?”

“You're terrible at making the bed.”

“I'm not going to lose.”
He did.

The next round, which Obi-Wan lost when he nearly tripped over an uneven part of the hydrocrete floor, came with a penalty of having to deal with the far-too-friendly fruit seller next time they went to the market. Anakin crowed with laughter thinking of Obi-Wan smoothly deflecting the obvious flirtations of the Sullustan dealer.

Obi-Wan was surprised by how much he was enjoying himself and how endearing Anakin’s enthusiasm was. It was fun to have a game to play that felt like something familiar. It was still dangerous, as any armed training could be, but they were careful and followed all of the rules that they had followed for years in practice. It was exhilarating to have fun at all.

The next wager was a rude joke, then an unwanted chore on the ship, then a childish dare, then an embarrassing truth.

They were winded after the first three matches, but kept going because they were momentarily happy.

When it was Anakin’s turn next, he challenged, “Loser has to tell the winner he loves him.”

Obi-Wan lifted one judgmental eyebrow, and Anakin felt like he had to justify himself or change his wager. Saying it aloud felt a bit pathetic, making him self-conscious; was he really so desperate that he felt like he had to win Obi-Wan’s affirmations?

To his surprise, his companion raised one shoulder in a shrug and smiled playfully. “All right.”

His easy acceptance put him somewhat at ease; he could have easily imagined a grumbled, stern Anakin. Nodding to seal the deal, he stepped back and took his guard as Obi-Wan took his. He’d never admit it, because there was always a little bit of playful competition between practitioners of the different forms, but he loved how Obi-Wan often stood with his empty hand stretched forward for balance and his first two fingers extended. It was such a sign of his style, that graceful, exposed pose that was just as much to bait an adversary to come closer.

This was the first wager that Anakin had really cared about winning and he fought hard. When Obi-Wan neatly parried every attack, sidestepping with perfect Form III grace, Anakin began to wonder if Obi-Wan had accepted the bet because he was confident that he wouldn’t lose; he certainly seemed like he was especially dedicated to avoiding those words.

That pierced a little wound that opened wider as they continued to spar. While Obi-Wan would have won a real fight at the this stage in Anakin’s healing, a point-match left them more evenly balanced; when the minute passed without either scoring a point on the other, they continued without a word. As the round progressed and Anakin started to tire, his frustration began to heat to a slow-boiling anger. The past few days of being kept at a distance along with lingering doubt of Obi-Wan’s sincerity hit him all at once; he found his strikes coming faster and more vicious as he drove his companion back with several perfect swings of his saber.

To his annoyance, Obi-Wan always recovered; he still looked light-footed and energetic, even though he was breathing fast and the secret tells that only Anakin could recognize said otherwise. Still, the older Jedi was very good at maintaining appearances, and he moved as easily as if they were dancing. For some reason, it made Anakin want to fight harder, even if he broke the rules and hurt him; the image of his lightsaber cutting effortlessly through Obi-Wan’s jacket sleeve and burning a punitive stripe onto his fair arm came unbidden to his thoughts. The sound of Obi-Wan’s pained yelp in his mind pleased him.
Just as quickly, the thought nauseated him and conjured memories of not only his earlier vision but of their fight on Mustafar. His steps faltered and the deft arc of his sword stuttered as he brought it down; in that brief moment of weakness, Obi-Wan neatly sidestepped him, took the point, and called the match.

Anakin felt a surge of despondency mixed with his fresh guilt - Obi-Wan had fought so well. He had fought so hard not to have to say that he loved him. And now, honor-bound, he had to tell Obi-Wan that he loved him; despite that he would have told him every day for the rest of their lives, the prospect of laying himself bare here seemed humiliating. The words were heavy on his heart and like sand on his tongue.

“I love you,” he told him, trying to sound casual.

“I love you too,” Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin was so startled that his mouth fell open; after the effort that Obi-Wan had taken to win their mock-duel, he hadn’t expected him to say a word.

“But you fought so hard!” he blurted out stupidly, knowing the meaning would come across.

“Otherwise you would have stayed awake all night debating if I’d meant it or if I’d just been under obligation.”

That was undeniably true, and his self-assurance on the assessment was initially irritating. It was sometimes frustrating to be known so well, particularly when one was known by one of the most judgmental men in the galaxy. His confidence also cemented Anakin’s earlier thought that his former Master only did what he wanted to do, but a sudden sidebar to that annoyance struck him hard: if that was true, then Obi-Wan had wanted to say it, and he had wanted to be able to say it because he meant it rather than because he had to.

Maybe he had even been fighting so hard because he liked to hear Anakin say it.

Adoring, consuming, possessive love rose rapidly in him, threatening to drown him. Thinking incorrectly that strength of feeling had caused Obi-Wan to close himself off before, he struggled to master his emotions.

“Oh. Oh ,” he managed with a foolish smile.

“You lost control earlier,” Obi-Wan commented, meeting his eyes evenly. His expression was unnerving to Anakin because it was so very calm.

“Yeah… but you still love me?” he asked, his smile faltering.

Obi-Wan was briefly astonished that that was Anakin’s first thought and the one that he had given voice. The surprise was short-lived because he knew his friend well; all Anakin had really ever wanted was love and safety. As intelligent as Anakin was, there were many things about him that were remarkably simple.

“Yes.”

“I… thought about hurting you.”

“I know. I could feel you wanted to. I could also tell that it scared you to want that, and as a result I remain unharmed,” the older Jedi said, reaching up to smooth his beard absenty. “I told you that you wouldn’t hurt me, Anakin.”
One of the things that Anakin always noticed was how often Obi-Wan said his name in casual conversation, as though he might be uncertain that he was the one being spoken to even when he was the only other sentient in the room. So many sentences began or ended with his name. When he was a teenager looking for any reason to be angry, it annoyed him that his master was constantly saying his name to keep his attention; as he got older, he began to see it as a unique way of speaking that always addressed him specifically. It was like the words were tailored to him and Obi-Wan’s world had narrowed to just the two of them.

He didn’t know how to respond to what Obi-Wan was saying, though. He knew that this was the time to tell him about his vision in the cave, and how pieces of it kept insinuating themselves into his waking thoughts. He should admit that he sometimes thought of dark things and sometimes they sounded appealing, if only for a moment.

He had imagined a whole system of motivations within his closest friend, then he had gotten murderously angry over his paranoid fiction. He hadn’t hurt Obi-Wan, but that was owed at least in part to the fact that the other man was still a superior fighter; he didn’t know what would happen when he grew strong enough again to be a true threat to his lover. His overreaction without basis made him realize how close he still was to the dark side.

All that he could manage aloud was a quiet, “I know.”

Obi-Wan could tell that there was more going on in Anakin’s mind and there were still secrets that his lover was keeping from him. As much as he wanted to sit him down like a Youngling and demand an explanation, he knew that he needed to be patient and try to earn his confidence by treating him as an equal. He had to put his trust in the Force and have faith that Anakin would make the right choices.

He reached up and cupped his hand against his jaw then leaned close to lightly kiss his mouth. When he pulled back, Anakin pursued him for another. They traded kisses back and forth with gently growing intensity until Anakin pulled him into his arms and crushed him close, needing nearness and normalcy.

Anakin wouldn’t have admitted it - it was the one thing he could never admit - but he was scared.

Chapter End Notes

Sort of a quieter chapter this week... with the inauguration and everything else, I just sort of needed something milder and a little bit gentler. Next week we'll hopefully get back to more action and some fun things. Meantime, I hope you're all taking care of yourselves and being safe. :)
XXIV. Padawan

Another full week passed before their ship was ready. Repainted, refitted, and re-chipped, it was hardly recognizable as the same vessel. Of course, the inside was still close and rickety, and that strange spicy smell never did go away, but the dodgy little shop had done a remarkably good job. “Word travels” was what the head mechanic said, but Anakin wasn’t entirely sure that it was purely a grab at a good reputation; they had kept the ship for almost two weeks so while they certainly had the time to go above and beyond, it hadn’t been necessary for them to reupholster the split Captain’s chair or run the disinfection cycle on the capsule bunks.

At some point in the week, Obi-Wan had disappeared for half the day and then come back talking optimistically about a particular Senate friend who was going to put them into contact with a handful of other fugitives from the Empire; apparently, several well-off Senators and politicians were bankrolling the beginnings of a rebellion on Dantooine. If they could safely make their way to the developing base, there was a possibility that they would be able to settle for more than a few days.

Anakin liked the idea of being able to stay in one one place for a little while, long enough to breathe and start to make a plan for what their lives were going to be now. Their two weeks on Tatooine had been too stressful to really think about the future, but the same amount of time on Mataou had started to feel like home. He was fond of their rooms at this nameless hotel; having grown up a slave and then shipped around the galaxy for most of his home life, his standards were low and his requirements were few. Decent food and a warm bed were really all he needed, and having friends or family could make even that bare minimum less important. He and Obi-Wan had frozen together in fur-lined sleeping packs on a handful of cold planets over the years, subsisting on nutrient block, and he had still been content.

The night before they left Mataou, he dreamt vividly of his twins. It was restful in its simplicity: all he did was lie on the edge of Padmé’s bed and watch the two babies where they slept in a large basket on the floor. The walls of the room were a deep, dusky mauve and the furniture was elegant in its clean, curving lines. The light of dawn filtered through gauzy curtains over a pair of doors that opened onto a broad balcony. He felt like if he could extend his view, he would recognize the place, but he was still and quiet, just soaking in the warm presence of the children he missed. Even now, without having seen them in two months, he could feel the difference between them. Luke and Leia.

In the morning, he woke disoriented beside Obi-Wan, wondering if it had been a dream or a vision. Though it refreshed his longing to be with the rest of his family, he also felt strangely peaceful. The Empire seemed far away and the dark side seemed remote and unthreatening. If he could just be a good enough person, he could see them again.

Lying there, his face pressed into the back of Obi-Wan’s shoulder, he also realized that his time with Padmé had come to an end. Somehow, his dream of the twins had given him an insight into her as well; she was content there without him, safe without him. They had loved each other deeply, but it was love with no foundation; they hadn’t wanted the same things, they had never really understood each other. He had always expected to come first, heedless of her responsibilities to far bigger things, and she had never really understood the man who was different every time he came back from the battlefield. There had been a single moment when they had been perfectly matched, but it was like an alignment of stars or planets and they had moved on in different
directions; they had chased that singularity for several years, but never caught it again.

She didn’t hate him.

He sighed softly, closing his eyes again and wondering what he had been shown. Was it a dream, a vision, something else? Where had Padmé been?

The answer came to him as soon as he silently posed the question: she had been right there. He had been seeing the twins through her eyes and feeling her drowsy, atmospheric thoughts. The pressing question, as it had been with so many of the visions and dreams he’d had lately, was Was it real?

There was no way to know, so all he could do was try to hold on to the feeling of peace and comfort that had filled his heart when he’d first opened his eyes. With Obi-Wan still asleep in his arms, he felt warm but lonely. He kissed the back of his lover’s neck knowing that the contact would wake him, then accepted Obi-Wan’s groggy morning affection. He should have felt guilty for rousing him, but he didn’t at all.

Per the terms of their wager, Anakin packed their bags; Obi-Wan helped in comfortable silence, though he didn’t have to. Anakin didn’t bring it up, even to tease. It was nice to work together, even on things that were easy or unimportant. With their packs on their backs, they walked through the quiet, early morning streets. With unaccustomed boldness, Anakin reached over to take his friend’s hand as they walked, and Obi-Wan let him right up until they walked into the mechanic’s shop.

Settling the deal was easy; chop shops like this didn’t ask a lot of questions when off-worlders wanted to change the registrations on their ships. They were paid for their speed, skill, and silence, as opposed to licensed workers on reputable planets like Coruscant who were paid for their professionalism and the fancy permits and inspection slips that they could issue. Given the choice, Anakin would have always dealt with small-town shops before he’d wade through the bureaucracy of an official inspection.

As the shop owner, a tall, rangy human man, reached for the generous handful of credits that Obi-Wan was handing over, he hesitated for a moment before he grabbed Obi-Wan’s wrist and pulled him closer. He spoke to him in a low, gruff whisper.

“Are you Jedi?”

Anakin’s eyes widened and his hand immediately went to the saber he’d concealed in a holster similar to Obi-Wan’s. Without looking at him, Obi-Wan lifted his other hand to subtly tell Anakin to stand down as his eyes searched the mechanic’s face.

After a moment, he said, “Yes.”

The mechanic released his hold, then thumped his open-hand on his skinny chest. “I thought so. Keep your credits - there is no cost to you.”

Obi-Wan blinked slowly, absorbing that. It was the first statement of support or solidarity that he’d heard for the Jedi since before the fall of their order. He’d heard generally pitying statements in cantinas and in town, (“Those poor bastards got wiped right out.”) but no one had openly said that they were on their side. He could hardly believe what he was hearing, much less wrap his mind around the implications. Support. The Empire not buying all of the Emperor’s lies. It could mean that they were so much less alone than he’d first imagined. He wasn’t sure how to deal when not faced with a worst-case scenario.
He managed a confused, “Thank you… what?”

“I am from Jedha,” the mechanic said, as though it explained everything. “My family is tied to yours through a deeper bond.”

Obi-Wan wanted to ask more and find out if he was associated with the Temple at Jedha or the Guardians of the Whills, but he knew that sort of talk wasn’t necessarily safe even in a closed space like this. Instead, he reached out with the Force, trying to feel for some proof of his words. He could feel a faint sensitivity in the man himself, and with a bit of gentle prodding he felt the ambient chime of a kyber crystal concealed somewhere in the room, different from the parcel concealed in his pack.

Somewhat reassured, he nodded. “Have you seen any others?”

The man frowned slightly.

“There was a boy what came through with a Kalleran scoundrel, Janus Kasmir. He didn’t say he so, but I could feel it, same as with you.” He thumped his chest again for emphasis.

“Was he safe?” Obi-Wan asked, immediately ready to abandon any travel anywhere in favor of finding another of their own. He wanted to know if ‘boy’ meant a young man like Anakin or an actual child. “Do you know where they were going?”

“I don’t know… but I’ve got a log of his ship’s vitals; had ‘em reset like you. You could probably track him down based on that,” the mechanic offered.

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin, and the other Jedi nodded; there was little time for hesitation where it came to a Youngling or Padawan in these dark times. Obi-Wan could feel Anakin’s surprise, but also a faint undercurrent of mistrust; he wasn’t as desperate to find Jedi, and he was far more wary of strange men in shops than his idealistic companion.

Nonetheless, Obi-Wan knew this was essential. “If we could have that, we would deeply, deeply appreciate it.”

“Of course…” the mechanic said, walking over to fetch a holopad with his records.

Obi-Wan noticed that Anakin had left their ship under one of his aliases - Arrik Squall. When he took the pad to download the other ship’s data to his now-defunct Jedi holocom’s internal memory, he updated the record to one of his own on impulse.

Their friend from Jedha watched him curiously, then lifted his dark eyes to Obi-Wan’s face. “This is a dangerous time for you and yours.”

“It’s a dangerous time for all, even for those who believe themselves to be safe. Would you be so kind as to erase our ship’s data before we leave?”

“I would,” the man confirmed, taking the pad back and promptly clearing the data. Anakin wondered for a moment if Obi-Wan had affected that small favor through a mind trick; his companion was skilled enough not to need an accompanying hand gesture, but his voice had lacked the gently authoritative tone and curious wording that he often employed.

“For that, we thank you,” Obi-Wan said, holding his hand out to the other man to shake. “We are deeply in your debt.”

“And we are in yours. May the Force be with you,” he replied, giving Obi-Wan’s hand a firm
squeeze before releasing it.

Obi-Wan felt a painful twinge in his chest at the words, the familiar goodwill that had been so freely given. For most of his life, the phrase had been so frequently spoken that it had almost lost its meaning. It had become more like a “goodbye” for travel or danger, rather than an almost-blessing. This time, the full meaning struck him for the first time in years.

He smiled quickly, a flash of teeth. “And with you also, my friend.”

The two Jedi walked into the hangar and paused, surprised, in front of their repainted ship. Where it had been a dull, chipped and fading gray before, it was now a deep, inky violet with an array of stars swirled across the exterior. It was showy and a bit silly when it was motionless in a dusty hangar, but it would make them harder to spot and harder to target in the starlit void of space. It hadn’t been what they’d asked for, but Anakin realized suddenly that he had never specified what they actually wanted; all he’d said was that they needed the ship repainted and re-registered.

Apparently this was what that meant.

They looked at each other, then walked into their ship and settled into the cockpit, each consumed with his own thoughts on this turn of events. Anakin realized that the care that had been given to the ship gave credibility to the idea that the mechanic had been an ally, but he still remained uncertain about the prudence of rushing off after a Jedi boy who might or might not even exist. He sighed, rolling his shoulders before beginning the start-up diagnostics.

“You don’t like this plan,” Obi-Wan observed.

“I don’t think we have enough information,” Anakin said simply, avoiding his eyes. “If this kid exists, yeah, I am all for us finding him… but how do we know we can trust that guy? He could be planning to send the Empire after us as soon as we get off-planet. You have the biggest bounty on your head I’ve ever seen, Obi-Wan.”

“You know why that is, don’t you? Because Palpatine knows that you will always do the right thing as long as I’m with you,” Obi-Wan said, powering up the engines. The ship sounded good, much better than it had since they had been its owners. “This is the right thing to do.”

The younger Jedi groaned.

“If he was telling the truth. We don’t know whose signature that ship belongs to. We could be going right into a trap.”

“It’s a risk I’m willing to take… and it’s one I know you would have taken before without hesitation.”

Anakin couldn’t deny that. During the Clone Wars, he had made numerous foolish decisions and rushed off on heroic errands based on much less; he had risked many more men on far less information. He impatiently dragged his fingers back through his hair, casting his eyes toward the ceiling.

“I just… I didn’t say I wouldn’t do it. I just… I don’t like this.”

Obi-Wan softened at that, reaching over to touch Anakin’s forearm. He sighed. “It isn’t as though I am keen to rush headlong into danger, Anakin… but if there is a chance that there is a Padawan on his own, I can’t - not in good conscience - abandon him. I consider how difficult it has been for us, as capable adults with a wealth of experience making our way through the galaxy… and I can’t imagine what life would be like for a child with no credits and no caretaker.”
The blond puffed out a frustrated breath. “I know. And we’re going, Master, I promise.”

Without saying anything more, he guided the ship out of the hangar. He felt strangely sad to be leaving this city, where he’d felt safe for the first time in a long time. There had been moments of fear, reinforcements of the numerous reasons that he was horrified by himself, but there had also been moments of happiness; he had built his new lightsaber and Obi-Wan had told him he loved him and slept by his side. In this new life, these small, bright lights were rare and precious.

Obi-Wan read his lover’s melancholy, but he didn’t have anything comforting to say at the moment. He let Anakin guide the ship into the darkness of space, visualizing the way the light of distant stars would twinkle over the exterior of their deep violet ship. The lines of the inexpensive vessel weren’t elegant and the interior still smelled slightly stale, but there was something reassuring about carrying the stars painted on the hull.

After a few minutes, he pulled out his holopad and opened up the hacked pathway into the transit authority’s port registrations to see if he could find the smuggler and their Padawan. The trace was surprisingly easy - concerningly easy, as Anakin pointed out - and placed the ship in question on Kasmir’s home planet of Kaller.

The name of the planet vibrated on the edge of Obi-Wan’s memory; someone he knew had died there. As he thought about it, he found himself wondering if Kasmir had picked up the Padawan on his home planet after Order 66 had taken his master; if he could remember who had died on Kaller, he might know who they were looking for. Unfortunately, the autopsies and lists of names and places all bled together in his memory into one soaking red smear.

“His ship docked on Kaller about 6 standard hours ago,” Obi-Wan said, closing the holopad and keying the specific port into the ship’s navigation.

“Kaller’s not too far, really… just… you know… most of the way across the Outer Rim,” Anakin said, making a face.

The other man snorted. “Well, once the ship computer calculates a route, it’ll hardly feel like anything. Besides, you love flying.”

Anakin laughed at how his companion had gracefully deflected his grousing, the way he had when he’d been Obi-Wan’s Padawan. Obi-Wan and his famous gift of gab. Shaking his head, he admitted, “I do.”

Things felt far more normal when he was in the cockpit. The two things that had always come naturally to him were engineering and flying; if he had never left Tatooine, he would have made his life at one of those pursuits. Maybe he would have been happy, though he never would have known the power or destruction of the Force. Maybe that would have been better; without having met Padmé or Obi-Wan, he wouldn’t have ever known what he was missing. Never having met Palpatine, he couldn’t have been used by him.

“You’re rather brooding and dramatic today,” Obi-Wan commented, looking over at him.

Anakin blushed faintly, knowing that he was practically broadcasting his discomfort with their destination. He smoothed his hair self-consciously. “I’m fine. Just thinking.”

“Well, my contemplative friend, the calculations are complete and we can make that jump whenever you can rouse yourself from your misery.”

“Oh, ha ha,” Anakin replied drily, rolling his eyes.
“Anakin, there is no point in focusing on fear or unhappiness. It will only weigh you down... we are Jedi. We are both capable of setting aside our fears and releasing them into the Force, so that we may draw the energy back in as something new.”

As pleased as Anakin was to be included as a Jedi, he still wanted a reassurance more than a lecture. He reached across the place between their seats and took Obi-Wan's hand, then kissed his knuckles without answering him right away. There was no way to say that the Sith part of him still found negative emotions slightly addictive, or that the fear of danger made him fight harder rather than hesitate. The things that scared him weren’t things, they were concepts: loss, loneliness, and lack of control. Some scurvy pirate, or even a battalion of clones, didn’t scare him.

Obi-Wan sighed through his nose and squeezed his hand before pulling his own away.

“You should at least try,” he told him. “And now would be a good time before we have to adjust the calculations.”

“I know, I’m ready.”

Once they jumped to the atmosphere outside of Kaller, it was only fifteen minutes to the ground. Anakin felt unsettled as they came to dock in the bustling port; this planet had been hotly contested during the last days of the Clone Wars and there were bound to be straggling remnants of the Imperial troops who had secured the major cities. The planet itself was officially considered to be under Imperial control, but he wasn't sure how that translated into ground troops.

“Maybe you should stay on the ship,” he suggested breezily to Obi-Wan. “You’re a pretty recognizable criminal, you know.”

“I’d be less recognizable without the beard,” Obi-Wan threatened casually, raising his eyebrows at his companion.

“Ugh, Force, no,” Anakin groaned, though it was followed by a laugh.

About a year and a half before, Obi-Wan had shaved his beard because he had been curious what he would look like. The answer was that he looked just like he had as a Padawan. Anakin had yelped in surprise when his clean-shaven former Master had wrapped his arms about his waist and leaned in to kiss him, hardly recognizing him. He had demanded over and over Put it back! Put it back! while Obi-Wan had laughed until his eyes teared up.

The strangest thing was how clearly it highlighted how young his Master actually was; without his graying whiskers, he had the smooth jawline of a young man and conspicuously few wrinkles. For all that he teased Obi-Wan about being an old man, seeing Obi-Wan in a different way had changed his own views of what it meant to be in one’s late-mid thirties. He wasn’t actually old at all; despite being a Jedi Master and a council member, his life was really just beginning.

Well, it would have been. Maybe it still was.

For emphasis, Anakin added, “No. I like your scratchy beard against my neck.”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “I’d still do it, if not for the fact that that the rest of my face is quite tan.”

Anakin grinned at the thought of Obi-Wan’s half-white face, then shook his head. “Well, never thought I’d say this, but thank the Force for the twin-suns of Tatooine.”

“I’m sure I could find makeup to even out my complexion.”
The younger man snorted.

Obi-Wan set some of the biometric locks and switched to the external cameras to take a look around the docking area. At first blush, there didn’t appear to be any armed soldiers; there was a customs inspector, but he could easily be tipped off and fed false papers. During their flight, Anakin had also admitted that he had paid (or planned to pay, before their tab was erased) for several scan codes that would allow them to switch between identities. The ship would still be distinctively painted, but that wouldn’t matter as much at high speeds in the darkness of space.

He smiled at his lover absently, his thoughts traveling several steps ahead to their task and its potential outcomes. Like Anakin, he had an analytical mind; he liked to plan through several scenarios and come up with different strategies for each. He’d been told that this was also a symptom of anxiety, but he preferred to think of it as simply being prepared.

The way he saw it, there were three ways that this could go and two of them were negative. This could have been a setup, whereby they would be sent into an Imperial trap and it would be entirely his fault for being so gullibly optimistic. This could have been a real lead, but the Kaller might refuse to give up the boy and things could get violent. That would also be his fault, most likely, but he was pretty sure that Anakin would be a key contributor to any violence that might occur.

In the last scenario, which was the one he hoped for, there could be some kind of peaceful negotiation, possibly involving a little bit of Jedi sleight of hand if things got heated.

“I believe I’ve found the ship in question,” Obi-Wan commented. “I suppose we can just wait until we see some activity nearby… it’s a large enough vessel that they are most likely not bothering to find proper lodging… so it’s simply a matter of waiting until the right moment.”

“Or we could just go over and knock a few times, see how that goes,” Anakin said drily, glancing over at him.

“Oh, ha ha.”

Anakin grinned obnoxiously, very much like he would have before, and shrugged. “Seriously, though, Master, what do you want to do? Do you really want to just wait it out? There aren’t any troops around and the dock’s quiet.”

“So you are literally suggesting that we walk up and knock on their door?”

“They probably have a call system.”

Obi-Wan groaned, but he couldn't think of a good reason not to seize the moment. If anything, taking immediate action would prevent Anakin from getting too riled up.

“You know what, why not? Let’s just walk right into the thieves’ den,” he said, giving Anakin a debonair smile. “I’m ready.”

Anakin sighed and hauled himself to his feet. “Yeah, it’s as good a day as any to get tied up and handed over to the Empire.”

The other man laughed, then stood far more gracefully than his companion had. As he slipped past Anakin, he made a point of letting their shoulders and hips brush in a slightly suggestive way. There was no real reason, except as a momentary distraction from the pessimistic conversation.

“I couldn’t agree more.”
Several minutes later, they stood in front of the other ship’s locked walkway, feeling exposed in a way that they hadn’t in any of the other ports they’d traversed; while the Empire was a threat everywhere, based on some of the informational holos and the unnatural quiet on the street, there was an obvious military presence even if there weren’t presently any troopers in sight.

“And you’re sure about this? We’re sitting ducks out here,” Anakin muttered as Obi-Wan pressed the comm button beside the locked entryway.

“You can wait on the ship if you’re afraid?” he replied under his breath.

Incensed at the implication that he was scared, Anakin huffed and moved slightly closer to Obi-Wan. His body language wasn’t that of someone who was afraid, rather someone who was protecting someone weaker by shielding them. Obi-Wan chuckled to himself, grateful for the levity even if it was not at all his lover’s intent.

After a moment, the comm picked up, voice only.

“Who is it?”

“Friends from Coruscant,” Obi-Wan said smoothly. “We’re looking for a boy we think might be traveling with you.”

It was the sort of response that all sorts of criminals had up their sleeves, so the initial response was just an amused puff of air. Then the lens on the tiny camera beside the comm screen swivelled and focused its attention on the two Jedi.

Obi-Wan waited patiently, knowing exactly how vulnerable they were; with the massive bounty on his head, there was no way that the crew onboard the ship wouldn’t know his face. Still, he kept a mild, almost bored expression and waited as though his heart wasn’t pounding in his chest. Beside him, practically on top of him, Anakin reached over to lay a calming hand at the small of his back; he knew, of course.

To his surprise, he heard a younger voice in the background insist, “I know him.”

Anakin perked up a little at that, then subtly reached out with the Force to see if he could feel another Jedi in the immediate vicinity. He felt the distracting heartbeats and the mental noise, the biological machinery of a hundred nearby sentients. It was difficult to wade through the lives around him to feel for someone who could feel the Force as they did.

He did feel something, though. It was suppressed and scared, but he could feel a quickly beating heart that was attached to a human Padawan. His own pulse quickened, and he half-considered just cutting through the door with the lightsaber concealed on his belt - they were so close, and they weren’t just going to walk away.

Obi-Wan looked over at him and raised his eyebrows, as if reminding him to steady his thoughts and remain calm.

After a moment, the door slid open and a tall, sturdy Kaller beckoned them in.

“Come then, out of sight. We don’t need a dozen troopers busting up my ship to follow you in.”

Nodding, the two Jedi followed him onto the ship and through the narrow hallways until they reached a small captain’s office. In the office, a teenage boy waited nervously, perched on the corner of the desk.
Impulsively, he hopped down and crossed the small space between them to latch on to Obi-Wan. The knight leaned down just a bit and wrapped his arms around him, hugging him tightly. He recognized him, though he couldn’t remember him clearly. He was Depa Billaba’s Padawan; he recalled seeing him with her a few months ago, and with that context he was able to remember the report of the human Master’s death.

He smoothed his hand over the boy’s hair, telling him quietly, “I’m so sorry that it took us so long to find you… you have seen the state of the galaxy…”

“Yes,” the boy said, pulling back and looking at him. “I didn’t know if there was anybody left. I thought maybe I was the last one.”

“I’m so glad that we found you. You’ll have to forgive me, but what was your name?”

He paused uncertainly, looking between the Jedi and the Kaller who had escorted them in.

“It’s… ah… it used to be Caleb Dume.”

“Yes, yes… I remember that now. You have given yourself a new name? That seems to be the fashion these days,” Obi-Wan said with a wry smile, glancing over at Anakin. “We have both acquired a number of pseudonyms ourselves.”

Reassured by that response, Caleb smiled a little bit. “I’m Kanan now.”

“That’s an excellent name,” Obi-Wan affirmed. “Though I hope you haven’t given up your given name entirely; hopefully there will soon be a day when we can take back our old selves.”

“So why are you here?” the Kaller interrupted.

Surprised, Obi-Wan glanced over. “We came for Caleb.”

“Oh?”

Kasmir crossed his arms, looking between Anakin, Obi-Wan, and Kanan. He was big, as many Kaller were, with a broad chest and an appealing, even set of features. His skin was a pleasing shade of green with fairly symmetrical markings over his arms, neck, face, and domed, crested head. His slightly salty personality was communicated through the slant of his brow and his crooked smirk.

“You see, I think the boy is safer with me,” he said flatly. “We have stayed ahead of the clones for… what, two and a half months now? Three? We have stayed ahead, I’ve kept him safe.”

“Running alongside a thief is no place for a boy his age. He needs a safe, stable-”

“And where are you going to find that, Jedi? You’re a wanted man. I could turn you in right now and collect enough credits not to have to work another day of my life.”

“That would be unwise,” Obi-Wan said, jerking his chin casually in Anakin’s direction. The younger Jedi had already pulled his lightsaber, though he had not ignited the blade. “It’s extremely unwise even to joke about such things.”

Kasmir laughed, a low, rumbling sound that grew in volume. “You threaten me, on my own ship? That is low, in these friendly negotiations.”

Obi-Wan sighed wearily, not at all in the mood to play games. There were numerous times in his
life when he had been willing to play at politics and witty wordsmithing; often, he even enjoyed it. However, at the moment, on an Imperially controlled planet, in the belly of a criminal’s ship, with his saber-happy companion getting irritated behind him, he was simply not interested. He steepled his fingers for a moment, staring the Kalleran down almost absent-mindedly.

“Perhaps we should leave the decision to Caleb.”

“Kanan,” Kasmir corrected.

“Whatever he chooses to call himself,” Obi-Wan said, glancing over at the shell-shocked Padawan to acknowledge his autonomy. “Obviously, if he chooses to stay with you, we wouldn’t force him. I can’t deny that you have kept him safe and disguised him well; if not for the fact that I can feel the Force in him, I wouldn’t have recognized him as Jedi at all.”

Caleb looked uncertainly between Obi-Wan and Kasmir. In their own ways, both of them had saved his life. It had been Obi-Wan’s holocron message that had kept him from returning to the Temple; he knew the Jedi Master’s voice and his face already and that familiarity made him long for his home and his friends. He was old enough to understand and Jedi enough to have felt what happened, but he was young enough that he still hadn’t grasped the permanence of the loss. Even though he knew better, a part of him insisted that going with Obi-Wan would be like going home.

But Kasmir had saved his life. When none of the Jedi had found him, when he’d been hiding and scavenging from dumpsters, Kasmir had taken him in. Even after he’d wronged him terribly and stolen his ship, he’d given him a second chance after he’d proved himself. The Kasmiri was home now, even if it wasn’t a home he’d ever wanted.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled, looking down.

Obi-Wan masked his disappointment easily, though his heart ached with a new sense of loss.

“Caleb, the choice is yours. If you want to stay with Janus, you are welcome to do so; we won’t stop you. Our only priority in this conversation is that we want you to be safe. If you feel that it is safer here--”

“I don’t know, Master Kenobi,” he said softly, looking down at his hands where they were clasped in his lap. “It’s hard. I don’t know if I can be a Jedi anymore. I’ve done some stuff, killed some people. I know I shouldn’t have but--”

“Those things don’t matter right now,” Anakin said, speaking for the first time since they’d boarded the ship.

Obi-Wan and Janus looked over in surprise, then back to Caleb.

“We both feel the light in you. We don’t know what it will mean to be a Jedi in the future… but you are welcome with us, if you choose. If you feel your path lies elsewhere, we will also respect your wishes. Hopefully your partner in crime will do the same.”

Looking at the tall, sturdy criminal, Obi-Wan was fairly sure that he would.

“Can I… can I think about it for a little while?”

“Of course. Why don’t you sleep on it tonight, and tomorrow morning we will meet and you can give us your decision,” Obi-Wan assured him gently. Anakin could feel that it was taking a great deal of effort for his Master to stay so calm, but to an outsider it would simply seem that the Jedi was extremely calm and remarkably even-keel.
Caleb nodded, looking down.

“Would you be disappointed if I didn’t come with you?”

“Of course. But we would be disappointed to lose your company,” Obi-Wan said, catching his eye and maintaining eye contact. “We would not be disappointed in you. There is an important difference. Even if you remain with Janus, we will part as friends.”

Anakin was struck, again, by how perfectly his former Master was able to interact with young Jedi. He had seen him playing with Younglings and practicing with Padawan, even though the war and his council duties didn’t formally allow him much time at the Temple - certainly nothing that could be scheduled or relied upon by the dedicated creche Masters.

In any case, he seemed to know exactly what to say to put the teenager at ease.

“Okay… early tomorrow. I know you don’t want to stay here long, we’re almost done with our work too,” Caleb said hopefully, smiling a little at Obi-Wan.

“All right,” Obi-Wan agreed. “We will see you both tomorrow, then.”

He stood and reached over to shake hands with Kasmir, who clasped his forearm amicably. There was an unspoken gentleman’s agreement that neither would do anything dishonest, like rat the other out to the local authorities or take off in the night; it was one thing that Obi-Wan liked about dealings with the underworld. A sentient’s word was usually his bond, unless you were dealing with Hondo Ohnaka.

“It is decided then,” Kasmir agreed, releasing Obi-Wan and stepping back from the table. “I would suggest that you two avoid the docks until late this evening, when the patrolmen are drunk or crooked.”

“Thank you for the advice,” Obi-Wan said, nodding to Anakin that it was time to go.

Back on their own ship, Anakin raked his fingers back through his sun-lightened hair in frustration.

“We’re endangering ourselves to be here - risking capture, this place is under kriffing Imperial control now - and they want to sleep on it?”

Obi-Wan shrugged calmly, brushing past him to secure their ship for the night.

“I suggested it, Anakin.”

“Still!”

“The boy is attached,” he said simply, shrugging. “He lost his master and was left to fend for himself… and he has been hunted like an animal for months. He’s relied on Kasmir for everything since. I can't blame him for his indecision… and really, Kasmir may be right; it may be safer for Caleb to remain with him.”

Anakin wasn't sure how Obi-Wan was actually feeling about this turn of events; he knew that his former Master had been heartened by the idea of survivors and innervated at the prospect of being able to save at least one other Jedi. Learning that the Padawan in question was no longer sure about being a Jedi and may have been safer where he was must have been a blow. Still, his Master was logical and stoic. As always.
“Still…”

“I know. I hope he will choose to come with us,” Obi-Wan agreed.

Anakin watched from the doorway to the cockpit, arms crossed over his chest to show his own disapproval, as his former Master went through the usual routine of setting locks and alarms, then running the resting diagnostics.

“What’ll we do with him if he does? Will you take him as a Padawan?”

He had a strange feeling about the prospect of Obi-Wan having a new apprentice. For the first time, he really wondered what his friend had felt when Qui-Gon had taken him from Tatooine. Obi-Wan had been about the same age as Anakin was now, though he had been a Padawan on the cusp of knighthood then. Had he been nervous or sad to lose his place and his bond with his Master? Had he been angry, as the other Younglings had insisted to Anakin as a child?

Sometimes it was strange to think about how different their apprenticeships had been. Obi-Wan had traveled a comparatively peaceful galaxy with his Master for years before becoming a Knight under duress at just around 25; at 24, Anakin had already been a knight for 4 years of constant war and had already tried and failed with his first Padawan. In retrospect, it was ridiculous to think he'd been training someone only 6 years younger than he was; if Obi-Wan had been too young, even with his calm maturity and mild temperament, Anakin had been even less suited.

It was completely normal for Jedi to train more than one Padawan during their lifetimes, but Anakin was fairly sure he never wanted another. Awkwardly, he realized that he didn't want Obi-Wan taking another either. The reasons were complex, but it came down to comparison - anyone would be better than the Jedi who had betrayed his entire Order - and the fact that he still consistently needed his Master’s guidance.

In the moment before Obi-Wan replied, Anakin realized what he hoped his companion's response would be.

“I don't know,” Obi-Wan admitted. “My hope is that we can safely stay with this resistance group for awhile as we regroup… and if so, if it's safe and he's willing, his training should continue.”

Anakin nodded, not certain what that meant.

As if reading Anakin’s mind, Obi-Wan added, “I hesitate due to my responsibilities to you.”

“You make it sound like a burden.”

“You are my favorite burden, Anakin,” he replied with a soft laugh.

He smirked as he turned to walk to the narrow hallway to join him. Anakin didn't move from the doorway, and when his former Master came close, he reached out and hooked his index fingers through his belt loops to pull him close. Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows.

“That was unkind, Master.”

“How so? I said you were my favorite,” he said, his voice more obviously teasing.

“I just-” he made an irritated sound. “You better watch it, or else you're going to get this reputation as Obi-Wan, Master of the Unwanted Padawan.”

“Lost, inherited maybe, but not unwanted. Must we argue about this? Now you're the one being
unkind,” Obi-Wan chastised, slipping his arms around his neck and leaning comfortably against
him.

“You started it.”

“You were looking for an excuse to be upset.”

“You said I was a burden.”

“You said it first.”

“You didn't have to say it back.”

“I was teasing.”

“I didn't like it.”

Up until that statement, it had sounded very much like their usual bickering. However, with
Anakin’s admission, Obi-Wan was forced to change tack and double back.

He looked away. “I apologize, Anakin. I didn't mean it.”

Anakin sighed, trying to let go of the tension he felt. There was an overwhelming feeling of
something just being wrong about being here; a premonition of danger put him on edge and made
him needy and short tempered. He tried to recite the Jedi code, but gave up halfway through
because he still didn't really buy into the sentiment; even the act of mindlessly repeating the words,
divorced from their meaning, did little to settle him.

He instead leaned closer and rested his forehead against Obi-Wan’s temple. He closed his eyes
and took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of his companion’s clean hair and warm skin, and let the
close contact ground him.

“It's okay. Sorry. I'm just on edge.”

“I know, Anakin, I feel it.”

He turned his head and tipped his chin up to kiss Anakin apologetically.

“I’m just tired of worrying so much. I don't want to think anymore tonight,” Anakin mumbled.

There were many ways to alleviate tension, but Obi-Wan didn't think that meditation or
conversation would bring his beloved companion any peace. Nor would it settle his own restless
nerves.

Obi-Wan hesitated for a moment, then kissed him again. This time, there was intent behind the
gesture as he slipped his tongue into Anakin’s mouth and pressed him back against the cool metal
doorway. Anakin’s breath caught at the chill on the thin strip of skin exposed where the back of
his shirt hitched up, but Obi-Wan was warm and solid against him.

The kiss turned more heated as Anakin intuitively realized that his lover would allow it. Relieved,
he slouched to even out their height difference and then tugged Obi-Wan’s hips snug against his
own. He rolled his hips to grind against him, his breathing quickening when he realized that Obi-
Wan was half-hard already.

As Obi-Wan crushed him back against the wall, pressing his thigh between his legs, Anakin
realized that he still didn’t know what to do with his hands. His unforgiving fingers seemed hostile
and unwanted in this context; even a gentle touch would be cold and hard on bare skin. He awkwardly rested his hands on Obi-Wan’s waist, letting the older man decide their course.

Obi-Wan could feel his hesitance, though he didn’t know where it came from. He pulled away from the kiss to meet his eyes for a moment, trying to read his face for clues to his distress. He leaned in and kissed from the collar of his shirt to the pulse point just below his ear.

“Do you want me to touch you?” he asked softly.

The words made a bolt of heat drop straight to Anakin’s groin; Obi-Wan often asked permission or checked to make sure he was still all right. Anakin had never said no and couldn’t think of a single context where he would, but he liked that his lover asked.

He nodded, then voiced aloud an embarrassingly needy Yes! Smiling, Obi-Wan kissed him tenderly, sliding his hand between Anakin’s thighs and stroking ticklishly upward from knee to hip. Anakin rolled his eyes, squirming slightly, until Obi-Wan’s palm cupped his testicles. He lingered there for hardly a second before rubbing his knuckles up and down over the obvious bulge in his trousers.

Obi-Wan watched his face, his eyes tracing the shape of his lover’s mouth, as he expertly unfastened his snug leather trousers and drew out Anakin’s cock. After months without this sort of contact, just the warmth of Obi-Wan’s calloused hand was enough to draw a moan from the taller Jedi.

It made Obi-Wan chuckle. “If that makes you moan…”

He stroked him several times, enjoying how readily Anakin moved with him, how even simple overhand strokes made his hips jerk; he rolled his thumb over the head of his cock on each pull, drawing soft, nasal little moans from his lover. He could have easily gotten him off just like this, but he wanted more.

He kissed Anakin deeply, his free hand resting against his jaw. Keeping his full body in firm contact with Anakin’s, he slid down to crouch before him. Just seeing him there, Anakin groaned, feeling his knees go weak.

Smiling wickedly, Obi-Wan lifted his dark blue eyes to Anakin’s slim face and watched him patiently until Anakin held his eye contact. Without looking away, he traced the tip of his tongue up the underside of Anakin’s cock from base to tip. He laid the head of his companion’s heavy cock against the flat of his tongue, then tilted his chin up minutely and slid him deep into his throat.

Anakin’s entire body seemed to go limp as he let out a throaty moan. Chuckling, Obi-Wan rested a hand on his lover’s hip to steady him as he bobbed his head, keeping his lips taut around him.

Anakin tried to regulate his breathing and keep himself from getting too riled up too quickly. He hadn’t been with many people, but he knew intuitively that Obi-Wan was more than unusually talented with his tongue; his former Master could reduce him to begging just using his mouth. With that in mind, he haphazardly tried to apply Jedi-breathing exercises to make this last longer.

Obi-Wan was steady and relentless, though, breaking him down with even pulls and controlled, targeted movements of his tongue. He knew what Anakin favored, what made his breath catch and his hips piston involuntarily. Feeling the muscles of Anakin’s upper thigh tensing under his fingers, Obi-Wan backed off to let him catch his breath.
Using the moment’s composure, Anakin reached down and curled his fingers into Obi-Wan’s soft, thick hair and pulled him to his feet. He kissed him hungrily, gasping against his mouth as Obi-Wan’s strong hand found his prick again. He thrust into his hand, his kisses turning filthy and needy.

“Want you,” he gasped against his mouth. He knew that Obi-Wan wasn’t going to give him what he wanted most and he wasn’t really even asking; he just wanted Obi-Wan to know.

Obi-Wan made a soft sound of relief as he undid the front of his own trousers. He freed his own arousal and guided it up against Anakin’s, then wrapped his hand around both of their cocks and stroked them together, thrusting his hips against Anakin’s as he pressed open-mouthed kisses to his throat.

“I know... and I promise that when we are safe... on Dantooine...” he paused every few words to continue kissing Anakin’s neck. He pressed a kiss to his jaw, right below his earlobe before pulling back to meet his eyes with a wicked little smile, “I will give you my full attention.”

Anakin moaned at the words, knowing exactly what it meant to be the recipient of Obi-Wan’s studious attention; it was Obi-Wan lavishing attention on him, talking to him and kissing him, touching him all over before he even took his clothes off. It was Obi-Wan stroking his hands over every part of his body, pressing worshipful, tongue-heavy kisses to his ankles and up over his calves and thighs. Everywhere, even places that still scandalized him. It was Obi-Wan edging him for hours before finally making love to him, making him come so hard that his eyes teared up and his emotions felt jumbled. It was Obi-Wan telling him was good, that he was beautiful, that he loved the way he moved and the sounds he made. Maybe this time, it was also Obi-Wan telling him how much he loved him and making silly promises.

He turned his head to kiss Obi-Wan’s mouth, grinding his hips against his, thrusting his cock against Obi-Wan’s. The older man moaned quietly, moving against him and knocking him back against the metal wall with each steady thrust of his hips. Anakin wanted so much more; the jarring snap of Obi-Wan’s hips made him want him inside of him, crushing him close, nearly pinning him against the wall, and taking everything.

“Oh, Anakin...” Obi-Wan breathed, pressing his face into his shoulder as he rubbed up against him, stroking them faster. He knew exactly how to touch Anakin to make him moan, exactly when to thrust his hips to make the tips of their cocks catch and rub against each other. Anakin could feel the heat building in him, could feel his belly tightening as his lover rolled his hips up against his.

The Force-bond between them didn’t heighten the physical sensation, but feeling Anakin’s desperate need and hearing his moans grow in volume and intensity, Obi-Wan knew he couldn’t last much longer. It had been too long for either of them to withstand this kind of intensity.

The sound of Obi-Wan’s voice was enough to push Anakin past the limits of his endurance; Anakin came into his hand with a soft, broken cry, hips pistoning involuntarily and his cock sliding slickly against Obi-Wan’s. He was oversensitized, gasping and practically squirming when Obi-Wan came almost silently, almost holding his breath, several strokes later.

They leaned together, overwarm and out of breath, as they came down from the high. Anakin wrapped his arms around his neck and held him close, not wanting him to pull away, well, pretty much ever.

“Thanks,” Anakin breathed, turning his head to kiss his lover’s soft mouth.
“Of course,” Obi-Wan laughed softly, kissing him back and then bumping his nose against his. “Did it clear your thoughts?”

“Oh… yeah. Force, yeah, it did,” Anakin said with a grin.

Obi-Wan pulled back after a moment and looked down at the sticky front of his shirt, then made a face. He pulled his shirt off over his head, then wiped his hand on the crumpled ball of fabric casually. He could put it through the laundry cycle with everything else.

His cheeks were still warm and his hair was mussed, but he still managed to look somewhat put together; Anakin, by comparison, was a complete wreck, all blotchy pink flush and kiss-swollen lips. Even as mild regret was starting to creep up on Obi-Wan, he couldn’t help but love the effect of the last fifteen minutes on Anakin; he didn’t toss around words like “beautiful” or “stunning” when he was talking about masculine, muscular fellow soldiers, but there was something unusually evocative about Anakin when he was well-fucked.

Though Anakin, who retained a surprisingly human, heterosexual mentality, probably wouldn’t think of what they’d just done that way. He rarely thought of sex without penetration as sex. To him, they had probably just “fooled around a little,” and this was “no big deal.” Obi-Wan, whose definitions were considerably more complex, saw it very differently.

“Good… mm…” Obi-Wan rolled his shoulders, then stretched up. “You still… your voice when you come. It is the most… incredibly erotic sound in the galaxy.”

Anakin blushed in addition to his lingering flush, grinning almost shyly. He was surprised how much a bit of fooling around had relaxed him; the combination of endorphins and feeling accepted had made him momentarily put aside his feelings of gloom and impending danger.

“I can’t wait to get to Dantooine,” he said with a smile as he reached down to re-fasten his trousers. He leaned in close to kiss Obi-Wan, overwhelmed by enthusiastic affection. Unlike before, though, he wasn’t desperate or insecure; he was able to just kiss him, staying in the moment, despite that he was foolishly in love.

Obi-Wan chuckled. “You’re insatiable. We’ll be there soon enough, my beloved Anakin.”

If the Jedi had been teasing him, he might have called him ‘my darling Anakin.’ The endearment was usually sarcastic, given to friends and foes alike, and Anakin had certainly been called that before. Beloved was new, though, and Anakin liked it. He smiled, knowing that teasing or not, Obi-Wan was probably playing him. Of course his former Master would want him to relax and to get his mind off of their situation.

As he came down from his high, he began to feel the worry creeping up on him again. At the moment, walking down to the tiny refresher onboard the ship, they were safe; however, that could change at any moment. He couldn’t help but feel a resurgence of fear, even in the face of his good mood.

Nothing good ever lasted for him, not really.
The next morning, Anakin woke with a start, his heart pounding. Obi-Wan jumped at the sudden movement, groggy and confused, then pulled back to look at his bedmate.

“What…?”

“I just… I…” Anakin didn’t have a ready response because he didn’t know exactly what had startled him awake. His mind was curiously blank, but adrenaline threaded down his thighs uncomfortably and made him feel as though he wanted to run or fight. He felt a little bit like he might throw up. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, pressing his face against Obi-Wan’s neck.

“Bad dream?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to be here. We need to get this kid and go, Obi-Wan.”

Knowing that his lover tended to be deeply intuitive as well as occasionally clairvoyant, Obi-Wan felt an uncomfortable shiver chase down his spine. He crushed Anakin close, holding him tightly and wishing that he could reassure him that there was no need to be anxious. However, without knowing the source of his concern, there was little that he could say that would have any meaning at all.

“We will, I promise. We will speak with Caleb, then leave immediately either way.”

“Okay,” Anakin replied, wrapping both arms around him and hugging him emphatically. “Let’s get up and get it over with.”

Even as he spoke, he was hesitant to let go of his companion. This exact moment was still all right and they were still safe, no matter what else happened later. Or didn’t, as the case may have been. There was nothing to say that there was any basis for his apprehension, though the application of that logic didn’t put him at ease so he just held Obi-Wan a moment longer before pulling away and sliding awkwardly out of the capsule bunk.

Obi-Wan landed lightly beside him.

Trying to lighten the mood a little, Anakin laughed. “How are we going to bunk if the kid comes with us?”

“Mm, well, ideally we’ll be settled on Dantooine by the next time we sleep… and if not… well,” Obi-Wan smiled crookedly. “There are only two bunks, and it would hardly seem right to expect Caleb to share one with someone he didn’t even know.”

Anakin grinned and looked over at Obi-Wan out of the corner of his eye, affecting his ‘obedient Padawan’ tone. “That’s very considerate, Master.”

Obi-Wan shrugged into a clean shirt, then punched his arms through the sleeves of his dusty jacket. Dragging his fingers back through his hair to return it to some semblance of its usual tidy style, he once again looked rakish and completely prepared to face the day. Anakin, still a bit bleary-eyed, still accurately looked like he had just rolled out of bed.
“Well, we are still gentlemen knights, after all,” he said with an answering smile. Already, though, he seemed more like Master Obi-Wan Kenobi than the charming, comfortable lover who had held him all night. Anakin sometimes forgot how easily the other Jedi could slip between his public persona and the self that he only allowed Anakin to see.

“I suppose that’s true,” Anakin agreed, tugging his boots up his metal calves.

“We can have a quick breakfast. Perhaps just a bit of nutrient block would be enough for now, real food later?”

“That suits me fine,” the blond replied with a brisk nod. He would have skipped breakfast entirely in favor of finishing up with the Kasmiri and getting off-world faster, but he knew that Obi-Wan would have none of that. Breakfast being the most important meal of the day and all of that.

In fairness, it did only take a few minutes to eat the flavorless nutritional supplement and reset the locks for their departure. At Anakin's insistence, they pre-set the coordinates for the base on Dantooine so that they could leave without having to run any fresh calculations; Obi-Wan thought it was a bit paranoid, but he was more than willing to indulge Anakin in any way possible if it would help him to get through the next social exchange. He recognized that there were other emotional considerations surrounding the possible acquisition of a Padawan, outside of whatever grim spectre of future horror was pinging off of Anakin's heightened senses.

“Are you ready then, Anakin?”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“There’s my boy,” Obi-Wan sighed, clapping him on the shoulder before pushing him forward to walk ahead of him through the hallway.

“Yeah, yeah,” Anakin groused, feeling his pulse quicken again as they walked out into the misty, early-morning fog.

Sometimes feeling of the Force in the sentients around him was almost overwhelming. Even when he wasn’t trying to tune in to anything in particular, he sometimes caught the edges of people’s thoughts or their simple biometrics, like an erratic pulse or a broken heart or a lovesick sigh. It sometimes made it hard to focus, but other times it was comforting background sound. Sometimes it made him feel isolated to know that all of these other lives continued on without any reference to him, but other times it made him feel connected by the similarities among strangers. Today it was an overwhelming buzz.

The Force had always been a major part of his life and the way that he interacted with the world around him, even before he knew what it was called or how to direct the energy of the universe in any sort of productive way. Walking through the quiet dock, Anakin was struck by something Obi-Wan had mentioned the other day; lying in bed on Mataou, his companion had confessed that things had recently started to turn for the better when he had given in and let the Force guide him again. Anakin wasn’t sure that he could passively put his fate in the hands of the universe - he really didn’t think that was how the Force worked - but he felt oddly desperate to believe.

Setting his shoulders, he resolved to let himself feel the movements of the Force and to obey his instincts; hopefully, doing so wouldn’t drag him under.

It was still early and this part of the port was quiet; a few sentients from nearby ships were loitering by their retractable metal walkways or milling about, engrossed in quiet, commerce-driven conversation. There was no white plastoid-alloy armor in sight, nor were any of the usual
customs officers walking the reasonably empty roadway.

Obi-Wan glanced over and gave him a quick, bracing smile that Anakin had long ago come to equate to a brief, reassuring embrace. Anakin would have preferred a hug, or to comfortably sling an arm around his lover’s shoulders, but he tried to satisfy himself with that look for now. He promised himself that when they got back to the ship, he would kiss Obi-Wan until the older Jedi got that slightly flustered, impatient bossiness that he got when he really wanted something but was pretending that he didn’t. Though really, Anakin didn’t even want anything like that when he actually thought it through. All he really wanted was to sit safely with him in the cockpit of their rickety little ship somewhere really, really far from here. Preferably without a new Padawan aboard.

Though that wasn’t fair either; he knew Obi-Wan would be depressed if they left without Caleb-turned-Kanan. He didn’t want that, he just childishly didn’t want to have to share his master’s attention. He didn’t want Obi-Wan putting on a more constant mask of “good behavior” to set a proper Jedi example.

What he wanted wasn’t especially important, though. But it was much easier to let his mind hone in on petty minutiae than it was to deal with the gut-clenching anxiety that he felt. Did Obi-Wan feel this way all the time, and that was why he was the way he was? Super careful and constantly focused on details that he were within his power to correct? He tugged at the cuff of his glove to make sure that it hadn’t slipped down; glancing over at Obi-Wan.

Ahead, Kanan half-ran down to greet them at the foot of the Kasmiri’s walkway while Janus waited by the door, giving them a wary but polite space to talk. The Padawan seemed awkward and oddly energized, but Anakin couldn’t tell if it was because he was upset to leave Janus or nervous about refusing Obi-Wan. His agitation exacerbated Anakin’s discomfort. He glanced over at Obi-Wan, who was already reaching over to clasp Kanan’s hand in greeting.

Anakin was only half-listening to the brief platitudes about sleep and food and travel; he was only waiting for the answer, and then the promised exit. All three of them were only holding on for that answer, but even in intense wartime, propriety and their Jedi good manners seemed to demand normalizing conversation.

Finally, Kanan looked down and said, “I decided… I’m… um… I’m not going. I think it’s better to hide on the Kasmiri. It’s, uh… it’s home. And I think that we’ve been doing a good job staying ahead so far, and I don’t want to endanger you two more, you know? I’ve got some specific clones… they’re… I mean they’re actually tracking me. Like specifically… and it just seems like… I dunno, we know how to avoid them, and we blend in well…”

He was rambling on, waiting for Obi-Wan to interrupt him to tell him that it was all right or to shout at him that it was unacceptable. Anakin could feel, though, that his Master was reeling from the rejection. To him, it felt like loss. Failure. Outwardly the other Jedi had the same patient expression, and when he did speak, he was as gracious as ever.

“We respect your choice… though of course we do wish that you were coming with us. But… again, you know what’s best for you, and you have done very well so far. You’re a very bright, talented boy, Kanan,” Obi-Wan said mildly, giving him a slight smile that Anakin knew Obi-Wan didn’t feel. He also noted that he was calling him by his new name, rather than his given name; he was being gently clear that he was accepting Caleb’s new identity and what it meant for the tie that they wouldn’t be sharing.

Perhaps some of the emotion and some of the nuances were lost on Caleb, but he was aware that he had disappointed the Jedi. He understood what it meant for Obi-Wan to call him Kanan.
“I’m sorry,” he said, ignoring Obi-Wan’s compliment and focusing instead on trying to make sure that Obi-Wan still liked him. He didn’t know him, but he craved his friendship and his approval; his young mind wasn’t especially well-shielded, and Anakin could feel that the boy was terribly lonely and homesick, and he was still hesitant to give up this tie to his old life.

“There’s no need to apologize - you need to do what you feel is right. As I said before, we part company as friends. Should you change your mind, I can give you a few people who would help you contact me… but I need your word that you will not share them with anyone, even Janus…”

Anakin wondered who those contacts were, and if Obi-Wan would have told him if he’d asked. Somehow, he was fairly certain that at least one of those contacts was a shared contact with Padmé, and it was was a conduit through which the two could pass messages if they wished. He was vaguely jealous thinking of the two of them carrying on without him, but he was also suddenly very distracted; he felt a high, singing note in the back of his mind, and the hair on the back of his neck was prickling uncomfortably. He felt as though there was a rope tied around his skull at the temples and it was slowly tightening.

Suddenly, impulsively, he drew his sword from its holster, ignited it, and brought the blade up in a swift, precise arc. As he did, a sniper’s bolt glanced off the glowing gray blade, deflecting it harmlessly upward.

Otherwise, it would have gone right through Caleb’s left eye.

The Padawan cried out in alarm and jumped back, eyes wide. Obi-Wan spun to face the direction where the shot had originated, drawing his lightsaber in a fluid movement that immediately identified him as a Jedi alongside Anakin.

A moment later, several more shots rained down, targeting both him and Caleb. He deflected some and Anakin put himself in the way of others.

“Get back on the ship,” Obi-Wan shouted. “Janus, take him!”

A flurry of bolts came their way unexpectedly from the left, cutting them off from their escape. Other merchants and skyfarers ducked out of sight, disappearing into their ships or running for cover. Anakin’s head whipped to the side and his eyes widened when he saw a score of clone troopers advancing on them. Despite the adrenaline that was suddenly and almost painfully coursing through his system, the younger knight felt horrified by the prospect of killing their attackers.

As he defended Obi-Wan and Caleb from the rapid fire, now deflecting the bolts back at the shooters in an effort to drive them back, Anakin quickly felt for the Force signatures of the men attacking them. He shouldn’t have wanted to know, but he had to find out if any of the clones fighting them were men that he knew; he would have recognized many of the 501st, maybe even some of the 212th.

To his relief, there was only one familiar heart among the lot. Though he wanted to probe deeper, just holding their ground was taking his full attention. There was also the issue of the sniper, whose shots he was barely managing to deflect by letting the Force guide his blade. Anakin tried to remain focused and faithful, knowing that if he began to doubt he would fail.

Reaching out toward the window where the sharpshooter was positioned, Anakin jerked him forward through the glass and sent him tumbling to the street below using the Force. With that threat neutralized, he focused his energy on advancing forward to start reducing the ranks of their attackers.
Obi-Wan was not moving with him, though. His entire attention was bent to the task of shielding and protecting Caleb, who had pressed himself up against his back and was taking quick, occasionally accurate shots with a small blaster. Janus, crouching just within the doorway of the ship and returning fire when he could get off a shot, was unable to move down the steel decking to get to the Padawan despite shouted encouragements.

A clone toward the back went down, then another. So far, through deflection and targeted shots, they seemed to have taken down a handful of soldiers. Still, there were a lot of bolts zipping by, targeting only Obi-Wan and Caleb; it was only Obi-Wan’s speed and skill that was keeping the two of them from being struck down. To Anakin’s frustration, he realized that his companion was going to continue to hold that tenuous position if it meant protecting the teenager behind him.

It was bound to happen eventually though, one of the shots had to make it past both Jedi’s sabers. A blaster bolt impacted Obi-Wan’s shoulder, torquing his body hard to the side. He immediately lost color as the pain and almost-shock washed through upper body, but he sucked a breath audibly between his teeth and transferred his lightsaber to the other hand; after Anakin had lost his dominant hand in the battle with Dooku, they had spent a lot of time working together to learn to use their weaker hands, sparring, running drills. He was an adequate fighter now with both, though there was no way that he could survive an extended skirmish with these odds.

Anakin felt the shot and his lover’s stunned resolve. Though he was tempted to turn back to protect him, he instead surged forward and took down the three nearest clones with a vicious swipe of his blade. He felt the life leave them, the energy instantaneously dissipating into the Force like a soap bubble popping. It was immediately chased by a pang of sorrow, but there was nothing to do but keep fighting. It seemed like time had slowed down.

He felt another shot hit Obi-Wan; the jolt through their bond was nauseating, though again he didn’t turn to look. He wanted to look; he wanted to run back to his former Master and shield him with his own body. He knew that it wasn’t the way; he would lose his focus if he faltered in his resolve to move forward. Instead he kept fighting, unwillingly cutting down the clones who continued to fight, knowing that it was the only way to the end of this battle; he was aided by the fact that their adversaries were specifically forbidden to kill him, and their entire lethal directive was sharpened with laser-like focus on Obi-Wan and Caleb.

He did his best to imagine that they were just droids, that he didn’t know what their faces looked like behind their sleek, unadorned helmets. They called them their lids or their buckets, and knowing their slang seemed painful too. The fact that all of their distinguishing marks and customizations had been wiped clean was another shot to the gut; they may as well have been droids, except that he knew that they weren’t… and that a few months ago, they had been even less like droids. They had been so human, and now they didn’t know him at all.

There was one who did. And even as Anakin savagely impaled a nearby trooper, he couldn’t help but glance over. Just as he did, he saw a clone lift one of his short blasters and fire just below another trooper’s left shoulderblade. It was a kill shot, quick and painless. Efficient, like the man himself. Seeing his swift, sharp movements and his effortlessly precise shots, Anakin knew exactly who he was. He would have known him anywhere in the galaxy, wearing anything. And seeing him quickly dispatching other clones without detection, he knew that the clone in question was not chipped and remained as fiercely loyal to him as ever.

With only a handful of clones remaining, Anakin turned finally to look at Obi-Wan, who was still fighting despite his entire body being hunched forward and his face drained of color as he choked on gasping breaths. His lover’s dark, dusky-colored clothing still betrayed his injuries; scarlet wicked slowly from an incapacitating wound in his right shoulder, another just below his
collarbone, and a third on the side of his ribs. He was in rough shape, hindered further by the fact that he was holding his right side nearly immobile he fought; all of his movements came from his left arm and the shift of his hips and knees. Anakin knew that it wasn't to spare himself the pain of movement; if they didn't kill immediately, blaster wounds were not always immediately fatal; though they didn't cauterize like a lightsaber, the bolts burned through flesh and muscle and partially seared the wound closed. Obi-Wan was in a world of pain, but it would take him considerably longer to bleed out if he could avoid tearing the weak seal.

“Kanan! Get him onto the ship - our ship. GO!” Anakin shouted.

Caleb was young, but he still had a Jedi’s strength. As Anakin took out one of the final three troopers, the Padawan hooked his arm around Obi-Wan’s waist and bodily dragged him out of the line of fire toward their dark violet ship.

Anakin reached the last clone, then was surprised when his armored ally took down his target. Rex holstered his blasters and threw his former General a fast, modified salute before gesturing quickly for him to follow Caleb and Obi-Wan. All of the troopers communicated heavily through hand signals; Anakin had learned many, liking the sharp, elegant gestures, and he could take the other man’s meaning: there would be more troopers now that this group had flatlined, but he would slow them down. He knew that even though he couldn’t hear it, Rex was speaking inside his helmet and communicating inaccurate information back to their local operations.

He nodded quickly to Rex and gave him an answering salute, then took off after Caleb and Obi-Wan. He felt a stitch in his heart to leave behind another ally, but it was white noise to the panic over his Master’s injuries.

In the hallway of the ship, Obi-Wan was weakly arguing with Caleb that he had to fly, but he was managing little between gasps; just listening to him and looking at the bluish tinge on his skin, Anakin knew that one of the shots had collapsed his lung. He was reassured by the fact that he wasn’t bleeding heavily, which could only mean that the heat-scarring of the bolts was still intact. However, the focused micropressure of hyperspace travel would likely blow that right open and turn the situation immediately critical.

The blond wanted an outlet for the crippling terror that he felt; he wanted to shout at Caleb and tell him that this was his fault, and that it wouldn’t have happened if he could have just given them an answer the night before. He wanted to snap at him to stop crying because Jedi didn’t cry. He wasn’t cruel though, and he knew that this wasn’t the fault of anyone here; it was the Empire’s fault, it was Palpatine’s fault. It was not the fault of a scared fourteen year old who was crying because his life was terrible and his new ally had been hurt protecting him. And now he was being dragged away from the new home he'd made for himself.

“Get him to the medbay. That way, on the left. Life support, go,” Anakin said gruffly, not letting himself think too much and not giving his barely conscious Master an opening to argue. “We’re leaving. We’ll get you back to the Kasmiri later.”

Without questioning him, almost relieved to have a Jedi master telling him what he should be doing, Caleb pulled, half-dragged, Obi-Wan down the short hallway. Anakin chewed his lip, wanting to cry himself; he wanted to scream and break something. He wanted to crush things with the Force, or kill something, or hug something. He wanted Obi-Wan to tell him that this was going to be fine. He wanted Rex to come with them so he knew that the blond clone was all right. He wanted home and safety. He would have even taken their shitty camp on Tatooine with Obi-Wan sulking around and not loving him.

He forced down thoughts of the clones he’d killed, knowing that he couldn't escape the guilt for
long, then threw himself down in the captain’s seat and engaged the engines. He knew that once they reached the end of the Kaller atmosphere, he would need to kick the ship into hyperdrive and gun it to Dantooine. They needed to get Obi-Wan proper medical care if they were going to save his life; the medbay could sustain him for a bit longer, but he would need a skilled medic’s care to survive his injuries for long. On the other side of the coin, the jump to hyperspace could also rupture the delicate scarring that was only tenuously preventing Obi-Wan from simply bleeding out.

He guided the ship off the ground, knowing that the decision would need to be made momentarily.

He punched the comm button and asked, “You have him hooked up? Got an oxygen mask on him, everything? Set the machine?”

“I-I’m trying, Master Skywalker… almost… I got the mask on… and the machines’re calibrating… I h-h-had to…” The boy took a quick, sobbing breath. “I had to reset-reset it from Wookie. It was set wrong for human.”

“Is he helping you? Is he conscious?” Anakin asked, navigating the ship upward rapidly toward the cloud cover.

“I’m here, Anakin,” Obi-Wan gasped weakly.

The sound of his voice almost brought on tears again, but Anakin held on firmly to his emotions. A task, he had to give himself a task. It was the only way to drive himself forward whether he was embracing the light side or the dark. He simply spiralled into his own depressive rage otherwise.

“Master… I don’t know what to do here. We need to get you to a medic quick, but hyperdrive’s probably gonna bust open your wounds…”

“We need… to… get away… from Kaller,” Obi-Wan replied slowly over the comm, his words punctuated by suffocating gasps. “So… do it. Go.”

Anakin wanted to explain that there wasn’t as much of a rush because Rex was likely going to misdirect their adversaries, but he also knew it wouldn’t change Obi-Wan’s answer; his Master wanted him and Kanan to get as far from Kaller as possible. He wanted them on Dantooine, even if it was disastrous for his health.

“Just… hold on. Okay? You’ll be okay, we’re gonna get you to Dantooine, get you a medic… okay?” He wanted Obi-Wan to confirm every time he paused, just to hear that he was still awake and able to speak, but Obi-Wan was quiet. “We’ll be safe soon, okay? I need you to stay awake if you can. You need to be okay. I need you to be okay. Can you answer me? Just say something… anything…”

“Go, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said shortly, sounding more like his surly self than Anakin had expected.

They both knew that hyperspace was going to be a problem, but there was nothing to do about it except hope. Anakin disliked relying on hope; it never worked out in his favor.

“Kanan, sit down. Tell me if he passes out or starts bleeding badly.” There was a little sound of confirmation that came through the comm, the voice of a child for whom the horrors of war had only been a precursor to the worse things that had come after it. Anakin pressed his mouth; there was nothing to do for that now. He only had words for reassuring Obi-Wan that he’d be alright. Anakin wasn’t very good at taking care of people emotionally; at the moment, he could barely take care of himself.
He held his breath for a moment, his hands resting uncertainly on the controls. What good was making it to safety if he was alone? Maybe there was somewhere safe nearby, somewhere they could go that wouldn't require the stress of hyperdrive. He realized that he was stalling, though, and that there was no perfect solution. Hesitation wasn't his style; for better or for worse, they had to make the jump to Dantooine.

“Okay, here we go,” he said finally. He wanted to tell his Master that he loved him, but not in front of Caleb; it wasn't that he was embarrassed - he didn't care who knew - but he knew that Obi-Wan would want discretion even now. Especially now, really. He was certain that Obi-Wan was holding on to all of his training to manage the pain and panic.

He turned off his comm and said the words aloud almost like a prayer, then engaged the hyperdrive, leaving Kaller far behind them.

He was acutely aware of the additional strain on his own body as they sped through the galaxy. He’d always felt it, though he had tried to tell himself that it was bracing, exhilarating even, to be able to feel pressure in every capillary of his body. He never quite convinced himself, but he'd married the sensation to his love of flying to make it tolerable. Now, it just made him more aware of the damage it was doubtlessly wrecking on Obi-Wan.

“Kanan, how is he doing? Still conscious? Bleeding more?”

“H-he doesn't want me to tell you… but he's bleeding a lot,” Kanan said uncertainly, tearfully. In response to the Padawan’s admission, Anakin heard an annoyed, pained sound from his Master in the background followed by a bout of rough, choked coughing.

“Of course he doesn't,” Anakin muttered to himself, not angry and not surprised. He knew Obi-Wan well enough to know that he was trying to keep him focused on flying. He took a deep breath and replied a little louder. “Help him sit up, try to keep him conscious.”

“Yes, Master Skywalker…”

Anakin checked their readouts and clocked their ETA at about twelve minutes.

“Make sure the life support system is working, check the oxygen,” Anakin instructed. “We’ve just got to make it a bit longer.”

It was frustrating not to know the extent of the damage or how much Obi-Wan was bleeding; Kanan had certainly gotten a down and dirty crash course on life in their horrible galaxy over the last two months, but he didn't have Anakin’s experience in battlefield assessment and triage. Anakin agitatedly drummed his fingers on the controls, impatient to reach the exit point of the hyperspace lane.

His mind was full of unpleasant thoughts, half-remembered conversations and unwanted images, all tumbling end over end in his mind. It was nothing like when he’d been worried for Padmé; that had been a heavy, nebulous fear. It had been particularly hard to get his mind around it or find ways to settle his nerves because there were so many aspects of his visions that were unclear. Why, in this day and age, would Padmé have died in childbirth? And yet, his visions had said that she would, and after his mother’s death he hadn’t doubted them. He’d hardly questioned them. So then there came the mistrust of every medic, of every possible situation, every possible danger. This was different. This was a sharp, acute terror. There was no ambiguity; if they didn’t arrive quickly enough or if the base was not equipped adequately, Obi-Wan was going to bleed out.

He remembered having a vague, drowsy argument one night with a couple of other Padawan when
he was a teenager. It was mostly semantic, but it was about whether or not it could be said that someone died of a stab wound. One of the boys, a golden-skinned Zabrak, insisted that all deaths related to blood loss were really caused by cardiac arrest. That the blood pressure dropped so low that the heart could no longer beat… and so it wasn’t the knife that killed someone, but their own heart. No one had really bought into it, but for some reason the morbid conversation was replaying itself in his thoughts.

And what if Obi-Wan did die? Would he want him to keep the Padawan and try to train him? Caleb had said he was going to stay with Janus Kasmir, but he was pretty sure that he could persuade him otherwise. He wouldn’t be alone if he had a Padawan, and it would be easier to fight the call of the darkness if he wasn’t alone. It was probably selfish, but the galaxy was safer if he was aligned with the light.

The galaxy would have been safer if he was the one bleeding out in the medbay.

And what about the twins, if Obi-Wan died? He knew that his former master had a way of contacting Padmé; without him, it would take years to find them, assuming he ever could.

He tried to focus on the map, then he tried to recite the Jedi code. There was sure as kriffing hells no serenity right now, though.

His thoughts came with a sharp focus on conversations with Palpatine about stopping death. Of course, the Chancellor, later Emperor, hadn’t given him those secrets; why would he? He had given him some vague outline of the process of transferring life from one body to another, stealing and redirecting, but he hadn’t given him any clear instruction on how it would be done. Even knowing wouldn’t have helped him now; there were only three people on the ship, and as desperate as he was, he wouldn’t have sacrificed a teenager to save his former Master. Or maybe he would have, in a terrified, irredeemable moment that he would regret for the rest of his life. He would have given up half of his own life to have the other half to spend with Obi-Wan, but he didn’t think dark Sith magics worked on self-sacrifice. Either way, the point was still moot; he didn’t know how to save a life. Of all the things he’d learned, of all his strengths and skills, saving had never been his gift, even as he’d thought about it from the moment he’d watched the Master he should have had burning on his pyre on Naboo, even as he’d reached for Obi-Wan’s hand for comfort he hadn’t known at the time the young Jedi wasn’t trained to give.

Anakin tilted his head back against the rest, closing his eyes for a moment. The insides of his eyelids felt hot; his eyes were burning with unshed tears.

When they finally dropped out of hyperspace, he pressed the comm again. “You know how to fly?”

As it turned out, Kanan did. He knew how to fly well enough that he had stolen the Kasmiri to return to Coruscant, before Obi-Wan’s holocron had warned him off. With the coordinates preprogrammed, he was more than able to manage the rest of the flight; he would even call ahead once they got within the short range to ask them to prepare an emergency medical staff to meet them in the hangar.

Well, they hoped they had a medical team. And a hangar. They really knew almost nothing about this base or the people stationed there, aside from the fact that they were against the Empire. For now, that had to be enough.

Anakin and Kanan passed in the hallway in a rapid switch as the teenager took the controls and Anakin went to sit with his lover.
He had mentally prepared himself, but he still wasn’t quite ready for the sight of Obi-Wan propped up against the bed, eyes closed and weakly compressing his shoulder. At this point, he was too tired and too weak to be applying enough pressure to do much of anything, but it gave the Jedi a sense of purpose rather than just sitting and waiting to bleed to death. He hazily met Anakin’s eyes, drawing gasping, uneven breaths through a clear oxygen mask.

“Hey,” Anakin said quietly, sitting on the edge of the bed and looking him over. He tried to keep his voice lighter, not wanting to sound scared or tearful despite that Obi-Wan would already know exactly how he felt. He could feel that Obi-Wan was resigned and tired, but not ready to give up. Strangely, the other man wasn’t scared.

“Hello,” Obi-Wan murmured, then coughed. He pulled in a thready, wheezing breath and let it out as slowly as he could.

“You in a lot of pain?”

Obi-Wan nodded, managing a wry look. Anakin had never seen him so washed out and sick-looking, nor had he seen him so readily admit that he felt pain. The other Jedi was normally stoic to the point of frustration.

“Three shots?”

Again, the older man nodded.

“Shoulder’s bad,” he coughed. “Chest is bad... ribs aren’t serious. It’s…” He coughed again, then pulled up the mask to spit out a mouthful of blood, “a graze.”

Anakin reached for Obi-Wan’s free hand and held it, watching his face and trying to ignore the stickiness of the blood on his metal fingers.

“We’re almost there. You’ve just gotta make it a little longer.” He wasn’t sure if he was reassuring Obi-Wan or begging him.

Obi-Wan nodded and closed his eyes tiredly.

“Eyes open, old man,” Anakin scolded with a quick, forced smile.

Irritated, Obi-Wan opened his eyes again and held Anakin’s gaze in an unfocused way. His thoughts were unfocused as well, mostly jumbled worries and regrets. At that moment, the bulk of his energy was wrapped up in pain and survival; everything hurt and it was almost all he could think about. Looking at Anakin and feeling his crippling fear, his heartache, that hurt too. He couldn’t help but feel responsible for his pain; if he hadn’t bonded with him so deeply, Anakin wouldn’t be so afraid to let him go. He wasn’t sorry for loving him, but he didn’t know how to comfort him, aside from fighting to stay awake longer. He loved Anakin too much to give up a moment of looking at him. Of course, he couldn’t really feel his hand around his anymore, which was worrying. He didn’t say so and his expression didn’t betray him, but he was feeling colder and colder and his hearing was getting fuzzier and fuzzier.

He wanted to kiss Anakin, or just touch skin rather than metal. It wasn’t important - and seemed less important by the moment - but he wanted to be closer than they were now. He didn’t know how to ask, or if speaking was even an option now.

He tilted his head to the side, feeling the weight of his sorrow lifting. He focused on Anakin, the way his mouth moved when he spoke, the way his eyes shone when he was trying not to cry. He wasn’t sure what he was saying now - processing words was too much work - but he knew he was
upset. He himself wasn’t, at the moment. For once, he wasn’t anxious at all. The pain had dulled, and he was dimly aware of what that meant though it didn’t really bother him. At the moment, he felt a strange sense of peace and a comforting focusing of the Force; he knew how to stay with him always. He’d learned already.

The thing that held him there, though, was Anakin. He could feel him blazing like a star, like nights when he sat too close to the campfire. His Anakin wasn’t letting him go. The bond between them was so strong at that moment, and he couldn’t stand the thought of parting from him, even with the promise of becoming one with the Force. He couldn’t let go of his hand even as he was choking on his own blood.

“I…” Love you, his mind finished when his body was too weak.

He closed his eyes.
XXVI. Drip

Anakin held Obi-Wan’s hand, feeling his life slipping away even as the higher functions of the support systems whirred to life. He imagined a gradual drip that was joining the ocean of the Force, a cracked cup that was slowly emptying. In his mind, he kept borrowing from the liquid, ever-changing body of energy to drip a few seconds of life at a time into his lover. He stole from the universe, he borrowed from himself, seconds at a time. He bargained with the Force for longer, he mentally made promises, he silently made threats. He begged, he fought, all without moving from where he sat beside his still, quiet companion.

It may have been nothing but a mental exercise, but it felt less helpless than staring down the breathing apparatus or listening to the slowing, uneven beep of the heart monitor. He felt the very slight change in pressure that meant that they had entered the atmosphere, but he maintained his focus on the visualization that he had chosen. Seconds at a time, drops of water. Treading water, just holding out a bit longer. Borrowing time. He continued to push and pull at the reality of the Force and the seams of life and death, unwilling to yield.

He didn’t let anything go easily.

A few minutes later, the ship came to an uneven landing.

A few exhausting minutes after that, a medical response team swarmed the medbay. In the depths of his meditation, Anakin hardly noticed as they rapidly worked to stabilize the unconscious Jedi before moving him. He felt his own burden lifting with the assistance of the techs; as they transfused Obi-Wan with two units of blood to take some of the strain off of his heart, Anakin surfaced from his trance with a gasp as though he was coming up from the bottom of the ocean.

Kanan stared at Anakin from the doorway, taking in the Jedi’s wasted, colorless face and his nightmare-dark eyes. He felt as though he was looking at something not quite human and much, much older than the 20-something year old skin that it was wearing.

Anakin tried to rise to follow when they strapped Obi-Wan to a gurney to bring him into the infirmary on base, but he collapsed back to sit on the edge of the bed. He closed his eyes for a long moment, dizzy and spent, then tried again, determined to follow.

He woke hours later in the infirmary with Kanan drowsing beside his oversized hospital bed.

“You passed out,” the boy said by way of explanation. “They couldn’t wake you up, so they brought you here.”

“Where’s Obi-Wan?”

“He got out of surgery a little while ago… they said they’re gonna put him in a bacta tank for awhile, maybe a few days,” the Padawan said quietly, looking down at his hands. He had big hands and feet for a kid his age, like a puppy; Master Bilaba had laughed and said that it meant that he was going to grow up to be big and tall.
“Yeah? So he’s stable?”

“Kind of?” Kanan shrugged, avoiding Anakin’s eyes. “Should be after the bacta soak. Not right now, though. Right now he’s… not great.”

Anakin closed his eyes again and tilted his head back into the surprisingly soft pillow. ‘Not great’ wasn’t terribly descriptive, but a bacta submersion sounded promising; the near-magical liquid had brought numerous Jedi and clones back from the brink of death. He wanted to see Obi-Wan, but he wasn’t sure that he would be allowed just yet, or if he even had the strength to rise. He wasn’t even sure why, or what had happened between when Obi-Wan had lost consciousness and when he had passed out himself. He had vague images and the memory of intense determination, but nothing fit together correctly or made a lot of sense. When he tried to think more deeply on it, his hands began to shake.

So he opened his eyes and stared at the clean metal ceiling and the inset lighting that gave everything a soft, green-toned cast that reminded him of the way that light reflected off of leaves.

He couldn’t think about Obi-Wan right now, or what had happened on Kaller. If he let himself think about his lover’s near-fatal injuries or the clones that he had killed, he would lose the tight control that he was presently maintaining over his emotions. He hadn’t cried yet - not in the pilot’s seat, not when Obi-Wan was fading in the medbay - and he wasn’t ready yet for the complete breakdown that he could feel looming on the horizon. He needed to focus on something else. Someone else. He needed to be a good Jedi knight and take care of the Padawan that he had basically stolen from the Kasmiri.

“How are you holding up?” he asked belatedly. “You hurt at all?”

“I’m not hurt,” Kanan said with a shrug. It was truth, but the tone was unconvincing. Anakin knew that tone. There were many types of hurts, and Jedi didn’t always know how to word them.

“You upset?”

Kanan looked a bit surprised by the Knight’s straightforward question; he wasn’t used to discussions of strong emotions, especially in a tone of voice that seemed to imply that an affirmative answer wouldn’t be met with an order to go and meditate on the nature of the Force. The way Anakin asked, it seemed as though he could admit to being upset - and really, given how he had been crying like a Youngling on the ship, what was the point in lying - without being lectured or losing favor. He cocked his head to the side and looked at Anakin uncertainly. Even if he’d lied, his red, puffy eyes would have told the truth.

“Yeah. Today has been terrible.”

“We can get you back to the Kasmiri,” Anakin assured him apologetically, as if he thought that might help put him at least somewhat at ease.

“I dunno,” the boy shrugged. “I don’t know if I should. I kind of think maybe I’m meant to stay with you - like the Force wanted me to. And Master Kenobi said I had to take care of you if anything happened to him.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. He was pretty…um…adamant that you shouldn’t be by yourself.”

“Well… he’s gonna be okay,” the blond replied tiredly, not even giving any thought to the idea that Obi-Wan might not recover. They were past that, he’d decided emphatically. He needed them to
be past that, otherwise he would probably break down. “So you shouldn’t worry about that. If you want to stay, you can… but it’s still your choice.”

“I just…” Kanan - took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Anakin knew what he was doing; the teen was trying to focus and to control his emotions. He was obviously trying to turn his emotions into something else, trying to give up his sadness and his fear to the Force.

Anakin reached over and rubbed his upper arm, and Kanans’s semi-calm facade crumbled instantly. He covered his face, jamming the heels of his palms up against his eyes.

“It’s all my-my fault,” he whispered agitatedly. “They were after me! They w-were after me, and now Master Obi-Wan’s hurt really bad, and you hate me because-”

“Whoa, easy, I don’t hate you. Relax…. It’s not your fault. It’s not your fault.”

“I… I wasn’t even going to go with you though! And you defended me anyway… he could have left me and he didn’t. You two coulda just run,” he said miserably, rubbing at his eyes, then his nose, with the cuff of his jacket.

“We don’t really do that.”

Kanan's - Caleb, really, especially then - Caleb’s breath caught all once as though the words hit him very personally, then he bit down on his lower lip. It took a moment for him to regain control enough to speak. When he did, his voice was a little bit higher and tighter, and he couldn’t make eye contact with Anakin. Nonetheless it was there; this boy was a Jedi and here was his control. It never truly went away.

“I did. My master told me to and I did… and she's dead and I’m not. I ran and she...and now Master Obi-Wan almost died and I didn’t… I didn’t even get-get hurt.”

Anakin sighed softly. He couldn’t imagine being so alone and so young, shouldering the survivor’s guilt that burdened his young companion. He reached over and took his hand, thankful for the leather glove between them that made him seem more human. I am human, he reminded himself. He had always been good with people, even kids. Between that reminder and trying to think of what Obi-Wan would have said in this situation, he was determined to get through this conversation.

“They made those choices because they felt like you were worth it.”

“What if I’m not thought? I’m not. I’m not at all!”

Then he was crying again in earnest, gripping Anakin’s hand in one of his and self-consciously covering his eyes with the other. He was so conditioned to suppress his emotions that he felt guilty for crying; he knew he was supposed to be strong and focused, and he was supposed to let go of his fear and guilt. He hurt so much, though, and he was so scared. He had been scared for a long time, even in the relative safety of Janus’ ship, and it was all hitting him again now.

Watching him rather helplessly, Anakin felt like he was in over his head with this traumatized teenager. He tugged him up onto the edge of the bed by their linked hands and wrapped his arms around him, then hugged him tightly the way that his Master would have hugged him as a Padawan. He held him close and Caleb slumped against him, then melted into his hold. Anakin wondered if this was what normal people did, in normal relationships where emotions weren’t ignored and attachment wasn’t flat-out forbidden.

“You’re okay,” Anakin assured him quietly, realizing that the human contact was reassuring for
him as well. He leaned more into Caleb, allowing himself to draw on that warmth and be grateful for the boy’s presence. Caleb had been waiting for him to wake up and watching over him. Neither of them were alone. “You’re safe here, you’re safe with us. Obi-Wan’s gonna be fine… we’re all gonna be fine…”

“I know…” he said, sniffling pitifully and scrubbing at his eyes with his free hand. “And… I swear I d-don't usually cry this much…”

Anakin laughed quietly. “Yeah, I’m sure. But it's been… a really kriffing horrible day.”

“Obi-Wan’ll be okay,” Caleb assured him suddenly, without any authority at all.

“Yeah.”

They were both quiet for a moment, just sitting and thinking over their own private sorrows and fears. Anakin rested his chin on the top of the Padawan’s head, thinking about his twins and what the world would be like by the time that they were Caleb’s age. He hoped he’d be able to hug them like this, though for happier reasons.

“Why did you pass out?” Caleb asked softly.

“I dunno. Stress?”

Caleb knew he should pull back and put on his stoic Jedi face, but he didn’t feel ready. He wasn’t sure he’d ever be ready again, or if he could ever really believe in the Order’s ideals the way that he had before. Right now, his mind full of questions that he was afraid to ask. Where Obi-Wan seemed naturally welcoming and unintimidating, Anakin had an aura of unpredictability even as he was hugging him and offering him the most human comfort that he could remember receiving.

“Are you okay?” he asked, trying to be as cool as Anakin had been a few minutes before, even though his own voice was still frustratingly waterlogged.

Anakin shrugged gently, then dragged his hand back through his hair a bit fretfully. He knew that he shouldn’t unburden himself to a teenager, but he also didn’t think it was fair to act as though Caleb was the only one who was dealing with the “weakness” of emotions; since Mustafar, he had found himself rejecting the Jedi’s detachment from emotion. It was impossible to avoid feeling; that wasn’t within human control. What was within his control was how he reacted to his emotions and how he resolved them. As Obi-Wan had said on the way to Dhirrod, the issue wasn’t that he was angry, the issue was that he needed to control how he spent that energy.

Talking was healthy, and maybe even Obi-Wan would approve of him trying to build a rapport with the young Jedi this way.

“Not really…” he admitted almost reluctantly. “I’m… really worried about Obi-Wan.”

Caleb nodded consideringly. He wasn’t stupid; he could feel that the two of them were deeply bonded to one another. He wasn’t sure if it was normal for adult Jedi; he knew that Masters shared training bonds with their Padawans, but he didn’t know exactly what happened to that bond at the end of the apprenticeship. He didn’t know if everyone was the same, or if the order of things had been upset by everything that had happen. In any case, though, he knew that the two Jedi were much closer than any Jedi he’d known before.

“He’s really important to you,” he said carefully, glancing up at Anakin.

“Yeah… especially now.”
The Padawan had so many questions, but he didn’t know what what he was allowed to ask or what might make Anakin angry. He tried to read the Knight, but he was still locked up and shielded tightly. All he knew was what he could glean from pure common sense and visual observation: Anakin was upset.

“Do you… want to talk about it? It’s okay to talk now, isn’t it? Things are kind of different.”

Anakin sighed softly, wondering if he would lose control if he started talking. It would have been better if he could have talked to Obi-Wan about this; then Obi-Wan would have been holding him and he wouldn’t have been worried about scaring an already fragile teenager. Weirdly, in this conversation, Anakin was the adult. Obi-Wan was much better equipped to handle this, though he was also just now realizing how much Obi-Wan had needed to figure out on his own and how constantly his Master had been forced to take on situations and emotions that he had no training for. There had doubtlessly been times when Obi-Wan had needed comfort, but he had been in the position that Anakin found himself in now.

“We don’t know each other yet, but you can tell me,” Caleb offered again hopefully.

Anakin smiled, remembering being on the opposite side of similar conversations with his frustratingly closed-mouthed Master. Strangely, he found himself wanting to tell Caleb - it would be such a relief to admit aloud to another living, breathing sentient that he was deeply in love with the impossible Obi-Wan Kenobi.

But that was a terrible idea. No amount of rough day excuses made that sound smart.

“Some things have been different since everything happened… and I am very… attached to Obi-Wan. It hurts to think of him hurt… I can’t even imagine losing him.”

Caleb nodded with a surprising degree of comprehension for someone who’d never been in love.

“He was real protective of you on the ship, so I think he feels the same way.”

“He does,” Anakin laughed softly. “Though he almost never says so.”

“Because of his vows?”

“Yeah.”

“Do… do those vows still matter now? Like are we still Jedi? There’s no Order now, just… people like us,” Caleb said uncertainly.

The Knight chewed on that for a moment.

“I don’t actually know.”

“So… is it okay now? Your attachment? Or is it a problem?”

*Man, this kid is sharp*, Anakin thought, surprised. Really, though, he'd been pretty shrewd at that age - it wasn’t like Caleb was a Youngling - and really, most kids figured out a lot more than their adult caretakers gave them credit for.

“I have no idea… at this moment, it doesn’t feel too important,” he said with a little shrug as Caleb pulled away. The boy was obviously more stable; settled by the conversation and the contact, he was content to sit close without touching.
Caleb nodded, understanding that the conversation was veering into an area where Anakin was less comfortable. He returned to a topic that had been safer before. “Obi-Wan’ll be okay.”

“I know,” the Knight murmured, giving him a quick smile. “We’re all safe here. We just… we just need to settle in.”

He didn’t want to think about Obi-Wan or their bond, or what other Jedi would think of them… what Caleb would think if he knew about the darkness in Anakin, the things he had done at the Temple, the way that he had nearly killed both of his most beloved within the span of minutes. He felt a little flare of shame, but he kept that down deep so that the Padawan couldn’t feel it.

“Have you looked around the base at all? What’s it like here?” Anakin asked.

“Not really… just a little. I saw our rooms, the mess… I met a few people… but mostly I’ve been here with you and Obi-Wan. I… think it’s pretty big. I don’t know,” Caleb said consideringly. “It seems big.”

“Yeah? I’d like to take a look around… see what it’s like.”

“Can you walk now without passing out?”

“I dunno… only one way to find out,” Anakin replied with a crooked grin.

With some effort, he sat up and pulled back the thin hospital blanket. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and tried to gauge how his body felt about the transition to verticality. Not very good, he decided. He was lightheaded and his limbs felt like they were full of sand. He hated sand.

“You just turned white,” Caleb informed him helpfully.

Anakin laughed shakily. “Yeah, thanks…”

With some effort and a bit of straight-backed resolve, he slid off the bed and to his feet. A wave of nausea swept through him and his knees buckled, but he resolutely stayed on his feet.

“Master Skywalker, maybe you should just rest for tonight…”

“Nah, I’m fine,” he said, waving a hand dismissively.

His vision washed yellow, then black as he passed out again. Caleb threw his hands out in surprise to catch and cradle him with the Force.

“I told you,” he groaned, clumsily maneuvering Anakin back into the bed.

XXVII. Unwanted Reunions

His wakeful awareness for his conversation with Caleb could only have been a fluke; it was two days before Anakin had the energy to get out of bed. He spent almost three days drifting between sleep, half-conscious nightmares, and wakeful, lethargic boredom. Several times, he imagined people coming or going from his room that he logically knew weren’t there - he thought he caught a glimpse at one point of Ahsoka’s striped mandrels, another time he was certain that Qui-Gon was watching patiently him from the foot of his bed. Early the first morning, he clearly heard the
Emperor’s voice calmly explaining why his fall to the dark side was irreversible, and that no good deeds could wash away the darkness that he had embraced, however briefly. For a moment, he had felt as though Obi-Wan had taken his hand, though he knew that his friend was still isolated in a bacta tank. Throughout, Caleb came and went with news and anecdotes, though Anakin was sure that he was dozing through at least some of it.

The confusing blur of dreams and had mostly eased off within the first day and a half, leaving him strictly awake or asleep. Sleep was restless and filled with nightmares of killing clones to find that they were men he knew, of having clones remove their helmets and reveal faces of Jedi he’d known. One dream featured Padme prominently, but she always kept her back turned to him. Another was a disjointed reiteration of the vision in the caves, and this time his horror woke him with a shout when he realized that his master was already dead in his arms. He knew it wasn’t real, just his mind reshuffling traumatic images and deep fears into almost-nonsense narratives that were still somehow frightening.

There was a brief moment when one of the terrifying dreams felt more real - a glimpse of himself walking away from Obi-Wan while the other man begged him not to go, before he rounded back on him with his bold blue saber in his hand.

Finally, as though waking after a fever broke, he felt his strength return and his mind clear again.

By that point, Obi-Wan was mostly stable though he remained unconscious and submerged in bacta; all Anakin wanted was to see him, but at least initially the staff were hesitant to take him. A gentle but firm application of the mind trick gained him access and a guide down to the room where the Rebellion’s three tanks were located.

Anakin was impressed by the tanks and the nurse’s description of the stores of bacta that they had managed to smuggle to Dantooine. However, knowing that the Empire had taken control of Thyferra’s production facilities, his enthusiasm was dampened by the knowledge that the viscous healing fluid was going to become very rare in the near future to anyone who wasn’t associated with the Empire.

Even with the full understanding that submersion in the glass tank was sustaining and strengthening the other Jedi, Anakin didn’t like seeing him there. Watching Obi-Wan float, unconscious, nearly naked, he looked more like a lab specimen than a living man. It was the first time in a long time that Anakin had seen Obi-Wan so close to naked; he was struck by how much weight he'd lost and how much the last few months had impacted his body. His soft auburn hair floated around his still face, catching on the breathing mask that provided both atmosphere and a mixture of gases that kept him soundly asleep.

Anakin could feel that his health was still fragile and his pulse was slow; his Force signature was weak and slightly augmented. He just felt different to him now, distant, though he told himself that he would recover completely.

“How is he? Stable?”

“Mostly,” she replied carefully, employing the utmost care in her bedside manner. She intuitively knew that the blond Jedi would need gentle handling. “He went critical briefly this morning, but everything seems to be in order now.”

“What happened?”

“His body is still recovering from the traumatic injury, Master Skywalker. He suffered three blaster wounds, two of which were very serious.”
“The shoulder and the chest?”

“The shoulder and the chest? The shoulder is going to require intensive rehabilitation to regain his full range of movement, but it wasn’t life threatening. The other two shots damaged his right lung badly enough that it required a lobectomy; his lungs are functioning at only around 50% at present and his heart is stressed by the synthetic transfusion.”

“That… sounds serious,” Anakin said with a frown, looking at the wounds on his lover’s body. With the bacta, they had closed to dark red scars that would eventually lighten as they healed completely. The scars from the life-saving surgery were healing more cleanly and had already faded to thin white lines.

Obi-Wan had said that the one on his ribs was just a graze. Had he been lying or hadn’t he been able to tell? Either way, no wonder the idiot had been choking on his own blood.

“He’s stable at present, and within a few more days he should be able to move to a bed.”

Anakin sighed, knowing that there was no point in complaining; even further questions were probably pointless. All he could really do at this point was wait. After Mustafar, he’d been in bacta for a few days himself and he hadn’t had any internal injuries or trauma to his organs, just the intense shock of multiple amputations. He had to be patient. Even if he wanted nothing more than to touch the other Jedi, he was safer and more likely to recover if he stayed behind glass.

“That’s… good,” he said with some effort. “Thank you for taking such good care of him.”

“He will be all right, Master Skywalker,” she said, nodding. How strange it was to be called ‘master’ again. That implied that he had reached a rank that he never actually had; otherwise, only Younglings and Padawan would have ever used that word for him. In her case, it was just likely that she knew he was a Jedi; all Jedi were "Master" to civilians.

“Thanks, I know… it’s good to just see him,” he said a bit uncomfortably.

“He’s looking much better. It’s hard to tell under these lights,” she replied with a friendly, knowledgeable smile. Anakin tried not to find it condescending.

She leaned over to bring up a few screens to check on Obi-Wan’s progress, then clicked her tongue thoughtfully. She jumped when another voice came from their right.

“It is true. Everyone looks like shit in a bacta tank.”

Anakin twisted sharply to look into the tanned face of Quinlan Vos. Vos looked different to him - most noticeably, he had cut off his thick, highly recognizable dreadlocks; his dark, curly hair was now styled in short braids that fitted tightly along his skull and fell to just below his earlobes; the left side of his head was shaved almost to the skin. The thick yellow tattoo that ran cheekbone to cheekbone across his nose was also curiously absent. The combination of these things with a much more civilian style of dress rendered him almost unrecognizable as the roguish Jedi that Anakin had been hoping to avoid.

“Master Vos!” he exclaimed in surprise. “You found us.”

“It wasn’t easy after Ilum…” Quinlan admitted with a little laugh, “but your Master has been leaving clues for me since that first message on Tatooine.”

Anakin wanted to know how and when Obi-Wan had been communicating with the other Jedi, but
he didn’t know how to ask. He also didn’t think that he had the mental fortitude to deal with Quinlan Vos on his own right now; most of the time, he preferred to let Obi-Wan take the brunt of Vos’ personality.

“Yeah?” he said uncertainly, still a little shellshocked by his sturdy presence.

Quinlan laughed, correctly reading his discomfort.

“He looks better today, doesn’t he?” he said, gesturing to the Jedi in the oversized glass vial.

“It’s, ah, the first I’ve seen him since we got here,” Anakin admitted, happy to have the focus of the conversation on something concrete. He wished that they weren’t talking about his nearly-nude lover as though he was a new piece of Temple decor.

“Ah… that’s right. You’ve been passed out, yeah?” he asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Anakin said, looking at Obi-Wan again to avoid Quinlan’s eyes.

“What happened to you? I mean, I get that Obi-Wan was shot, but you seem all right physically.”

“I… ah… don’t actually know. I was trying to heal him or something on the way here or at least keep him alive,” he said, finding himself admitting this practically against his will. There was something in him that was still conditioned to report to more senior Jedi masters, but more than that he was ready to let someone else be the adult in the conversation. “It kind of wore me out.”

“I didn’t know that was a skill you had.”

“I don’t know if it is.”

“Well, by all accounts he should be dead,” Quinlan said, looking consideringly between Obi-Wan and Anakin. Knowing what he did and combining it with what Anakin had just said, he shivered and rubbed his arms. “So maybe it’s a… new skill for you.”

The way he said it made Anakin’s pulse quicken.

“We have a lot to talk about,” the older Jedi said, reaching into a satchel that was slung across his body. He rummaged for a moment, not looking at Anakin as he spoke. “I have been debating the best time, whether it would be better to wait until Obi-Wan was awake so you would be less distracted… or if it would be easier to discuss without him.”

Without saying anything else, he pulled a lightsaber from his deep in his bag and held it out to Anakin.

It was Anakin’s own blade, the one that they had sold on Tatooine. The sight of the smooth black and silver hilt filled Anakin with a sense of terror that surpassed even what he had felt on the ship with Obi-Wan dying beside him. Seeing it in Quinlan’s hand, he knew that the Jedi had already used his unusual skills to read its memories through his touch; with his gift of psychometry, Quinlan knew everything that Anakin had done at the Temple, everything that had happened on Mustafar. He may even have known things that Anakin didn’t know, what Obi-Wan had said with the sword in his possession while Anakin was unconscious, things he had done when he was alone and the sword was nearby. His shame burned brightly, bringing color to his cheeks and frustrated tears to his eyes.

Even more than the prospect of facing his crimes again, though, was the horrifying possibility that his vision in the cave could come to pass. He had been able to dismiss what he had seen because
so many of the details didn’t fit - the lost saber, Obi-Wan’s later admission of love, the fury and betrayal that he no longer felt toward his former Master. But here he was, staring at that blue-bladed saber in Quinlan Vos’ hand, remembering other details. Obi-Wan’s painful breathing, the unfamiliar scars on his body.

“I don’t want that,” he breathed, taking a step back. “Get rid of it.”

The other Jedi smirked, his dark eyes intense. “This isn’t just going away, Skywalker.”

Anakin turned away sharply, focusing again on Obi-Wan. He reminded himself firmly of how much he loved the other Jedi, of everything he would have done to protect him. He told himself firmly that he was in control of his future, and that the events of his vision wouldn’t come to pass as long as he remained in control.

“Please, just not now. I’ll do anything you want, just… not now.”

He absently reached out and rested his fingertips against the glass, feeling for his lover’s quiet, resting Force signature. He was reassured by the presence he sensed in him, even if he couldn’t feel the rush of his thoughts or emotions. He wanted to touch his skin, just curl up against him and hold him safe from the rest of the universe, but it wasn’t an option.

I can’t do this, Master. I need you so much right now.

Obi-Wan’s auburn eyelashes fluttered and his vitals picked up, then jumped sharply in a panicked rush as he groggily began to come around. The nurse, who Anakin had forgotten was there beside them, quickly brought up the necessary screens, checking his quickening pulse and the electronic output of his brainwaves.

“No, no, stay asleep, Master Kenobi…” she murmured, raising the levels of the Jedi’s drug inhalations. Within a few breaths, he was out completely again; he was still, almost dead-looking, where he floated in the cylindrical glass tank.

Anakin stared, his own heart beating quickly. He licked his lips, trying to find the right question to ask.

“It’s better for him to be completely unconscious,” the nurse explained, reaching over to rub the back of his shoulder soothingly. She was tall, almost Anakin’s height, and she had a welcoming, credible aura about her when she spoke. “Many patients are claustrophobic in the tanks, especially just waking up; it can be very stressful if they regain consciousness.”

“Ah… yeah. Okay.”

“He will be all right,” she reaffirmed.

Quinlan, who seemed just as unsettled by that turn of events, slipped the saber back into his bag. He looked introspectively at his unconscious friend and sometimes lover, then focused himself inward for a moment to control his emotions. He turned them over in his thoughts, rapidly dissecting them and reducing them to their base components before putting them back out into the Force.

“Later then. We’ll talk later.”

Chapter End Notes
Well, it was either going to be late or early this week, and I did leave off in sort of a mean place last week... So here you go! And hey look, it's Quinlan Vos! Now I have to watch myself, though... because I am a big Quinlan/Obi-Wan shipper...
Chapter 16

XXVIII. First Seen

Obi-Wan stayed in the bacta submersion for another two days before he was moved to one of the normal rooms. He was stable, though the room was still being pumped with a considerably higher oxygen concentration to help his healing lungs. The beds in the Rebel infirmary were all large, made to accommodate any species of sentient that might eventually fill their ranks. Unconscious and looking rather wasted (though his fair complexion positively glowed from the bacta), Obi-Wan seemed unusually small where he was hooked up to various monitors and drips.

All three of the Jedi were there when their friend first woke. Groggily, Obi-Wan surfaced from the mind-dulling anesthesia and his eyes moved slowly from Anakin to Caleb to Quinlan. He stared at the tall, tan Kiffar for a long moment without quite recognizing him, then he smiled in surprised pleasure and murmured hoarsely, “Quin!”

Quinlan responded immediately by reaching over to clasp Obi-Wan’s hand. Feeling uncomfortably emotional, he leaned down to kiss Obi-Wan’s cheek, then his mouth. His time with Ventress and his fall to the dark side was recent enough that he still felt his emotions more keenly than most Jedi; seeing his closest friend awake and alive almost overwhelmed him with relief and affection. It hit him harder than he expected and he had to blink back involuntary tears.

Holding one of Quinlan’s hands in his, Obi-Wan lifted the other to touch his face where his tattoo should have been.

Understanding his confusion, Quinlan laughed a little, his throat annoyingly tight.

“It’s just makeup. I’ve still got it.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Obi-Wan rasped in his pseudo-flirty way, letting his fingers linger against his friend’s cheek.

Anakin bristled, hurt that Obi-Wan had reached out to Vos first and was now kissing him right in front of him. He had fought so hard to save him, he loved him. Through their bond and Obi-Wan’s unshielded, drug-fogged thoughts, he could feel his master’s love for his age-mate. He remembered him saying in the desert that he loved Vos - though differently, he reminded himself. He pressed his hurt and jealousy down, trying not to be petty; Obi-Wan had been worried for his friend for months, and this reunion was emotional for both of them. He understood that and he had to respect it, even if it stung a little. He glanced over at Caleb, who had an expression of careful confusion; he had never seen two Jedi greet each other that way. The Padawan could feel the warmth of the connection between them as well; between that and the Force-bond he felt between Obi-Wan and Anakin, he was feeling a bit uncertain as to how things were supposed to work.

Obi-Wan leaned weakly forward to kiss Quinlan again before almost collapsing back against the pillows.

He smiled at Anakin and his former apprentice immediately felt a glow of affection that was only for him. It was different than what he felt for Vos- just as Obi-Wan had said - and its solid
intensity was like a salve to his wounded heart; relief and overpowering love flooded through him, warming him and allowing him to let go of some of his resentment toward his relationship with Quinlan. Some of it.

He leaned over and chastely kissed Obi-Wan as well, very narrowly forcing down an overpowering urge to blurt out right then, in front of everyone, that he loved him.

Caleb, now exceptionally confused, wondered if he was supposed to kiss Obi-Wan as well. Maybe it was just a way of greeting one another in some circles. He hung back, then relaxed, relieved, when the injured Jedi just smiled at him and raised a hand in greeting.

“So…” Obi-Wan asked quietly, drawing a deep, careful breath, “What all did I miss?”

“Well, Vos showed up,” Anakin said drily, nodding to the tall, dark, and handsome Jedi who had taken a perch on the edge of the enormous bed.

“Told your time,” Obi-Wan laughed softly.

Quinlan shrugged one shoulder, smirking. “You didn't go where you said you were going.”

Anakin’s eyebrows flicked upward but he didn't say anything - he'd ask one of them later. Obi-Wan, accurately sensing that his companion felt betrayed by the lack of disclosure, pushed gentle reassurance through their bond.

“That happens when you're trying to evade capture. Have arrangements been made to return Caleb to the Kasmiri?” he asked.

“Caleb is considering staying,” Anakin supplied, realizing belatedly that he should have let the Padawan answer for himself.

“Well, if you change your mind, we can find your way back.”

“I’m sorry you got hurt,” he replied softly, sounding very young and very lost.

Obi-Wan smiled tiredly. “I’ve had worse…. and it’s hardly your fault that I make such an enticing target. Don't worry about it, Caleb. I’m absolutely elated that we’re all here together now.” He took longer pauses between sentences to accommodate his healing lung, but he wasn't going to change his speaking style otherwise.

Caleb smiled at that, relieved by what seemed like very sincere forgiveness. He also liked the idea of the four of them being there together, like he wasn't the only stranger amidst his older caretakers. He had no idea what his life on Dantooine would be like, but the fact that he'd already
enjoyed several days without Imperial pursuit had not gone unnoticed.

“I'm glad too… it's good to see Master Vos again. I didn't see him a lot.”

“Master Vos is usually up to his eyebrows in trouble somewhere far away,” Obi-Wan said drily, sparing his friend a slight smile.

“Hey, not always by choice. I always liked coming home,” Quinlan laughed good-naturedly.

Home was a strange word to use to refer to the Temple; technically and dogmatically, Jedi weren’t really supposed to have possessions or a permanent place to call home. Even so, the feeling was there for many of the Jedi who had come up through the crèche and come back again and again as teenagers and adults. The Temple was like home and the assemblage of assorted, colorful Jedi were family. Obi-Wan wasn’t sure that Anakin had ever really thought of the Temple as home, after having had a real home on Tatooine.

His former Padawan was somewhat quiet, as though he was thinking very hard about something and trying not to share it. Usually, that meant that something was bothering him, though Obi-Wan didn’t really have the presence of mind to think of what that could have been at that moment. Seeing Caleb’s quiet readiness to be part of their group could have set him on edge, particularly if he was struggling with the idea of Obi-Wan training a Padawan. It could have also been Quinlan’s comfortable familiarity; Quinlan and Anakin had always been slightly antagonistic, even though they seemed outwardly to get along rather well.

It occurred to him that Anakin could be jealous on all sides, really, though he had no reason. He took a slightly labored breath as he laid back again.

“So… how did you find us?” Anakin asked.

Quinlan smiled crookedly. The obvious answer was that he was a hell of a tracker; he had found strangers on less; it had been easier to follow their trail on account that he knew Obi-Wan very well, and he knew what both of them felt like in the Force.

“Well, when your Master made a broadcast from Tatooine - terrible place, by the way, far too much sand - he also left me a message that I could read through psychometry.” He glanced over at Caleb to explain further, seeing the boy’s confused expression. “When I touch an object, I can read its memory and the memory of people who handled it. Obi-Wan laid his hand on the receiver when it was turned off and talked to me, told me where he was going. When I went to Tatooine to start my search, I found…” He paused in his narrative to look at Anakin, but he continued without mentioning the lightsaber, “...that it was really easy to find the same place and read Obi-Wan’s memory. From there I went to Dhirrod - Obi-Wan and I stayed there a few years ago. Very seedy.”

Anakin felt a bit prickly at that, wondering what Vos knew and what he had seen. Had he been in their room? Did he know the humiliation of Anakin’s rejected kiss in addition to the horror of what had happened at the Temple? How many of Anakin’s horrible recent choices had the other Jedi witnessed?

“I didn't go there with Janus…” Caleb said curiously. “I don't even know where it is.”

“It's a station in the Outer Rim - fascinating place, neutral and packed with criminals and lowlifes… but one of the safest places you'll ever go as long as you keep to yourself,” Quinlan laughed. He was always an easy, engaging speaker. Even after the hell his life had been since his attempt on Dooku’s life, he still had a charm to him that made him instantly likeable and
perpetually credible; even knowing him since he was a child, even being old enough to know better, Anakin was still pretty sure he'd be gullible enough to believe almost anything he said.

Caleb nodded, obviously curious.

Before he could ask more, Anakin asked, his tone slightly challenging, “Then you followed us to Ilum-”

“You went to Ilum?” Caleb asked incredulously. “The Empire is all over Ilum now!”

Obi-Wan winced at the thought, knowing how carelessly their enemy would tear apart the planet if they wanted the crystals underground. He also knew that they had gone at the right time; even a day later and the entire place might have been fortified with stormtroopers.

“Yes… we have a number of kyber crystals suitable for sabers, should the stones be willing to bond with a Jedi in need of one,” Obi-Wan replied.

“That was a kriffing dangerous move,” Vos told his friend, dark eyebrows raised in judgment. It wasn't to say that he wouldn't have done it himself, but, even knowing how capable his friend was, he tended to be more comfortable risking his own skin. “You're lucky you didn't get shot.”

Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows at him and Quinlan laughed, “Sooner. Shot sooner.”

The joke helped put Caleb at ease by furthering normalizing what had happened.

“Anyway, Anakin needed a new crystal.”

Quinlan looked at Anakin curiously. “Did you find one?”

Caleb thought the question was weird - of course Anakin had found one. Even Younglings could find them and Anakin was a really powerful Knight.

“Yep,” Anakin answered shortly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Quinlan parsed that, then went on smoothly. “I did lose you both at Illum. You didn't go where I thought you would… and the galaxy is a big place. I found you when Kenobi was spotted on Kaller - I've got a line-in to the Imperial transmissions - and went there and tracked Kasmir… I was able to get enough out of there to get to Dantooine, and from there to you, thanks to your comm frequency.”

Anakin was impressed by the other Jedi’s tracking skills; it was so obvious how effective Vos was and why he had been an invaluable tool to the Council and the Republic. All the same…

“Wait, you had our comm frequency?”

They'd picked up short-range comms on Mataou, though they'd hardly had time to use them.

“Kasmir had them.”

“Yeah, he scanned you both on the ship,” Caleb admitted, slightly embarrassed.

Anakin relaxed at that; if Obi-Wan had given their frequency to Vos without telling him, he would have been angry. As it stood, he was already uncomfortable thinking about the communications between his Master and Vos, as well as what the skilled tracker might have picked up in his pursuit. Already, his possession of that lightsaber was enough to make Anakin want to fly himself back to Mustafar and voluntarily throw himself into a volcano.
Though he had only been awake for a few minutes, Obi-Wan’s energy was already flagging. It was due in large part to the fact that the majority of his blood was synthetic and devoid of midichlorians; he felt dull and Force-blind, though he was reassured that his body would recover within a week or two. Still, he was thankful that they were safe here and there would be no need for him to command the Force in the immediate future. He could barely feel the Jedi around him, though their bonds were intact.

“And here we are,” Obi-Wan said with a peacekeeper’s smile, “On Dantooine.”

“You look like you're falling asleep,” Quinlan said with a laugh.

“The anesthetic hasn't worn off,” he replied by way of an excuse.

“You want us to let you rest, Master?” Anakin asked.

“That's all right…”

“That sounds like a yes,” Quinlan laughed, though he didn't move. “I'm pretty sure, though, that you're not going to be alone… Skywalker, would you like to play watchdog first and keep him company?”

Anakin recognized that Quinlan was offering him first watch as a small concession. He didn't know if the Kiffar knew the nature of his relationship with Obi-Wan; he was pretty sure that he knew that the two had been sleeping together before Mustafar, but he had no idea if Obi-Wan had given him any updates in his strange Force-memory missives. And even if he had, it seemed as though Vos hadn't had any direct information since Dhirrod.

“Yeah, I can do that,” he replied with a nod.

“Then I will let the old man rest—”

“You're two years older than me,” Obi-Wan retorted.

Quinlan laughed and reached over to clasp his friend's hand before climbing to his feet to make way for Anakin.

Caleb watched the exchange, wondering if any of his friends had survived the order. He didn't think that they had. Sensing that the teen was a bit downcast, Vos said, “Hey, Padawan Dume. You've been here a week almost, yeah? Want to show me around?”

Even Caleb thought it was a little transparent, but it was because Quinlan wasn't trying to be subtle; in his bright, open way he had just identified that he noticed Caleb was down and was interested in cheering him up. Smiling a little shyly, he nodded. “Sure, that would be cool.”

Anakin watched them go, then took his place beside Obi-Wan. He reached for his lover’s hand, not sure what to say. He was torn between telling him how much he loved him, rejoicing over how relieved he was that Obi-Wan was alive, demanding to know how much he remembered of what Anakin had said in the ship before he passed out, and soundly chewing him out for leaving him in the dark about Quinlan Vos.

All he could manage was, “Hey.”

Obi-Wan squeezed his hand. “Hey.”

“So… you really worried me.”
“I know.”

“You’re not sorry at all, are you?” Anakin said with a little smile.

“Should I be? Next time I get repeatedly shot by a dozen-”

“Come on, probably only two or three actually got a hit in-”

“Next time I will make sure to take your feelings on the subject into account,” Obi-Wan finished, smiling at him tiredly.

“See that you do,” Anakin said haughtily, leaning over and kissing him affectionately, before just leaning his forehead against Obi-Wan’s for a moment. He could feel Obi-Wan’s exhaustion and his lingering pain, though he knew that his former Master wouldn’t openly acknowledge either.

Both sighed quietly, and Anakin released his hand in favor of moving slightly closer to carefully wrap an arm around him. He wanted to hold him, though he knew that applying any pressure or weight would be a bad idea; his lover was still on the mend, even if it had been a few days. All the same, the additional contact felt good; it helped him to feel their bond more strongly.

“It’s been lonely sleeping by myself,” he commented.

“How long has it been?"

“Five days.”

“I was in bacta for five days?” Obi-Wan asked with a frown. For some reason, that revelation seemed to give perspective to how badly he’d been hurt and how close he had come to death.

“Yeah… no one’s really talked to you, have they?"

“A bit, but it’s rather hazy.”

“They removed like two-thirds of your right lung and your shoulder is totally kriffed. You’ve got more synthetic blood in you than your own. Apparently, you should have died.”

Obi-Wan considered that.

“Huh,” he said by way of consideration.

Anakin realized that perhaps what he’d said wasn’t the kindest way to broach the topic of his lover’s near-death experience. Before he could speak, though, Obi-Wan reached up and lightly stroked his hair back from his left temple, frowning.

“This is new.”

“Mm?”

“Your hair has gone white here.”

Anakin blinked and reached up to touch the same place, realizing suddenly that he had been avoiding his own reflection in the mirror for the last few days.

“A lot?”

“Noticeably.”
Anakin was quiet for a moment, wondering if he should tell Obi-Wan that he had tried very hard to save him. It wasn’t that he wanted credit, exactly, but he felt like some kind of disclosure was necessary, particularly since he didn’t know exactly what he’d done or how he’d done it. It was a difficult topic to broach though, for exactly that reason; he was concerned that Obi-Wan would judge his new skill as “dark” or otherwise frightening, but having another secret, especially one like this, especially with his old lightsaber near by, seemed like a bad idea.

When Obi-Wan pulled him closer, he didn’t resist. His companion kissed him lightly, then laid back against the pillows and closed his eyes.

“I’m so tired, Anakin. I want so much to talk to you, but I am falling asleep.”

The younger Jedi sighed. “I know… we can talk later.”

As if he’d been waiting for Anakin’s permission, Obi-Wan fell asleep against his shoulder.

When he woke again, Quinlan was sitting in Anakin’s place, reading something on a beat-up tangerine-colored holopad. He smiled at Obi-Wan when he noticed that he was awake, then said, brightly, “Hey there. Never knew you to sleep so much!”

Obi-Wan smirked. “Never lost so much blood at once either, I’m afraid.”

Quinlan moved up to sit beside him on the bed, then carefully gathered Obi-Wan into his arms and laid back against the cushions. Though the transitional movement was initially uncomfortable, Obi-Wan settled with a sense of relief against his friend. He wasn't really surprised that the closeness felt good or that fitting himself against the other Jedi felt natural; they had been close most of their lives. Physical contact with anyone would have felt good after being in isolation for a several days; even unconscious, he had felt the absence of other people.

“Yeah, seems like you had a close call, Kenobi. You talked to your Padawan about it yet?”

“I've barely spoken 10 sentences to him.”

“Mm,” Quinlan acknowledged. “He seems pretty rattled. I'd be interested to hear his take on how you survived.”

Obi-Wan sighed wearily and laid his head against his shoulder. “Oh?”

“He told me he was trying to heal you, keep you from dying. I can feel his Force signature all over you now.”

“I'm not up to thinking about this right now.”

“I know. I'm just very concerned for you. He's still got a lot of darkness in him, Kenobi,” Quinlan pressed carefully, knowing that his friend would shut down the conversation if he was too forceful.

“There's also a lot of good,” Obi-Wan said. He was quiet for a moment, then he tilted his chin up to meet the other Jedi’s dark eyes. His own expression was open but still slightly guarded, as though he didn't want the answer to the question that he was about to ask. “What do you know?”

Those words with a different inflection could have been a dismissal, but it was instead a request for honesty and a tacit promise of the same.
“I picked up his saber on Tatooine.”

Obi-Wan nodded slowly, a little thunderstruck. It was the moment of reckoning, finally; not only did Obi-Wan have to justify his choices, but he had to do so to his best friend.

The only thing on his side was that Vos knew the dark side better than any Jedi that Obi-Wan had ever known.

“So you know the worst.”

“Yes, probably more even than you,” Vos admitted.

“He’s made such progress, Quin,” Obi-Wan said weakly, resting his cheek against Quinlan's chest.

“He really has…” he replied, to Obi-Wan’s surprise. He lifted his hand to stroke his companion's soft, mussed hair, “But he may also be reaching the limits of his recovery under your supervision… uh… because, well, let's face it, Kenobi, you're really attached to him.”

Obi-Wan sighed, closing his eyes.

“I know you don't want to talk about this right now, but hear me out. This is dangerous for you too; I don't want to see you fall because of him.”

Obi-Wan considered that in silence. Quinlan knew what it took to fall and he knew him well enough to spot the weak points that he himself was too proud to see. Was Anakin so much of a weakness that his closest friend would really believe he could embrace the dark side? It was a lot to think about, especially with this fog of exhaustion on his normally quick mind.

“Look. It's not… I'm not saying you're weak or trying to insult you… just this is something I know about. And I know you’re the good boy, you've always been the good boy. I get it. But I also know you would have done just about anything to bring me back, and you would have believed anything because you wanted it so bad…”

Obi-Wan’s hand, which had been lightly resting against his chest, tightened for a moment in his soft shirt. He had come so close to losing him, both to the dark side and to execution by the Council. If it had come to it, even now he wasn't sure he would have been able to end his friend’s life, just as he had been unable to kill Anakin.

"I know you'd just as far for Anakin... further, because you pigheadedly feel responsible for him.”

Quinlan was also avoiding the Bantha in the room; they both knew that he loved Anakin and that his devotion was a weakness. For that matter, Quinlan also knew that Obi-Wan loved him. Neither of them needed to say it; it was enough to know and to feel.

He pressed slightly closer to Quinlan. “So what are you suggesting?”

“That you give him to me for a few weeks. I'll work with him. I know where he is and I'm… shall we say, a little less besotted with him.”

“He's not my Padawan - he's an adult Knight in his own right. I can't just give him to you,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

“We both know he'll go if you ask him to.”

“I'll ask. All I can do is ask.”
Quinlan rubbed his back lightly, accepting that for now. He would press harder and delve deeper when Obi-Wan was more capable of conversation. For now it was enough that his friend knew that he knew and that he was going to help him.

“We've got a lot to talk about when you're more with-it, Kenobi; don't think you're getting off easy. I've got questions—”

“-and opinions—”

“-and opinions!” Vos laughed.

“Hopefully you won't judge me too harshly.”

“After I almost left the Order for a ex-Sith Nightsister?”

“Ah, touché,” Obi-Wan smirked, though he could feel that there was still a ghost of real pain under the self-deprecating dark humor. He could also feel the pain of loss that all Jedi felt, and beneath that a deeper feeling of conflict over the end of the Council that reminded him of Anakin’s emotional ambiguity toward Mace Windu’s death.

He stayed comfortably close, wanting to offer his friend the comfort of his nearness. He could give Quinlan the same opportunities for support and introspection, openness that they would all need to recover from what they had survived. He could start that conversation now, in small ways.

He was feeling less anxious with the idea of going through everything that had happened with his friend. Quinlan was going to work him hard and force him to confront a lot of uncomfortable truths - about the Jedi Order, about Anakin, and about himself - but he wasn't going to hurt him unnecessarily to do so; he would be stronger when he came out on the other side.

Hopefully he could make Anakin see it that way too.

XXIX. Intruder

Anakin slept fitfully, and when he came to relieve Vos in the morning he found the two Jedi curled up together, asleep. Though he forcefully told himself not to be jealous, it didn't dull the sharp stab of depressive anger that ached instantly in his chest. There were a lot of things that he could tell himself - that Obi-Wan caring for Vos didn't diminish how he felt for him, that Vos had known him longer, that their relationships were fundamentally different - but nothing seemed to make him feel like less of an outsider. He'd always been outside, but he almost never felt that way with Obi-Wan; his former master had always kept him close and kept a place that was just his, and the two of them had always had something that was inaccessible to anyone else. Vos was the only one who could ever make him feel distant from Obi-Wan... and the Jedi who showed up just had to be Vos. It just had to be Vos with his lightsaber and all of his secrets.

He tried to dismantle those emotions, which he recognized were dramatic and paranoid, so that he could release them into the Force and center himself. The most he managed, though, was to tell himself that he didn't care and to resolve not to act out because he was hurt and scared. To him, that seemed like progress.
Maybe the real problem was that he never believed anyone who said they that would stay because they loved him; he was always waiting, always afraid to be alone again.

He didn't mean to be, but he was cooler with Obi-Wan and outright avoidant with Vos. He spent most of his unoccupied time down in the hangar with the mechanics, servicing droids and repairing engines. He quickly learned that an extra pair of hands was always welcome on a rebel base.

Interacting with astromech again, he realized how much missed R2. *That* was a droid who knew what was what. He could have definitely talked to him about this (and everything else), and the salty little astromech would have almost definitely been on his side. The colorful things he would have beeped about Vos and his invasion into his memories would have made this much easier to endure.

Before long, he found himself upset again, just staring blankly at an open access panel on an A-Wing’s engine. He held his breath, telling himself to shut up.

“Your Master thinks you're mad at him,” Vos said, walking up beside him.

Anakin felt his shoulders tighten.

“He's not my Master.”

“So you *are* mad at him.”

“No, I'm just… I'm not his Padawan. I'm a Knight. I should be a Master.”

Quinlan raised his eyebrows slightly. “Right. Anyway.”

“Look, I know you're trying to corner me and get me to talk,” Anakin said shortly. “I know you know what I did.”

“Yeah, I do,” he replied, holding up his hands defensively. “And I also know what it's like to be where you are, trying to move forward and find your way back.”

“I'm trying, okay? And Obi-Wan’s helping me.”

Anakin made a big deal of devoting a large portion of his attention to the electrical panel that he was rewiring, using a combination of small hand tools and perfectly directed little currents of the Force. He could feel that he was spoiling for a fight - still jealous, still angry with the Empire, still guilty over the clones he’d killed on Kaller - and he tried to keep himself focused on his work. It was peaceful to fix things. It reminded him that he was a builder and a mender, not a destroyer.

“And I get it, you're trying. But you're going to need help to get past this that Kenobi’s not gonna be able to give you.”

“Obi-Wan knows me better’n anyone. He knows how to work with me.”

“True, but he doesn’t have the experience that I do… and he is too attached to you to be as impartial as he needs to be. To be blunt, you need a guide who’s not kriiffing you.”

“Well, you'd know about that.”

Vos masked the sting he felt at Anakin’s words with a chilly lift of his thick eyebrows.

“Really now, Anakin?” he said archly.
Called out on his petty comment, Anakin flushed slightly and looked away. Quinlan Vos could always outcool him, and differently than Obi-Wan; even when Obi-Wan dressed him down, there was always affection. Vos was in a position where he could just judge him without any emotion at all.

It annoyed him a bit.

“I just… I don’t need your help.”

Quinlan considered Anakin’s stiff shoulders and his unwelcoming expression, trying to think of how to warm the frosty air between them.

“The dark side’s a scary thing, I know. I know a lot about the dark side, and I know what it feels like. I also know that sometimes you feel like you’re in control even when you’re not. I was much further gone than I’d thought, and I started to let myself think that, ah, my intentions were good so it didn’t matter so much. I mean… when you and Obi-Wan got to me, finally, I thought what I was doing made sense… I was trying to get to a better spot for me and someone I loved.”

“It isn’t the same,” Anakin said, frustrated and instantly insulted that Quinlan would even dare to insinuate that his relationship with Ventress was on level with his marriage to Padmé. “Padmé was my wife, not just some dirty--”

“Don’t,” Quinlan warned quietly.

Surprised again, Anakin licked his lips and looked down without finishing his tirade.

“I'm not apologizing for falling in love with Ventress,” the older Jedi said flatly. “And I’ve apologized enough for what happened after. We’re talking about you now, and how my experience can help you.”

The smooth way that Quinlan knocked down his argument reminded him again of Obi-Wan, though without any of the flexibility that made Obi-Wan such a graceful communicator. Quinlan was just efficient and didn't take any shit.

He remembered being a teenager and overhearing Vos’ thoughts about Obi-Wan’s teaching style and lack of control over his Padawan; he’d taken extreme offense and all Vos had done was snort and tell him he shouldn't have been eavesdropping.

Not wanting to yield himself, Anakin looked over at him with carefully feigned calm and said, “I'm fine. I'm in control.”

Quinlan sighed, frustrated. “Superficially, yeah. But you fell harder than I did, broke more in yourself. I'm looking at you and I can see it's hard, and you're angry… and you're hiding things like you always have-”

The words struck a chord; like there was more knowledge that Vos hadn't admitted to, like he had sifted through years of memories instead of just the events of the Temple or Mustafar. It made him self-conscious and angry as he thought, again, about how many years that lightsaber had been on his belt and what memories might be accessible. He didn’t really know how psychometry worked, but it was possible that everything that had happened since the beginning of the Clone Wars was on the table.

“I don't know how deep you went… or what you think you know about me… but I didn't invite you into my past. I didn't give you my trust, you didn't earn it. You can't just act like you're here to rescue some Force-kripped fuck-up Padawan.”
Quinlan stayed remarkably level, despite that his emotions tended to be closer to the surface and harder to dismiss.

“For Force sake, I was trying to understand you, Skywalker.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve known you since you were a kid, and you were always a good kid even if you were a serious pain in the ass? Because you saved my pain-in-the-ass ass recently? Because there aren’t many of us left? Because I want to make sure Obi-Wan’s safe around you? Because we’re friends? What do you want? I’m not attached to you, but it doesn’t mean that I don’t give a shit.”

Yet again, Vos surprised him. There were a lot of ideas to unpack from that short, slightly pejorative monologue.

“I’ll think about it,” he said finally. He added a little more confidently, “I need to think about it.”

“All right, that’s all I’m asking today, kid. Just… don’t think you don’t have anyone, okay? You’ve got Obi-Wan, yeah, of course… but you’ve also got me, Caleb. And if you can get this all under control, I can maybe help you track that Padawan of yours.”

Anakin blinked quickly, wondering why it hadn’t even occurred to him that Quinlan could do that. He’d tracked him and Obi-Wan across the Outer Rim, and he had found them within only a few weeks despite several unexpected hyperspace escapes that broke the line of neatly connected dots.

“That’s quite a bribe,” he said, a little shellshocked.

“It’s not a bribe,” Quinlan said with a broad grin. “It’s **incentive**.”

“So…. a bribe,” Anakin laughed, his demeanor softening visibly.

“Maybe a bit. But I’ve learned traveling with Sith isn’t very good for me.”

The younger Jedi looked back to the tangle of wires that he had been tidying, then repeated, “Well, I’ll think about it.”

“All right,” Quinlan nodded. “Y’know where to find me.”

“Yep.”

“And do go visit ol’ Kenobi. You know how he is.”

“Self-righteous and bored?”

“Something like that.”

“Yeah, I will soon as this’s done,” Anakin said with a nod.

As Quinlan turned to leave, Anakin’s thoughts returned to the blue lightsaber and the Kiffar’s comment about wanting Obi-Wan to be safe.

“Hey, are you actually worried Obi-Wan’s not safe? Like I’d hurt him?”

Quinlan paused, looking at him critically as though he was looking into him and then through him. The makeup on his face was wearing off, and the ghost of his yellow stripe tattoo was beginning to glow through on his cheekbones and at the bridge of his nose.
“I don't know, Skywalker, but sad things - bad things - follow Sith around. The good person who
loved me died; I can't help but worry about the one who loves you.”

The good person, Anakin echoed in his thoughts.

There wasn't much else to say after that. Something in Anakin ached to confess to his visions and
explain exactly why the sight of his old lightsaber had horrified him. He wanted to ask if Obi-Wan
had admitted that he loved him, or if Quinlan just knew because he tended to be more intuitive
than most. For the first time, he wanted to ask, without disbelief or judgment, exactly what
Quinlan had seen in Asajj Ventress and how he had survived losing her and swearing off the
darkness all at once.

The window to ask was very small, though, and the moment quickly passed. The two parted
company with less tension between them, but no resolutions.

Chapter End Notes

Well, damn. I've crossed the 100,000 word mark. What am I doing with my life.
Blasterfire and frantic shouting in the hallway broke the early afternoon calm and brought Anakin racing from the hangar, his lightsaber already lit and his mind reaching out into the Force for some idea of what to expect.

He was not prepared for the sight of two of the base soldiers holding Caleb down while another looked after a clone whose upper arm had been seared by a blaster bolt. He stared for a moment, listening to the clone swearing quietly in Mando’a and Caleb swearing less quietly in Basic. He looked more closely at the clone and determined that he was no one that he knew, then killed his blade and crouched down next to Caleb, gesturing to the soldiers to release him. They had a moment of obvious uncertainty, then one of them let him go before stepping back. The other soldier kept a hand on him, and even the one who’d released him was still ready, though ready for what was a little harder to determine. Anakin focused on Caleb; the boy’s panic and fear were coming off him in sickening waves, overwhelming.

“Easy, easy… what happened…?” he asked, immediately protective of the younger Jedi.

“There’s a kriffing clone here, Anakin! What is he doing here?” Caleb explained frantically, his eyes wide. “What if he goes back and tells everyone where we are, and then this isn’t safe either? I can’t—”

“Hey, it’s okay… I think the guys here know him,” Anakin interrupted before Caleb could let the words work him up even more, taking a gamble and reaching down to smooth his hair lightly. He couldn’t mind trick Caleb into calm, but he did put the most soothing emotions into the Force that he could summon.

“That’s Golden,” one of the soldiers told Anakin. “We’ve been trying to tell your Padawan—”

“He’s not…nevermind. What’s a clone doing here?”

The soldiers shared a look before one of them explained. “We’ve got about forty of them. Couple of the old clone commanders under the Republic have been getting them out and de-chipping them… doesn’t always go well. About a third have offed themselves. They’re good guys, ready to help us…”

“Why haven’t we seen any of them?”

“They’ve been generally staying away from you all because you’re Jedi… and they weren’t sure how you’d react.”

Anakin glanced over at Caleb, who was teary-eyed and shaking, then nodded. “Yeah… huh. Well… ah… how about I take Caleb here… and you guys take Golden, and maybe later we can talk about this more?”

“Ah…. yeah. We can do that for sure.”
“Are there… do you know if there are any guys from the 501st? Or the 212th?”

“Those two are the hardest to get at, I guess. 212th is a bit easier than 501st on account that there’s so many of ‘em, we got three or four from there though I don’t remember their names. Rex is real big on getting Commander Cody out- talks about it all the time.”

“Rex?” Anakin asked, eyes widening slightly at the prospect of his friend returning to this base at some point. Realizing that this conversation was very upsetting to Caleb, he shook his head. “Y’know, I’ll find you later. I want to know more about this. Apologize to Golden for us.”

He looked back down to the Padawan then waved off the other soldier who was still half-heartedly holding him down. At this point, Caleb had stilled. Anakin knew that it had mostly been the act of being held and protected that had quieted the younger Jedi; even though the soldiers outnumbered him and outweighed him by more than double, two adult men couldn’t have taken on a Padawan his age if he’d really been intent on getting away.

He offered Caleb a hand up, then made a surprised sound when the boy suddenly flung himself into his arms and held on tightly. Most Padawan were rather independent, and he had absolutely no doubt that Caleb was no different; however the loss that he had endured, coupled with being personally hunted by previously trusted clones, had really changed his views of the galaxy and his place in it. Seeing how much the sight of Golden had upset Caleb, Anakin suddenly had a different view of Janus Kasmir’s role as Caleb’s protector.

No wonder the boy was attached.

He hugged him, wondering again if this was what being a brother or a father was like, then rubbed his back lightly before pulling away.

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re safe, we’re good.”

He glanced over to see that the clone was on his feet, holding his arm carefully to avoid reopening the blaster sear. The hallway had the charred-flesh smell that Anakin recognized from battle and absolutely hated; he didn’t really remember it from when Obi-Wan had been hurt, but he knew that it was because he was too stressed about everything else to even process any kind of olfactory input. The clone himself seemed calm, despite the pallor of his cheeks. It had just been a graze - a real graze, not like Obi-Wan’s idea of the graze that had taken out part of his lung - and the clones were conditioned to handle much worse. They were conditioned to handle a lot, and as Anakin thought about it, he realized he didn’t want to know what that conditioning had been like. He also knew that at some point in his history with them, he should have found out. A good commander would have known.

He met Golden’s eye and nodded in a friendly way, which seemed to surprise the clone as he walked down the corridor.

“They’re gone. So you’re okay… I don’t think he was even armed.”

Caleb nodded numbly, processing that. His brain went in two directions at once, dizzyingly. On one side, he was relieved that the clone hadn’t been armed; on the other, he was a bit horrified that he had shot an unarmed man.

“Oh,” he managed.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet for a little while,” Anakin suggested.

“I sort of… I shouldn’t have done that, should I?”
The older Jedi sighed. “Well… with all of what we know now, maybe not… but… hey, you know? This is all… okay. Let’s talk about this. We can talk about some stuff that I don’t think the Jedi really talked about, about how things can hurt for a long time… or…”

He tried to think of how to put some kind of large concepts about trauma and anxiety and loss into terms that he would have understood when he was Caleb’s age.

“Or like… how things can sort of… trigger feelings that don’t fit the situation. There’s just a lot of things no one’s probably told you, that I really wish people had told me.”

Caleb nodded. He was still not certain how Anakin felt about him, or if the young Knight liked him much at all. He had a hard time reading Anakin - partly because the blond’s emotions were so changeable - and he never knew if it was okay to reach out to him or not. At the moment, Anakin seemed very soft to him, welcoming like Obi-Wan or protective like Quinlan.

“Okay… we can, um, go to the roof. It’s quiet there. I like going up there at night - you can see really far. Not like… Coruscant-far, but pretty far.”

“Come on, let’s go up there then,” Anakin said, sliding an arm around his shoulders to steady him as they made their way to the stairwell that opened up onto the building’s roof.

He was surprised when Caleb picked the door lock with a surprisingly sophisticated use of the Force. He sometimes forgot how resourceful Padawan could be; it was completely the kind of thing that Ahsoka would have done. It was strange how different Caleb was from Ahsoka; Caleb was the age that Ahsoka had been when she had started training under Anakin, but every part of his world had been upended during that crucial time. Things that he had always been taught to trust and to believe were suddenly gone or, worse, turned to enemies with no warning at all.

The two sat down on the edge of the roof and looked out over the bright, sunny base. It seemed hard to believe sometimes that anything bad could happen during the day, when the suns were shining, but they both knew well enough that misfortune wasn’t terribly discriminating, and it was always the darkest night somewhere in the galaxy.

“So… ah… I dunno where to start talking about this, or what to start with.” Anakin laughed self-consciously, not looking at Caleb. “Maybe… why don’t you tell me what you were thinking when you saw that clone?”

“That I was going to die. I just… Master Skywalker, I just couldn’t even believe that he was there. I mean… I know he was with base guys… and he wasn’t wearing his armor… but… he was just… there. And I panicked.”

“It’s not weird…” Anakin assured him quietly. “What happened with you and Master Bilaba was really… horrifying. That was more awful than anything most people ever have to endure in their lives, and then it got worse because you were by yourself and being hunted.”

“I was… I was eating garbage when Janus found me,” Caleb admitted shamefully, as though it was his fault that he’d been alone in the universe with no credits at all.

“That must have been really terrible.”

“Yeah… it was just… I felt like…” The boy took a deep breath. “Like I was totally alone. I didn’t know if any Jedi would ever find me… or if they were all dead, or if I was just lost… and… Mixx, Remo… Big-Mouth. I thought they were our friends, even… like not just our soldiers, like our actual friends. I… I had to kill Big-Mouth. And Soot. And then that wasn’t even enough, they
just kept coming… there are…” He swallowed hard, eyes looking over the base but seeing the war he’d left behind. “There are so many clones, Master Skywalker. They just don’t stop… and they… they all look the same, so it’s like you’re just fighting the same one over and over and over, like you just can’t win. I have nightmares about them.”

“That’s not weird either… I know everyone’s always told you that meditation was all it took, and that you weren’t supposed to focus on your fears… and that Jedi are supposed to just let go of everything.”

“But I can’t… what kind of Jedi am I?” Caleb said miserably.

“You’re a tough one, a brave one,” Anakin assured him, rubbing his shoulder. “Just… this isn’t normal Jedi stuff. Like, yeah, if we were all just meditating and being peacekeepers and learning about the Force like Jedi are supposed to, maybe… maybe we could just let it all go and not feel anything too much. But… Caleb, seriously. We’ve seen people die. We’ve felt people die. A lot of them. We’ve had horrible things happen, we’ve had to do things that were terrible so we could survive. Jedi shouldn’t have to do those things… no one should… and it’s normal to feel terrible about it, or to be scared, or to just… not know what to do.”

The Padawan nodded slowly, eyes focusing on a man who was unloading a transport down on the base’s runway. It was easier than focusing completely on what was being said, or to look at Anakin, or even to say anything more than just a quiet, “Yeah?”

“Yeah… I know. No one’s told you this, but it’s true. You have to think of these things like scars, inside. You can’t just think away a scar, right? You can’t just ignore when your leg’s broken and just meditate it better.”

“So what do I do?”

“Talk about it… find ways to make it less scary. You can just avoid clones forever, or you can try to get used to them again. It’s up to you. But you don’t need to just pretend that you’re okay. You can say that you’re scared or that you hate them, or that you hate what happened.”

“But… Master Yoda says that fear is the path to the dark side.”

“Master Yoda doesn’t know bantha shit,” Anakin grumbled, and Caleb broke out into a scandalized giggle that he quickly covered with his hand.

Anakin grinned at him. “Being scared isn’t good, it feels awful… but if you lie to yourself about how you feel, then you can’t get past it… and that’s the part that leads to the dark side.”

Caleb was quiet again, though he seemed less tense.

“I… really hate what happened. And I am scared.”

“I am too, sometimes. That’s okay. We can be scared together, okay? You, me, and Obi-Wan… I guess Master Vos too… we’ll all take care of each other here,” Anakin said, looking back out over the sunny concrete until it met the natural landscape at the borders of the base.

“Yeah… okay…”

There were some questions that were flickering on the edges of Caleb’s understanding, and though he didn’t want to think too hard on them, he had been putting together pieces of things he’d overheard with feelings that he sometimes picked up from Anakin.
“Master Skywalker… where were you when it happened?”

Anakin’s shoulders tightened and his pulse jumped. After having this open conversation with Caleb that seemed to have been going so well, he didn’t know how to answer. He couldn’t lie again, but he didn’t think Caleb would accept the truth either. The truth might undo everything and send the young Jedi straight back to the Kasmiri and a half-cocked pirate whom Anakin still didn’t entirely trust.

“You don’t want to tell me,” Caleb observed in the brief silence, looking over at him. “But you can. I promise that you can.”

Anakin looked for an out, or a way to deflect the question. Obi-Wan would have known how; Obi-Wan would have turned it back into a question or used it as a way to explore something about Caleb’s experience. However, he wasn’t Obi-Wan, and he knew that the truth and his past were inescapable.

“Are you sure you want to know?” he asked. “It’s not what you’re expecting.”

“Yeah.”

“I was…” he paused, finding himself incredibly nervous. Who could have expected that the first Jedi he’d have to confess to would be fourteen year old boy? It was nothing he had planned for, despite that he’d known that Caleb would eventually need to know the truth.

He braced himself and continued in a rush. “I had fallen to the dark side. I was under the control of the Emperor, and I hurt people… if I could take it back, I would.”

He looked over at Caleb to find the boy staring disbelievingly at the grounds below, his brows drawn down in concentration. Watching his face, Anakin knew that he was trying very hard to wrap his mind around the scale of that confession, then justify it and lock it away so that he could continue forward without having to change course.

“Is that…” Caleb struggled to find something to say; he had promised Anakin that he could tell him what had happened, but he didn’t know how to handle something like this. The magnitude of this revelation was more than he knew how to deal with. He chewed his lip, his eyes tearing up at the sudden fear that Anakin was just another person whom he couldn’t really trust. “Why did it happen?”

“I wanted to protect some people… and it just… Caleb, it’s so hard to explain it all. No one knew that the Chancellor was a Sith, and I’d known him since I was younger than you. He was always there for me and he made me trust him… for years… and then he just knew what to say at the right time, and I just… I believed him. I was scared and I thought I was ending the Clone War and saving people. I was wrong… I was lied to. I made a huge mistake.”

The younger Jedi nodded slowly, trying to absorb everything he’d said. He latched on to the commonalities between them as a coping mechanism - trusting someone who couldn’t be trusted, being scared. He understood being scared and he understood wanting to protect people, and more than anything he could understand wanting to end a war.

“That’s… really…” he paused, then closed his eyes tightly as he spoke. “I don’t know… it’s really… I don’t hate you… but… I just… what did you do? What does it mean that you fell to the dark side?”

“It means that I learned to use the dark side of the Force… and I killed…” Anakin paused, unable
to admit to Caleb that he had killed Younglings. He justified that Caleb wouldn't be able to handle knowing that right now. “The Chancellor sent me to kill the head of the Trade Federation.”

“Did you do it?”

“Yes… and Obi-Wan came to try to help me come back to the light, and I fought him too.”

“But Obi-Wan trusts you now?” he asked in a whisper. “Can I trust you? How can I trust you? Why does Obi-Wan trust you, did he hurt people too?”

“No - no! He saved me. He’s saved me so many times, and he brought me back from the dark side… he’s so good, Caleb… even if you never trust me again, Obi-Wan is the best Jedi I’ve ever known,” Anakin said quickly, surprised by his own vehemence in defending his former Master.

“So why does he trust you?”

“He knows me. He knows I’ve changed, that I’m working really hard… and that I’m going to stop the Emperor. I’m going to fix things. I can’t change what I did… but I can try to make things better. Please believe me, I want to make things better.”

Caleb thought over different comments that Anakin had made, like about moving forward and how the past didn’t matter… how he could still be a good person and a Jedi if he wanted to, even if he had done things that made him feel ashamed of himself. Those had been unguarded statements, ones that Caleb had felt were sincere. He was very good at reading people, in general, and for all that he was distressed by what he now knew of Anakin’s recent past, he didn’t feel anything in him except the desire to do good.

Caleb sighed and sat back, resting his weight on his palms. “I believe you. I mean, if you were evil and you wanted to kill me, I guess you’ve already passed up a lot of really good opportunities. I mean, you could push me off the roof right now…” Caleb gave him a slight smile to show that he was trying to lighten the mood.

“That’s… really practical,” Anakin said, surprised. He smiled quickly, relieved that Caleb was willing to try give him a chance.

“Yeah, well. I respect that you’ll talk to me about this stuff,” he said, shrugging and looking down. “No one else has said that it’s okay to be not okay…. Like… it’s not weird, and I’m not just… all kinds of wrong. Like, even Janus told me to man up and get over it… and Master Vos was really nice to me, but he sort of just didn’t talk about it. He just tried to keep me company and cheer me up.”

“Yeah…” Anakin sighed, feeling his adrenaline level dropping slowly. “I get that. I think a lot of Jedi feel like way, at least the ones who have had to fight in the war… definitely anyone who’s been on the run.”

“It’s kind of kriiffed,” Caleb said quietly.

They both just watched the ships coming and going from the base airfield, then Caleb slid down from the ledge where they were sitting and left without saying anything else.

Anakin wasn’t sure if he’d ever say anything else to him again.

XXXI. Truth and Gossip
Obi-Wan was allowed to go back to his own room the next day. Though he had his own quarters, he stole into Anakin’s room to sleep beside him on the first night on his own. Like the infirmary beds, these were standard-issue for much bigger creatures; though the bed wasn’t as wide as a typical double, it was still enough for two humans who generally slept very close anyway.

_Suck it, Vos_, Anakin thought smugly as his former Master fit his body up against his to sleep.

He could feel Obi-Wan’s love for him, even though the other Jedi was still tired and somewhat subdued; he could feel that Obi-Wan’s shoulder was still paining him and his blood was still weak. Still, they were together; Obi-Wan hadn’t stayed up late talking to Vos and he hadn’t chastely stayed the night in his own room.

Obi-Wan kissed him languidly, carding his fingers gently through his hair. The touch was welcome, though Anakin had become sensitized to physical contact. When Vos would clap him on the shoulder companionably when they passed in the hall, when Caleb would hug him in a fit of exuberance, when Obi-Wan would touch him or kiss him. He needed these small touches to ground him, and he needed the closeness with the other Jedi on base more and more.

“Tomorrow I want you to tell me about this white spot…” Obi-Wan told him tiredly, meeting his eyes with a thoughtful expression as they laid face to face. The older Jedi had his as he lazily kissed his face and caressed his upper body.

“I don’t know… I’m not even sure how it happened.”

“Mm,” Obi-Wan mused, leaning over and looking at his hair more closely again before kissing his temple. “Tomorrow, we’ll talk about it. I want to know more about what happened on the ship…” He yawned. “What you were saying to me…”

“You really don’t remember?”

“No… I’m afraid forgetting emotional conversations is becoming somewhat of a trend for us…” Anakin laughed, stealing a kiss. “I actually do remember that night on Dhirrod.”

“You…”

“Ehhhh well, it was really embarrassing.”

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan groaned. He shook his head, then laughed softly.

Anakin laughed too, surprised by how little the memory hurt now that he was lying here with his lover in his arms. It was easy to let go of a lot of things now when they were close; it was easy to brush off how Obi-Wan had kissed Quinlan, how threatened he felt by Vos’ intrusion into his memories. Here he was safe again and his former Master was only his.

“Well,” Obi-Wan added after a moment, “I honestly don’t remember what you said… or if I said anything back. I want to talk about it tomorrow.”

“Yeah, we’ll talk about it tomorrow, Master.”

“I’m not your master, Anakin…” he replied softly, starting to drowse as he pressed a warm kiss to his jaw. “You and I are equals.”
Anakin smiled and hugged him closer, liking what he’d said even if he had no intention of giving up calling him ‘Master’ as a habit, joke, or term of endearment. On the tail end of that warmth, though, he wondered if Vos had relayed his comment from the other day about not being Obi-Wan’s Padawan. The slight paranoia tempered his contentment, but faded quickly when Obi-Wan kissed him again and he felt the warmth of their unique connection through the Force.

“Yeah…” he said after a moment, “But I don’t know if I can stop calling you that. It’s like… a nickname almost now. Like calling you ‘darling.’”

Obi-Wan chuckled sleepily, tucking his head under Anakin’s chin. “That’s so dysfunctional, in the context of the Master-Padawan relationship…”

“Yeah… just…” Anakin laughed. “Don’t think about that.”

“Mm-hm,” he agreed.

Within a few minutes, Anakin knew that his lover was asleep. In that moment, he was happy and comfortable; everything was stable and he wasn’t alone. He missed Padme still, though he was beginning to adjust to the idea of their separation being permanent. More than anything, if he wanted anything in this entire universe it was his twins. Still, in the quiet peace of this room, everything seemed closer and anything seemed possible.

Anakin woke a few hours later to Obi-Wan convulsing in his arms, gasping for breath. Panicked, he immediately called for the medical staff.

The good news was that it was just a withdrawal symptom of the painkiller that Obi-Wan had been taking and could be dealt with very easily; the bad news was that gossip spread quickly, and by mid-morning a surprising number of people knew that Obi-Wan had been sleeping in Anakin’s bed. Though the facts themselves were very innocent, there were a few colorful rumors; especially with the intrigue and taboo around the “unattached” nature of the Jedi, it was more interesting to speculate about the former Master-Padawan pair than the average sentients on base.

Anakin, never having had any relationship that was common knowledge, found himself surprisingly shy about the idea of people knowing about them; Obi-Wan, who was on his feet even though he was still achingly tired, was simply acting as though everything was completely normal.

When he bumped into Anakin after lunch, he smiled easily though his pallor was slightly ashen. The younger Jedi frowned and reached over to steady him, but Obi-Wan gently shrugged off his hand. “I’m all right… just a bit tired.”

“You were having seizures last night,” Anakin reminded him, as if he had forgotten.

Obi-Wan didn’t look to see if anyone was around, but Anakin felt when Obi-Wan reached out to see who was nearby. He didn’t know why, but Obi-Wan’s self-consciousness made him feel more awkward than being overheard would have; he hadn’t said anything wrong. It wasn’t as though he’d made reference to the fact that Obi-Wan had been wrapped up in his arms, or that he’d been hoping to have a leisurely make-out in the morning when they woke up.

“I know… but they have corrected the chemicals in my system and there’s really no excuse for just lying about,” Obi-Wan shrugged with a little smile. “It feels good to be out of bed and exploring the base.”

“Oh… yeah. Did you know that there are clones here? With no chips?”
“No… that’s curious,” Obi-Wan said, surprised.

“Yeah… Caleb shot one. Not fatally… but… yeah. That’s something that happened yesterday.”

Obi-Wan sucked in a quick breath. “Well.”

“He was scared. He panicked. No one ever told him that his feelings weren’t just going to go away, or that he couldn’t just… meditate to be normal again,” Anakin said a little defensively, finding himself protective of both Caleb and of his own indirect vulnerability.

Sensing that it was a tender subject, Obi-Wan just nodded.

“Thank you for taking care of him,” he said, knowing intuitively that Anakin’s insight came from the fact that he had been the one to handle the fallout of Caleb’s panic.

“Yeah… well. I wish someone had talked to me about that sort of stuff,” he replied. Just as quickly, he realized how Obi-Wan would take his comment and regretted saying it, so he tried to soften his words slightly by adding, “The Jedi were supposed to be peacekeepers… you know? There was just no training for us.”

Obi-Wan nodded again, feeling the two rapid shifts in his companion as he quickly went from frustration to remorse. He smiled slightly, wanting to put him at ease. “No… I was similarly ill-prepared. Before you say it - no, I don’t need to rest. But sitting down and talking for a little while seems like just what the doctor ordered… and I’ve hardly spoken to you since we arrived.”

Anakin agreed. “I still don’t think you should be on your feet.”

Obi-Wan chuckled and gestured for him to accompany him down to one of the rec rooms used by the base soldiers. Anakin walked with him partway, until he realized that his lover was trying to keep everything above board and highly public to try to curtail the rumors about them. Otherwise, he would have certainly invited him to one of their rooms to talk. That made him self-conscious again, as though Obi-Wan felt that they were doing something wrong.

He stopped walking. “I’d rather talk in private… if we’re going to talk about what happened between us on the way here.”

“Anakin…” he murmured.

“Come on… it’s a personal discussion, I don’t want to sit in some base community room,” he said, knowing Obi-Wan wouldn’t refute the logic of that.

Obi-Wan sighed, then nodded. “Of course. We can talk in my room.”

“Thanks,” Anakin said, smiling quickly and steering Obi-Wan back toward his room. All four of the Jedi had rooms in the same hallway of the sparsely populated base; Anakin’s room was just beside his former Master’s, whose was right across from Quinlan’s and kitty-corner to Caleb’s.

He waited beside Obi-Wan as he keyed in his room’s passcode, then opened the door for Anakin to walk in first. Once inside the room, Anakin pressed him back against the closed door and kissed him lingeringly. Obi-Wan allowed the kiss, but he did nip his tongue playfully and push him off before he could get too involved.

“I did actually bring you here to talk,” he told him, slipping out from between Anakin’s sturdy body and the solid, shiny metal door.
“Yeah, I know, but why not take advantage of the fact that we’re alone? I mean, if you’re worried people are going to talk, we may as well get up to what people will think we’re doing anyway….”

Obi-Wan sighed. “And what, you want people to know now?”

“Well, would it really be so bad?”

The older Jedi didn’t really have a ready response for him; it had never occurred to him that Anakin would want public disclosure of their relationship. They had spent so long in secrecy that Obi-Wan had forgotten that it wasn’t normal - hiding their closeness and their physicality from the clones, from Ahsoka, and from the rest of the Jedi had become second nature. He didn’t even think he knew how to love someone in the open.

“It’s just… overwhelming,” he said, trying to pick words that were true but wouldn’t upset his lover. “I am still struggling with admitting to myself and to you the depth of my feelings without an audience.”

“An audience? You didn’t seem to have a problem kissing Vos in front of me and Caleb.”

“First, I was on a lot of pain medication-”

“He wasn’t.”

“-and he is only a friend.”

“A friend you’ve been kriffing since you were Padawan,” Anakin pointed out. He didn’t want to argue, but for some reason he couldn’t seem to shut up.

“Anakin!” Obi-Wan exclaimed, reddening slightly. “Why is this bothering you all of the sudden? You and I have never even discussed any sort of… you were married to Padme while you were with me and this was never a problem.”

Caught out on his hypocrisy, Anakin didn’t quite know what to reply. He dropped his gaze to the side for a moment, then looked back up to Obi-Wan, determined not to seem embarrassed. “I just… I need you more now. More than he does.”

Obi-Wan, frustrated, retorted, “He’s alone too-”

He cut himself off, then held his breath for a moment. Feeling slightly dramatic, he held up a hand to Anakin as he fished in his jacket pocket with the other to pull out a small brassy-metal breathing apparatus. Anakin thought it resembled the devices that Jedi often carried to breathe underwater, though as Obi-Wan lifted it to his mouth and drew two deep breaths, he realized that it was concentrating the oxygen in their air for his use.

The interruption was good for Obi-Wan emotionally as well; feeling more centered, he reached over and took Anakin’s hands, then tilted his head up to meet Anakin’s stormy blue gaze.

“Anakin… no matter who else even exists in the universe, it doesn’t change that you are first in my heart.”

Anakin sighed and pulled away to instead put his arms around Obi-Wan’s neck and hug him tightly. He hated that he needed these reassurances, or that he was always looking for a fight; he hated the yawning chasm that filled his chest. He hated that he was always afraid, and that his fear came out as anger or neediness. He wanted more than anything to just believe when someone said they they loved him or that they would stay or that everything would be all right. That wasn’t the
dark side; that was just him. It had been him for as long as he could remember.

“I know… I just…”

“I promise that it’s the truth. Quinlan is my friend, but you are my lover and my beloved.”

There was the word beloved again. Something about it settled Anakin’s fretful heart and gave him something almost tangible to hold on to. He hugged Obi-Wan again, crushing him tightly enough in his metal arms that he heard the older man wheeze.

“Oh, sorry, sorry…” he murmured, kissing his cheek before he released him.

Obi-Wan rolled his injured shoulder, then gestured for Anakin to sit down on the bed. “Come on, then. Let’s talk… there are a few things we should discuss.”

The way he said it made Anakin’s heart beat a little faster, but he yanked off his snug, comfortable boots and flopped down onto Obi-Wan’s perfectly-made bed as though he didn’t have a care in the world, as though he half-expected that his lover was going to soliloquize on his good looks and then ride his cock. Inside, though, he knew that ‘things we should discuss’ were never good, and that this conversation was going to be stressful even if it went perfectly.

Obi-Wan neatly paired his boots and set them beside the bed, then repeated the gesture for Anakin’s sad-looking slumped footwear. He settled lightly on the bed beside Anakin, though he leaned comfortably against the minimalist headboard rather than lying down.

“Anakin… what happened on the ship, on the way here?”

The blond was silent for a moment, trying again to sort through the jumble of images in his mind that accompanied that surreal time between when Obi-Wan passed out and when they arrived on Dantooine. None of it seemed logical or coherent; intuitively, he knew that because of that he should have mistrusted what happened and Obi-Wan’s survival. However, sitting so close that he could feel the edges of their Force signatures crackling against each other, he couldn’t summon any emotions other than pride and relief.

“I… don’t really know.”

“What do you mean?” Obi-Wan asked carefully.

“I can’t describe it. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Try,” he said, reaching over and smoothing Anakin’s hair.

Anakin took a deep breath, then tried to just explain as the words came into his mind. “There was… I don’t know. You passed out… and I just… panicked. But I was also weirdly calm at the time? I don’t know. I just… I can’t really remember. All I remember was thinking about the Force and thinking of it being like water… I know, it sounds stupid. But like, it was leaving you… dripping out… and your life was just… going out into the Force. And I was siphoning it back in, and trying to pull in more from the Force with it. There was all of this… I don’t know. I don’t know, I can’t describe it. It was like there was this ocean of energy around us that no one cared about, no one was using… and I just… I was kind of stealing from it, for you. I was taking a bit from me, sometimes…”

Obi-Wan nodded, his gaze fixed hazily on something on the other side of the room as he tried to match up what Anakin was saying to what he knew of the Force. It didn’t sound like anything that he had ever known as a Jedi.
“That… is very powerful Force manipulation, Anakin.”

“Yeah… I guess.”

“Where did you learn it?”

“I have no idea, I just sort of did it.”

“So… Palpatine didn’t teach it to you?”

“What?” Anakin asked, surprised. “No! I just sort of did it. I asked the Force for help and I could feel everything…”

“I’ve never heard of a Jedi doing that,” Obi-Wan admitted.

Anakin could feel the implications there, that it wasn’t something that Jedi did. That there was something dark about manipulating life and death, and that it was probably not a power than a light-side Force user should be playing around with. He could feel that it scared his former Master, but he still couldn’t find it in himself to regret what he had done; he didn’t think that Obi-Wan wanted him to regret it, even if Obi-Wan was probably duty-bound to tell him that he shouldn’t have done it. Dogma said that he should have let Obi-Wan drown in that ocean of life energy and become part of it, but as far as Anakin was concerned, dogma could go kriff a Sith.

So he just shrugged and turned on his side to look up at Obi-Wan.

“It wasn’t time to let go,” he told him with surprising confidence.

Obi-Wan smoothed Anakin’s hair again, this time brushing it back from his temple so that he could look at the stark, sterling-white hair threaded through the dusty gold curls. He sighed, then leaned down and kissed his temple, then the corner of his eye. He couldn’t help but be moved by someone who would command the Force and subdue death itself for him; he had never been so loved, and he didn’t know if he could ever love anyone that powerfully.

“What will you let me go when it is?”

The words were jarring; Anakin knew that it was about attachment and it all harkened back to his fall. If he had been willing to let Padme go, he wouldn’t have been so susceptible to the call of the darkness. His love made him powerful, able to do incredible things, but it also made him foolish. Selfish. Easily led and easy taken advantage of. He would have done anything to save Padme, and he would have literally destroyed the balance of the universe if it would have saved Obi-Wan.

Even knowing this, he was powerless to change his own heart; he loved too deeply and he fell too hard. He needed too much, and he held on too tightly.

“I don’t know.”

Obi-Wan sighed, then slid down in bed beside him so that they were curled up on their sides, face to face. There was a softer edge to him, as though that torn-silk inside was openly exposed; there was confusion and fear, loneliness and need. He watched Anakin with tired eyes; for just a moment, Anakin saw how young he really was. Obi-Wan wasn’t even forty yet, and beneath his beard and his stern expression he was just a man who had spent most of his life making decisions that should have been left to much older, much wiser men who had much, much more experience. Obi-Wan, for all his wisdom, had simply done his best against terrible odds and it had aged him unfairly.
“There will come a time when you will have to let me go… or that I will have to let you go. And you need to remember, Anakin, that we will meet again in the Force as long as you remain in the light.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“It’s important,” Obi-Wan insisted in his firm, quiet way. “Attachment-”

“Attachment!” Anakin groaned. “Love, Obi-Wan! I love you. You love me, even if you never come out and say it-”

“What it’s called isn’t the point,” he said firmly. “Anakin… I don’t know if what happened on the ship was a Sith magic or not… but… I’m worried for you, and I am worried for how vulnerable I have made you by caring for you as I do.”

“I’m fine. I’m strong, I’m in control,” the younger Jedi said. He paused, then said, “Vos wants you to tell me to let him help me, doesn’t he?”

“I want you to let him help you,” Obi-Wan said quietly.

“Why? Are you afraid of me now or something? I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“No, you didn’t…”

“You just want to go back to being Jedi, no ‘attachments,’” Anakin said bitingly, his expression darkening. “That’s what he’s going to tell me, isn’t it? That I can’t be a Jedi and stay with the light as long as I’m in love with you, and you’re so kriiffing brainwashed by the system that you’re like yeah that makes sense.”

“Anakin, nothing is going to stop me from feeling as I do-”

“From loving me-”

“But Quinlan does know the dark side, and he does know the ways-”

“It’s not exactly like he just came trotting back to the light - he wasn’t going to give up Ventress, he wasn’t sorry,” Anakin protested. “She just died, and he had nowhere to go except back to what he knew. He didn’t want to give up feeling things-”

“And he hasn’t,” Obi-Wan interrupted, frustrated. “Anakin, the problem is not attachment - or love, if that’s the word that you want to hear. The problem is control. Remember? A s we discussed before, you can feel anger or frustration… but you need to be able to control how those feelings affect you, and put limits on what you will do in anger. Love is like that. You need to find the limits for your love.”

“There is no limit for love, love is… why don’t Jedi understand that love is the light side of the Force?”

Obi-Wan sighed, and turned onto his back. He pulled out his breathing device and took a few long, slightly painful breaths, then just stared up at the unadorned metal ceiling.

“Love is, undeniably. But you can do - and have done! - very dark things to protect it… Because for you, love and fear can’t be separated. That is what you need to talk to Quinlan about, and that is the peace that you need to find. I am far too compromised to teach you those lessons.”
Anakin thought of all of the ways that Obi-Wan didn’t say that he loved him; instead he said that he was attached, that he was compromised. He made obvious implications without saying the words. Did he not want to say it? Was it pride, indifference? He knew that it was hard for Obi-Wan, but it was hard for him not to hear it. It wasn’t enough now to dance around the words; how could Obi-Wan mean something that he was too afraid to even put into words? How could he lecture him about fear?

“I don’t want to give up how I feel for you,” Anakin said. “And… I don’t… want you to want me to.”

“You’re not hearing me,” Obi-Wan said quietly. “I don’t want to lose the… bond that we have. I promise you that I don’t. I want for you to be free of the fear of losing love, or of being left alone.”

Anakin looked away, understanding what Obi-Wan meant but still feeling raw at the prospect of being separated from his lover. He was still afraid that with more training, he would feel differently for Obi-Wan, or that Obi-Wan would feel differently for him. He was afraid that Obi-Wan wanted him to let go.

“Anakin… I want for us to be together. It isn’t that. I always feel you, and now I feel you even more, so strongly. I feel you here,” Obi-Wan said, touching his own chest over his heart. “Especially now that your life seems to be a part of mine.”

The younger man sighed and seemed to fold inward. He closed his eyes and let Obi-Wan reach out to pull him closer. He felt the warmth and the connection, and he felt that extra resonance between them that he recognized now as the faint echo of his own Force signature fortifying Obi-Wan’s. He felt like if he just opened himself up completely, he could be more connected to his companion than he had ever been before.

Doing so, though, could expose any of his lingering darkness and the secrets that he was still guarding. One big secret in particular, a vision that terrified him. A vision that would make Obi-Wan recoil in horror. He would never be able to look him in the eye again if Obi-Wan knew what some version of himself wanted to do to him; Obi-Wan could never love him this way, this openly, if he knew that he had seen himself mutilating and consuming him, taking everything in his mind and heart to make him his own, taking everything from his broken body as he humiliated and tortured him through the last moments of his life.

“I’ll think about it… I will. I’ll consider it,” he said quietly, letting Obi-Wan hold him though he didn’t put his arms around him to return the gesture.

He wanted to yield himself up completely and solicit kisses and tender words from his lover, but shame made him close off his heart as though it was somehow forbidden. He felt dirty, with Obi-Wan opening himself up to him even as he shoved this secret down deeper.

That kriffing blue lightsaber. Quinlan fucking Vos.

He pulled away after a moment and said, stumbling through his words, “I… I need to get out for a bit. It’s not you, totally me. You should rest here.”

From there, it was a blur from putting on his boots to slipping out into the hallway and down to the hangar. Instead of working on one of his many repair projects, he found himself gravitating toward his other great love and natural talent. He had access to all of the fighters and the sleek little ships that were being smuggled into the Rebellion, and he had a particular bond with a little A-wing fighter whose hyperdrive he had just repaired the previous morning.
Before he knew it, he was signing it out and slipping into the cockpit. He just needed to clear his head, he needed to do some loops and rolls, spectacular aerial artistry that only he could pull off. He needed to lose himself in the Force rather than his feelings.

Before he knew it, he had left the atmosphere and immersed himself in the starry void. He felt like he could breathe again there.

Chapter End Notes

For the first time since probably Christmas, I have actually gotten ahead writing - I have a chapter and a half more written already, which is good because the part I'm writing is really rather dark and somewhat difficult to write. (Insert ominous music here.) That said, I am potentially in the home stretch of finishing this fic within maybe 4-5 chapters... and I need to make some decisions in terms of how far I'm going to take this, if I want to make it into a series... or tie it off with a somewhat open ending and let it go. I guess... maybe it's a weird question, but how much of this are you guys interested in reading?
Anakin hadn’t intended to travel far, but once he had left Dantooine it seemed easier to just keep going. He wasn’t running away from the Jedi, nor did he intend to leave them behind for long; things just always made more sense in the cockpit of something that was fast and armed to the teeth. At the moment, he needed to think and he needed the clarity of a parsec or two’s distance from his problems.

He felt the weight lift as the distance grew. His bond with Obi-Wan stretched thin until he could no longer feel him in the Force; the quiet was disorienting now, but the sting of sudden loneliness was a welcome alternative to the fear of exposure.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, letting himself feel the currents of the Force about the hull of the small fighter-class ship. The same flow of energy passed through him and became something else on impact with his blood and breath, then passed on to become something new on its collisions with stars.

Things were going to be all right.

He felt himself relaxing through the physical meditation of flight. Without jumping to hyperspace, there were no planets within easy reach, but this region of the Outer Rim was dotted with small starports that welcomed travelers and offered lodging and refueling venues; almost in a Force-meditative trance, Anakin flew for hours until he came to a starport that felt safe.

Docked but still mentally drifting, he paused beside the customs officer and drew himself down to focus on where he was. The port was bustling with travelers, from commercial pilots to families traveling to visit relatives to low-key smugglers. The mood was different from many of the ports he’d frequented lately - cleaner, safer, and more transitory. The only sentients who lived here were the ones who worked at the station, which gave the large port a cool, falsely welcoming feeling and made it hard to stay in the moment.

Feeling isolated and anonymous brought a melancholy sense of freedom; without the judgment of anyone he knew, Anakin hired a pale blue Twi’lek girl for an hour and fucked her with all of his clothes still on. It was dirty and nothing that he would normally want, but it was a certain kind of cathartic to have her moaning his false name and making faces as she bounced enthusiastically on his cock, like she was in some kind of exquisite rapture rather than just providing a paid service. With his gloved hands he touched her all over, cupping her soft breasts as he kissed her throat and inhaled her heady, aquatic perfume. That moan was the most sincere of any of them, though that didn’t say much.

She was nothing like Obi-Wan or Padme, though his mind still drew comparisons to the differences. How much more reserved Padme was even when she was openly loving him and demanding more, how much more vulnerable Obi-Wan was when he yielded to Anakin’s bolder advances. There was nothing reserved, sweet, or vulnerable about the girl in his lap and he focused on that, reveled in that, until he came with a satisfied groan.

She invited him to stay, as he’d been told that the girls in starports often did. It was just a way to earn extra tips, sometimes an offer of steadier employment, but it came couched in an endearingly
“Why don't you stay awhile, gorgeous?”

He didn't, though. With a grin, he tossed out the condom and fastened his trousers, then headed downstairs for a drink. Being drugged on Dhirrod had turned him off of Dorian Quill, so he ordered a shot of Prenlivet and chased it with a bitter packet of travel inoculation powder; he’d learned from the more adventurous clones that it was the best way not to bring anything home from an indiscretion off-base.

The chemical mixed with the alcohol to leave a sandy, bitter copper texture on his tongue that reminded him of spitting out a mouthful of blood in the desert on Tatooine. That hadn't been nearly so long ago as it seemed now; his mostly-healed ribs, still the faintest bit tender, throbbed once at the memory of Obi-Wan holding him down and grinding his face into the sand.

He ordered another drink, lighter and sweeter, then decided to stay in one of the capsule hotels that he and Obi-Wan had always joked reminded them of coffins.

Sexually sated and warmed by the alcohol, he dreamt of the Clone Wars and of flying side-by-side with Ahsoka. It wasn’t right exactly, not in the details; somehow they were also walking on a frozen planet and she was wearing that jacket with the two ridiculous little pom-poms perched at the tips of her mandrels. He was happy to be with her, though she was being terribly annoying. It was a familiar annoying that he had missed, though in his dream he hadn’t been separated from her and didn’t know she missed him. At some point they were going to meet up with Obi-Wan and Master Plo, but he surfaced from sleep just enough to lose the dream. He tried to hold on to it, half-wakefully trying to push it along to see the two masters, but the effort woke him entirely.

Momentarily disoriented in a “room” no bigger than the bunks on the ship that he and Obi-Wan had shared, Anakin panicked for just a moment before placing himself within the galaxy and within the Force. He was on the Bellaro Starport. He sighed and tried to quiet his pounding heart, wanting to sleep a bit longer before his flight back to Dantooine.

Obi-Wan was going to be pissed about his joyride, but that didn't hold his attention. He didn’t feel guilty about the prostitute either, just generically pathetic. He was tired of thinking about love, loss, and his own horrible nature. He instead thought about his former Padawan. He recalled the time she'd offered to let him touch one of her mandrels because he had asked her what they felt like, if they were just smooth like skin or if they had a different texture. He had, of course, awkwardly taken her up on it and she'd giggled a little (which was something she almost never did) as he'd said, sounding a little disappointed, that they just felt a like slightly firmer skin. For some reason, it had seemed surprising that they were warm.

It was a strange memory, but she'd thought it was so funny and she'd actually laughed about it. In turn, she'd asked to touch his hair, then complimented him by saying he was slightly softer than a Wookiee.

He dozed off again, falling into another dream through Padme of the twins. All told, it was the fourth of its kind. This one, however was unique in that it was daytime and the view he observed was active and warm. The sun was shining through an open window and the babies, more alert now at just past three months, were more aware of some of the things in their world. Leia belligerently stared at the gently fluttering curtain while Luke smiled happily as Padme made faces at him.

It was idyllic in its safety and simplicity. Anakin realized at some point that he was awake, aware of his own place in his bed, and he was simply watching. He felt a thrill of joy that almost made him lose his hold on the vision.
He watched for the better part of an hour, wishing to see more than just this room but still content to be so close to this quiet moment.

“Padme?” a man’s voice said from the doorway behind her.

Anakin felt a flare of jealousy until Padme turned her head and through her eyes his vision shifted to the familiar, welcoming face of Bail Organa.

He was so startled by the sudden recognition that it completely jarred him out of his focus; the vision vanished like a soap bubble on a pin, leaving Anakin staring blankly at the ceiling that was hardly a meter from his face.

Alderaan. Force! They're on Alderaan.

With Bail Organa’s presence to tie the scenes together, he knew for certain where they were. He knew the way that the beautiful green and blue planet felt; he’d been there several times. After the bitter hostility of dry, gritty Tatooine, Alderaan had seemed like as much of a paradise to him as Naboo. It would have been impossible to forget what it smelled like and what the sky through the windows had looked like.

Overwhelmed by longing and still half-drunk, he struggled fitfully back into his boots and jacket, then shoved his lightsaber back into the oversized blaster holster. His breathing was quick and slightly panicked as he unlocked his capsule room and shimmied down the narrow ladder to the duracrete tile below.

His hands were actually shaking, but he was grinning, elated. He could think of nothing that would make him happier than seeing his twins. Even if Padme never wanted to see him again, he knew she wouldn’t be so cruel as to deny him his children. He imagined Leia’s determined little face and the unfocused warmth of Luke’s smile. He was practically giddy as he refueled his fighter, then climbed up into the cockpit.

Alderaan was in the core systems, which were a hotbed of Imperial activity. Really, proximity to Coruscant made it a strange choice as a safe haven, but hiding in plain sight seemed like the sort of thing that Padme would enjoy. She was a chameleon in different clothing, and if she mostly stayed out of sight and changed her appearance when she went out, no one would ever suspect that she was a famous woman who had been reported dead.

The location did present a challenge for travel, but Anakin considered few things to be impossible. He was daring and brave, a fine pilot and a powerful Force user. And though the hyperdrive condensed everything to just dots and points, one tiny ship was easy to lose in a star system. One man was easy to lose in a city, much less on a planet. With his fleet, economical little fighter, he could shoot across in one of the minor hyperlanes to the Hydian Way, he could slip right in and hop off just a comparatively little way from Alderaan. The engines were perfectly maintained and the injectors optimized; he’d just done the work himself, so he knew the ship was sound. It would have been easier with an astromech for the calculations, but if he could just get to the Way, the math would get substantially easier because most of the coordinates were pre-set.

Practically crowing, he shot off again into the blackness of space, then vanished into the starry, brilliant blur of hyperspace.
XXXIII. Saint Anakin

By the time Anakin reached the edge of the Core Systems, he had come to his senses and was filled with a different sort of urgency. Dread. Surfacing from his own cloud of alcohol, loneliness, and manic enthusiasm, he had realized rather abruptly that this was a horrible idea.

It would be totally in keeping with who he was, though, to lead the Empire straight to his estranged wife and children. Anakin Kriffing Skywalker, Patron Saint of Bad Decisions.

Slightly numb, he shot past the Core and only dropped out of hyperspace after he was once again safely on the other side Outer Rim. The hyperroute had taken him to the opposite edge of the galaxy, somewhere between his childhood home and Padme’s home planet. Looking at his fuel gauge, he knew that couldn't just turn around and zip back to Dantooine; he would need to refuel before could even begin to consider crossing the breadth of the galaxy again. Somehow, he always ended up here, in spitting distance of the same cluster of systems that had been so instrumental in his upbringing and his downfall. It was on this edge of the galaxy that he had become a slave, become a Jedi, fallen in love, and fallen apart. There was a beautiful symmetry to it all that was almost nauseating.

“I am so stupid,” he breathed, pressing his palm to his face.

He idled the engine so that he could consider a plan, looking out at the blackness of space through the spaces between his fingers.

So stupid.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another ship drop out of hyperspace beside him and realized that someone had followed him. The Force signature was familiar, but no one he knew; that meant, quite obviously, that it was a clone. He wasn’t sure how or when he had picked up the tail, but he could deal with it easily enough.

The other ship hailed him.

“Your ship’s registration is false; identify yourself,” the clone said.

Looking closer, Anakin could pick out the wing markings that identified the other ship as a Central Systems Security Guard; the attention he’d grabbed passing through the middle of the galaxy hadn’t been specifically for him. Any unregistered fighter-class ship would have caught the attention of the patrols as it passed through the Hydian Way. It was exactly why smugglers usually avoided the Core or paid top-credit for the most convincing ship codes available.

Clearly, the Rebellion was running a low budget operation.

Anakin sighed, checking both his armory and his fuel to decide if he wanted to take down the other ship or just bolt.

In the pause before he answered, five more ships appeared to back up the first. Despite that he had seen hundreds, maybe thousands, of ships drop of out of hyperspace, the suddenness of their arrivals still felt like magic.

Six to one was still pretty good odds, though he also tempered that opinion with the knowledge that these clones were trained fighter pilots in much sharper ships. There was also the fact that there were an unknown number of ships available for pursuit, and the more attention that he drew to
himself, the bigger this problem would become.

“Name’s Rando Silkspur,” Anakin replied on the open frequency. “Just heading home. Bought the fighter in a scrap shop on Taris - you saying the regs aren’t legit?”

“Afraid not.”

“Of all the karking luck.”

“Sir, I’m going to ask you to put your drive into neutral and allow us to call an impound vehicle so that we may bring your ship aboard and run the serial numbers.”

*Must be a Coruscant clone; he’s so polite.* Anakin mused. He considered his options, the nearest planets, starports, and hyperspace lanes. The A-wing’s on-board computer was adequate, but mapping a route to the major lanes and hyperroutes would take several minutes and might be obvious if they were scanning. There was also the fact that he didn’t want to just lead them back to Dantooine.

If he was doing to lead anyone anywhere, or if he was going to maroon himself anywhere, the best place in the immediate vicinity was going to be Naboo. If he was captured, he could think of a dozen excuses why he would have gone to his wife’s planet, from the sentimental to the mercenary. If he managed to land and hide out, he did have allies in both the human and Gungan ruling parties.

Well, he did before, anyway. There was also the disconcerting fact that he was considering heading to the Emperor’s home planet, which was no doubt up there with today’s other Bad Ideas.

“Sure... hold on. I’m still a little unsure of the controls,” Anakin replied, affecting a slightly flustered tone as he put the engines into neutral. He reached over and keyed in the coordinates for an exit point just above Naboo’s watery blue surface, then set the calculations to run.

*Please be fast, little ship. Come on, I worked on you for hours. We’re friends.*

The guard ships moved in closer to him, no doubt communicating with each other even as they were silent over the open frequency. After a moment, a larger, boxier ship that Anakin recognized as a small, repurposed transport appeared beside the ship on point. There was only a moment or so longer before the tractor beam snagged him, and once that happened he was royally kriffed; he didn’t have any identification on him to speak of, even fake identification. Even if he had, his face was well known to the clones and to the inner factions of the Empire; if he was taken on board, it was a one-way ticket to Palpatine.

The ships moved in closer, setting up a perimeter about him to herd him back toward the transport. As the panel slid back on the side of the bigger ship and the beam canon extended like a beckoning finger, Anakin held his breath and willed his ship’s computer to work faster.

One beam tacked loosely to his left wing. Just before the second, balancing beam caught on to the opposite wing and sealed the connection, the calculations finished. He immediately fired up the engines and kicked off, jerking out of the other ship’s tenuous hold and accelerating at a breakneck speed until everything around them bled into a white blur.

Anakin’s hands on the controls were tight; his steely grip was firm enough that he was actually crushing the internal frame of the throttle.

He was fast, one of the sharpest pilots in the galaxy, but he was out in the open aside from some miscellaneous debris scattered above the atmosphere. There was nowhere to hide and nowhere to
go but down through the atmosphere.

Unfortunately, his pursuers had gotten a hold on his trajectory and were only a few seconds behind him. He hated to run, but he knew that he’d do better hiding than exposing his distinctive piloting skills and bringing in the whole of the airborne 212th.

As it was, the beautifully targeted shots skimming his wings made it clear that they had no idea who he was and were shooting to kill. A quick barrel roll, then a slightly showy dip and flick allowed him to gain a bit of air and avoid a larger cannon blast.

_I should just let them kill me. I don’t know why I keep running. I should have died on Mustafar_, he thought as he persistently fought to stay alive. It was the first time he’d been on the receiving end of clone fire and it was almost shocking how _good_ they were and how effortlessly they moved together as a unit.

More than ever, Anakin was stunningly aware of the fact that the Jedi really didn’t stand a chance with a clone army bent on their extermination.

He accelerated, coming in hot through the atmosphere. He was going far too fast and he knew it, but the troopers behind him were keeping pace and taking increasingly targeted shots. He began to pull up to change his angle, knowing that otherwise he’d meet the planet’s surface head-on within seconds.

In the half-second’s distraction, a shot caught the left engine and sent him into an uncontrolled spin. Knowing that quick action was the only thing that could save his life, he pulled the air mask more snugly up around his nose and mouth, checked its connections to his flight suit, and ejected from the ship.

He fell fast, arms tucked close and compact to his body, outpacing the fall of his now-unmanned ship. He watched with a grimace as the pursuing ships shot it down; in the oxygen-rich atmosphere, the explosion was fantastic.

Anakin waited as long as he could to deploy his parachute, and several moments later came to a jarring landing on his hands and knees. Overhead, the Central Systems patrolmen did several fly-bys to scout for him, knowing that he was exposed in the tall grasses with his brilliant white parachute billowing out like smoke from where it was anchored to his flight suit.

He took a deep breath, then unclipped the carabiner that connected it to his suit and took off at a run for the treeline. The oxygen provided by his mask fortified him as he bolted; he was fleet-footed even on his awkward prosthetics, which had by now been modified to a passable standard of mobility. A cannon bolt from above narrowly missed him, sending him sprawling. He caught himself on his palms and pushed himself back up; just as quickly he was on his feet and racing to avoid the rapid-fire rounds of smaller caliber blaster fire raining down from above.

Without thinking, he let his training take over; his Jedi agility and strength, along with the very slight precognition that had always enhanced his daredevil piloting, allowed him to outmaneuver and outrun the targeted shots as though his adversaries were moving in slow motion.

Safe under the canopy of trees, he kept running until his lungs burned and his thigh bones throbbed from the impact of his metal feet contacting with the damp, packed ground.

He slowed and reached up to yank off his helmet and breathing mask, sending both to the ground with a dull thump. He slumped, almost collapsing, at the base of one of the thick trees with his hand pressed to his chest. For all that he had believed his body had healed, he was nowhere near as
fit or strong as he had been before; he ached deeply and his cheeks blazed with the heat of exertion.

“Fuck,” he gasped, lifting his eyes to the canopy above.

He was stranded on the opposite side of the Outer Rim without any means of contacting the outside for help. He had also given himself away during his rapid escape; the athletic twists and spring-loaded bounds would have identified him immediately as Jedi, even if his helmet had otherwise preserved his anonymity. There would definitely be other troopers after him, and it was only a matter of time before he was either killed or captured.

He idly fidgeted with the hilt of his lightsaber, briefly considering pressing it to his heart and igniting the blade. It would be better for everyone if he was dead; at this point he was a liability, a weapon, and an all-around waste of midichlorians.

However, he was also a fighter. As the adrenaline ebbed, leaving him burned out and exhausted, he began to formulate a plan: he wasn't above stealing a ship, either through force or a successful mind trick. All he had to do was keep his head down and avoid detection long enough to get to civilization. Hopefully he could do so before any of his allies on Dantooine tracked him here and put themselves in the line of fire.

He pushed himself to his feet, stiff and resolute, and let himself feel the ground and the movement of life about him through the Force. He tried to shove down his self-recrimination and doubt, knowing it would only cloud his path and sap his strength. Now more than ever, he needed to follow the path of the light.

All the same, he couldn't help but feel like the most foolish sentient in the galaxy.

XXXIV. Choices

He walked for a day and a half before a city’s sprawl began to encroach on the pastoral green lands. He was hungry, tired, and badly bruised from his rough landing, but oddly peaceful. Though he wove his way through several farms and back into forest, there were no appropriately equipped ships to steal; apparently the country folk of Naboo didn't have much use for interstellar travel.

He had left his flight suit behind in the woods, leaving him clad in his nondescript dark leathers and beat-up, travel-soft cottons. He was dirty and smelled like the wrong end of a tauntaun, or at least like some kind of salty, musky, unsavory stew that he would have avoided in a sketchy starport.

When he slept, his mind was clear of dreams.

A day and a half was a long time to do nothing but walk alone, but it gave him a lot of uninterrupted time to think.

He remembered the first time he'd come to Naboo, and then again when he'd stood and watched Qui-Gon's body burn. It had been ghastly to see his hair and clothes burn away first, then to watch his flesh smolder and blister; he'd held on to Obi-Wan’s robes, unable to look away. He’d felt his new Master breaking inside and reached to take his hand to comfort him, and the simplicity of human comfort had surprised the new Knight. Looking back on it now, he realized that it was likely the first comfort of that sort that Obi-Wan had received; the Jedi focus on “rejoining the
"Force" seemed to gloss over grief. His new Master had picked him up and held him, and after a few moments they'd both finally turned away somehow different from the rest of the Jedi in attendance. From then on, their path progressed together though they fell out of step, stumbled and parted to meet again several times.

The next time he was on Naboo, he'd won Padme through persistence that he now realized was genuinely inappropriate. He still wasn't sure how it had worked, though he didn't doubt her sincerity; Padme, as he learned, made few compromises. Weeks later, newly orphaned, recently baptized in blood, and wearing an awkward metal hand, he married her and tried to hang all of his future happiness around her neck.

What a strange balance he eventually found between the two of them, and how relieved they must have been to share the intensity of his love. He couldn't have all of either of them, due to duty or their own reservations, but the two together could love him almost enough; he gave himself fully to both of them, even knowing that both were creatures of reason rather than passion.

He found himself thinking about what Obi-Wan had said in the desert, about taking them both and leaving the Order. Padme would have never given up her role in politics, but it was a warm fantasy and he enjoyed the soft melancholy that ached in his chest when he thought about it. He thought about a lot of the things that had been said and shared in the desert; his memories of those weeks seemed disjointed and surreal. The violence that they had inflicted upon each other seemed like it had happened to other people - when he had forced his will on Obi-Wan, when Obi-Wan had beaten him and nearly smothered him in the sand. Obi-Wan wasn’t innocent, but he could see now how he had pushed and taken. It was self-indulgent to wallow in thoughts of his lovers, but there was no one there to judge him for it; in any case, his thoughts moved just as quickly to memories of the war, both sad and poignantly joyful, and on to introspections on his own development and his plans for the future. He had come a long way since Mustafar, and for the first time he felt as though he was seeing himself clearly.

When he settled to rest through the strongest of the midday heat, his body suddenly made it known that his muscles were tired, and the juncture points between his thighs and prosthetics ached. He was exhausted, and no amount of forceful optimism could change the fact that he had regally kriffed this one; he couldn’t even imagine what Obi-Wan was going to say when he saw him. He could only hope that his former master would be so happy to find him alive that he would abridge the lecture and let him off with a only a few succinct, biting judgments.

He laid back in the tall grain-grasses, knowing that they masked him from view in all directions. There were probably all sorts of tiny, biting insects, but it was easier not to think about that; for now, he just needed to rest; up until this point, meditation had only taking the edge off of his hunger and his strength was beginning to flag.

A familiar voice echoed through his thoughts.

*My dear boy, my errant apprentice.*

His eyes widened and he held very, very still. Even closing himself down tightly and making sure every shield was firmly in place, the Chancellor’s familiar, river-run smooth cadence permeated his mind and the rest of the world fell away.

*Now, now, don’t be like that. It’s hardly the time to play coy, I just want to talk to you, at the moment. No? I suppose that this can be a one-sided conversation, then, until you’re ready to talk.*

*I’m going to be brief, Anakin. Regardless of your time away or your dalliances with your old master, you are going to come back to me. The reason is simple; you know what you are, and you*
know that the darkness within you is going to win out. You’ve already seen it, I know you have.

How that happens will depend on you, my boy.

If you come back to me of your own volition, give yourself over to the troopers who are sweeping the area, I will ensure that you are not harmed and I will force you to maintain a safe distance between you and your… friend. I will even call off the hunters who are tracking him and that Padawan that you were spotted with on Kaller.

However, if you fight me or try to flee, I will find you and I will draw the darkness out of you. I will reduce you to little more than a wounded animal out for the blood of those who have harmed you; it will be everything you have seen for yourself and worse.

Anakin’s breathing had turned shallow and panicked; with a great effort he drew in a lungful of air and exhaled the fear that was concentrating in his belly like acid.

I’m going to give you until sunset, Anakin. At which point, I will assume that you have made your decision.

I do hope you make the right one.

All at once, the Jedi was alone again, shaking from head to toe with a combination of fury and terror. He rapidly tried to dissect what he had been told and sort out the veracity of his threats and offers; he didn’t doubt his capacity to follow through on the violence in his threats, but he likewise didn’t believe in his commitment to honor his promises. Knowing how Palpatine had worked to separate him from Obi-Wan and poison his heart against his former master in the past, he knew that the Sith Lord would never allow the Jedi Master to live; he posed too great of a threat to Palpatine’s perfect control over him. His ownership of Anakin relied on the younger man being completely alone and deprived of any support.

Regardless of what he chose, Palpatine would ensure that Obi-Wan died. If possible he would see to it that Anakin had a hand in it, and that it would push him irredeemably deeper into the darkness.

If he gave himself over to Palpatine, he also risked exposing Padme and the twins. As much as he loved Obi-Wan, he also knew that the Jedi was not defenseless; even in the worst case scenario, he stood a better chance of survival than two infants and their civilian mother. He couldn't conscience endangering them by giving in.

The only real option was to try to escape; if the moment came when there was nowhere left to go, he would fight until he fell. Lying perfectly still and just listening to the wind whistling between the tall grasses, he smirked to himself.

Make the right decision? Who did Palpatine think he was talking to?
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

XXXV.

Obi-Wan, who had thought that Anakin just needed to walk the base for a little while, felt guilty enough about his lover’s departure without Vos dragging him for it.

You just let him go?

I didn’t know he was leaving the kripping planet!

Guilty and angry. He was absolutely furious that Anakin would just take off on his own and selfishly put them all at risk. While they had become lax in their unofficial roles as guardian and semi-prisoner, Obi-Wan had felt confident that Anakin wouldn’t stray far and would always come back. Despite that he intuitively knew that his lover would return, the departure had broken a bond of trust that Obi-Wan hadn’t even realized that they had built. The betrayal made him angry, as did the absolute stupidity of Anakin casting himself out into the wilds of the galaxy alone.

As always, any anger with Anakin was tempered with self-recrimination; obviously he had done something wrong to drive Anakin away, and this situation could have been avoided if he had trained him better or supported him more. There was always a failing of his own that he could cite for Anakin’s bad choices, and for that reason anger with Anakin always bled over into anger with himself.

He made an effort to give up those emotions to the Force, but the hurt and worry stuck to his ribs even after he dismissed the anger.

Vos declared that he was going to go pick Anakin up before he got into trouble, but by the time that he secured one of the base ships they had received news that Anakin’s A-Wing had been shot down over Naboo. The tracking indicated that he had ejected before impact and that his flightsuit’s life support had remained operational for a while after he’d reached the ground. After that, it no longer registered any data, but everyone assumed that Anakin had simply discarded the suit and helmet to move faster in just his civvies.

Knowing Anakin was stranded in Empire-controlled territory, it became a more complex retrieval mission; Quinlan’s contacts within the Empire confirmed that the concentration of soldiers, including specialized units, had increased dramatically on and around Naboo. It was becoming more and more obvious that Anakin was going to be captured or killed before any of them could reach him.

When the two Jedi Masters discussed his retrieval, Caleb was excluded from the conversation; probably unfairly, they weren’t even keeping him fully apprised of the severity of the situation. Quinlan, who had a very strong intuitive understanding of the Padawan’s mental state, didn’t feel that he was stable enough to take the news without trying to come along with them. As adept as he was with a blaster, his lightsaber was still aboard the Kasmiri and a relatively inexperienced warrior was more of a liability than anything else.
“Well, we’re going to have to fetch him - he’s far too dangerous to be just given to a Sith Lord,” Vos said, shaking his dark head. The round black polyalloy beads woven into his short braids clicked pleasingly at the movement.

“And, of course, we don’t care about what happens to him as a person at all,” Obi-Wan replied drily, giving his friend a pointed look.

Quinlan snorted. “Look, we all care about him, but I’m being pragmatic. I can’t just say ‘Well, we have to fetch him because his Master’s boots-over-blaster for him.’ That’s not logical, that’s not reason enough to justify endangering anyone other than the two of us. For Sith’s sake, Kenobi, don’t be oversensitive.”

Obi-Wan sighed tiredly and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He had become unaccustomed to being separated from his former Padawan, and with the new element to their bond he felt the physical distance between them even more keenly. He dropped his hand from his face to rest it lightly against his chest.

“I know, I know. I just... worry,” he said, knowing that Quinlan would catch the heavily weighted meaning of the word.

Vos had been privy to his anxiety since they were very young, since before Obi-Wan had words to describe how he felt beyond “scared.” The older Jedi had always tried to steady him, the way that Obi-Wan had always tried to keep his friend from pushing limits too far or submersing himself too deeply in the galaxy’s darker underbelly. They had familiar old ways of protecting each other from themselves; they didn’t talk about it most of the time, and sometimes went so far as to deny that they were doing it.

“We’ll get him. Palpatine wants him alive; we know that. We’ve got time,” Vos said bracingly, reaching over and lightly rubbing his friend’s upper arm.

Obi-Wan fell silent again, thinking on all of the implications of that statement and all of the suffering that it implied. He wasn’t sure if he was more afraid of Anakin dying or Anakin falling to the dark side; he didn’t think that he could pull Anakin back a second time, nor was he certain that he wasn’t newly vulnerable to the dark side himself thanks to the Force-connection that Anakin had forged between them on the brink of death. More than anything else, he knew that he still lacked the conviction to kill his former Padawan. A golden-eyes Anakin would be the harbinger of Obi-Wan’s death; and if Anakin fell, they would not be reunited in the Force.

The thought of never being with him again was overwhelming. Obi-Wan took several uneven breaths as his friend continued to rub his arm, then his shoulder, then the back of his neck.

“Come on, Kenobi. We’ll get him before anything happens. Take a breath,” Quinlan coaxed, exerting a calming influence through the old, familiar bond that they shared. “We’ll get him.”

“I know. I’m just…”

“Stop. You’re not going to be any help at all if you can’t keep a level head. He’s a tough kid.”

“I just worry that he’ll give in to the Sith, to the darkness… out of some benighted belief that he is saving someone else by doing so. He has always loved so deeply while thinking so little of his own worth; it is the perfect recipe for foolish self-sacrifice... and Palpatine knows him so well.”

Quinlan puffed out a frustrated breath between his lips and shook his head. “You told me that you had faith in him. If you don’t…”
“I do…” he interrupted quickly, though not very convincingly. Obi-Wan tried again with more vigor, though it quickly tapered off again. “I do, but we both know what it feels like to be on the wrong side of impossible odds. There’s something deeply demotivating about being in the belly of a ship and knowing that behind every door, there will always be someone else to fight.”

“Obi-Wan Kenobi.” Vos scolded, scowling. He said his name with a hint of Qui-Gon’s accenting, that particular way a Youngling was scolded. It was intentional; he watched Obi-Wan’s eyes as he spoke. “How many ships have you fought your way off of?”

The ginger smiled a little unwillingly. “Quite a few.”

“And Anakin?”

“Almost as many.”

“Think of it this way then: ‘It’s just one more,’” Quinlan told him firmly, giving him a manly thump on the back. He smiled quickly, wanting to give him the reassurances he needed without patronizing him.

“Right, right,” Obi-Wan mused quietly. “After he’s taken, how long do you think it will take to get his new location?”

“I don’t know; it’s going to depend on how many people know. Our guys are pretty high up, but if this is admiral-level info or higher it’s going to take time.”

“Makes sense.”

“If it will be awhile…” Vos paused, trying to think of how to proceed. He decided not to sugar-coat his words, and just forged on bluntly. That had always worked out for him in the past, even if the initial delivery was rough. “If it’s going to take us long to get him out, I think we should move forward with evacuating this base. The location will be compromised if the Emperor gets into his head or manages to turn him against us again.”

Obi-Wan wanted to argue but knew better; they’d talked already about how Palpatine had gotten into Anakin’s thoughts outside of Ilum and how vulnerable the young Knight was based on the years of gradual exposure. While he knew Anakin would fight hard and he might resist the dark side, he had little chance of keeping up his defenses indefinitely. It wasn't worth endangering a whole rebel base to prove a point.

“We may want to do that as soon as he’s caught.”

Assuming he's not killed, neither of them said.

“If we do, you’re going to have to wait till they get a transport in that can travel inconspicuously and take a slower route… medical hasn’t cleared you for hyperspace travel.”

“I’ve had worse.”

“Oh yeah? Worse than losing a lung? Your blood rebalanced enough to use the Force even?”

Obi-Wan paused as a realization dawned on him. He stared at his friend. “You think I’m going to stay here while you go for Anakin.”

“You’ll get lost in his eyes or some such rubbish,” Quinlan laughed, trying to lighten the mood and postpone Obi-Wan’s inevitable high-handed tantrum. He looked away with a movement that
seemed to expect his long hair to follow, but it was gone, along with everything else that had made battles in the past easier.

“Quinlan.”

“I’m not sure I’m going to let you go.” Vos turned back to Obi-Wan, chin tipped up slightly and lower lip just barely pushed forward. An adolescent posturing that he’d never grown out of.

“Let me?”

“You heard me. You’re not cleared for travel, your shoulder is kripped to hell, your lungs are shit, and you’re emotionally compromised,” Vos said flatly. “You are a hot mess, Kenobi.”

“But Anakin doesn’t trust you,” the younger Jedi protested, smoothly ignoring his friend’s valid assessments. “If he’s on the edge, you won’t be the one to pull him back.”

“Why wouldn’t he trust me?”

“Normal people don’t like when psychometrists read their memories and delve into their secrets without asking. I mean, I didn’t like when you grabbed my satchel and knew I’d been kissing Qui-Gon,” Obi-Wan pointed out defensively, not liking the idea of the other Jedi deciding what he was and was not allowed to do.

Quinlan rolled his eyes, amazed at how long Obi-Wan could hold onto that stuff. “That was an important conversation. It was good for you. And it was good that I got so much out of his lightsaber; it helps me believe he can recover.”

“I hardly think that this is the time to explain that to him,” Obi-Wan replied drily.

“You should take Caleb and get him to the new base, make sure he’s safe and settled,” Vos said, shaking his head. “You’ve taken responsibility for him, and he can safely travel with you.”

“You can’t decide what I’m allowed to do,” Obi-Wan said, raising his eyebrows challengingly. He looked an awful look like Anakin when he tipped his chin up and set his jaw. Or maybe it had always been that Anakin had looked like him.

“Medical can.”

“I’m not staying behind,” he said stubbornly.

“You will if it’s unsafe for you to travel. You want to make yourself a liability and get all of us killed? You may be the best candidate for getting through to Anakin - if that even becomes necessary - but there’s gonna be a lot between us and him. Come on, you need to be smart about this.”

Obi-Wan looked away, his pride pricked and his chest tight with helpless worry. He logically knew that he couldn’t be angry with Vos for being level-headed (it happened so rarely), but he simply wasn’t willing to lose his two closest friends at once because he wasn’t there to protect them. He chewed his already-raw lower lip, a habit he’d picked up from his former Padawan.

“We’ll figure it out when it’s time to go,” Vos said after a moment of tense silence. “We’ll have you re-evaluated, then we’ll decide.”

“I am going to be on that ship with you when you go,” Obi-Wan said finally, turning his head to look Vos in the eye.
Quinlan sighed weightily, feeling as though the two of them had somehow switched roles. He wasn’t used to being the responsible one who said no, and he wasn’t used to having Obi-Wan pressing for something stupidly dangerous. Maybe this was how his friend had felt his whole life, dealing with his brash, exuberant plans.

It was really kriffing irritating. He must have been pretty irritating himself.

He smiled a little crookedly. “Yeah, we’ll see, Kenobi.”

XXXVI. Papercuts on the Soul

Anakin could feel the press of the trackers and the approaching clone troops. As before, it was no one he knew, but the presence of clones was thick and uncomfortably uniform. Every now and again he felt the spike of a different, fiercer type of soldier - likely a commando unit - but he kept himself drawn in tightly and left the smallest impact on his environment that he could.

The housing was becoming more dense as he came closer to the city: the tree cover and the heavy, loamy smell of the vegetation and mosses was giving way to city air and evening light pollution. He could cover a lot of ground before tiring, but his endurance wasn’t what it had been before Mustafar and speed sacrificed care; the faster he moved, the easier he was to track.

There was a meditation in movement, and he let himself focus on his breathing and the smooth, rhythmic swing of his limbs as he walked, jogged, and full-out ran. The internal cadence was soothing, clearing his thoughts and setting his mind to an untraceable blank. As he continued on, drinking from farmers’ wells and stealing edible fruits from orchards, his body hit highs and lows, giving him bursts of energy and almost-euphoria.

He was so tired, but so ready and willing to fight. He felt strong and confident, as though he finally knew his place in the galaxy and in the Force. He felt the path before him and the words he had to say to Obi-Wan, the letter he had to write to Padmé to thank her and ask for her forgiveness. He finally sensed his way forward, rather than letting his self-doubt and blame for others hold him back. He felt strangely light, and that made him faster and more determined. It was a strange mood to be in while he was desperately trying to evade capture, but he reveled in it, if not in the actual situation.

The first team of four commandos got the drop on him, but he recovered, cutting them down with a surprising lack of effort. It was just nimble twists and deft, text-book perfect Form V flicks and arcs of his platinum lightsaber.

He left them behind, keeping his mind blank; he didn’t let himself linger on who they had been or what their lives had been like. Right now, his only goal was survival. He had to make it to the city and steal a ship, and from there he could make an escape; no clone, no anyone, in the galaxy could out-pilot him once he slipped into the currents of the Force.

As he approached the city, the clones began to catch up with him. From all sides, they closed in. Soon he was dodging shots, volleying them with expertly timed swings of his sword. He felt the men he struck down die; they rejoined the Force like a drop of rocket fuel igniting in a burst of light and a smoldering spot of heat. It hurt, like a papercut on his soul, but he fought on relentlessly and left a bloodbath in his wake.
His heart ached more and more as the death toll, by now over twenty, permeated the cool distance of meditation. His awareness glowed into being and each loss of life cut deeper than the last, until he was gasping and feeling as though he was bleeding inside.

There were more and more troopers closing in; as men fell, others stepped up to take their place; every time a health monitor went silent, it helped the Empire triangulate his location and trajectory more clearly.

All Anakin could think of was when Caleb had described what made clones truly terrifying - that it felt like you were fighting the same ones over and over, that they just kept coming. Even sensing them as discrete individuals, Anakin couldn’t help but feel the same way - as though he was fighting one small team of ruthless immortals who would always outlast him.

He was just outside of the city limits when the battalion closed their circle about him and began to close in. Feeling the futility of his struggle and knowing that his capture was imminent, he sent up a prayer to the Force - to Shmi Skywalker - then thumbed off his blade, flipped it in his hand and pressed the hilt to his own heart.

In the split second before he could ignore the column of lethal plasma, a sniper’s dead-eye shot tore through his metal forearm and sent the weapon rolling uselessly through the short, dry grasses. Before the horror could even register, the Jedi was struck by several stun bolts at once.

He crumpled to the ground, eyes wide and staring.

XXXVII. Grounded

The base on Dantooine felt different when it was mostly empty; while it had never been densely populated, there had always been a hum of life and snatches of conversation drifting through the corridors. There had always been droids to trip over and merrily lit data screens glowing in the walls.

Almost completely evacuated following the news that Anakin Skywalker was now a captive of the Empire, the base was unnaturally still. Many of the corridors were lit only by the emergency lighting, and only the most necessary service droids remained, and of those, many had been reset to factory standards. A skeleton crew of ten remained on-site to wait until a service transport could arrive to collect Obi-Wan and his new Padawan for transport to the base on Yavin 4.

The medical staff had barred Obi-Wan from hyperspace travel, just as Quinlan had predicted. Though the Jedi couldn’t really blame Quinlan for the fact that he was medically grounded, he remained standoffish as Vos prepared for departure.

It didn’t help that their sources within the Empire didn’t have specifics for Anakin’s location, or that the only option seemed to be classical psychometric tracking and old-fashioned espionage.

“When I get to Naboo, I’ll contact you. I’m going to find him,” Quinlan assured him, oddly uncomfortable with his friend’s quiet anger. He wasn’t sure if Obi-Wan had ever been genuinely upset with him before; sure, he’d been disappointed, certainly irritated, but not angry.

Unfortunately, now more than ever, when his closest friend was also one of the the only familiar faces in the galaxy, he needed Obi-Wan’s approval.

“I know,” Obi-Wan said shortly, watching as the Kiffar fastened the front of his flight suit. He
looked so unlike the Jedi he’d always known. He wanted to think that Quinlan was acting unlike
the Jedi he’d always known, but the reality was the his friend had only ever taken reckless chances
with his own life; he had never been willing to risk anyone else, especially Obi-Wan.

“And maybe we’ll get other news before I do; it’s been less than a day since he was captured. It
might just take a little while before the information makes its way out to a place where we can get
it.”

Obi-Wan nodded, still not meeting his eyes.

“I suppose that we can only hope, at this point.”

Feeling the coolness in his voice, Vos sighed.

“Don’t act like this, Kenobi. This is the best way to go; I can move faster on my own. We need
speed, and you need to recover still. Don’t be pissed with me,” he said, dragging his fingers back
against the shaved side of his head fitfully. A little bit more plaintively, but still in the same
imperative tone of voice, he added, “Please.”

Obi-Wan, who had his arms crossed over his chest disapprovingly, sighed heavily.

“I’m not pissed with you.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m just…”

“Pissed.”

Looking at his friend, Obi-Wan could see that his contentious tone was not matched by his
surprisingly open expression. Quinlan had always been easy for him to read, and at this moment he
could tell that his friend was genuinely concerned that they were going to part ways on bad terms.

His shoulders sagged as he released some of the resentment that he had been carrying, losing the
rigid support that it had provided to his weary, healing body. He instead acknowledged that what
he really felt was frustration with his own helplessness and fear for the fates of the two people he
loved most in the galaxy.

“I’m not angry, Quin. Kriff,” he muttered as he took a step closer to Vos and leaned up to hug him.

Quinlan gratefully wrapped his arms around him and hugged him hard, crushing him close.

“Well, thank the Force for that. Last thing I need is to march off to my death with Obi-Wan
Kriffing Kenobi pissed at me,” he laughed softly, pressing his cheek against his and soaking in the
warmth of his friend’s body.

“Shut up,” Obi-Wan replied, rolling his eyes. “You’re not going to die and I’m not pissed. For
Force’s sake…”

They stayed close for a long moment, both needing reassurance that wasn’t found purely in the
nebulous contemplation of the Force or in the recitation of Code. They were both solid and real,
connected by an old, deep bond of friendship. The fragility of life weighed heavily on both of
them, and neither was willing yet to let go.

Obi-Wan turned his head and kissed him with unusual sweetness, cupping his hand affectionately
against his jaw. Vos leaned into the contact, deepening the kiss briefly as, just for a moment, he poured out his fear, sadness, and affection. Obi-Wan accepted it, holding it for him so he wouldn’t have to, and opened his heart to his friend for solace.

Even when he pulled back, he stayed close. He kept his eyes closed, his head bowed and his forehead resting against Quinlan’s cheek. It could be the last time that he would see him, and there was so much that he wished that they had talked about. His most recent conversation with Anakin hung on his heart, stifling him under the weight of his guilt; why hadn’t he told him that he loved him? Why hadn’t he kissed him all over and taken him to bed? Why had the Force and walking the right path been so much more important than the man who had been right before him? Anakin had never felt that he loved him enough and he hadn’t shown him otherwise.

There was no conflict in his heart between Anakin and Quinlan; his soul didn’t burn for Vos the way it did for Anakin, and kissing him, even loving him, wasn’t the same. There was no guilt for him in this dear closeness, but there was an aching worry that mirrored his regrets about Anakin; this could be the last time that they could laugh together, kiss each other, and be who they could only be around each other.

“Quin, I-”

“Shh, you’ll ruin it,” Quinlan laughed softly, hugging him tightly.

Obi-Wan knew that it wasn’t a rejection of any kind; if anything, it was confirmation that his friend felt the same as he did. But they were both Jedi, true Jedi who still clung to their code even as they felt love for each other between the cracks in their beliefs. They didn’t need to say anything at all.

“Stop telling me what to do,” he groused.

He grinned at his friend and both knew that everything was the same between them as it had always been. Even if they parted in this world, they would find each other in the Force.

XXXVIII. Drifting in Silence

As Anakin slowly regained consciousness, he first became aware of the conspicuous lack of stimuli. Wherever he was, it was flawlessly silent. The air temperature was at a perfect threshold between warm and cool, accompanied by a neutral humidity that left the air feeling thin, weightless, and unremarkable. It was perfectly dark, uninterrupted by a single LED or seam of light beneath a doorway.

Strangest of all, he was floating, possibly drifting unanchored in this perfect, sensationless darkness.

It was disorienting, but not so disorienting as the utter lack of connection that he felt with the Force. As he woke, he recognized the familiar sensation of Force suppression, though he’d never felt anything so absolute before. The crude drugging on Dhirrod had only robbed him of his capacity to wield the Force by temporarily reducing his mental capacity; by comparison, the sophisticated Force-suppressing collar that he could feel around his neck seemed to actually form a barrier between him and the Force. Separation from the Force also had the torturous side effect of ruining his concentration and making him feel as though he was slowly dying.
Anakin came up with about a half-dozen analogies to describe what true Force suppression felt like. It was like being forced to exhale for twice as long as he was allowed to inhale. It was like being swaddled in durasteel. It was like his entire body was swollen. It was like being blindfolded and deaf. It was like his soul had been trapped in a bottle with no air holes and he was slowly suffocating.

Waking more, he tried to reach out to feel for a wall or anything that might help him orient himself. However, he found that his artificial limbs were unresponsive. He could move his shoulders and thighs, but the prosthetics connected to his abbreviated limbs were limp and useless; Anakin hazily concluded that his prosthetics had been disabled.

Frustratingly, when he moved his dead arm, it knocked against the lightsaber that was still clipped to his belt; Palpatine had completely disabled him, then left him with his weapon as a reminder of his own effortless power and Anakin’s comparative weakness.

His mind dazedly came back around to the quiet. Lost in this senseless silence, Anakin was unsettled. Though it was not physically unpleasant, he felt isolated and alone; without light, sound, or interaction, it was like being forgotten or ceasing to exist. To the Jedi’s mind, that was worse than dying.

He remained silent for awhile, still trying to sort through his situation and take inventory of his own mind and body. Soon, in the absence of all external sounds, his heartbeat, steady and even, was echoingly loud to his oversensitized ears.

He deliberated calling out, but he knew that no one would answer; if he was being observed, his distress would only amuse his captors. For better or worse, he was too proud to give anyone that kind of satisfaction.

After awhile, he started to sing and was startled by how quickly the sound died on the air. It was crisp and sharp, and then gone - it vanished as soon as it left his lips; the vibrations on the air stilled as the sound was absorbed.

Anakin realized abruptly that he was inside an anechoic chamber. These “quiet rooms” were a form of psychological torture that was illegal in Republic-governed territories; in the complete absence of external sound, particularly coupled with darkness, many hearing-dependent sentients began to mentally break down within an hour or two. Anakin had been inside one once briefly when retrieving a prisoner from a dictator on a supposedly neutral planet - the lack of sound, even with the door open, had disrupted his balance so much that he had nearly fallen over.

That prisoner, who wasn’t even sure how long he’d been in the room at that point, had been a crying, gibbering wreck. It had taken him weeks to recover.

Anakin began to understand why very quickly. Unable to orient himself visually, aurally, through the Force, or through physical touch, he quickly began to hallucinate. The sounds of his own body - the whoosh and press of blood in his ears, the smooth rasp of his lungs, the gurgling of his stomach - were impossibly loud; he had become sound and it was horrible.

His brain, craving input, began to supply its own - phantom sensations on his skin, bursts of light and color, and imaginary Force perceptions. All to the soundtrack of his own metabolism.

He swallowed hard, hating the sound of his own throat, and tried to focus inward to meditate. Unfortunately, Jedi meditation was heavily reliant on Force perception, which he didn't presently have. Drifting in silent darkness, it was hard to think about anything clearly. It was different from the quiet of space, where there was always some infusion of atmosphere to create echoes and white
Instead, he turned inward and tried to focus his mind; he knew that he would soon become vulnerable and that he would need to prioritize what information he protected. Even in his disoriented haze, there were two things that seemed the most precious - the location of the Rebel base and the fact that Padmé had survived to have the twins. Even if he lost control of all else, he resolved to keep that information tucked out of reach.

Feeling his anxiety mounting as an unknown amount of time ticked past, meted out in his own deafening heartbeats, Anakin disjointedly reflected that he had expected Palpatine to soften him up with violence before moving on to mind games. He would have preferred that, but that was exactly why his Sith master had opted for something more creative. Unfortunately, Palpatine knew him well enough to know what he could endure and Anakin could handle an incredible amount of pain. He had been physically tortured numerous times before and he had survived the pain of losing each of his limbs. Physical pain was not the way to break Anakin Skywalker.

Palpatine knew that loss and loneliness were his true weaknesses; isolation alone could drop him into a deep depression. In this darkness and distorted reality, not knowing where he was or if his friends would ever find him, he had never felt so alone.

He tried to maintain his focus and drag his listless mind to more interesting thoughts, memories. He tried to remember in detail his first kisses with Padmé, though the sound of pulse in his ears kept disrupting him. He tried to remember what it had felt like to sleep beside Obi-Wan under a pile of fur pelts on freezing Arcania, or what it had sounded like when the crowds had cheered for him as a nine-year-old winning a pod race on Tatooine. To his annoyance, his mind kept drifting.

He sang again, this time persistently and quite flat; he had never been able to sing, much to Obi-Wan’s distress. He’d always liked it, though, and self-consciousness had only made him try harder and sing louder. He sang Mando’an drinking songs that Fives had taught him, and then raucous war songs that he had learned from the 501st. He tried to channel the brave men he had known, many of whom were now dead, and find strength in their ghosts. They may have been unfocused in the Force, but they weren’t just gone. No one was ever completely gone.

He sang until he was hoarse and his voice tapered off into quick, uneven breathing as he began to imagine creatures in the unknown darkness surrounding him. Soon after, though, the adrenaline faded and he was just limp and quiet, lost in his own head. He half-heartedly tried to pick up threads of thought and memory to anchor himself, but just as easily lost them.

When he first felt Palpatine’s touch in his mind, relief washed through him at the distraction from the nothingness around him. He didn’t immediately close himself off as he should have, allowing the Sith Lord to slip into his memories and bring him through the events at Mustafar, from choking Padmé unconscious to blindly gripping Obi-Wan’s shoulders as his exhausted compatriot lifted him out of the way of the lava flow. It hurt to remember in this level of detail, but almost watching from the outside his newfound place of stability, he could finally see how dark and unbalanced he had been. He could see how scared Obi-Wan had been, how unwilling, and how sincerely heartbroken and betrayed Padmé had felt. It was grounding for him and brought his meditations of the last few days full-circle, leaving him deeply self-aware and introspective.

However, when Palpatine began to infiltrate the memories of waking up on Polis Massa, Anakin abruptly remembered what was happening; he clamped down hard and closed him out, shoring up the vulnerabilities and tightening his focus once again.

He suddenly realized that none of this was actually intended as classical torture. It wasn't even the worst thing he'd ever endured. Instead, it was basic preparation; his brain, deprived of all input,
was open and craving stimuli. Completely against his will, he found himself reaching back out in the hope that further mental contact would alleviate the impenetrable nothingness and once again drown out the sound of his own heart pounding.

He couldn’t tell how much time had passed before Palpatine made another attempt, this time resuming his prying attentions on their time on Tatooine. He seemed to focus on the ways that Obi-Wan had caused Anakin pain, but when the focus became too close, Anakin found the strength again to push him away.

It went on like this for hours or days; Anakin wasn’t sure of any of his perceptions. He held off his former master, and other times he let him in deeper without meaning to. Sometimes he found himself craving the distraction or even the opportunity to see his own memories more clearly; in that mindset, hazy and disoriented by the Force suppression, it was harder to fight against the intrusion.

Up to a certain point, it was only an invasive presence without a voice. Palpatine wasn’t dialoguing with him, only stealing glimpses of his memories and making himself at home in his mind. In some ways, it was hardly different from Vos’ telemetry; in others, it was so personal and violating that Anakin felt himself gagging when Palpatine pushed too hard.

*We’re just catching up, Anakin.*

Aloud, Anakin spat, “If you want to call mind-rape a conversation, yeah.”

His voice sounded very small and insubstantial in the void.

*There’s no need for hyperbole. I’m not trying to hurt you.*

“Yet.”

*I warned you on Naboo, my boy. But this isn’t going to break you.*

“No?” Anakin asked. He had a disconcerting moment of being uncertain as to whether his eyes were open or closed. It was so dark that it made no difference, but he made a point of blinking several times.

*No. You’ll give in to me all on your own once you’ve killed Master Kenobi, once you’re all alone with no one else to blame.*

Anakin set his jaw.

“I’m not going to do that.”

*You will because I’m going to tell you to… and you’re very open to suggestion right now, and with the right drugs, the right… skills… the right words at the right time, you’re going to do whatever I tell you to do. It’s a foregone conclusion.*

The Jedi was silent, trying to come up with a sharp response that wouldn’t sound childish or unbelievable. He knew his own vulnerability and he recognized Palpatine’s strength. There was a nagging desperation that was sinking its claws into his guts; left on his own, he would either break or he would die here. As strong as he was, he was just one man and he was outsmarted and outgunned. Outside of this room, wherever he was, there were scads of troopers and a great deal of distance between him and anywhere safe.

*Even Obi-Wan and the ragtag assembly of rebel fighters had little chance of extracting him.*
He licked his lips, then said stubbornly, “Like fuck I will.”

He could feel rather than hear the Emperor’s laughter. He wished he could drown it out, but the careless, callous sound belittled him from inside his own skull. He closed his eyes and defensively drew himself up as much as his limited mobility would allow.

I will make you.

“You can’t. And you can’t just brainwash me and call it a victory! That’s not going to make me a Sith.”

Oh, Anakin. My dear boy. You seem to think that I require your enthusiastic compliance. I do not. The harder you fight, the more thoroughly you will submit once you realize the futility of your struggle. You don’t have a chance, and you have never had a choice.

Anakin remembered shouting almost those exact words that at Obi-Wan before he flooded his mentor’s mind was his own memories. With Palpatine’s unwanted presence in his thoughts, he understood now why Obi-Wan had abandoned him for several days; he’d known it was wrong, but he had no idea of the degree of violation that it represented. He chewed the middle of his lower lip, which he had already chewed raw.

“I do have a choice. There’s always a choice.”

If you want to believe that, it will hurt you more in the end. I will make you kill Obi-Wan more savagely than even in your visions…. Do you want to believe that it was your choice?

“I won’t,” Anakin said sharply, almost panicked.

Just as suddenly, a wash of cool relief broke over him. His vision of killing Obi-Wan was impossible now; the blue lightsaber was safely with Quinlan Vos. If anything, it was safer with the Kiffar than it would have been on Tatooine, where it would have eventually made its way from a bounty hunter to an Imperial payor to the Emperor to the Apprentice. Whatever else might happen, he still had a choice.

“I can’t,” he said more emphatically, feeling hope flare in his chest. ”I don’t have my lightsaber. I can’t.”

Oh?

“It’s not how it happens.”

I assume that you’re referring to your vision on Ilum, where you dismembered and murdered your master and former lover?

“It wasn’t like this. That was my old saber. It-”

The voice in his head cut in sharply, then dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

Anakin, I am going to tell you something that is really… very funny. I think you’ll agree, though perhaps not right away.

Anakin felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle as something in him tightened uncomfortably. Up until this point, in all of the time he’d been in this floating, horrifying stasis, he had remained outwardly calm. He hadn’t made any sound of fear or frustration, he hadn’t cried out. He had sang drinking songs and war songs until his voice gave out, and he had drawn himself up and held out
against the urge to scream that had been boiling in his chest. Pride as much as anything had made him bear up under this silent torment, and he was *strong*. Even so, he wasn’t sure that he was strong enough to face what was coming. In preparation for what he could already sense would be a blow, he told himself silently *There is no emotion.*

*You’ve never actually had a vision of the future. While you are excellent at sharing present moments with people you know well, clairvoyance is not actually a skill that you possess.*

“What?” he scoffed incredulously.

*I introduced the images of Padmé’s death into your mind… and when you were in the caves at Ilum, I fed the images of Obi-Wan’s horrific murder into your mind. Kyber crystals enhance all Force abilities, and I was close enough then that I could concentrate through them on you.*

Stunned, Anakin remained silent. He didn’t immediately know how to respond now; his off-the-cuff insults tended to fall a bit flat unless he was planning to run someone through immediately after. Combat puns were one thing, but in situations like this his mind frustratingly tended to supply only low-brow biological insults or slurs he'd learned as a child on Tatooine.

And in this situation, he didn’t even know how Obi-Wan would have replied. Even the Great Negotiator would have been struck dumb by the sudden clarity of the situation; as much as he wanted to argue, it made sense. He had seen his mother being tortured as it happened; unknown to Palpatine he had also been walking with Padmé through some of her days and nights recently. They were real, but they were happening concurrently.

By contrast, the vision of Padmé’s death had never come to pass, and the vision of the blue lightsaber had numerous details that could only be wrong.

In a manufactured vision, it made sense that Palpatine would have kept the blue lightsaber in his hand - if Vos had intercepted it before it passed into the Imperial chain of command, the emperor would have never known that he had given it up. It was easy to extrapolate that he and Obi-Wan wouldn't have been dressed in Jedi robes, or that Obi-Wan would have been thinner, or that either of them would have new scars. Coincidences had made him believe more than anything else, coincidences and ingeniously vague imagery.

“Even… better,” Anakin breathed, staring wide-eyed into the depthless darkness as the meaning of his words slowly permeated his brain.

*What you have instead… is a fantastic capacity to fulfill your own prophesies. With the right suggestion, you will disregard everything from your morals to your common sense and follow the path you see before you to its completion. Look what you have lost already, your wife, your unborn child…* 

Anakin reeled. Convinced that he would lose his family, he had fallen to the dark side and nearly murdered them all himself; the greatest threat to Padmé’s life had been him. The vision had never quite become reality, but he had certainly made a good effort at it and he had lost her just as completely in the process. Terrified of hurting Obi-Wan, he’d run straight to the Emperor and set himself for an inevitable second fall.

His breathing came quick, panicked and furious. The self-focus and calm he’d been learning fell away, replaced by fury and despair. They weren’t directed where the Emperor needed them to be, but that dark laughter rang through his thoughts again.

*It really is very funny*, he assured Anakin as he felt the younger man’s emotions shifting toward
darkness.

The only consolation was that the emperor truly believed that Padmé had been murdered and his child dead with her. If he had accomplished nothing else, he had kept that one secret safe. He kept that thought locked up tightly and let his anger and fear press to the forefront.

“That means… that future, that vision, isn’t set. I can change it,” he tried stubbornly, feeling again how alone he was in this fight.

*You can add flourishes, stamp it with your own personality as you did with Padmé… but you will do what I tell you because you belong to me. My claim is as old as the Jedi Order’s, and it is stronger because I have always understood you completely.*

Anakin felt the truth in his statement, and his old training of servitude hummed in the background. He had been conditioned to need orders from a very young age; his impulsive decisions and confidence as a Jedi had been rebellion against the ownership he’d endured and a child and the echoes of slavery he felt in his obedience to the order.

Choice had always been an illusion, and he didn’t know how long he would be able to pretend that he believed otherwise.

Chapter End Notes

Anechoic chambers are really interesting - the best one on earth currently absorbs 99.9% of sound, and no one has voluntarily been able to stay in there for more than 45 minutes! It's different from how a deaf person would perceive sound... because internal sounds remain. So there's no sound outside of what you hear inside yourself... and people do hallucinate. Really neat stuff. I thought that and the general lack of sensation would be a good way to prime Anakin's mind for Palpatine to slip in easily.

I'm about two chapters ahead of what I've posted... which is great. It's so nice to get a headstart on things so I can work them through more thoroughly and go back in and edit stuff to make it flow better. I am thinking that there will be 4 more chapters to this fic, though there may be more - I ended up adding a chapter in the middle because I had to fix something I broke.
XXXIV. As I saw it

It had been days since the news had come, days since the base had been evacuated.

Obi-Wan had briefly entertained the idea of taking off to look for Anakin on his own, but he had caved to logic; his body wasn’t in condition to handle the strain of hyperspace travel. While he would definitely have risked his own health, everything that Quinlan had said was true; he was still weak, even if his Force abilities had returned, and his swordsmanship had suffered from the injuries to his shoulder. He was more likely to be a burden to a rescue than an asset, though it hurt his pride to admit it. There was also the issue of Caleb, and the fact that couldn’t just send his Padawan off on his own to another base while he ran off after Anakin.

Caleb was a quiet, kind companion as they waited in the abandoned base for the transport that would take them to the base on Yavin 4. Obi-Wan could feel his restlessness and his fear and tried to exert some gentle suggestions of calm through the Force; Caleb had openly admitted that the prospect of soldiers swarming the base terrified him, but he was still willing to wait with his new Master rather than taking off with the rest of the base crew in the faster ships.

Bravery and loyalty were some of Caleb’s finest traits, though Obi-Wan was starting to feel that his ability to address his emotions and recognize the feelings of others was the most powerful.

They walked together through the deserted corridors and listened to the radio broadcasts for news on a small, portable comm device that one of the base mechanics had gifted to Caleb before her departure. They were bored, though they laughed that Jedi were never bored; boredom was a call to meditation, after all.

“So why aren’t we just taking one of these transports here?” Caleb asked as they walked through one of the large, mostly empty hangars.

“The one coming for us has superior cloaking. Frustratingly,” he paused to inhale a breath from his breathing apparatus as if to illustrate his point, “I am still not cleared for hyperspace travel, and we must therefore travel more slowly. A higher-end ship such as this one will manage more impressive speeds while remaining nearly imperceptible; it’s much safer for us and much harder to track and expose the base…. unfortunately, it’s just… a long way without hyperspace capabilities. It takes a lamentable amount of time.”

“Oh,” Caleb sighed, his eyes moving idly over the blocky lines of an old passenger ship that had been junked for parts. Near that, there were several half-repaired astromech that would likely never be restored to functional condition; many of them were antiquated models, but it still made Caleb slightly sad that their mechanical lives were essentially over.

After a moment, the Padawan asked, “Are you doing all right, Master Kenobi?”

Obi-Wan nodded, looking ahead as they walked. “Yes… I’m recovering quickly. I really am quite confident that a hyperspace trip would hardly have killed me. Damn Vos for putting that idea into the attending medic’s head.”
Caleb laughed, but his voice quickly turned a little bit softer, more conspiratorial. “I mean more... ah... emotionally. Are you okay?”

The question surprised the older Jedi, who knew that Master Billaba wouldn’t have encouraged her Padawan to pursue lines of emotional inquiry. It wasn’t their way, really, to offer or expect comfort from other Jedi; meditation brought clarity and balance, and release of emotion into the Force ultimately brought comfort. He smiled slightly, thinking that the question reminded him of Anakin.

_No, yeah I know, but are you okay? Like you-you, not 'perfect Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi.' Are you okay?

He shrugged his good shoulder. “I’m doing as well as can be expected, Caleb. I’ll be better when when we’re all together again on Yavin 4... though I am honored that you have chosen to stay here with me.”

“You’re worried about Master Skywalker and Master Vos,” Caleb acknowledged quietly.

“Of course.”

“Me too. Anakin and I talked the day before he left... and I... “ He looked away a little shamefully, bearing this guilt the same way that he had his Master’s death. “I told him he could confide in me, and when he did I couldn’t handle it.”

Obi-Wan glanced over in surprise.

“What did Anakin tell you?”

“That he fell to the dark side... and that he killed the Trade Federation and fought you.”

The abridged version was easier to swallow than the full, unexpurgated list of Anakin’s crimes; still, the Jedi Master was very aware that it was a lot for Caleb to hear and process. Obi-Wan nodded, then reached over to rub his shoulder lightly.

“He did do those things,” he said, looking up at the ceiling where it stretched across the distance several hundred feet above them. “Though your difficulty accepting them it isn’t why he left.”

“He said you two fought. Who won?”

“I did. I wounded him very badly,” Obi-Wan said evenly, feeling like he was talking about someone else. It was like a ghastly fairy tale rather than something that he had lived through and now had to live with; it seemed almost impossible sometimes to think that it had happened. “It scarcely feels real, even now.”

Caleb ruminated on that in silence as they walked, noting how short Obi-Wan’s answers had become. He fit the new information into what he had pieced together since they had arrived on base. There were so many things that he still didn’t know, but the things that he had learned combined to make a very human, very painful story that no one seemed to want to talk about. He still didn’t understand what had happened between his new Master and Anakin, or what their relationship was now. He had heard that Obi-Wan had been sleeping in Anakin’s bed the night before he’d left; he had been trying not to speculate, but he was old enough to know how things worked, even if his views of sexuality and physical needs were skewed by Jedi teachings.

He had a head full of questions, but he knew that now wasn’t the time to ask, not when Anakin was in Imperial custody and Master Vos was heading off into dangerous territories. He wanted to
demand the truth about what had happened and how they had all come to be here, but he knew better. He forcefully reminded himself that this wasn’t the time to remind them that he wasn’t a Youngling.

“None of this feels real,” he said finally.

Obi-Wan smiled slightly, recognizing that Caleb was thinking a lot more than he was saying. He was so different from Anakin in that way; at that age, Anakin had asked every question that crossed his mind and shared every opinion that he had.

He was about to comment on that when a siren wailed and the distant rumble of starships vibrated almost painfully on the air.

Obi-Wan knew immediately what the sound meant - that the Empire had come for the base and that they had only moments to prepare before troopers swarmed through the corridors. He closed his eyes for a few seconds, centering himself in the moment and not letting himself feel anything at all; if this was his time to go, then all he could do was make his death as meaningful as possible.

Focused like a laser, he opened his eyes and unclipped his lightsaber from his belt.

“Caleb, I want you to hide now, as quickly as you can. You can get into the ventilation from the first floor, and from there I want you to get to a quiet corner and simply stay there until the troopers have left. There’s nothing here now, they will leave once they’ve cased the grounds. Do you understand?”

“What about you?” he demanded.

Obi-Wan smiled quickly, his eyes tired, and said, “I will be right behind you.”

Caleb stared disbelievingly. He knew that Obi-Wan couldn’t have known that those were Depa Billaba’s final words to him; he wondered if that was just what Jedi Masters said when they wanted to be left behind to die alone. If he became a Knight, would he be taught to say the same thing? He understood what his Master’s objective was in sending him away, and he knew what would happen if he went.

He wasn’t ready to outlive another Master, or to be the one guiltily struggling on by himself. He wasn’t ready to be marooned on an empty base with no way of even retrieving Obi-Wan’s body to give it a proper cremation. He wasn’t ready to be alone again, or to watch this new life collapse the way the last had.

“No,” he said, shaking his head and pulling out his blaster. “You won’t.”

“Caleb,” Obi-Wan said sharply. “We don’t have time for heroics.”

“Exactly,” the boy retorted, looking at him meaningfully.

The older Jedi groaned, retracting his earlier judgment that Caleb was nothing like Anakin - he was exactly like Anakin in the bad Padawan ways. The troublesome ways, the endearingly human ways. At least he already knew how to deal with it.

“We both run,” Caleb said, as though he thought Obi-Wan was too stupid to understand him.

“Force fucking damn it all,” he breathed. He grabbed Caleb’s upper arm and dragged him out of the open center of the hangar toward the corridor that led into the main compound.
His breathing came quick, frustrated and slightly panicked even as he mentally congratulated his new Padawan on his bravery in the face of his fears. Outside, he heard several ships touch down on the airfield and he felt the familiar Force presence of many, many clones.

Amidst the sea of strangers, he felt someone else. Though he couldn’t feel the emotional bond that they had reforged, the unnatural Force-bond between himself and his lover glowed into being and pulled them painfully close again. He came to an abrupt stop and released Caleb, pressing his hand to his chest as though he had been shot.

“Master?”

Obi-Wan knew immediately that either of them hiding would be pointless; if Anakin was there with the troopers, it was because he was there with the troopers. His former Padawan would find them and he would kill them because that was what he had been sent to do.

He pulled out his inhaler and took a few deep, steadying breaths. “I just… couldn’t breathe. Caleb… I’m going to warn you. Anakin is going to be here, and he isn’t going to be himself.”

Caleb stared, not comprehending.

“What…? How do you know?”

“I feel it. There’s no point in hiding. We will walk out to greet them; the troopers won’t hurt us unless Anakin tells them to. He won’t; that isn’t how this is going to go.”

The Padawan’s brows drew together and pressed down, disapproving of Obi-Wan’s resignation. He could feel his Master’s quiet despair, but when he met the man’s eyes he was suddenly unable to feel anything about him. He nodded uncertainly, still preferring the idea of trying to make an escape.

“What do you mean? Are you sure that’s the best way…? I mean.. If you say it’s the way, I’ll do whatever you say, but… it’s really… it feels like giving up.”

Obi-Wan smiled quickly. “I know, but it isn’t. I have fought this battle before, and I know that it is between Anakin and the dark side… and I need to stand beside him this time, rather than against him.”

“What if he kills you?”

“I have to have faith,” he said quietly, reaching for Caleb’s hand. “And I need for you to try to have faith too… and try not to be afraid. The Force will be with us.”

Caleb wasn’t so sure, but there was something about Obi-Wan’s sudden calm and deep conviction that helped him believe. He squeezed his Master’s hand, nodding quickly, frantically.

Not for the first time, he found himself wishing that he had a lightsaber rather than a blaster. He almost wished that he had chosen to go back to the Kasmiri, which Obi-Wan had offered him again when the base was being evacuated. In this hopeless situation, it probably wouldn’t have made much difference if Obi-Wan was alone defending himself or not; he knew he was only a Padawan and that one fourteen-year-old would make little difference against a battalion of troops. Even so, he was proud of himself for staying; even if they both died here, he was proud that the other Jedi wouldn’t have to face this alone.

By contrast, Obi-Wan felt like the worst Jedi ever as he walked beside his brand-new Padawan and hoped that he wasn’t escorting him to his death. As they walked out to meet the advancing
soldiers, Obi-Wan wondered if he was making the right choice. He knew that he had no choice but to put his faith in the Force; the odds were against them, especially with Anakin leading the charge.

Ahead, he could see his lover’s dark silhouette preceding several rows of gleaming white troopers. In the vibrant light of sunset, their armor gleamed gold and Anakin’s fair hair shone like fire.

He could feel Caleb’s tension beside him and he reached over and lightly wrapped his arm around his shoulders.

“I’m proud of you for standing your ground, Caleb,” he told him quietly, giving him a bracing smile that he wasn’t quite sure that he felt.

Too rattled to speak, the boy just nodded quickly and tried to stand taller.

“You stay back, all right? I need you to stay back and give us space to talk. No matter what happens, I want you to trust me and trust the Force. Don’t try to help me; don’t draw any attention to yourself. I need you to do this for me, please. I know you’re afraid, but please, please do this.”

Caleb nodded jerkily, shaking all over even as he hastened to obey. He retreated several steps to stand by the glass doors to the main complex, then watched as Obi-Wan continued out onto the tarmac, which reflected the same gold as the soldiers. Everything was yellow and unnaturally brilliant.

Anakin lifted his right arm and gestured with his mechanical hand, his gloved fingers curling into a tight fist. In a command intended for his troops, he called, “Hold.”

Immediately, the clones stopped and snapped to attention in perfect lines, rifles held at a measured, identical angle across their chests.

“No one moves unless I order it; Kenobi is mine.”

His gaze ticked over to Caleb for a moment, then back to his Master.

“The boy is not our target and is not to be touched.”

“Sir, he’s a wanted Jedi,” Deadeye, his next-in-command, said uncertainly. “We have orders.”

“I know exactly who he is. If your orders didn’t come from me, they’re no longer your orders,” Anakin said flatly, in a tone that didn’t invite questions and didn’t tolerate criticism.

Obi-Wan nodded, appreciating his lover’s mercy even if he was uncertain as to the cause. Without so much as glancing back at his new Padawan, he took a step closer to Anakin.

“Anakin, I’m so relieved to find you alive,” he said, reaching out toward him optimistically.

Instantly, Anakin’s saber was up between them.

“Don’t try that game, Master. Your manipulation isn’t going to work on me; you know why I’m here and what I am going to do. Prepare to defend yourself.”

“I will not raise my lightsaber to you again, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said evenly, meeting his eyes. He let his hand drop to his side, ignoring the fierce glow of his lover’s lightsaber and the intuitive urge to reach for his own.

“So you’re just going to stand there while I cut you down? It won’t be an easy death for you, Obi-Wan; I’ll make you suffer for everything you’ve done to me, I’ll humiliate you before my men and
your new Padawan before you die.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“I want to do this. I’ve wanted to do this since I woke up helpless on Pollis Massa with you lording your Force-kriffed superiority over me... your fucking righteousness,” he spat furiously, taking an aggressive step forward until they were almost toe to toe.

Obi-Wan took a deep breath and raised his chin slightly, not giving up any ground.

“I’m not going to fight you.”

“Draw your kriffing lightsaber.”

“No.”

For some reason, it surprised Obi-Wan when Anakin struck. With the blade extinguished, Anakin hit him hard, letting the length of the hilt collide with the swell of Obi-Wan’s cheekbone. He inhaled sharply through his nose, turning his head with the blow to minimize damage. His vision swimming, Obi-Wan swayed unsteadily, almost dropping to his knees at the rush of blood in his ears.

He felt as though the blow must have caved in his his skull, but he fought the urge to touch it with his fingers. Instead, he dazedly looked back to Anakin, then lifted his chin slightly to look him in the eye again.

“Don’t do this,” he lowered his voice and whispered, “Anakin, we can leave here. We can go somewhere safe, and we can sort out whatever it is that you think-”

Anakin hit him again, this time with a fierce, cold metal fist. It felt little different than the saber had, though it was slightly padded by his glove.

“Stop talking and get out your lightsaber. I know you and that mouth of yours,” he snorted. “You’d say anything to save your own skin. ‘The Great Negotiator.’ You always put that tongue to good use, don’t you?”

Dazed and off-balanced, Obi-Wan shook his head to try to clear his hazy vision. Still on his feet somehow, still standing stock-still on the asphalt, he blinked slowly. His eyes tracked up over the zipper of Anakin’s black leather jacket, across his weathered black Naboo podracing t-shirt and up to his face again.

Even this close, he felt nothing of the lover’s bond between them; the air between them was as cold and quiet as it had been on Mustafar.

“Anakin,” he said wearily. “I won’t fight you.”

Anakin snarled in frustrated rage and swung the hilt of his lightsaber. This time, Obi-Wan moved closer and lifted his arm to interrupt the momentum of his swing. His forearm collided with the metal crook of Anakin’s arm, and he gasped in pain though he held fast to his position.

Smirking, Anakin applied his other hand to his chest, aligning his long fingers against the wound that had nearly taken his life, that so-called graze, and shoved him backwards.

Gasping for breath and pale with pain, Obi-Wan stumbled back a step. When Anakin attacked again, wielding his lightsaber like a short club, Obi-Wan met him blow for blow with short,
effective blocks. Even with perfect form, turning his arms to jam Anakin’s strikes with the thicker muscles of his forearms, Obi-Wan felt as though the bones would snap against Anakin’s forearms and saber hilt. Everything was metal and nothing yielded.

They broke apart after a moment, Anakin fuming and Obi-Wan scarcely able to raise his arms. His injured shoulder throbbed at the forced activity, but he ignored it. Releasing the pain into the Force didn’t feel like a possibility at the moment, so he was relying on denial, which he had always excelled at.

“Fight me,” Anakin snarled.

Obi-Wan stole a quick, painful drag on his breathing device, then shook his head.

“I told you - I told you that I won’t.”

“Why? Because you ‘don’t want to hurt me again’? Like it would make up for the fact that you cut off my fucking legs?” He looked to Caleb, gesturing to Obi-Wan. “Did your master tell you he did that?”

He pulled off the glove on his left hand to expose his gleaming metal fingers and looked back to Obi-Wan even as he addressed the Padawan. “Did he tell he did this?”

Obi-Wan set his jaw, his chest heaving and new bruises rising as darkening welts. He ached, but it was nothing compared to the violence in his heart at Anakin’s words.

Anakin fixed his piercing stare on Obi-Wan again, cutting through him with the intensity of his anger.

“And you acted like I should be grateful.”

“Anakin-”

“Well, you've got two choices here,” Anakin interrupted. “You can either light your damned sword and try to kill me or I will do to you what you did to me.”

“I won't fight you,” he wheezed.

“Why, because you love me? Think you'll still love me when you're lying helplessly on the ground?”

By the way he said, Obi-Wan suddenly knew that Anakin had still loved him when he’d been lying in the volcanic sand on Mustafar; he had wanted more than anything not to be left alone, and for Obi-Wan to come back for him.

Realizing the information he’d given up and the temporary weakness he had shown, Anakin’s eyes widened. There was a note of almost-panic in his voice, and he rushed on as though he simply couldn't stop. The words tumbled out of his mouth, sharp and cruel.

“If you can tell me that you love me when you’re lying on the pavement begging for the pain to stop, I won't kill you. If you can say it then...”

Obi-Wan felt the shift in him as he issued the vulgar challenge; he caught the split second of horrified revulsion in his eyes. His eyes, which he realized suddenly, were blue.

Anakin was not a Sith; he had not given in to the dark side.
Knowing that he was risking immediate amputation, Obi-Wan reached out and grabbed Anakin’s upper arm, just above where the prosthetic joined his organic body.

“Anakin, I love you now and I will love you long after my death. I will follow after you in the Force—”

Anakin swung his arm in a lethal hook punch, and Obi-Wan raised his arm to block, jamming the movement at the shoulder before the other man could connect. Almost reflexively, and with a muscular grace imbued with Force-precognition, Anakin twisted to grasp a handful of Obi-Wan’s short hair and jerk his head back. In the split second when the older man was off-balanced, he grasped his injured shoulder in the other hand and fluidly threw him to the ground.

Impact with the pavement drove the breath from his lungs. Obi-Wan rolled onto his side, drawing himself up defensively as he tried to goad his diaphragm into doing its kriffing job. He had certainly had the wind knocked out him before, but never when his lungs had already been so compromised. He gasped loudly, rapidly, trying to catch a lungful of air.

Anakin thumbed the switch on his sword and the focused column of light slid into being like a brilliant gray rapier blade. Almost casually, he pushed Obi-Wan onto his front with his foot, then pressed the sole of his boot down between his shoulderblades.

“Tell me you love me now,” he said as he reached down to grip Obi-Wan’s already-bruised wrist. He pulled upward, twisting the man’s left arm upward behind him and stretching it out straight.

Obi-Wan couldn’t even breathe with the pressure on his chest, much less speak.

“You can’t, can you?”

He laid the blade of his lightsaber across the back of Obi-Wan’s arm, just above the elbow. It was close enough to smolder against the heavy fabric of his jacket sleeve. He could smell it burning and knew it would only smell worse in a moment. He began to slowly ease forward until the saber singed his skin and Obi-Wan soundlessly jerked in his hold.

He jumped at the click of a dozen rifles behind him, then twisted to look at his men. For some reason he had, just for a moment, thought that they were coming to his master’s aid. Instead, he saw that their sights were trained on something beyond both of them.

Anakin turned slowly to see Caleb standing uncertainly with his hand on his blaster holster. Without breaking eye contact, Caleb slowly drew his blaster and pointed it at Anakin’s chest.

“Hold!” Anakin shouted to his men, releasing his grip on Obi-Wan in favor of throwing the closed-fist gesture behind him. In the same smooth movement, he swung his arm forward and extended his fingers toward the Padawan in a familiar Force gesture.

He tore the blaster from Caleb’s hand and sent it skittering across the pavement. With a second, more emphatic gesture, Anakin lifted the boy and slammed him back against the metal control bank beside the sliding glass door.

Caleb collapsed, stunned and barely conscious.

Anakin turned sharply toward his men and said savagely, “You have kriffing orders. First of you to break them is a dead man.”

When he again focused his attention on Obi-Wan, he saw the man struggling to sit up, breathing heavily into the brassy device that helped him pull concentrated oxygen into his ragged lungs.
“Not giving up yet?”

“Anakin, why are you doing this?”

Anakin’s voice dropped to a feral whisper. “Because I want to. Now draw your lightsaber and kill me before I kill you.”

Obi-Wan could feel that the hatred that his former Padawan felt for him was genuine, as was his desire to hurt him. Though the life-bond communicated differently between them, he knew intuitively that Anakin wanted to see him reduced to nothing, humiliated and mindless with pain. That knowledge broke his heart and momentarily deprived him of the strength to rise.

When Obi-Wan didn’t move, Anakin repeated more forcefully, “Draw your kriiffing sword.”

Obi-Wan struggled to his feet stiffly and simply stared Anakin down, focusing every ounce of his conviction through the bond that no longer seemed to exist.

“Anakin, I’m so sorry. What can I do-”

Anakin, furious and almost panicked by the way that his former Master was calmly facing down certain death, bellowed, “Draw your sword!”

When Obi-Wan again disobeyed him, he snarled and extended his bare metal hand toward him, fingers flexed. Obi-Wan had never seen anyone look so twisted or terrifying; it was the same forceful determination as on Mustafar, but this time he knew enough to recognize that this was also Anakin. This anger had always been there just below the surface, and nothing he had done would ever tame it.

“Now, Obi-Wan,” he hissed.

The older man suddenly felt the bond between them - the new one, the one that he had questioned and feared - draw taut. It hurt, as though his soul was being garoted. Against his will, he reached for his lightsaber and slid it out of the improvised holster.

The blue light gleamed as he flicked the switch with his thumb. It hummed horribly in his hand.

“No,” he breathed, willing himself to break Anakin’s control.

But when the younger man attacked, he raised his own lightsaber to block. Their movements, a flurry of imperfect slashes, thrusts, and parries, lit the cooling sunset and reflected off the armor of the statue-like 501st.

It was such an ordinary setting, nothing like the lava fields had been. There was no poetry, just an airstrip and a modern-looking military base. Neither was as fit or strong as they had been when they had fought in the burning heat, but Anakin had the clear advantage. To that end this was little more than an execution with an opening act, played out before a barely-conscious boy and an apathetic firing squad.
Obi-Wan was tiring quickly, forced to fight for his life but lacking the endurance to hold out long. He was still trying to piece through what motivated Anakin now, and what had changed in his heart if he wasn’t a golden-eyed Sith? As he moved, anger and pain began to replace panic; in some ways, this was the final abuse, and it was one that he wouldn’t tolerate. Even if he’d gone as dark as Palpatine himself, he couldn’t believe that Anakin would reach into him and take control. Was he forcing him to fight so that he could claim a true victory or because he himself wanted to die?

The control that Anakin was exerting on him was suffocating, and Obi-Wan realized that he had been right to question that life-death bond. Even with the purest intentions, there was an inherent danger in having someone else’s life inextricably tied to one’s own. Anakin had saved him out of nothing but love, but did that matter if he was wielding a power that he didn’t understand? Was this connection truly one-sided, and how strong was it? What could Anakin make him do?

Another question burned in his mind: What am I willing to do?

Abruptly, he twisted inside, taking his own Force grip on the tether between them. Startled, Anakin released his control.

Dropping his own lightsaber, Obi-Wan extended both hands toward Anakin and ordered, “Stop.”

Caught in the same snare, Anakin stilled and pressed his hand to his chest as though he now felt the same constricting grip that he had exerted on his Master moments before.
Directly touching the link between them, Obi-Wan could feel that it was an old magic, much older than the Jedi or the Sith. This bond practically radiated power, and in manipulating it Obi-Wan felt a fierce hunger for more.

He drew his hands downward in a sharp, claw-fingered gesture, forcing Anakin to his knees.

“Don’t ever do that again,” he said imperiously, drawing strength from his lover’s momentary weakness.

Anakin stared at him in confusion, one hand braced against the pavement and the other pressed to his chest. Under Obi-Wan’s silent direction, he raised a hand to his troops and ordered them “Hold!”

Obi-Wan held his gaze, not allowing the younger man to look away as he held him in place, using their bond as a leash. He had felt pride before in his ability with the mind trick, but he’d never felt powerful; it was a means to an end, a reasonably benign suggestion that couldn’t contradict the target’s true nature. Even for someone as skillful as Obi-Wan, the mind trick could only be used on those who were weak-willed or secretly willing to comply. By comparison, he was holding Anakin effortlessly. Powerful, beautiful, strong-willed Anakin Skywalker was finally doing what he kriффing told him to. He could have told him to kill himself and he would have.

The thought scared him, but not as much as it should have.

With this intimate focus, his metaphorical fingers sunk deep into Anakin’s spirit, he could feel the fine threads of another Force-user’s power. Woven wetly through his lover’s Force signature, Palpatine’s control clung to Anakin like choking ivy.

The corrupting touch of the emperor was warping Anakin’s perceptions and driving him toward this violence. Since he had arrived on Dantooine, Anakin had been nothing more than a toy soldier of the Sith.

*If you belong to anyone, you belong to me*, Obi-Wan thought angrily, tearing the constricting web away as viciously as a lothcat savaging its prey. It pulled free easily because it was made of something insubstantial, like an oily spiderweb or a festering vine. It was nothing like the bond that stretched between the two of them, Obi-Wan thought possessively. Theirs was like a luminous thread of warmth, golden like this sunset and musical like a guitar string. He furiously rent the Emperor’s web about him, intent on keeping the other Jedi for himself.

Despite the violence of this Force manipulation, there was almost no movement in the outside world. Obi-Wan was perfectly still and staring as Anakin gasped, clutching his heart. Unable to look away from his former Master, his dark eyes communicated the pain that Obi-Wan’s indelicate extraction was causing.

“Stop-” he finally managed, horrified.

Startled by the emotion in his voice, Obi-Wan snapped out of his preternatural focus and finally saw the man before him and remembered the clone troops and his Padawan. Light and sound returned in a rush, giving a context to where they were and what had happened. His body ached, his new bruises, the asphalt scrapes on his cheek, his tired lungs. Instantly horrified by what he had done, he released his control without any thought for what doing so might mean for him and staggered back several steps.

Anakin slowly rose to his feet, his expression open and momentarily haunted. The darkness swept past and Obi-Wan recognized him yet again; this was Anakin, just Anakin. His Anakin, if his
lover could ever consider himself that again after what he’d done. Shame burned through his veins like lightning, but he crushed it down and waited for judgment.

Judgment came from another quarter, in the form of several dozen rifles once again being cocked in unison.

Anakin looked over at his troops almost dazedly, then lifted open hands to them. “Hey, hey, stop. Guns away, boys.”

No one moved.

“What are you doing?” he asked, his brows drawing in close in confusion. His mind had reordered itself, but outwardly he was the same commander who had led this unit to Dantooine; he didn’t understand what had changed.

“I have been informed that you have compromised, my lord,” Deadeye said crisply, his voice synthetic and uncomfortably generic. “We will be completing your mission and bringing you into protective custody until you can be treated.”

“Like hells you will,” Anakin retorted, dragging his discarded lightsaber into his hand using a casual flick of the Force. “You are my 501st. You take orders from me.”

“We are Lord Vader’s 501st.”

The name hit all three of the Jedi hard, all for different reasons. Caleb, who was struggling to get up, knew that name; before the Empire had clamped down on the media, the news had reported that Lord Vader, Darth Vader, had swept through the Temple with the 501st and murdered all of the Jedi. No one knew what Vader looked like, but Caleb had imagined a yellow-eyed face for him, and he’d had nightmares about who the boogieman was who led the clone troopers to hunt the Jedi.

The thought that these were Vader’s men terrified him; the thought that Vader couldn’t be far behind almost paralyzed him with fear. Suddenly, though, everything snapped together in his mind, all of the half-stories and the pain and the anger around him.

Darth Vader was already there.

Hardly thinking of the consequences, he pulled his scuffed blaster to his hand with the Force. In an unsteady, adrenalized movement he managed to get off one shot that glanced off Anakin’s metal knee before a quick-moving trooper turned and fired on him.

Obi-Wan put himself between Caleb and the blasterfire, deflecting the precise shot with his lightsaber and sending it harmlessly up into the darkening cloud cover. Furious, Anakin reached out with an open hand, fingers flexed menacingly as he grabbed the trooper by the throat in a crushing Force-grip.

It was time to face his discarded identity, the name that he had been given by his Sith master. It felt like burning brand or a choking collar of ownership; it was heavy and sharp, but it was his to own and his to use. Inclining his chin slightly, the way he always had when he was facing something that felt bigger than him, he squared off against his troops.

“What the fuck are you idiots so confused about? I am Lord Vader and I am not compromised,” he snarled. “You had better fucking fall in line.”

Obi-Wan could feel the massive draw, the violent pull on the Force as Anakin exerted his will over
the lines of troops stretched out before them; it was the mind trick, backed by an incredibly amount of power. For the moment, no one moved.

Obi-Wan imploringly gestured to Caleb to lower his blaster, hoping that the boy would trust him just one more time. Unwillingly, the Padawan stood down.

The thing about the mind trick was that it was the most effective on weak-willed sentients. The clones weren’t weak-willed by any stretch, but they were conditioned to obey. Commanding a full squad of troops this way would normally be well beyond Anakin’s ability level, and even with his fierce determination it was still possible that the clones would buck his control and finish their assignment as planned.

Deadeye, one of the more free-thinking of the group, broke from his perfect posture.

“Sir, we have to-”

“You have to acknowledge your master,” Obi-Wan said, lifting his hand and adding his strength of will to Anakin’s.

The abused bond between them linked their intentions and amplified the already impressive power of their commands. Though the two of them were awkwardly at odds with one another, deeply wounded by what had passed between them in the last half hour, they were united in their need for the clones to obey them.

“Drop your weapons,” Anakin ordered sharply, releasing the clone whom he’d been choking so that he could give his full attention to his demands.

Moving as one, this sub-unit of the 501st submitted to his will. Their weapons clattered to the ground as they released their grip, then snapped to attention. Caleb, leaning heavily against the door, watched disbelievingly and half-wished that the trooper’s shot had killed him.

Chapter End Notes

I'm trying to actually start doing the illustrations that I'd been intending to do all along. So far, it's just the one in this chapter and one in the first chapter, but I'll hopefully be adding 10-15 to the whole thing over the next few weeks. :)
Chapter 21

XXXV. Sutures

It was a long way to Yavin 4 on a ship without a hyperdrive.

The three Jedi didn’t talk much for the first cycle on the transport, only meeting at meals. Obi-Wan’s new injuries, primarily scrapes and swollen bruises, made him stiff and a bit grouchy while the psychic damage that Anakin had sustained left him drowsy and unfocused. Caleb, concussed and overwhelmed by what he had learned, avoided them both in favor of talking to the pilot when he spoke at all.

The clones, stripped down to their black underarmor and scanned for any kind of transmission equipment, were confined to the lower quarters; Obi-Wan wasn’t entirely confident that they would remain as docile as they had been when they left Dantooine and he was taking few chances. A greeting party of the Rebellion clones would escort them to the medical wing, where several expertly programmed medical droids would remove their chips.

After that, it was any guess how many of the rescued 501st would be able to bear up under the emotional weight of what they had been made to do.

Anakin was trying not to think about it. In fairness, though, he was trying not to think about a lot of things. He was trying to forget his recent quality time with Palpatine. He was trying to forget how it had felt to hit Obi-Wan with the hilt of his lightsaber, and how it had smelled when the plasma blade had burned through the arm of his jacket and singed his skin. In his memory, hurting Obi-Wan had felt good. Satisfying. It was only now that he was free of his Sith Master’s control that bile rose in his throat at the memory. So he tried to forget. He was trying to forget when Obi-Wan’s eyes had briefly flashed yellow and the rims of his irises had darkened to scarlet.

He was trying to forget how Caleb had brushed off his apology on the transport, replying with a hurried “Yeah, it wasn't you” before slipping off again.

Most of all, he was trying to forget the ways that he and Obi-Wan had emotionally and spiritually violated each other’s trust. He had stolen Obi-Wan’s free will, and Obi-Wan had taken his in return. He wished that he could blame it entirely on Palpatine's mental control, but the truth was that it felt good; even now, he half-wanted to do it again so that he could feel that intimate hold over Obi-Wan. His guilt over the lingering temptation was tempered by the memory of his lover willingly exerting the same control over him. He logically felt like it should make them even, but it didn’t. Both sides of the exchange hurt on a deeper level than he could voice.

He wanted the comfort of his lover’s company, but he was both fearful and ashamed to seek him out. In addition to everything else, his guilt over foolishly jetsetting into Imperial territory weighed heavily on him; this wouldn’t have happened if he had been more even-tempered, if he had confessed his fears to his lover rather than running from him. Though their rooms were side by side on the surprisingly well-equipped transport, he didn’t join him and Obi-Wan didn’t come to him either.

On the second night, he knocked on his lover’s door and Obi-Wan wordlessly pulled him inside and took him to his bed. Shellshocked, they kissed each other until the contact turned too heated. Both wanted to forget, but their enthusiasm felt artificial; at a certain point, they mutually backed
off and just huddled close atop the thin comforter, barely breathing.

The connection between them - the one that they had built together - was closed and almost stifling in its absence. However, the life-bond that they had recently abused was practically singing. Neither knew what to say, so they just held each other as though they were hiding from something and needed the other’s protection.

It was easily an hour before either broke the silence.

“I was so worried about you,” Obi-Wan said finally.

“I’m sorry, Master… I shouldn’t have left.”

“You shouldn’t have,” the older man agreed, his mouth muffled against Anakin’s shoulder. “You should have stayed with me and told me to stop being such an insufferable ass.”

“You’re not insufferable,” Anakin laughed softly.

Obi-Wan snorted, taking his lover’s joking implication. “I was. I was so fixated on right and wrong, and light and dark… I didn’t… I didn’t even think about how incredible it was that I was alive, or how beloved I am that my… that you commanded the Force for me. That you literally gave me a part of yourself.”

The quality of his voice had changed as he progressed - he had started out very much in his usual preachy, slightly self-deprecating tone, but had ended in a quiet, emotional whisper. He had obviously been trying to make this confession since Anakin had come to his room, and in doing so he had worked himself up into an unaccustomed level of emotion. Anakin wasn’t sure that he had ever heard his lover sound so vulnerable or so broken in all of years he’d known him. This was a different sort of grief and a different sort of guilt.

“After everything, I couldn’t even tell you that I love you,” he said, his voice cracking unattractively before he jammed the heel of his palm up against his nose and mouth.

“Hey, hey…” Anakin murmured, dragging him closer and kissing his face.

“No…” he said, brushing off his comfort. “I should have told you I loved you that night, again and again - I should have told everyone - I should have kriffed your karking brains out, Anakin. I never should have let you go, even back to your own room.”

Anakin smiled slightly, though it didn’t soothe the ache in his chest.

“I didn’t go because of that. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Obi-Wan turned onto his side and Anakin naturally mirrored his pose so that they were face to face again. His eyes were soft and blue, familiar, and Anakin could see love beneath the lingering sadness.

“No? Then why?”

“You were open with me, and I wanted to be that way with you… but I had this secret I was afraid of you knowing.”

Knowing that Obi-Wan would ask, he pressed on.

“On Ilum I had a vision that I was going to kill you. Not just…” He swallowed hard, terrified to
admit this aloud. Even after their recent reality, he was afraid that this was too much, and that this would be what finally pushed Obi-Wan to walk away.

“Anakin?”

“It was… torture, and mutilation… humiliation… I wanted… really *fucked up* things.”

Obi-Wan was quiet for a moment, turning that over in his thoughts and considering Anakin’s prior behavior in light of this new information.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“If you knew… and if you knew how much I’d enjoyed it in the vision… I mean… I *wanted* it. It felt good. How could you love me knowing that something in me wanted to do that to you?”

“We could have addressed it, sorted through those feelings. There are a lot of things we’ve… just avoided talking about…” he said softly, looking up at his younger lover calmly as he rubbed Anakin’s new metal arm to illustrate. “We could have guarded against it.”

“It wasn’t real anyway…” Anakin said dismissively, not ready to acknowledge that there had been a corrective course of action. He also wasn’t ready to slow down and consider that Obi-Wan hadn’t reassured him that he would still love him. He rushed on. “Palpatine… he said he put it in my head. Same with the visions of Padmé. Neither vision… that I *kriffing* made terrible decisions to try to avoid… none of it was real. Anything that came true was because of me. And then on Dantooine I was going to do it for real…”

“You were being controlled.”

“I shouldn't have been! Even if I was so *kriffing* stupid that I ran right to the Empire… why wasn't I stronger?” he steamrolled over Obi-Wan’s attempted interruptions to continue. “I'm supposed to be some kind of fucking super special Chosen One, but I'm just… I'm so stupid and weak. All I do is *fuck up*.”

He pawed at his wet eyes in frustration, not wanting to cry. He didn't deserve comfort for this, not from Obi-Wan. There were things that he would gladly accept comfort for, but right now these were his own failings.

Obi-Wan obviously felt differently, for he crushed him closer.

“Forget that Chosen One banthashit,” he said flatly. “No one has won yet against that Sith Lord. You can hardly take it personally.”

“But-”

“If a clairvoyant 800- year- old- whatever-the-hells-Master-Yoda-actually-is didn't see this coming, what chance did you have?” Obi-Wan demanded flippantly. “An entire council of supposedly *brilliant* Force users just shuffled the ‘Chosen One’ off with a brand new Knight - a brand new Knight who, I might add, had just brutally bisected a Dathomirian Sith Lord out of nothing but grief-fueled rage, yes, rage, thank you very much for checking up on my mental state, thank you, no support at all.” The ginger seemed to lose the flow of his tirade for a moment after sidetracking himself. After a barely noticeable pause to gather his thoughts, he concluded, “Because they said you were too old! *Too old!* And then they decided it was a great idea to let you… *pal around* with a Sith Lord in your free time.”

Anakin was startled by Obi-Wan’s vehemence.

“Don’t get me started on how they went over my head to send you alone to a summer vacation palace with your childhood dreamgirl.”

Anakin laughed again, relaxing slightly in the face of his Master’s animated diatribe.

“I’m not excusing your choices or making excuses for the things you’ve done,” Obi-Wan said, quieting. “I’m just saying that this whole tragedy - most of our lives, actually, have been the result of one screw-up after another… so at the worst, we’re in good company. All we can do is strive to be better, do better…” He took a deep breath and concluded. “And make amends for our mistakes.”

He reached for his breathing device where it perched on the edge of the bedside table, then took several long drags.

“Let me try that,” Anakin said, taking it from Obi-Wan as the older man returned it to its place.

Anakin brought the small metal device to his lips, giving his lover an indirect kiss by putting his mouth where Obi-Wan’s had been. When he inhaled, oxygen flooded his lungs, giving him a slight high.

He held the air in his lungs for a moment, removing the pressure of speech. He briefly wished that they had some kind of recreational drug, even a strong drink, to ease their confessions and dull the ache in his chest.

He remembered a time when he and Obi-Wan had been traveling together on a peace mission during the Clone Wars, and they had joined in the local custom of smoking the crushed pearls of marlili grain, wrapped in paper-thin dried blue leaves from Fellucia. It had hit both of them hard; they had laughed and joked back in their shared room, then mellowed to kisses and surprisingly meaningful conversation until the early morning. It was a good memory.

He slowly exhaled as he placed the device back on the table.

“I don’t know how to face what I did to you on Dantooine,” Obi-Wan said abruptly, not looking at him.

“I did it first.”

“You weren’t yourself. I was panicked, but I was still completely in control of my actions. It’s…it’s inexcusable.”

Anakin nodded acknowledgment, not sure what to say. He needed to hear his former Master admit that what he had done was wrong. He knew that he had to make a similar acknowledgement and make other apologies that weren’t just poorly-disguised cries for reassurance, but he wasn’t ready yet. Perhaps it was selfish, but he needed this moment of shared understanding; it seemed important. In this moment, Obi-Wan was more fallible and more like him than he’d ever been.

“You understand the dark side more now, don’t you?” Anakin said quietly.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said with surprising bitterness.

They were quiet for a moment before Obi-Wan spoke again.

“I know words have little meaning concerning violations of free will, but I am sorry. Truly, deeply, unrelentingly sorry.”
“It’s… it’s okay. It’ll be okay eventually, anyway. I needed your help, I don’t know how else it could have happened. Getting Palpatine’s control off of me, I mean.”

Obi-Wan kissed him gratefully, though his acceptance didn't assuage his guilt or diminish his own misgivings about himself and the kind of person that he truly was.

“Tell me what you were thinking, what it felt like,” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan was surprised by the request. Chasing surprise, he felt a shock of panic. He didn't want to explain it; he wanted to superficially acknowledge and apologize, then hide for the rest of his life from what had really happened. However, a deeper training had taken hold, his own personal tradition of self-flagellation; the burn of shame in his chest compelled him to speak, accepting the humiliation as a portion of his punishment.

“At first I just wanted you to let me go. But after that… I was just fascinated by you, this part of you that I had never touched, that… wasn’t mine… and I was selfish. I wanted to get rid of any trace of the Emperor’s hold over you. I am ashamed to tell you that it wasn't for your sake… or even my own survival. I didn't want there to be any other claim on you. I wanted - I felt I deserved for you belong to me.”

“I already belong to you.”

“You belong to yourself, Anakin,” he said with sharpness that caught the younger man off-guard. “What you share with me is a gift and nothing that I am owed. It's certainly nothing I deserve, especially now.”

Though Anakin took his lover’s intended meaning, Obi-Wan’s forceful rejection of his romantic sentiment still stung. In his words and the tension of his body, Anakin could also read the intensity of Obi-Wan’s self-hatred. He felt his throat tighten, though he didn’t entirely understand why.

“I pushed you to it,” he protested.

“And what, with the slightest provocation, I subjugate you like your Sith Master? It’s against everything I believe, everything I’ve been taught. There is no excuse.”

“Obi-Wan, I did the same thing to you-”

“It’s different for you-”

“Why?” Anakin demanded.

“Because I don’t have the history you do-”

Anakin felt a flare of anger. “What, because I was a Sith? Only one of us had yellow eyes yester-”

“No!” Obi-Wan protested, immediately understanding how his statement had come across. He couldn’t bear Anakin to misunderstand him, nor could he stomach the rest of Anakin’s assertion.

“Because you were a slave. Everyone who meets you want to keep you, control you, use you… I'd never wanted it before, never seen you as something that could be owned… and I then did, and it's disgusting.”

Anakin sensed that the other man was starting to lose himself in his own rhetoric and self-mortification. He knew that Obi-Wan reacted to guilt and perceived failure by withdrawing and fixating on Jedi code, but he couldn't lose his lover to himself when he needed him so much.
“The right thing isn’t always the right thing all the time! I couldn’t have broken Palpatine’s control on my own, and think of what I could have done!”

“There must have been another way, a Jedi way. You deserve so much more than that, Anakin... better than me... and better than me at my worst for certain! Who in all of the Sith hells have I become? It’s against everything I believe, everything I’ve been taught. Jedi don’t have possessions, they certainly don’t try to own people...”

Anakin set his jaw, then caught on to Obi-Wan’s chin and turned his face toward his.

“No, talk to me about Jedi.”

Obi-Wan stared at him for a moment, surprised.

“You’re so... inflexible! Sometimes things need to be done, and it is actually for the greater good. You probably saved the karking galaxy and the only one who you hurt to do it was me,” Anakin said vehemently, his cheeks reddening and his eyes practically glittering with emotion. “And I’m not going to lose you over your ideas of what Jedi do. This isn’t just about you-”

“Anakin-!”

“-or what you think you're supposed to be or your Force-damned need to be perfect!”

Quick color came to Obi-Wan’s cheeks, surprised, defensive color. He pulled away from the firm hand on his jaw and drew an audible breath in preparation of protest. Knowing Obi-Wan and his tendency to argue, knowing how easily the two of them fought and how sharp his tongue could be, Anakin didn’t let him speak. He sat up part-way to maintain the superior position.

“I mean, for fuck’s sake! You just told me you felt like crap about getting stuck on all of this before I left! Aren't you supposed to be telling me you love me?” he said hotly.

There was nothing he could do that would take back the fact that he had crossed a line for the first time on Dantooine. He had retreated back to the light terrified of what he had seen in the dark, but he didn’t quite know how to scrub that ichor off of his soul. Instead of facing his trespasses, he clung to the familiar patterns that he had fit when his life had been different.

It was so much easier for Obi-Wan to talk about Jedi code and sacred duty; it was so much easier to analyze and punish himself for his failures than it was to face his emotions. No amount of trial and error changed it, nor did regret for past mistakes. It was easier to make the wrong decision and feel guilty after than it was to make the right decision in the moment. Somehow, in matters of the heart Obi-Wan just never learned.

Anakin’s strong facade slipped when he looked away, a frustrated film of tears on his eyes. His genuine upset always kicked Obi-Wan out of his own head. Sighing, the older Jedi reached for his lover’s hand.

“This always happens with you,” Anakin said angrily, pulling his hand away.

He sat up completely and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Obi-Wan sat up as well, following him reflexively.

“I’m sorry. Don’t go, Anakin, please. I love you.”

“Why are you saying it now?”
“It’s always the same reason.”

Anakin’s shoulders slumped and he tilted his head back, letting out a frustrated groan. When he spoke, his voice was an irritated whine. “Force! Why are you like this?”

Obi-Wan sat up and leaned back against the minimalist headboard. He knew that Anakin’s question was rhetorical, but it still somehow begged for a horrible self-deprecating answer. He didn't let his mind supply one. He was silent for a moment, then Anakin leaned back slightly against his legs.

“Talk.”

The older man sighed quietly, then reached over and took Anakin’s hand again. This time, the blond let him, carefully curling his cold fingers between Obi-Wan’s and taking care not to pinch or crush.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Maybe that you love me, that you forgive me for running off. Ask me what happened with Palpatine… demand that I apologize for what I did to you. I don’t know, something. You’ve got a fucking bruise on your cheek the size of a meiloorun fruit, you’ve gotta have an opinion about that…” Anakin rambled irritatedly, his tone slightly pejorative even as he leaned more against his lover.

He lowered his voice slightly, realizing that he hadn't really apologized for anything himself. He had a lot to apologize for.

“I really am sorry, you know. About hurting you… about making you fight me… about… everything. I don't even know what to say, but I know you can feel-”

“I forgive you. And I forgive you for leaving to begin with,” Obi-Wan said, shrugging his good shoulder.

“Thanks.”

“Would you forgive me for abusing that life connection?”

“Yeah, I forgive you,” Anakin said.

It seemed like a childish exchange of words, needlessly superficial and horribly insubstantial. Almost dishonest, more like a trade than a real apology. Obi-Wan knew that Anakin still hurt because he did too; saying the words always came before feeling any relief. This was a starting point for them, though, a place where they could pretend until the pain dulled.

‘Thank you’ wasn’t enough to cover the depth of his gratitude, and he didn’t even feel right saying it. Instead he communicated his emotion through touch, which Anakin had always understood more naturally. For the second time that night, when Obi-Wan pulled him into his arms, Anakin melted into his hold.

The older Jedi sighed and lifted a hand to stroke his lover’s mussed curls.

“When you were stranded on Naboo, I was afraid that I would never see you again… here, or in the Force. I was horrified that our last conversation would have been about some… dogmatic blather where I had found every possible way to avoid admitting that I love you. I do love you, Anakin… it terrifies me that there is an emotion that I can’t just meditate away, or a part of myself that I can’t
control… but I meant what I said on Dantooine.”

Anakin closed his eyes and pressed his face into the curve of Obi-Wan’s neck.

“I know,” he breathed. “And then I almost cut your arm off.”

“Bit of bacta and it was fine.”

It still scared Anakin to know that he had wanted to hurt Obi-Wan so badly. Palpatine’s influence had gone far deeper the Sith Lord simply commanding his limbs; he had altered his emotions and twisted his perceptions. His desires had been as powerful and as violent as in his false vision; he had taken a perverse pleasure in overpowering the other Jedi.

Control had felt good. Making Obi-Wan, who was so difficult and so often superior, do what he'd wanted had been an enormous rush of power. He hadn't been responsible for his actions, but he still felt a deep, uncomfortable guilt even after Obi-Wan’s ready forgiveness. Deep down, he still hungered for that power and incomparable intimacy again.

“It wasn't my best moment,” Anakin said quietly.

“It may have been my worst.”

“Maybe.”

They were both quiet again, though this silence was softer than earlier ones.

Obi-Wan rubbed the back of his shoulder, down the back of his arm to where it met the metal connection to the prosthetic. There were so many unresolved emotions tied in to Anakin’s body and the things that it had survived, the things that it had done and the things that had been done to it. Obi-Wan wanted to address it all, wanted to apologize, but he didn’t know how to start.

Anakin spoke before he could, though, and it took their conversation in a different direction.

“… but you know, for all that you’re right about the fact that you should have been telling me you love me and getting me naked… you weren't wrong to question this thing between us that I made. It’s a Sith thing, isn't it?”

Obi-Wan considered that, then shook his head.

“While it may be Sith who tend to toy with life and death, self-sacrifice is a Jedi trait. When the bond was misused, there was certainly something sinister… but on its own, I believe it's remarkably… balanced,” he paused thoughtfully, then settled more comfortably against the headboard and helped Anakin to resettle against him.

The blond nodded, shifting comfortably and letting his lover wrap a strong, bruised arm around his waist. Though he was taller than Obi-Wan, he still liked letting his former Master hold him; even after everything that had happened, even recently, it still felt safe. With some of the tension between them eased, he realized that he was exhausted.

“I'm tired,” Anakin admitted.

“We have a lot to recover from,” Obi-Wan acknowledged for both of them. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Yeah, long as that swelling isn’t gonna make you snore.”
Obi-Wan snorted and dragged him down close, holding him the way he always had.

XXXVI. We Come Around

Anakin woke Obi-Wan with kisses, overwhelmed by an inexplicable, panicked loneliness. The older man startled out of his deep sleep and took a moment to place himself before he was able to clumsily return any of his lover’s affections. His hands against his back were calming as he tried to bring Anakin down with gentle handling.

The blond was more needy and more forceful, very different from earlier when he had been guilty and almost lethargic during their conversation.

“What’s gotten into you?” Obi-Wan breathed, cupping Anakin’s face in his palms.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, pushing past the slight resistance of Obi-Wan’s hands to kiss him again, open-mouthed and insistent.

Gently, trying to ease him down before pulling away, Obi-Wan kissed him back. His pace was languid but skillful, satisfying without giving in to Anakin’s desperate haste. After a moment, he pulled back and said, “Use your words.”

Anakin rolled his eyes in the half-darkness and bit his former Master’s lower lip. “I need you.”

“Need me how?”

“Just… I want you. I want to be with you.”

“Why all of the sudden?” Obi-Wan asked, rubbing his lower back soothingly.

“I almost lost you.”

“Beloved… that’s not…” he paused uncertainly. “That’s not a good reason to rush into this in the middle of the night.”

Anakin stilled, then turned away from Obi-Wan and pulled his companion’s arm around him. His body language was tense and a bit hurt, but he was still demanding closeness.

“Tell me you love me,” he said quietly.

“I love you,” Obi-Wan replied tiredly, curling his body around Anakin’s longer one and spooning up against his back again.

Anakin exhaled slowly, but his heart was still beating quickly.

“I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“Everything. Just... everything.”

Obi-Wan slid his hand along the hem of Anakin’s battered t-shirt, letting his fingertips skim just underneath along his taut abdomen. He slid his hand up under his shirt, over his scarred ribs until
he could lay his palm against his heart. He pulled him back firmly so that they were seamlessly aligned belly to spine.

Anakin was breathing quickly like a hunted animal; his ribs rose and fell rapidly against Obi-Wan’s front, out of sync with his slower, night-settled rhythm. He closed his eyes and gently forced his lover to breathe with him by pulling him closer, pressing his hand against his ribs to remind him when to inhale and exhale.

Within a few moments, Anakin had fallen into cycle with him. He lifted his hand and laid it over Obi-Wan’s.

“This all just hit you again, didn’t it?” Obi-Wan asked softly.

Anakin nodded tearfully without responding, pressing his lips together to keep in a heartbroken sob. His entire body was shaking, and for a moment he lost their breathing pattern until Obi-Wan gently coaxed him back into it.

“It’s all right. We’re safe… let it out, it’s safe…”

It was a deliberately different word choice than a Jedi master would normally use. Instead of telling Anakin to give everything up to the Force and let go of his emotions, Obi-Wan was giving him permission to simply let himself react to what he had gone through.

With Obi-Wan’s acceptance and obvious love, Anakin cried.

He didn’t try to explain or articulate what had happened in the traveler’s starport on Bellaro, how he had slummed with a girl whose name he didn’t know just because he felt cheap, lonely, and starved for contact. How he’d dreamt of Padmé and the twins and been drunk and foolish enough to try to go to them. How he’d found his balance in the days after the ship had crashed, and how he’d felt so sure that he could set things right when he got back. How he had thought about dying, how he had been ready to kill himself rather than be taken on Naboo. How he’d failed at that, even, and how effortlessly and thoroughly Palpatine had taken him down. How small he’d felt and how alone.

“I didn’t tell him,” he choked out at one point without context.

He let himself feel and process what had happened on Dantooine, from his own powerlessness to what he had almost lost. In his heart, he could still feel the fresh wounds that had been rent in his soul when Obi-Wan had gracelessly torn away the trappings of the Emperor’s control. His voice broke on his sobs and then subsided to almost-silent shivering as he emptied himself out.

All at once, he felt painfully aware of his physical body again. The sinus pressure ached and his eyes were swollen; he could barely breathe and he felt unpleasantly tight all over. Sweaty. He drew in a huge lungful of air and held it, then pushed it all out at once and forced himself to lie limply in his lover’s hold.

Obi-Wan smoothed his hair back gently from his face, stroking back from the temples soothingly and letting his fingernails lightly drag against his scalp. He pressed feather-light kisses to the back of his neck and shoulders, his fingers still gently splayed against his chest.

As Anakin settled, he realized that he was also wrapped up in the warmth of Obi-Wan’s Force signature. His lover had opened himself to him completely, as though he had never left the week before.

He had so many things that he wanted to say, but he was exhausted. When Obi-Wan murmured,
“Sleep, Anakin,” he didn’t argue.
XXXVII. Judgment

Obi-Wan woke early and tried to convince himself that he was still asleep, but even with his arms around Anakin and his face pressed into his hair he was terrible at staying in bed once he was awake; his mind wandered too easily to his plans for the day, which always motivated him to action.

Lying in the dark and looking at the golden readout of the chronometer, he found his thoughts returning to Anakin’s comments about yellow eyes. He couldn't help but wonder who he had become since Order 66, and what it had cost him to rescue Anakin time after time; there were certainly beliefs he had set aside and lines that he had crossed. Even if Anakin had forgiven him, there had to be consequences for that sort of thing. At this point, though, he didn't know who or what would mete out judgment.

Maybe it would be Caleb. They hadn’t spoken beyond short exchanges since they had left Dantooine; regardless of Caleb’s path beyond their arrival on Yavin 4, Obi-Wan needed to make sure that the Padawan understood everything that he had seen and everything that he hadn’t been told.

He felt galvanized by the progress that he had made with Anakin; even with all of his concerns about the dark side and his crises of faith, he felt more like the brilliant strategist and powerful soldier that he was. With that slight lift in his spirits and the almost tangible centering within himself, he was ready to move forward.

He slipped out of bed and lingered for a moment in the dim room before quietly rummaging in his bags for a clean set of clothes, then paused when his fingers met with the carefully rolled Jedi robes that were tucked into his pack. He felt an instant stitch in his chest at the recognition of what they were, followed by a surge of longing to wear them again.

Crouching on the floor beside the bed, he ran though a thousand justifications of why he should leave them where they were, why he didn’t deserve to wear them. It was just a costume now, really. What did these hand-made garments mean anymore, even to an unsullied Jedi? They were just a target for a sniper and a burial shroud for the devoutly proud.

All the same, he unrolled the familiar garments and dressed silently. Even with his hands shaking slightly, even in almost-darkness, he could tie every closure and align every piece perfectly. His muscles remembered the way that it felt to tuck the soft trousers into his boots and how to even out the ends of his tabard.

Dressed in everything except the voluminous outer robe, he was remarkably relaxed. Feeling the soft fabric against his skin, he was Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi. He had been trained by Qui-Gon Jin, who had been trained by Dooku of Serreno, who had been trained by Master Yoda. Regardless of anything that had happened or would happen, for a moment he simply drew strength from the familiarity of his old life.
When he met up with Caleb down in the small rec room, the first thing that the boy said was a slightly dismissive. “Wow, you look just like your wanted poster.”

It was a little bit difficult to recover from, but Obi-Wan just laughed softly, casting his eyes down briefly.

“I’d like to talk to you, Caleb.”

“Yes?” the dark-haired Padawan said, raising an eyebrow. He was avoiding Obi-Wan’s gaze, but it was hard to ascertain if it was because he was angry, awkward, or wounded.

“You deserve to know everything.”

“I didn’t before, what changed?”

Obi-Wan suppressed a sigh, once again thinking that his initial judgment of Caleb was wrong; he really was very much like Anakin in some ways. Looking at the proud set of his shoulders and the combative tilt of his head, he could easily picture his former Padawan at that age. He wondered if he himself had been the same, and if it was just the way teenaged human boys were. All the same, he had literally no nostalgia for being the guardian of a young, sarcastic Jedi.

“I don’t have a good answer for that, and I am sorry.”

Caleb pressed his lips together and exhaled hard through his nose.

“Of all the Jedi, any of the Jedi that coulda found me… why did it have to be you two?”

Obi-Wan was surprised by how deeply the words cut. He was momentarily unable to speak, which only gave Caleb the space to say more.

“No! Why didn’t you kill him? You knew. You knew the whole time and you let me trust him - you let me trust you. I’ve had nightmares about Darth Vader, who I thought he was anyway, for months… I thought it had to be someone none of us knew, just some… bloodthirsty Sith. Nope. It was kriffing Anakin Skywalker the whole time! Just… “

Caleb took a shaking breath.

“How… why did this happen? It’s just… it’s so unfair. It’s so unfair that he killed so many people and he’s here. That you’re here.”

The Great Negotiator didn’t know what to say.

The silence stretched uncomfortably until Caleb looked over at him, realizing belatedly that he had just told Obi-Wan that he literally wished that he was dead; he could feel the injury that his words had inflicted. The teenager pressed his lips together again, determined not to take back anything that he had said.

“Do you want answers, or do you just want to talk?” Obi-Wan asked finally.

Surprised by the simplicity of the older man’s response, Caleb blinked several times quickly before looking down.

“I’m just… I’m so angry.”

“I know,” Obi-Wan said. “And I am sorry.”
Caleb sighed, scratching the back of his calf with the toe of his boot. Without looking at Obi-Wan, he flopped down angrily into one of the chairs and gestured to one of the others.

“I don’t know how I can believe anything you say.”

Obi-Wan took a seat on the edge of a semi-comfortable chair opposite the Padawan, clasping his hands in his lap. It felt natural to feel the slight tension of his tunic where it was stretched gently across his knees; he was off-balance in this conversation, so he tried to stabilize himself on these familiar details.

“I have never lied to you.”

“You didn’t tell all of the truth. It’s lying by omission.”

The phrase was rote for Caleb. Jedi were taught not to lie, but they were also taught to be ‘diplomatic’ when they were acting as peacekeepers. Even Caleb knew how to do exactly that, though to a less mature extent. Obi-Wan was a famous negotiator; his quick thinking and expert turn of phrase were prized among the Jedi. That wasn’t the issue. As far as Caleb was concerned, Obi-Wan could come up with a million charming quips or tactically mislead a hundred political leaders; he was betrayed by the fact that Obi-Wan, his new Master, would use this trick against him.

“I didn’t think you could handle everything at once;” Obi-Wan admitted. When Caleb started to protest, Obi-Wan held up a hand and spoke over him. “I - and I’m sure Anakin - wanted to tell you everything gradually.”

“That worked out so well!” Caleb said sarcastically.

“Caleb, when we arrived on Dantooine you were emotionally unstable and consumed with guilt over my injuries. You could not have handled finding out that the two of us-”

Caleb’s cheeks reddened angrily as he interrupted. “But you - you thought you could be my Master? You should have told me before I had to decide what to do!”

Obi-Wan couldn’t deny that it was a good point.

“You’re not wrong.”

“Which means I’m right. Just say I’m right!”

“Force, Caleb, you’re right. All right? Is that what you need to hear? I made a mistake thinking I could help you, or thinking that you would be better off with the two of us. I felt we had come so far that we weren’t who we’d been or what we had done; to be honest, I hardly remembered it, I was so excited to find you. I foolishly wanted you to come with us. I wanted my family, my order, even without knowing you. I didn’t give you what you needed to make a fair choice, and that was wrong, that is **my fault**.”

It was Caleb’s turn to be surprised by how much the words - the undeniable truth - hurt. For some reason, the idea what Obi-Wan had misled him with good intentions was more painful than a malicious lie. It would have been easier to just walk away from someone who had been lying to use him, rather than someone who wanted his acceptance.

“I guess… just… tell me about it. I’ll listen, but it might not change my mind.”

Recognizing that he only had one chance, Obi-Wan took a deep breath and tried to think of where
to begin. He himself had wronged Caleb differently, but there was little more that he could apologize for directly; he had already claimed his own wrongdoing. However, they both knew that he was acting as a proxy for Caleb’s upset over Anakin’s choices. Anakin was the one whose apology was actually due, Anakin as Darth Vader and Anakin as reformed sinner. Anakin was sleeping right now, though, so his former Master and keeper was left to make his excuses. It wasn’t the first time.

“It is a very complicated story and I’m not sure where to begin without trying to summarize our entire lives,” Obi-Wan said honestly, meeting Caleb’s eyes. “Anakin was Darth Vader, that is undeniable. The things that he did were horrific, and who he was for that time… scares even me. That’s the power of the dark side. I have seen several Jedi, some of the best Jedi, corrupted by the dark side…”

The relevance of the last statement wasn’t strictly tied into the narrative that he was giving, but the implications seemed to hit him hard for a moment.

“And?” Caleb prompted.

“Anakin was manipulated by the Emperor… whom he knew and whom he trusted since he was just a boy. Senator Palpatine, Chancellor Palpatine, now Emperor… that man had everything planned. He built the clone army, there is even mounting evidence that he engineered the Clone Wars themselves. He had been grooming Anakin to be his apprentice since the first time he saw his power, as a child.”

Obi-Wan rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Anakin was so powerful… and so human. So un-Jedi, so unable to resist emotion. Attachment. He was so easy to manipulate because he trusted the Emperor so much. He fell so hard because he was so in love, because he had seen so much suffering… he was desperate. It was the wrong decision - there is no possible justification to the contrary, Caleb. I wouldn’t insult you… or myself… or any of our lost friends…. I wouldn’t say otherwise. It was wrong, but Anakin has always had good in him. There is still so much light in him.”

Caleb could sense the pain coming off of Obi-Wan in waves and he held his questions for the moment, trying to find his Jedi patience and kindness. To his surprise, his new Master’s voice broke when he spoke again.

“I couldn’t kill him. I was supposed to, I was ordered to. I tried. He was my closest friend, Caleb. My lover, the… single brightest star in my life. I was a terrible Jedi - a deeply flawed Jedi - I loved so deeply. I was going to walk away and let the lava take him on Mustafar, but then he asked me to help him… and I couldn’t leave my friend to die, believing himself alone.”

Obi-Wan had started to break down the moment that he admitted that he had loved Anakin; the confession was painful, embarrassing, and liberating all at once. With it in the open, he felt the tension in the Force around himself ease slightly. He managed to keep moving forward despite his voice varying from a choked whisper to a studied, conversational tone. He didn’t look at Caleb as he spoke, knowing that his eyes were glossed over with tears and knowing he’d lose the last vestiges of his composure if he made eye contact.

“Perhaps I should have just laid down beside him instead,” he said after a moment, shrugging in resignation. Aloud it sounded dramatic, but his tone was sincere.

Caleb was quiet, trying to process everything. There was so much packed into such a concise explanation; so much of it fell outside of his experience or even his comprehension. In the days after the fall of the Jedi Order, he was learning that things weren’t as light and dark as he had been
taught. By reputation, Obi-Wan was a perfect Jedi, and here he was confessing to being in love. Anakin had fallen to the dark side, but it hadn't meant that he couldn't come back to the light.

It was all very confusing.

Obi-Wan shook his head, wiping at his eyes with his wide sleeve, then said, “You have every right to be angry and to feel betrayed.”

Caleb looked at Obi-Wan intently for a moment before answering. “Yeah… but I forgive you. Not Anakin.”

“I understand. You may never be able to forgive him… and that is your choice. But the person you've come to know is him. He wasn't acting when he reached out to you. Anakin is… the worst possible actor,” Obi-Wan said quietly, smiling slightly at the thought. “He doesn't know how to be anything except what he is.”

Caleb nodded, though he didn't feel any softer toward the blond Jedi.

“Yeah, I get that. But it's not like he's been looking for me to apologize.”

“He's barely been awake. He and I only just talked things through last night.”

“How did that go?”

“It was difficult, but important. Painful. Much like this conversation.”

Caleb appreciated that the Jedi Master considered this conversation important, but he didn't want to linger on it. His mind was going through a dozen different lines of thought, though he found himself revisiting this new idea of love over and over. He knew love from novels and holofilms, stories that he heard civilians telling from time to time, but nothing was so complex as what Obi-Wan was describing. He didn't understand how Obi-wan could love someone who had done so many bad things, fought him, tried to kill him. He didn't understand how Anakin could love someone who had cut off three of his limbs. And yet, he knew it was true; Obi-Wan was here in Anakin’s place to defend him even with those huge bruises on his face.

“Why did he try to kill you? Was he Vader then? Did he go to the dark side again?”

“He was being directly controlled by the Emperor,” Obi-Wan said, simplifying what he understood to be true. “He didn’t want to do it. Even controlled by Palpatine, he gave me a chance. He could have killed me right then, but he gave me every opportunity to kill him first.”

“I almost had to watch you die,” Caleb said quietly.

“I'm sorry that it was frightening for you,” Obi-Wan said.

“So what did you do to him? Why’d he stop?”

“I used a Force bond between us to make him stop. It was a bit like the mind trick.”

It was, again, an oversimplification. Even as he said it, Obi-Wan chastised himself for withholding information from the boy. However, in this case his justification was that he still wasn't entirely sure how he'd done it. He hadn't necessarily gone into it with the intention of subjugating this lover, and he hadn't intended to delve into a dark magic.

“Anakin's too strong for a mind trick,” Caleb said waringly.
“When Anakin kept me from dying when I was shot, it made a different bond between us. Just as he was able to coerce me to fight him, I was able to make him stop,” Obi-Wan said a little more honestly.

“That… doesn’t sound very Jedi.”

Obi-Wan sighed, tilting his head back tiredly. His hair, which had only the barest remnants of any styling product to give it shape, fell back from his face.

“It probably wasn’t very Jedi at all. But I am trying to accept that. I am starting to feel that the extremes that we were taught are flawed, and that our order’s ideals had been corrupted somewhere along the way,” he said, turning his deep blue gaze on Caleb again. “I think back to how far I would go to avoid killing evil men, and how many people suffered because I wouldn’t compromise. Once, Caleb, I was on a ship with a terrorist, and he said that he would blow up the ship if neither I nor a famous pacifist would kill him. I would have doomed an entire ship full of men because I wouldn’t cross that line.”

“What happened then?” Caleb asked curiously.

“Anakin killed him.”

The Padawan’s eyebrows shot up.

“In that instance, it was the right thing to do, even if it wasn’t the Jedi way. There was a prophecy that Anakin was the Chosen One, who was intended to bring balance to the Force. The council - and I! - thought it meant that he would destroy the Sith. Lately, I have begun to wonder if the meaning was more nuanced… destroying the Sith doesn’t create a balance . I wonder if the true balance would be to pull us all toward center, acknowledging the duality of the Force,” Obi-Wan mused.

Realizing that was a heavy dogmatic pondering that he really didn’t need to be burdening Caleb with, he backtracked.

“I don’t think a good Jedi would have done what I did on Dantooine, though… and I don’t know if I was even a good person to control my dearest friend that way. I don’t think I was. But I was desperate… and through that decision, we’re all alive and we may have potentially saved a few dozen clones,” Obi-Wan said. “So… all I can do is try to accept what I did and rebuild the trust I broke with Anakin.”

Caleb was wrestling with these ideas of light and dark, and what they meant for him and for his companions. He chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“Do you still want to be a Jedi?” the boy asked.

“I do, but I don’t know what that means anymore,” Obi-Wan admitted.

For a moment, his mind wandered to that first night after he had kissed Anakin on Ilum. He had been so vulnerable with his heart laid bare, but it had felt so right . He had felt stronger than he ever had, and his attachment had felt like a gift rather than a burden. He had felt like a true Jedi, a new kind of Jedi. He hadn’t been afraid of falling from the path because it had felt like a new one, a continuation of an old way. Until he analyzed everything and tried to fit it into the Jedi code, he had felt remarkably free and unafraid.

He sighed and dragged his fingers back through his hair.
“The more important question is, though, do you still want to be a Jedi?”

Caleb was quiet, but Obi-Wan knew that it was because he was considering his answer rather than avoiding the question.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, “I don’t want to be the kind of Jedi we were. I don’t know if I want to be the kind of Jedi you are either. I don’t know. I need to think about it.”

“There’s no rush… and if you want to go back to Janus, we’ll find a way to get you there. We would still respect whatever decision you make.”

“I want to stay with the Rebellion, for sure. Maybe with you,” he said a little more bravely. “I couldn’t go back to just… kriffing around in the galaxy when all this is happening.”

Obi-Wan smiled in relief, his whole body relaxing slightly. He hadn’t even realized that he had been so tense before Caleb had answered. He nodded quickly.

“Of course… of course,” he reached over and clasped Caleb’s hand without thinking, though he kept the contact very brief.

Caleb nodded a little awkwardly, wanting to hug him but still feeling a standoffish.

“We have a lot of things to work on, talk about. Even if you don’t follow a Jedi’s path, there are… many things you have endured that you will need to talk about to move past. Quinlan can help with some of them as well, as can some of the soldiers on the base.”

“I think you should too. Talk, I mean.”

“I’m working through it, and it’s going to take time for me too. And regardless of anything that happens, I do hope that eventually I can regain your trust.”

Caleb hummed in agreement, not quite knowing what to say.

Obi-Wan felt strangely light after having confessed almost everything and still being mostly forgiven. He had only kept one thing to himself - the line that he had crossed when he had torn his way through Anakin’s psyche to detangle the threads of Palpatine’s control. He couldn’t tell Caleb that he had, just for a moment, allowed himself to be seduced by darkness. He had thrown off the cloak of Sith magic before it had taken root in his soul; now he wasn’t sure if he was just imagining things, or if some tinge of the dark side remained.

XXXVIII. Closer

When he woke in the late morning, Anakin felt almost hung over from the physical exertion of crying. His eyes felt crusty and red-rimmed; though his head had cleared, the dregs of his headache remained. He slept on and off for several hours, dimly aware that Obi-Wan was beside him and then gone. Even if he hadn’t had an emotional night, he was still recuperating from psychic damage he had suffered.

The weird thing about Force-damage and aura pain was that it had a physical component despite being unrelated to the body. Different people might perceive the same injury different ways as their minds tried to translate the sensation into something their nerves could understand. After having Palpatine’s controlling grip forcefully removed, Anakin felt bruised inside, sometimes stinging when he inhaled too deeply, even though he had sustained almost no physical
injury.

When he woke again in what was probably mid-afternoon standard time, he was alone. He didn't remember Obi-Wan leaving, but he wasn't awkward being alone in his room. He felt unusually rested and clear. Curled up tightly under Obi-Wan’s blankets, he thought more calmly about what had happened and what he had realized about himself on Naboo. The way forward was clear, though he didn’t like it.

He had to study alongside Quinlan Vos.

A few weeks away from Obi-Wan seemed like an impossibly long time, but the older Jedi was still restricted from hyperspace travel so he could hardly complain. He'd wanted him to leave with Vos, after all. Given what happened, maybe Obi-Wan could use a bit of that training himself.

He was going to have to make Obi-Wan face that he'd slipped, that he had briefly given in to the dark side. He could feel that his former Master was trying to forget and he couldn’t let that happen.

He was barefoot in his lover’s bed, but otherwise still dressed. He didn't have much by way of belongings, just what he’d brought with them to Dantooine, but he did have a least one set of clean clothes in his own room. After weighing the pros and cons of staying exactly where he was and simply wallowing in the fact that there was nothing he actually had to do, he made the responsible choice and got up to wash and dress for the day.

In a surprisingly bold move, he made a detour and hauled his pack to Obi-Wan’s small room. Buzzed on the adrenaline that came from not knowing how Obi-Wan would react, he walked down to the refresher with a fresh set of clothes and tried not to look jittery. Obi-Wan could kriffing deal.

The hot water felt good; it wasn't the first time he'd showered since leaving Dantooine, but this time it felt like he was scrubbing off more than dirt. As he washed his face, rubbing the sand from his eyes and the dried salt from his cheeks, he noticed the unyielding pressure of his metal fingers but didn't hate them. For the first time, they felt like a part of his body rather than a scar left by his mistakes.

He felt less ambivalent toward his smooth-bottomed feet, which were slippery when wet. That needed modification.

He lathered his hair and body, working the crisp, vaguely antiseptic-smelling foam into his skin. The heat felt good on his stiff muscles and the steam soothed his sore throat.

He sighed when the system beeped to notify him that he had another 60 seconds until he’d exhausted his daily water ration. He considered committing tomorrow’s on the assumption that they’d arrive in the morning, but opted to just rinse off the lingering suds.

By the time he dressed and dragged his fingers through his wet hair to loosely style it, he felt better than he had in months. He was unburdened by his confessions and centered within the Force. He was confident that his family was safe, and he was loved deeply by his closest friend. There were failings to address, mistakes to apologize for, and things that still needed to be discussed, but everything felt possible.

Back in Obi-Wan’s room - now belonging to both of them in his mind - he picked up his lover’s battered holopad to catch up on galaxy news. It didn't really hold his attention, but his more stoic companion hadn't loaded much by way of recreational apps. He disinterestedly played a game of Dejarik against a computerized opponent and was losing quite badly by the time Obi-Wan
“Ah, you're up, I see…” the Jedi commented drily, though there was obvious affection in his voice.

Anakin stared without meaning to - his Jedi looked like a Jedi.

Though he wasn't wearing the soft, perfectly mended outer robe, Obi-Wan was dressed in his pale, loose-wear Jedi tunics and trousers. As usual, his darker undertunic was closed modestly to the throat and his tabards were perfectly even. His old, reddish leather boots were polished to a soft, even shine despite having been crushed in his bag for two months; though Obi-Wan had lost weight, they still attractively molded to his calves. Anakin had always found something secretly sexy about how his boots followed the slim contours of his ankle and heel.

He had trimmed his hair and beard, and aside from the bruises on his face and the stiff way that he moved, he looked just the way he always had during the last days of the Republic. Even though he had come to love Obi-Wan in his casual, dull-colored civilian disguise, this was what Anakin always wanted to see.

He was on his feet immediately, with haste that actually surprised the dandy Jedi. Anakin seized him about the waist and kissed him eagerly, with the same fervent intensity as the previous night but none of the panic.

Obi-Wan laughed, though the sound was smothered in the kiss, and wrapped his arms around his neck as he deftly slipped his tongue into Anakin’s mouth. He leaned comfortably against the edge of the small desk as they kissed, at ease in the moment.

“What's gotten into you this time?”

“Nothing yet,” Anakin said with a crooked grin.

Obi-Wan groaned, smiling, scandalized but delighted with the terrible line. He looked up at his taller lover as if considering every facet of him and this moment, then tilted his chin up to kiss him again. He was more than ready to leave his morning’s conversation behind.

“I shouldn't reward you for that.”

“But you want to.”

Even knowing how tedious it would be to peel Obi-Wan out of the many voluminous layers of traditional clothing, Anakin liked the familiar feeling of his lover’s body softened by yards and yards of fabric. He caught on to a handful of Obi-Wan’s tunic and dragged him close again, stealing his breath with the intensity of his kiss.

“And I intend to,” Obi-Wan purred when Anakin turned him loose.

At the words, a bolt of heat dropped to Anakin’s groin and his pulse quickened. While he was always an optimist, especially where it came to sex, he had only been joking; he hadn't thought that his friend would say yes, and he certainly hadn't expected to feel Obi-Wan’s hands on his waist or his mouth on his throat.

“Oh,” he said stupidly, reflexively tilting his head to the side to give Obi-Wan unhindered access to his neck.

The other Jedi chuckled against his flushed skin, then pulled back to tug Anakin’s t-shirt off over his head. As always, it was a graceless article of clothing to remove; it caught on Anakin’s nose
and left his hair a fluffy mess. All the same, Anakin eagerly pursued Obi-Wan for another kiss, quickly undoing his leather belt and secretly delighting at how doing so unmoored the rest of his fastidiously even clothing.

Laundering on Dantooine had taken the sweat and volcanic smoke out of the fabric, leaving it smelling faintly like military-issue soap and a ghost of the cologne that Obi-Wan no longer had. Somehow, even on the battlefield the gentleman Knight had always managed to be perfectly put together, and even with only his minimal Jedi’s stipend there was always something about him that seemed expensive. Both he and Padmé had always made Anakin feel a little common and a little unpolished by comparison, but always in a way that felt exciting, like he was getting away with something by being with them. With Anakin’s good looks and charismatic devotion, Obi-Wan had always felt the same.

Obi-Wan broke away from the kiss to breathe, feeling a little lightheaded at the exertion. He tugged at his sagging tabard, which only prompted Anakin to untuck it from his broad cloth belt and pull it and the belt off completely.

Realizing that the amount of clothing to be removed from each of them was wildly disproportionate, Anakin picked up his pace. He untied the inner closure and slid Obi-Wan’s outer tunic down off of his shoulder. Beneath that, his former Master had yet another tunic, this one closer fitting and dark brown. It felt like he was treading water as he fought his way through numerous ties and closures, but he was rewarded by warm skin under his cool fingers.

Anakin wasn’t sure why the sight of Obi-Wan’s soft, traditional Jedi robes had affected him this way. The texture of the fabric in his hands and the lingering scent of Obi-Wan’s old aftershave and cologne made him long for their life before; he wanted the casual affection stolen in private areas of public spaces, the jokes that they shared that were secretly shorthand flirtations, the completely consuming sexuality in private. He wanted the entire universe distilled down to just the two of them behind closed doors.

At Obi-Wan’s unspoken request, he stretched out naked atop the coverlet and tried not to shiver at the cool air or draw himself up in self-consciousness. Obi-Wan had seen all of him at one point or another, but the full, dubious majesty of his half-metal body hadn't been on display like this before. With Obi-Wan looking him over as he removed his boots, Anakin couldn't help but feel uncomfortably exposed.

Whether sensing his nervousness or just moved by affection, Obi-Wan rested a hand lightly on his metal knee as he leaned down to press a kiss to his lower abdomen. Anakin smiled, feeling his muscles tighten pleasurably in anticipation.

“What a lucky old pervert I am,” Obi-Wan laughed softly.

“You're actually not that old,” Anakin said graciously, the corner of his mouth tugging upward playfully.

“That may be the first time you've said that. You must want something,” Obi-Wan commented drily before leaning down and kissing his lover’s smug mouth. Anakin’s smiling lips were soft and slightly chapped under his.

“Am I that obvious?” Anakin asked innocently as he stole another kiss.

“You're certainly not subtle,” he replied cheekily, dipping his chin to kiss Anakin's throat. His soft beard scraped lightly against his skin. “Fortunately for both of us, for some reason I find that attractive…”
Obi-Wan’s hands skimmed over his ribs lightly, his fingertips occasionally following the lines of scars or lingering over the minute irregularities beneath his skin from healed broken bones. There was a gentle mindfulness that took in these small memories of the life Anakin had led - that they had mostly led together - and recognized the significance of where they were now. It was a soft almost-worship of the beloved, rebuilt body beneath his hands, and the adoring touch carried the same emotional weight for the younger Jedi as it had on Mataou.

“I am so looking forward to being the reason why your thighs are shaking and your voice is hoarse,” Obi-Wan murmured against his jaw.

Anakin blushed deeply and got a silly little smile, feeling a flush warming his cheeks and creeping down his neck.

Left to his own devices, Anakin would have been passionate but rather utilitarian in bed - low lights, enthusiastic missionary-style under blankets, and no talking except for sappy, romantic lines. Despite having watched numerous scintillating holovids during his military service, it somehow didn’t occur to the blond that these were things that real people could do and enjoy. By contrast, Obi-Wan had always been a more curious, adventurous lover. Through experimentation with his wayward Master, Anakin had developed a taste for variety even if he did generally still prefer to make love face-to-face. Obi-Wan rarely shocked him anymore, though his almost blase disregard for taboo did sometimes still catch Anakin off-guard.

There were two things in particular that still made Anakin blush, and both could jokingly be summed up by saying that Obi-Wan had a silver tongue. Namely, Obi-Wan’s willingness to put his tongue on almost any part of his clean body or his ability to put his diplomat’s wordplay to shockingly filthy use. Both things were slightly embarrassing to Anakin, but completely arousing and thoroughly enjoyable; it was more that he was still a little hung up on the very idea of being the kind of person who enjoyed that sort of thing.

“Mm-hm…” Anakin murmured, wishing he had a snappier reply. However, when Obi-Wan started to talk dirty, his own ability to form coherent sentences usually all but evaporated. He simultaneously hoped and dreaded that his lover would go into detail about what he intended to do.

As Obi-Wan kissed down to his collarbones, Anakin lifted a hand and laid it lightly against his bearded jaw. His fingers were cool, but the other Jedi didn’t flinch away. Instead, knowing that Anakin had some sensation in the newer prosthetic, he turned his head to press a kiss to his palm. When Anakin’s breath caught, he took his hand in his and kissed his fingertips, then slipped the tip of his index finger into his mouth. Anakin’s hips jerked upward involuntarily just once as Obi-Wan rubbed his tongue against his smooth fingertip, curiously watching for his reaction.

Pleased by the warm color spreading blotchy across his chest, Obi-Wan kissed the inside of his wrist and forearm. He liked how Anakin squirmed, aroused as much by the idea of Obi-Wan kissing him as by the strange way that the wet warmth and pressure that filtered across to his nerves. The blond watched him curiously, his soft lips parted, as Obi-Wan pressed warm kisses to his mechanical elbow and up to his bicep.

He met Anakin’s eyes with a quick smile that wasn’t quite shy, but wasn’t as cavalier as the older Jedi normally was in bed. They hadn’t slept together since easily a month before Obi-Wan had left for Utapau and everything had changed since then; he felt like everything had changed yet again even from the week before, even from the week before that. Stang, it had only been a few weeks since they had been on Mataou, and a few weeks before that they had kissed on Ilum. Obi-Wan felt unmoored, very aware of the fact that this was something old that was also completely new.

Rather than being disconcerted by Obi-Wan’s slight reserve, it bolstered Anakin’s confidence by
making him feel as though they were meeting as equals. He reached out for Obi-Wan and pulled his lover down into an open-mouthed, enthusiastic kiss.

The momentary tension eased as Obi-Wan settled atop him, letting the weight of his body press Anakin’s thighs apart. The warmth of bare skin was almost shocking in the cool room, drawing a sharp, audible intake of breath from Anakin. He canted his hips upward, subtly seeking friction as he arched up against Obi-Wan to pursue his kisses. His skin was hot and each point of contact almost burned.

“I want you,” he breathed, followed by a moan as Obi-Wan thrust his hips once against his.

“I’ll give you anything you want,” Obi-Wan murmured. “But first, I want to touch you, beloved. I want to feel you on my tongue and under my fingers…”

As he spoke, he dragged his hand down over his hip and up the back of his thigh. He hooked his fingers behind the joint of his knee to flex his leg, opening Anakin’s hips wider. He nuzzled his lips with his own, then deftly slipped his tongue into his mouth as he tilted his chin to deepen the kiss.

Anakin pushed him back after a moment, suddenly almost panicked.

“Wait, wait… I… uh… I slept with a girl at the Bellaro port…”

Obi-Wan tilted his head to the side appraisingly, his auburn hair attractively tousled. “A pro?”

He nodded shamefully, avoiding Obi-Wan’s eyes.

“Did you use protection?”

“Yeah… and… ah… a booster after.”

“It’s fine then,” the older Jedi murmured with a shrug.

He pulled Anakin into another kiss, even as his lover mentally struggled to keep pace with how that confession had gone; he had expected Obi-Wan to be jealous or angry, rather than mostly concerned with cleanliness. Strangely, he was almost offended even as he was relieved to feel Obi-Wan’s callused palm at the nape of his neck. He reminded himself that Obi-Wan had a very different, very open view of sex; as far as Anakin could tell, the main reason Obi-Wan found emotional meaning in their sexual relationship was because Anakin had placed that emphasis on it for both of them. He was pretty sure that if Obi-Wan ever brought it up again, it would be in the context of Anakin’s emotional state rather than any sort of perceived or intended infidelity.

He sighed, relaxing into his lover’s arms and letting Obi-Wan kiss him.

Where Anakin tended toward impulsive, Obi-Wan was always deliberate. His hands mapped the new contours of his body, lingering longer in places with sensitivity but still granting almost beatific attention to even his nerveless, utilitarian calves and ankles. His mouth followed the path of his fingers as he slid down his lover’s body, pressing open-mouthed kisses to his chest and hips.

When Obi-Wan bit lightly at the thick muscle that ran between his hip and thigh, Anakin jumped, then laughed self-consciously as he always did. Obi-Wan followed the bite with a flick of his tongue before sucking lightly at his fair skin. He edged upward between his legs, pressing his long thighs open wider with the solid weight of his body. He teased with his lips and tongue, occasionally giving the faintest press of teeth to make Anakin squirm. He briefly mouthed his testicles, then dipped lower to flick his tongue against his tight hole.
It was just once, just a tease before he moved back up to kissing his hips and lower abdomen, but it made Anakin’s breath catch and his cock jerk to attention.

Obi-Wan lifted his head to string a line of kisses down the gently depressed line that ran from his hip to groin. Anakin remembered him waxing poetic once, about how it was called the iliac furrow in classical art and likening Anakin’s slim-bodied, rangy musculature to something grandiose and sculptural. Anakin had laughed at it and passed off the compliment, like most of Obi-Wan’s compliments, but it had nonetheless stuck in his mind… along with the name of the stupid thing.

“I still love this line on you,” Obi-Wan commented as though reading his thoughts. He lifted his eyes to Anakin’s face with a fond smile. “You are such a stunningly handsome young man, Anakin…”

“Shh,” Anakin murmured, self-conscious and more than a little skeptical. He reached down and laid his index finger against Obi-Wan’s lips, then laughed when the other man playfully kissed the rounded tip of his finger.

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes, smiling, and showed his appreciation through touch instead; he pressed warm kisses to his hips and thighs, teasing occasionally with gentle bites or by sucking lightly at his skin. Anakin had an increasingly difficult time holding still as his lover continued to tease, avoiding the places where he most wanted to be touched.

_of course he’d tease_, Anakin thought, casting his eyes up toward the gently vaulted metal ceiling and trying not to whine in frustration at the warmth of his lover’s breath on his skin. _He always teases._

“You're very impatient,” Obi-Wan commented as he sat up to retrieve a small, single use packet of bacta gel from the built-in cabinet beside the bed.

It was probably an inappropriate use for such a valuable substance, but all soldiers knew it was the best lubricant in the galaxy.

Anakin grinned at him, then shrugged against the bed. “Well, yeah.”

With an answering smile, Obi-Wan resettled comfortably between his knees. He rubbed his thumb against the tight opening between his thighs, watching Anakin’s face. He could tell that his lover was oversensitive and overeager, but he continued to stroke and tease him, enjoying the quiet sounds that Anakin made. After a moment, he leaned down and rubbed his tongue against him teasingly, loving how Anakin’s muscles clenched and his breathing quickened. Anakin’s hips bucked at the first extremely intimate swipe of Obi-Wan’s tongue, his cheeks reddening in scandalized arousal.

“Oh…!” Anakin whined as Obi-Wan spread him wide and pressed his tongue into him.

Anakin was always awed and annoyed by how something so weird could feel so good. Who came up with this anyway, and why was genteel, high-handed Jedi Councilman Obi-Wan Kenobi so kriffing good at it? The skillful twists and flicks of Obi-Wan’s tongue drew the most embarrassing moans from him and left him practically squirming.

Obi-Wan didn’t let him move too much; he chased his pleasure, mercilessly edging Anakin with just his tongue. Anakin’s spine arched and his breathing came fast and rough.

“Fuck,” he whispered desperately, gripping handfuls of blankets because he didn't know what to do with his hands.
All at once, Obi-Wan lifted his head and slipped the wet head of Anakin’s cock into his mouth. If he hadn’t wrapped his thumb and forefinger tightly around the base of his cock at the same time, Anakin would have come right then. As it was, the younger Jedi cried out in frustration and his entire body jerked at the almost-release.

Obi-Wan chuckled, then eased up on him somewhat as some of his own attention was diverted to tearing open the little foil bacta packet. As he almost lazily rubbed his tongue against the head of his cock, prompting pitiful little gasps and shallow, frustrated thrusts of Anakin’s hips, he slicked his fingers. He swallowed him down until his lips pressed against his pelvis, even though it almost made his eyes water.

As he pulled off of him again, he gently, slowly slipped his first finger into Anakin’s eager body. Anakin reacted predictably by throwing his head back with a soft cry. Carefully, keeping his movements smooth and even, Obi-Wan opened Anakin first with one finger, then a second. His lover’s body was hot and close around his fingers, but some of the tension eased as Obi-Wan twisted and scissored his fingers within him.

Anakin’s moans grew in volume as Obi-Wan slowly took him apart with gentle persistence.

“Ah, come on… I’m ready, I want more,” the blond breathed, his thighs shaking at the effort of holding still.

Obi-Wan lifted his head and wiped his mouth on the back of his wrist, then smiled quickly.

He sat back on his heels and squeezed the last of the bacta into his palm, then stroked it over his own neglected prick.

He paused and licked a bit of the remaining bacta from the edge of the foil, wrinkling his nose. He had come to hate the sticky-sweet flavor after his almost-week long submersion; the taste and smell had lingered in his nose and mouth for days and days after. However, it was a good disinfectant and a generally polite thing to do if he wanted to kiss his lover; he was nothing if not courteous.

He settled atop Anakin and reached between their bodies to press the slick head of his cock up against him. He kissed Anakin affectionately and asked, “You're sure?”

“Mm-hmm,” he murmured, stretching up to give him an enthusiastic kiss. Obi-Wan always asked, even when Anakin was climbing all over him.

Obi-Wan kissed him more lingeringly, as he eased forward to enter him. Anakin moaned softly at the slow stretch, tilting his hips up to take him more easily.

“Ah,” Obi-Wan moaned, pausing to savor the tight heat of Anakin’s body. He skimmed his hand up Anakin’s thigh to rest on his narrow waist.

He met Anakin’s bright eyes and smiled quickly, almost moved to tell him that he loved him. The words were on the tip of his tongue, but it felt somehow silly or overly sentimental. Instead, he kissed him quickly and then pulled back to watch his face as he pressed into him fully.

His initial pace was slow and steady, long, smooth strokes that pressed in deep and then withdrew almost completely. Anakin always adjusted quickly, particularly with the impossibly smooth glide of the bacta lubricant, and he rapidly became impatient for more.

Anakin shifted underneath his lover again so that he could brace the soles of his feet against the mattress. As Obi-Wan began to quicken his movements, effortlessly maintaining the same smooth
regularity in his cadence, Anakin began to push himself into his movements. He knew that Obi-Wan loved to break him down with his relentless, untiring endurance, but he wanted more spontaneity.

“So impatient…” Obi-Wan laughed softly, his voice low and husky.

Anakin grinned at him and leaned up to kiss him as he pushed himself back onto Obi-Wan’s cock, taking him fully on each thrust.

“You feel so good,” Obi-Wan told him, bowing his head against Anakin’s shoulder. The words felt good; regardless of what body he had, Obi-Wan wanted him. He could feel it. The blond moved with him naturally, finding the rhythm in his movements. It was almost like meditation, the way his long run on Naboo had been. Even as his body shuddered and his hips pistoned into Obi-Wan’s thrusts, he felt strangely centered. He felt himself wrapped up in the bonds they shared, both the one that they had built and the one that they couldn’t control; he felt Obi-Wan’s love and echoes of his pleasure.

He wanted to touch him, but he didn’t know how anymore. His fingers knotted helplessly in the sheets as Obi-Wan pushed him back against the mattress, he touched his lover the way he often had before; using a refined, gentle touch of the Force, he caressed Obi-Wan’s chest and hips, drawing a surprised gasp from the ginger.

The sound was gratifying, especially when it disrupted the even pacing of Obi-Wan’s thrusts. Smiling smugly, Anakin arched up to kiss him. As he did, the Force-touch slid up the inside of the older Jedi’s thigh, then gently eased into him like warm fingers.

“Oh!” Obi-Wan moaned, eyes widening briefly as he pulled back.

Anakin pursued him for another kiss, wanting his lover overwhelmed by the sensation. He wanted Obi-Wan to know what it could be like with the two of them together; he wanted him to always want this and to want him most.

With Anakin pressing into him erratically, off-timed with Obi-Wan’s thrusts, they were both rapidly losing their focus as everything burned down to the blur of heated pleasure. It was dirty, sex was always wetter and louder and more obscene than Anakin had ever imaged that it would be; even high on his love for the other Jedi and flooded by sensation, Anakin was aware of how hot and sweaty they were, how Obi-Wan’s hips slapped against the insides of his thighs, how ragged Obi-Wan’s breathing was. As the heat built in his body, and his muscles tightened, he knew this was exactly what he wanted.

When Obi-Wan reached between them again and gripped Anakin’s cock, disrupting his concentration enough that he lost his ability to command the Force. It only took a few strokes in tandem with a few quick, hard thrusts before Anakin came into his hand with a short shout. Obi-Wan could have come just hearing his voice, but when his muscles spasmed around him it was over; he came hard, driving himself deeply into Anakin.

They both stilled, almost dazed by the intensity of what they had just shared between them. After a moment, Obi-Wan lifted himself off of Anakin and withdrew with an oversensitized groan as he slipped out of him. Anakin finally disentangled his fingers from the sheets, then groped blindly for the inhaler on the bedside table and pushed it into Obi-Wan’s hand.

The older Jedi sucked in a few grateful breaths before curling up against Anakin and pressing adoring kisses into his hair. He knew that they were both an absolute mess, and that he should
have been insisting that they both steal away into the ‘fresher to clean up. At the moment, he was unwilling to let him go.

“I love you,” he told Anakin quietly, his voice still a bit raspy from exertion.

Anakin turned his head and kissed him sweetly, then laughed and seized him in a tight embrace.

“I love you so much,” he affirmed, continuing to crush Obi-Wan almost uncomfortably against his chest.

Anakin grinned, kissing his cheek and settling close. Lying here now, comfortably sated with his lover wrapped up in his arms, he found himself relieved that Obi-Wan had shut down his desperate midnight attempt at seduction. This was better; he could recognize that this was healthier. Today they were meeting in a safer place and everything was better for it.

“So what were you doing kicking around in Jedi robes?”

Obi-Wan laughed self-consciously. “I think the real question is actually ‘why did doing turn you into a ravenous beast?’”

“Mm, I have no idea,” he laughed drowsily.

Obi-Wan smiled, letting that discussion pass; he didn't want to talk about trying to feel more Jedi by playing dress-up as one. That seemed pathetic, and he wasn’t quite willing to admit how much the small comfort of familiar clothes had helped him to get through his discussion with Caleb.

It was a distant thought right now, though; he was drowsy and spent, content to just let Anakin hold him. At just shy of 40, his own body took a longer to recover than he would have liked; he was reasonably certain that Anakin would be unsubtly hinting that he was ready for another round within an hour.

Anakin kissed his cheeks enthusiastically, making Obi-Wan laugh and push him away. He reached for a tissue to wipe off his hand, then looked at the chronometer and groaned as he flopped back down.

“Sex in the middle of the afternoon, like uncivilized-”

“You liked it. We may even have time to do it again before dinner.”

“Force, Anakin!”

“Don’t even pretend you’re not interested. You just told me I was hot. Not in those words, but that’s what you meant. You want this,” he said with a sweeping gesture over his lithe, naked body.

“That is undeniable,” Obi-Wan said with an answering grin, even though he knew that Anakin had probably been making fun of himself. “But I am considerably more advanced in my years-”

“You make it sound like you’re Master Yoda’s age!”

“Never, ever mention Master Yoda when I’m naked,” Obi-Wan said sternly, wrinkling his nose.

Anakin laughed, and then Obi-Wan lost his pretend seriousness and started laughing too. He kissed his younger lover tenderly, then turned onto his side and pulled Anakin’s arm around him. He was comfortable and warm, and at the moment he could think of nothing more pleasurable
than to sleep with Anakin, naked, pressed up against his back.

“Sleep with me, Anakin,” Obi-Wan said.

“I thought you just said you were too-”

“Sleep beside me,” the Jedi Master said, rolling his eyes.

“Fine, fine,” Anakin chuckled lazily, pulling him back firmly so that they fit together just right. He lightly rubbed Obi-Wan’s arm, then his chest, and then found that his hands were just wandering somewhat aimlessly over his unusually soft skin. He remembered belatedly that the long bacta soak would have done that; he’d noticed the effects on his face earlier, and how it had eased some of the roughness on his cheeks and “healed” away much of his Dantooine double-sun tan. It seemed strange to describe a forty-year old man as having a dewy complexion, but Anakin couldn’t help but think it fit. The thought of what Obi-Wan would think of the descriptor made him smile as he pressed a fond kiss to the back of his neck.

Force, he was tired; though he recovered quickly, sex always knocked him out for at least a little while. On campaigns during the Clone Wars, there had definitely been times when Anakin had wondered if Obi-Wan was only kriiffing him to get him to shut up and go to sleep. There was no way to know, but it wasn’t like he minded; sexual exhaustion was his favorite kind of exhaustion.

As they came down, crashing from their emotional and physical high, Anakin turned more introspective; his mind was always clearer when he didn't have an erection.

He rubbed Obi-Wan’s arms, feeling guilty for the marks that their fight had left on his lover’s body. The bruises on his face were ghastly, though they were looking better as Obi-Wan applied bacta every few hours; it was a stupid thing to worry about, but he was dreading the look of concerned judgment that would no doubt be on Vos’ face when they met up on base.

He sighed, kissing the back of Obi-Wan’s neck affectionately.

“How come you’re so okay with this today?” he mumbled self-consciously.

“With what?”

“This. Like, I kind of just said I wanted sex and you went for it.”

“You make it sound like I didn’t want you, or that I didn’t thoroughly enjoy myself,” Obi-Wan laughed softly, eyes still closed.

“No… but… I cheated on you and I beat the tar out of you, and you still said you love me. You said it first this time, even.”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “That’s because I do.”

“Why though? How? You've never said it without a reason before-”

“I probably should have.”

“But I've done more wrong than ever.”

“Right now, Anakin, we’re both here, safe, and I am happy. Knowing what we have survived and what we may have to survive in the future, I would be an absolute fool not to take advantage of the moment.”
Anakin sighed. He was still carrying heavy guilt over what had happened, not just over the last week but since he had defected to the dark side; however, the soft glow of emotion through their Force-bond warmed him and reassured him that everything that Obi-Wan was saying was true. He wondered, for a fleeting moment, what it would feel like to touch Obi-Wan again through their other bond. Not the way that he had before, but as a lover who could literally be trusted with his soul.

He knew better than to reach out that way, especially without asking, but the curiosity and the longing remained. He hugged Obi-Wan tightly, then relaxed and just settled against his back again.

“Let’s talk about it more tomorrow,” the ginger suggested, closing his eyes. “Between last night, working things through with Caleb today, I’m really… quite worn out, conversationally.”

“You talked to Caleb?” Anakin asked, surprised.

“Mm. And you should too,” Obi-Wan yawned.

“You gonna tell me how it went?”

“Tomorrow.”

Anakin always had a hard time with shutting up. After a few seconds silence, he piped up, “Okay, well just so you know, I've moved into your room. My stuff’s all here.”

Obi-Wan shrugged tiredly. “Just so you know, I told Caleb that I love you.”

“What?”

Chapter End Notes

Wow, guys, I think next week is the last chapter!
Chapter 23

XXXIX. Our Lost Songs

By the time that they arrived on Yavin 4, operations on base were in full-swing. Prior to the evacuation of the Dantooine base, the Y-4 location had been just as thinly populated; with everyone in one place, it was starting to feel like a proper rebellion.

The news that forty-one men from the 501st had been dubiously recruited had spread, and all of the clones in the rebel army had converged on-site to provide support following the chip removal. Their hope was that being surrounded by other culpable brothers would ease their pain and boost survival rates, but it was a great unknown. Despite biological similarities between them and a common upbringing, the psychological profiles of the clones were as individual as among any other group of humans; there was no way to know which men could shoulder the guilt of what they had done.

Rex, dark-haired and dressed in a combination of his Republic blacks and a rebel uniform, stood patiently beside Quinlan Vos to greet them on the airstrip.

On seeing him, Anakin dropped his pack and grabbed the clone captain in an enthusiastic embrace, practically knocking him over. Startled, Rex laughed awkwardly and hugged his former general tightly. Without his helmet on, it was finally possible to confirm what several of his Jedi officers had guessed for years: Rex had very open, almost exaggerated expressions when dealing with Anakin’s unexpected behaviors.

“What’s with the hair?”

“It was too distinctive.”

“Bah,” Anakin said dismissively. “Tons of guys shave and bleach their hair daily.”

Rex rolled his eyes, wondering why that was always the joke.

Obi-Wan neatly sidestepped Anakin’s bag with the intention of embracing Vos, but Caleb cut in line and fiercely hugged the tall Kiffar Master.

Quinlan laughed and gave him a good squeeze. “Ha, I guess you missed me!”

He knew the barest details of what had happened on Dantooine, but even now there was a lot that he didn't know; he hadn't been in direct contact with any of the Jedi involved and he hadn't had any opportunity to read artifacts of the scene for their psychometric histories. He could intuitively reason his way through this interaction and he could make certain assumptions. He could imagine that Caleb would have been taken the clone confrontation badly, especially when Anakin led the charge. That was going to be fun to sort through; maybe he would see about sending the kid to talk to one of the psychs on base who were working with the de-chipped clones.

“It's just good to see you're okay,” Caleb replied, stepping back and shoving his hands casually in his jacket pockets.
“Yeah, told you I would be,” he said, reaching over to clasp Obi-Wan’s hand.

He looked over his bruised friend, noting the livid marks visible on his wrists and the scrapes on his knuckles. Though the laundry cycle had gotten out most of the blood on his jacket, there was still a charred cut in the back of his sleeve that exposed the drab sleeve of his shirt beneath. It looked very deliberate.

“You look like shit, Kenobi,” he remarked.

“You're always such a pleasure to talk to,” Obi-Wan retorted drily.

With Quinlan’s attention focused on Obi-Wan again, Caleb slipped off after the pilot; he didn't want to be around when the still-chipped clones were escorted out in a few minutes.

Vos cupped one hand to his mouth and called after him. “Hey, Caleb! We’ll talk soon!”

Caleb, turning to walk backwards so that he could throw him an affirmative gesture with both hands.

Anakin watched, knowing that part of the reason why Caleb had been so eager to see Quinlan was due to the fact that the other two Jedi in his life had taken a tumble from grace in his eyes. _He probably wouldn't be so excited if he knew your track record_, Anakin scoffed jealously.

He glanced over at Vos, then felt a burn of adrenaline when their eyes met. _Yeah, he's pissed_, he thought. Not wanting to seem intimidated, Anakin asked flippantly, “So, when we leaving on our Sith road trip?”

Obi-Wan glanced over at him, surprised. Seeing the set of his shoulders and the challenging tilt of his head, he groaned quietly and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Whenever you're ready, kiddo,” Vos replied, not at all bothered by his childish petulance.

Something about Vos just got his hackles up since they had come together again after the fall of their order.

“I'm ready whenever,” Anakin said with a shrug.

“Tomorrow, then?”

“Works for me.”

The exchange seemed needlessly tense, but Obi-Wan was proud of Anakin for his choice to go with Quinlan to center himself. He had concerns about their ability to work together, but at the end of the day they were both intelligent adults and he had to let them work through their differences. It wasn't as though it would go further than a bit of nasty sniping, maybe some mutual brooding. They were hard-headed, but they wouldn't hurt each other; to the contrary, they would defend each other from danger if needed. There was also the possibility that they would get along better without Obi-Wan to complicate the issue; the dynamics of groups were always more complex than one-to-one communication.

As relieved as he was, he was equally uneager to be parted from either of them. He didn't say so, though Anakin could feel it.

“It will just be a few weeks, assuming you two don't kill each other,” Obi-Wan said, nodding his approval.
“You could always come too, some of this stuff might be relevant for you too after-” Anakin suggested carefully, though Obi-Wan shook his head to cut him off.

“You should have Quinlan’s full attention,” he said simply. “Perhaps later.”

Anakin wasn’t sure how glancing Obi-Wan’s brush with the dark side had been, or if it left any marks on him that the highly intuitive Vos would perceive. He was sure Vos would blame him for it as soon as he found out, as perfect Jedi Obi-Wan would never be tempted all on his own.

Quinlan’s expressive eyebrows arched as he looked between them, his forceful stare lingering on Obi-Wan as though he could see right through him.

“Anything you want to tell me?”

“Not standing here on the airstrip, no,” Obi-Wan replied breezily, as though it was a stupid question.

Vos knew the look; Obi-Wan was being difficult because either he or Anakin had done something that he didn’t want to admit to, which meant, of course, that it was absolutely imperative that he found out what it was. He sighed, knowing that it was difficult to get anything out of his friend that he didn’t want to share. His best options were getting him drunk, kriffing his brains out, or a bit of psychometric snooping.

“We’ll talk later,” Quinlan said smoothly, giving them both a broad, comfortable smile as he clapped Obi-Wan on the shoulder. “For now, let me get you guys settled. You just missed Senator Organa; he was here to inspect the base.”

Obi-Wan’s expression changed very slightly and his gaze cut over to Anakin; not knowing what Anakin had already pieced together from his visions, he wanted to keep Bail Organa as far from Anakin’s thoughts as possible. He would have preferred that his lover not even know that Bail had been the senatorial friend who had sent them to Dantooine to begin with.

I already know, Anakin thought, meeting his eyes briefly.

He realized that he should probably have told Obi-Wan that he knew, but he sort of wanted to keep that information to himself. He liked knowing where the twins were, and he didn’t want Obi-Wan to upset Padme’s new life by forcing them to relocate to a secret new location. All the same, if he was trying to be open with Obi-Wan, maybe even with Quinlan, he should share that information; if nothing else, in a more detailed discussion of “what in the nine kriffing Sith Hells were you doing on Naboo?,” the aborted travel to Alderaan would likely come up. The ability to Force-connect with others also seemed like something that was worth sharing.

Obi-Wan nodded calmly. “That’s too bad… I would have liked to have seen him.”

Quinlan walked them to the new barracks, then showed them to the hallway where their rooms would be. When Obi-Wan selected his room, Anakin put his bags just inside the door as well. He shared a look with his lover that just dared him to argue, but Obi-Wan remained silent. Quinlan, who also noticed, said nothing for the moment though the corner of his mouth twitched upward slightly in amused judgment; the Padawan was sure getting bold, wasn’t he?

Impulsively, the tall, good-natured Jedi slung an arm around both of their shoulders and hugged them up against his side.

“I’m so kriffing glad you’re both here and reasonably unharmed. Not dead, anyway,” he said with a warm laugh that made the other two smile.
He kissed Obi-Wan’s forehead and ruffled Anakin’s hair before releasing them. Against his will, Anakin found himself welcoming the gesture just because of how normal it seemed and how good it felt to have another person in the universe who cared about him. It didn’t make him any more enthused about certain aspects of his friendship with Obi-Wan, but it did make it easier to think of leaving with him sometime the next day.

“So what were you doing while I was wrecking havoc on Dantooine?” Anakin asked amicably.

“Tracking your sorry ass,” Quinlan laughed. “I got pretty far, but by then you were already on the move. I saw where they’d been keeping you - that anechoic cell. That was… pretty nasty stuff. I can't blame you for that lithkroffer getting into your head.”

“You were in an anechoic chamber?” Obi-Wan asked, surprised. He realized abruptly that he and Anakin hadn't actually gone into any detail about what Palpatine had done to him; Anakin had almost been avoiding the subject and Obi-Wan hadn’t pressed.

“A complete ambient chamber,” Vos amended.

“With Force inhibitors,” Anakin said quietly, almost embarrassed.

Obi-Wan sighed and impulsively reached over to lay a comforting hand at the small of Anakin’s back.

“Oh, Anakin.”

The youngest of the three shrugged; it was hazy in his mind now and he didn't want their pity. He smiled quickly, wanting to move on.

“How'd you get in so deep?” he asked.

Vos, sensing his discomfort with the subject of his mental torture, smoothly moved on with him.

“We’ve got some clones and some officers in pretty deep. It was tough - and man, was I ever shielding myself to keep that Sith from feeling me there!”

Obi-Wan made a face, not wanting to think about the danger that his two most beloved friends had recently faced. A few days ago, contemplation of these events might have edged him into a well-concealed spiral of anxiety; today, though, he was calm and centered, very much the Jedi Master that they both had come to rely upon. Strangely, neither of the men beside him was responsible for the change. He was elated to have them both safe on base, but it had actually been his discussion with Caleb that had settled his internal crises and helped him renew, well, his faith. In these times, that seemed like one of the most important things to have.

“That's pretty impressive. He doesn't miss much,” Anakin replied with a laugh. The laugh sounded a little forced to his ears, but he pretended that no one else would notice.

“He's fucking scary. I don't get how no one suspected him. He lived right next to the Temple.”

“We had suspicions,” Obi-Wan said a little defensively. “We could never find definitive proof. I think that the native vibrations from beneath the Temple may have masked some of it.”

“Yeah, it’s possible,” Vos conceded with a nod. As an afterthought, he added, “I’m not blaming you, Kenobi. Windu and Yoda, though?”

Obi-Wan forgot sometimes that Quinlan had as much reason - more, in some ways - to hate the
council as Anakin. They had pushed him to do some very un-Jedi work, then they had been ready to execute him when it went sideways. Obi-Wan was exempt from that judgment because of how he had protested and been overruled, but Vos had struggled with walking on eggshells around his corruptors after his return. If there was one thing that the Council had been good at, it had been alienating good Jedi; Qui-gon had been ready to leave, Dooku had deserted, Quinlan had been used and told to be grateful to be allowed back, and Anakin had been forged into a weapon. Obi-Wan felt a twinge when the memory of Ahsoka’s departure came back to him.

It was hard to admit that he had been a part of a body of leadership with that heavy history, but it seemed distant now. There was no Council to blame, and there was nothing to be gained by blaming them. They had all made the best decisions that they could at the time, and despite any sadness Obi-Wan still felt deep love for the council and his order. It was so strange to think that they were nearly all that was left of the Jedi at all. Remembering the past was not the same as lingering there.

“Windu paid a heavy price,” Obi-Wan said with a slight shrug, feeling a truly Jedi lack of emotion about it.

“What about Yoda?” Anakin asked suddenly. “Where is he?”

“In self-imposed exile.”

Both of his companions looked down at him with identical affronted expressions, surprised and slightly offended by his indirect answer.

“Wow,” Vos commented, though it was unclear if his incredulity was at Obi-Wan or Yoda.

“So the little green asshole’s hiding, is what you're saying?” Anakin asked, not pressing Obi-Wan for specifics. He could feel his lover’s self-conscious conflict through their bond and intuitively knew that he was honor-bound to protect Yoda’s secret. They all had secrets now.

“Something like that,” Obi-Wan laughed, surprised that Anakin wasn't arguing.

“Must be nice,” Quinlan groused. “You know they say he's one of the best swordsmen in the galaxy, and here he's holed up somewhere pretending that the rest of us aren't being slaughtered by the Empire.”

The other Master hadn't thought of it that way before. Yoda’s framing of exile and penitence had made it seem more noble somehow than desertion and the abandonment of responsibility that it felt like at this moment. The three of them were part of the Rebellion now, and hopefully with time they would find other surviving Jedi and bring them into the fold. Whether or not they wanted to accept it, they would have to be more than just peacekeepers again - the Jedi were at war for their very survival, even more than any of the other peoples coming under Imperial control. There was no compliance with the new rule - even a Jedi who bowed to the Empire was a dead Jedi.

Obi-Wan sighed and smoothed his hair back in a reflexive gesture, looking off down the hallway ahead. He wasn't sure how he felt about this shift in his ideology; he was uncertain if it was a natural, logical reaction to the changes in the world around him or the influence of the dark side.

“Well, at least we don't have to endure his unsolicited advice. Or his suggestions that we execute Anakin,” Obi-Wan replied drily. “It really is a small price to pay.”

Anakin smirked, determined to find humor somewhere. “You think he'd still want me dead?”

“Probably. He taught me as a Padawan that only Sith deal in absolutes, but he's not really any
different in practice. It's a very absolute viewpoint, isn't it? Though of course, we have all found our ideas about others, and ourselves, changing in these times.”

Vos had remained quiet, clearly holding his opinions on the subject. He and Obi-Wan had talked a lot about the Council’s past actions and how ready they'd been to execute Quinlan when he’d fallen to the dark side. In their extremely conservative views of the Force, there was no way to return to the light. The fact that Vos had been given any chance at all to recover and make amends had been largely due to Anakin and Obi-Wan’s insistence coupled with the Council’s lingering guilt over their plan to make an assassin of a Jedi Master.

He definitely had opinions about Yoda that he was politely withholding.

Anakin, however, snorted derisively and said, “Yeah, well kriff him and the dewback he rode in on. Kriff him with the dewback he rode in on.”

Obi-Wan laughed and bumped his forearm lightly against Anakin’s as they walked. It was a familiar gesture, though normally they would have clicked their armored bracers together the way the clones did to silently show solidarity. Of course, the healing bruises on his forearms protested the gesture, but he didn't really care. Anakin comfortably reached for his hand and held it, and Obi-Wan let him though a dark blush crept up his neck almost immediately.

The three of them settled eventually in the corner of the mess hall, where Caleb eventually joined them. They talked comfortably, telling old stories and laughing over things that they had gone; they were happy stories, personal stories about their lives as people rather than as Jedi.

Rex, looking harried and extremely tired, perched restlessly on the edge of a chair for a half hour and listened, occasionally chiming in with an anecdote from his short life. He was happy to be included, though his thoughts were clearly occupied with other things. It was strange to consider that despite his physique and his war experience, Rex was only a few standard years older than Caleb. The Padawan, realizing that for the first time, didn't shy away from the dark-haired clone even though he did keep Quinlan between them. Eventually, Rex’s fidgeting led him to rise, dismissing himself to check in on his post-op brothers.

Cheap base liquor, jet juice offered by one of the soldiers who had joined them, was enough to soften their edges; by the time it crept on to midnight, they were singing songs, Jedi travel poems, Mando’an war songs, and drinking songs from popular ports. Caleb fell asleep with his head on the table while Anakin, tone-deaf but determined, sang with the two more talented Masters and a dozen rebel soldiers.

Listening to Obi-Wan’s soft, clear voice as it blended with Quinlan’s smoother, deeper baritone, Anakin remembered times when they'd all travelled together before the Clone Wars. Things had been so much simpler then, before the droid army and the clones and the Separatists. Before Padme, when his mother had been alive somewhere in the galaxy, when he'd had two hands, a smiling mouth, and a Padawan braid. He wasn't nostalgic for his youth; he just longed for a time without so much violence, when his biggest concerns had been his unrequited crush on Obi-Wan and his frustration with the fact that his talent was going unnoticed by a bunch of grumpy old Masters.

Instead of being sad, it was strangely cathartic. Somehow, among the rebels and this tiny clutch of Jedi, he felt like he was coming home at last.

XL. Starlight
Sleepy and warm, Anakin comfortably nuzzled the back of Obi-Wan’s neck and shoulders with his lips as his hands lazily wandered over his ribs and abdomen. He woke Obi-Wan by kissing his neck and jaw, up to his bearded cheek and, as he groggily woke, he kissed his mouth. When he spoke Obi-Wan’s voice was a gravely, exhausted mumble that was somewhere between annoyance, fondness, and arousal.

“What time is it…?”

“No idea,” Anakin admitted.

Obi-Wan groaned, still half-drunk, and turned his head to accept Anakin’s more insistent kisses.

“Come on, I’m leaving tomorrow,” his younger, more enthusiastic lover murmured.

The blond pushed him onto his back and moved atop him, slipping comfortably between Obi-Wan’s legs. His kisses were deep and slow, almost lazy, as he traced his fingers over his sides and down onto his thighs. The metal was cooler than skin but not cold; for once, Anakin didn't worry about it.

“Want you,” Anakin breathed against his jaw.

“So have me,” Obi-Wan replied, tilting his head to take Anakin’s mouth in a demanding but unhurried kiss.

The words drew a barely voiced sound of arousal from Anakin as he rocked his hips against his, his hands coming to rest on the insides of Obi-Wan’s knees. It had been awhile since he had taken his more commanding Master, though he wasn't sure why; Obi-Wan openly enjoyed it and had never denied him, but he still somehow sometimes felt awkward asking. It was easier sometimes to just pull Obi-Wan up atop him or to make heavily innuendoed, sometimes outright obscene offers that he knew his former Master wouldn't pass up.

Now, with his soft, tired voice husky and darkened with arousal, it felt like Obi-Wan was almost asking.

“Surprised?” Obi-Wan laughed softly after Anakin kissed him jubilantly.

“Figured you'd tell me I’ve got an early morning tomorrow.”

“You already know that… and I want you,” Obi-Wan said plainly, meeting his eyes with a smile even as an attractive flush suffused his cheeks.

Anakin grinned and leaned down to kiss him again, wanting Obi-Wan to know exactly how much he wanted him. He could feel how his lover returned his longing; even though he was still drowsy and sluggish from the alcohol after dinner, his hands roamed freely over Anakin’s body, heedless of the borders between flesh and metal, and his kisses were gently demanding.

“I don't know… exactly how to do this,” Anakin admitted with a breathless, slightly embarrassed laugh. “My hands--”

“Just be gentle,” Obi-Wan said with a shrug, meeting his eyes. While he did blush surprisingly easily, almost nothing actually embarrassed him in bed. In Anakin’s experience, the worst that had ever happened was that Obi-Wan had laughed. He'd laughed too. They laughed a lot during sex, though it had taken Anakin awhile to get comfortable with that sort of informal ease. Obi-Wan
grinned and added, “Where you can’t, let me…”

If Anakin hadn’t been aroused before, the thought of Obi-Wan touching himself on his behalf would have been more than enough to get him completely hard.

“Do we have more bacta?” Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan nodded and sat up to find one of the little foil packets. He tossed it to Anakin. “We have a couple of these.”

“Sounds like you’re feeling ambitious,” Anakin laughed, watching as Obi-Wan stretched out again. He loved looking over his bare body, unevenly pale and tan in places, all freckled.

“I wouldn’t say ambitious,” Obi-Wan demurred.

Anakin grinned as he tore eagerly into the packet, making a bit of a mess as he applied the liquid to his fingers. He gave the remainder to Obi-Wan, who set it aside for the moment before settling again.

Anakin gently rubbed the tips of his fingers against him. Feeling a bit self-conscious and more than a little nervous, he carefully pressed his smooth index finger into him, earning a quiet moan.

He was careful as he moved his finger in him, knowing that there was no give to the metal at all. His lover gently rocked his hips into Anakin’s movements, watching his face with an expression that was difficult to read. It seemed like a mixture of arousal and curiosity.

“What does that feel like to you?” Obi-Wan asked, his voice a little uneven.

“Different,” Anakin murmured. “Hot, um… tight…” He gentled a second finger in beside the first, which made Obi-Wan gasp quietly. Anakin paused to make sure that he was all right, that it hadn’t be a sound of pain, before continuing to carefully press and slide his fingers deeply within him.

“What’s it like to you?”

“Very hard… slippery…” Obi-Wan breathed, leaning over to kiss him. “It’s… actually really… quite nice…”

Anakin grinned and kissed him again, twisting his fingers carefully on his steady thrusts. He could tell pretty easily what movements Obi-Wan liked, though he had to rely more on his voice than the tension of his body. As he pressed his fingers in fully, bending his wrist carefully to deepen the movement, he kissed his neck and shoulders. Gradually, he made his way lower, kissing his chest, avoiding the new scars that made him think unwanted thoughts, and pressed his mouth to the sharp lines of his pelvic bones. His former Master was nearly squirming, which only made Anakin tease him more.

“Anakin,” he breathed, frustrated as his lover continued kissing his thighs. He gasped when Anakin changed the angle on the next deep press of his fingers.

“Touch yourself the way I would,” Anakin said softly, blushing as he leaned back to watch.

To his surprise, Obi-Wan blushed as well; he rarely masturbated, owing to the fact that he was reasonably good looking and charming enough to talk someone into bed if he needed to blow off steam. It wasn’t as though he’d never touched himself for someone else’s voyeuristic enjoyment, but it wasn’t something he’d ever done with Anakin. He smiled, half-tempted to fluster Anakin by asking for specific instruction. All it would take was a murmured ‘tell me how,’ but that seemed
needlessly unkind when his lover was already trying so hard.

He slid his hand down over his ribs and wrapped his fingers around his cock. He stroked himself slowly, meeting Anakin’s eyes with a questioning lift of his eyebrows. Anakin nodded his approval, licking his lips, and trying not to seem too obvious in his almost fetishistic appreciation; he had certainly imagined things like this, but even the currently tame reality surpassed what he had pictured.

He teased and pleased Obi-Wan with his fingers, carefully but with growing confidence. Obi-Wan matched his pace to Anakin’s, his grip tightening and his breathing coming faster. His cheeks were flushed, with arousal now rather than embarrassment, and he was pushing himself into Anakin’s touch more eagerly than the younger man could ever remember in the past. It made it harder to hold off and focus on his pleasure, rather than just climbing up and sinking into him. He wanted to make this last, but it was unusually overwhelming and they were already so tired.

Obi-Wan twisted to pick up the mangled foil packet, then squeezed the remaining lubricant into his hand. He generously applied it to Anakin’s eager cock, stroking him several times more than necessary just because he liked touching him.

“Ah… kriff…” Anakin moaned quickly, thrusting into his hand without even meaning to. “How do you want to do this?”

“Mm, lie back against the headboard?”

“Yeah, okay…” he breathed, slipping his fingers out of Obi-Wan and easing back to lean against the simple metal headboard of their bed.

Obi-Wan followed him, kneeling up to straddle his hips. Balancing himself on his knees, he slipped one arm around his neck and leaned in close to kiss him. His other hand reached down to stroke Anakin’s slick cock before aligning it against his eager body.

“Good?” he asked softly.

“Yeah, yes. Yes,” the blond affirmed, laying his cool hands on Obi-Wan’s hips.

Obi-Wan settled back, letting the weight of his body pull him down onto Anakin’s cock. He moaned softly as he took him in, realizing that it had been quite awhile since he’d done this. It was good; even with the slight discomfort that always came with the initial stretch, there was a satisfying completeness to having Anakin so close. He wrapped his other arm around Anakin’s neck and leaned up to kiss him as Anakin eased forward until his hip bones were pressed flush against the insides of Obi-Wan’s thighs.

It seemed so normal. For the first time since Anakin had woken up on Polis Massa, it didn't matter what his body was made of; Obi-Wan wanted him.

He let Obi-Wan control the depth and pace at first, knowing that his lover had a hard time just letting things happen. Letting Anakin happen, specifically. As Obi-Wan rode against him, his cock rubbing against Anakin’s taut tummy, he began to lose himself in the movements. He had forgotten how good it felt to have his lover inside him, how good it felt to be full of him. He enjoyed giving Anakin this intimacy; though he felt more vulnerable in this position than he had in the past, it was only because his emotions were so close to the surface. He curled his fingers in Anakin’s hair, pressing fervent kisses to the side of his face and neck.

Anakin could feel that his lover was starting to ease up as he gave in to everything that he was
feeling. With his hands on Obi-Wan’s hips, he began to guide his movements, deepening them by pulling him down as he thrust his hips upward.

Anakin hadn’t forgotten what it felt like to do this; he remembered exactly what it felt like to have Obi-Wan in his arms, moaning softly and somehow keeping that unbreakable veneer of reserve in place. He didn’t know why Obi-Wan always held on so tightly, but he enjoyed how he could pull him further outside of himself in this sort of intimacy.

“Just enjoy it,” Anakin breathed against his jaw. “Be with me.”

“I am,” Obi-Wan replied before kissing him again.

“You’re thinking too much,” Anakin argued breathlessly as he dragged him down onto a slightly harder thrust that forced a quiet moan from his lover. Force, he felt good around him.

“You read minds now?” Obi-Wan laughed.

Anakin laughed too, though he knew that look in his former Master’s eyes. Obi-Wan was inviting him - challenging him - to command his full attention and wipe his mind blank of anything other than this moment. It was a challenge he’d gladly take.

He pushed his frustratingly composed lover onto his back, then pursued him down. He crushed him against the mattress, letting the warm weight of his body press his thighs open as he took him again.

With the range of movement that this position allowed, with his metal toes digging into the mattress, he had the freedom to vary the depth and pace of his strokes. He started out with shallow rocking movements that kept their hips locked tighter, then deepened his thrusts until the long strokes gave Obi-Wan the full length of his cock each time.

Breathing hard with his face flushed and his hair a mess against the pillow slip, Obi-Wan looked more human and more handsome than he had in a long time. The older man was moaning on the deepest part of each thrust, his eyes closed and his lips slightly parted.

With the right angle and pace, quick, harsh thrusts that slapped against his skin or long, steady strokes that made his lover’s hips jerk, Anakin could make Obi-Wan moan or cry out underneath him.

“T-tell me you love me,” Anakin whispered breathlessly, laying his hand against Obi-Wan’s jaw and lifting his face to his own.

Despite the word choice, it wasn’t a command. He wasn’t quite asking either.

Obi-Wan met his eyes with a playful smile, as though he was telling him Don’t tell me what to do. He reached over for the brassy device on the bedside table and theatrically drew a long breath. The hard thrust Anakin gave him as he rolled his eyes made Obi-Wan gasp and fumble with the metal inhaler, which made them both laugh.

For the first time, Anakin didn’t mind that Obi-Wan hadn’t said what he wanted to hear - he could feel that the older man loved him with every fiber of his being as well as the part of his soul that was on loan from Anakin. As soon as his lover set the inhaler aside, Anakin kissed him eagerly again, determined to push him past the bounds of his perfect control.

But somehow, even giving himself over to Anakin more completely than he ever had, even with their souls seamed together along one edge, there was still something that Obi-Wan kept only for
himself. He cried out against Anakin’s demanding mouth, his hips bucking involuntarily to press his wet prick against Anakin’s taut stomach. The rolling, rhythmic contact was quickly drawing the tension in his body tight.

“Just like that,” he half-begged, sliding his fingers up the back of Anakin's damp neck and curling his fingers in his hair.

He was momentarily overwhelmed by the temptation to ease up and tease the way Obi-Wan so often did, keeping him frustratingly riding the edge. When Obi-Wan tugged lightly at his hair and looked into his eyes, the urge vaporized instantly; there was nothing he wanted more right now than to feel his lover come.

“Touch yourself,” Anakin said softly, feeling bolder than when he'd made a similar request earlier.

When his lover readily complied, he wrapped his smooth metal hand around Obi-Wan’s, setting the pace and grip. It was faster and more focused than Obi-Wan probably would have chosen. Anakin could feel his muscles tightening and his movements becoming less fluid as he gave himself over to Anakin’s touch. A quiet cry broke from his lips and he pressed his face into Anakin’s shoulder.

“Come on,” Anakin began, but Obi-Wan was already there. Anakin sucked in a sharp breath as Obi-Wan’s muscles tensed and his hips bucked, his body gripping Anakin’s cock as he came.

“Ah… ah…” Anakin moaned, thrusting into the unsteady heat of his lover’s body.

He was close, and his lover’s voice and the wet heat on his stomach were almost enough, but he still hadn’t reached the end of his endurance. He held Obi-Wan and thrust quick and deep through his orgasm, enjoying the way he moved beneath him.

Still blitzed but coming down from the high, Obi-Wan leaned up and kissed him hard, his teeth clicking against his as he kissed him hungrily. He was spent and overstimulated with Anakin continuing to pound his prostate, but his sole focus had shifted to Anakin’s enjoyment. Pulling away from the kiss, he trailed open-mouthed, eager kisses over his throat and chest until he finally bit down on the tender flesh connecting his neck and shoulder.

That was the last thing Anakin could take; always weak to a well-timed bite or the scratch of Obi-Wan’s short nails on his back, he came hard and spilled himself into his lover.

Obi-Wan held him, keeping him close until Anakin pulled away to slip out of him. The taller man dragged him back into his arms and kissed him soundly, happy and exhausted.

Obi-Wan didn't mind his metal arms around him. He pressed his over-warm face into the hollow of Anakin’s shoulder, and neither moved.

Anakin’s mind buzzed with contentment, his body sated and his craving for contact satisfied for the moment. It didn't take long before his mind found new things to focus on, though.

“It really won't be that long,” Anakin said, as though Obi-Wan needed reassurance.

“I know.”

“And we’ll be fine,” he pressed a little urgently.

“I know. I'm not too worried… the biggest threat to either of you is each other,” Obi-Wan said,
stroking Anakin’s hair.

“Yeah, *ha ha.* Funny.”

“I do hope you two don’t kill each other.”

At the lighter, drier response, Anakin seemed to take his own reassurances to heart. It wouldn't be long, and then they would be together again.

“As long as he keeps his psychometry to himself…”

Obi-Wan laughed a little. “He will. I talked to him about that on Dantooine. He just doesn't consider how most sentients feel about him just popping into their memories.”

“That's weird. He's usually more, uh, intuitive than that.”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “He has strange blind spots.”

“Yeah… I guess.”

“I would…” The older Jedi paused, trying to find the best wording for what he was going to say. He already knew that Anakin would be suspicious, and that he was going to protest. His objections would probably be completely valid. “I would really appreciate it if you didn't tell Quinlan everything that happened during our duel on Dantooine.”

“Oh?” he asked, his tired voice holding a note of obvious judgment. “What information am I withholding?”

“Just… the detail about my eyes.”

“Because you’re going to tell him about it yourself, *right*?”

Obi-Wan was too tired to really try to argue and he didn't feel like putting a dark pall on their midnight intimacy. Not when Anakin was leaving in the morning.

“Yes,” he agreed, not sure yet if he meant what he was saying or if he was just appeasing his lover. “I just need to sort through it myself first and just… understand what happened. By the time you get back, I'll be ready.

Anakin accepted that answer as well, though he wasn't sure he completely believed him either. Still, he could easily follow up on his honesty when he and Vos returned; there was no need to fight about it right now.

He yawned hugely, too worn out to pursue an argument anyway.

“Yeah, okay. When we get back. *Lots* of good stuff when we get back. Vos said we’d go look for Ahsoka if I could do this… so yeah, there's that too. I mean, I know I need this… so… it’s not like… you know. I'm not just doing it for that. I just kind of want… everyone…”

Anakin trailed off mid-stream, asleep again with his cheek smushed against Obi-Wan’s shoulder.

The older Jedi sighed comfortably, carefully wriggling out from under him sitting up a little against the headboard. Not wanting to pull away too much, he let Anakin’s arm linger around his waist and and rested his fingers against Anakin’s damp curls. The air in the room was comfortable, but it felt almost too cool after being crushed under Anakin. He smiled, smoothing the shock of stark white hair back from his lover’s flushed face.
He looked across the room, remembering that they hadn't closed the slats in the blinds. It didn't matter much with the lights out, especially at this hour, but it gave Obi-Wan a limited view of the quiet airstrip and the darkness beyond the perimeter of the base fence. Yavin 4 had a different feeling to it than Dantooine; Dantooine had never felt permanent, even though it had been their destination even before they had stolen Caleb. By contrast, he felt like this room would belong to him and Anakin for some time, until either the Empire fell or they did. There was a reassuring stillness in the Force here and it was easy to casually wrap oneself in meditation.

He realized belatedly that he had passed his fortieth nameday without any acknowledgment to speak of. He didn’t really even remember what had been happening that day - had it been when he had been in the bacta? Had he even been conscious? Though the number of years seemed like it should be meaningful, it occurred to him that he didn’t actually care; he was what he was, who he was, regardless of how many hours he'd been alive. There were other milestones that were more momentous, even just in recent years.

It would have been easy to think of his life as one long series of sad events, but he never had. Since his mid-twenties, he had steadily fought, sometimes picking up small victories and other times losing major battles. Sometimes it was harder to square his shoulders and tip his chin up to greet the galaxy with charm and without anger, but he always managed.

*Here I am*, he thought.

Sliding back down and resettling himself in Anakin’s arms, he acknowledged for the first time in awhile that he was all right. He was too warm and he could feel the tacky, sweaty meeting where their bare skin touched, but he knew he'd miss that real, disgustingly human contact for the next few weeks. This moment was a good moment, a better celebration of being alive than most things. He was calm and centered, himself once again.

There were still things that scared him, but they felt far away. The Empire, even the seed of darkness in his own heart, seemed unremarkable and easily conquerable.

*Here we are.*

As he settled with his body pressed along the contours of Anakin’s, he felt the pull of that life-bond again. The temptation to explore his sleeping lover’s vulnerable soul was intoxicating, calling to him with a quiet, possessive hunger. He didn't reach out. He wondered if they ever would, if either would ever be brave enough to ask and the other brave enough to allow it.

Maybe someday that could be a loving touch, like a heart’s kiss.

He wondered how reliant he was on that new bond, both physically and spiritually. Tired but unable to sleep, he thought through comments that Anakin had made over the past months about Sith magics and Palpatine’s promises to teach the secrets of prolonging life. The things that he knew always seemed to imply that the life given had to be stolen, siphoned from someone else.

He could see the effect that the inexpert transference had had on Anakin; he had given Obi-Wan minutes, hours, or years of his own life without question. Likely, he’d done it without any thought of consequences, and he had married his own Force signature to Obi-Wan’s in the process. It was possible that he could pull back or break the bond, but what would doing so mean for the older Jedi? Would it kill him? Could he outlive his lover and companion?

It was another pointless line of thought, though it unexpectedly served to mellow him further when he realized that he didn't care about those answers either. If Anakin withdrew his life energy, it was simply his time to die; likewise, he didn't intend to outlive him when their lives were, and had
always been, inextricably interwoven. All this new bond did was make them more of what they had already been - deeply attached and dangerously codependent.

“You're doing it again,” Anakin told him groggily.

Obi-Wan smiled in the dark and kissed whatever bare skin was closest to his mouth.

“I'm not worrying.” he assured him in a whisper. “Almost the opposite.”

“Sleep,” Anakin mumbled imperiously.

The older Jedi closed his eyes again and settled closer. He could feel Anakin’s heart beating in his ribs, and the metal arm that was wrapped around his bare waist had warmed to the temperature of their shared body heat. At the moment, he felt peaceful.

Tomorrow they would part ways, but when they came together again they would be stronger. Soon, they would begin the real planning, the path to bringing down the Emperor and restoring whatever order they could. It was too big to conceptualize, but that made optimism easier. Together, there was nothing they couldn't accomplish. That was one thing that had always been true, no matter what they were facing.

Drawing in an easy breath, he let himself drift off into dreams of a better future.

Chapter End Notes

It's finished! Thank you all for sticking with me through this whole huge thing... and thank you so much for all of your comments and encouragement while I've been muddling through. It has meant so much to me to post this story for you, and to meet some of you through conversations in comments! Thank you for reading and for your interactions, comments, and kudos.

I have been crushed under a really bad creative block for the last month. The plot has been there but the sentences haven't felt like happening. It is intentionally open-ended with some unresolved issues becaaaaause I am working on a sequel to this that will explore more of this post-Order 66 world and take our boys down the road toward defeating Palpatine. I have so many things I want to write - like how the boys find Ahsoka, what consequences may come from Obi-Wan's trespasses, what role Padme and the twins have in this new galaxy, and the many unique ways that Palpatine could crush Anakin as an individual and as a rebel leader. I would really like to share these things with you, though I need a little bit of a break until I get through this dry spell!

If you're interested in reading more, I'd recommend subscribing to the series. If you'd like me to know you when I start posting again, please feel free to leave a comment and I'll ping you off the comment. I'll also update on tumblr (jcrowquill - feel free to chat or roleplay with me). :)

Thank you again for reading. <3
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!