## Old Man Luke

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### Summary

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“Luke Skywalker.”

Notes

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Update: this fic was started before The Last Jedi And is TLJ noncompliant. It does, however, borrow certain elements of the canon (that Luke went to Ahch-To after the fall of his academy) while ignoring the rest of it (...the rest of the movie). The events of this fic, and the characterization of the characters, prevents TLJ from taking place.
Chapter 1

Obi-Wan was--well, he wouldn't say fond--there was little to be fond about in war--but he found he preferred refugee evacuations, successful ones, to battles. It was something like a balm to the soul to save lives rather than watch them perish. Bittersweet, of course, because so many people had their lives torn apart by war, but they had their lives.

Perhaps that was why Obi-Wan was on the ground, overseeing the evacuation in person rather than keeping abreast from the bridge. Force knew he certainly had enough paperwork to do--Cody would find some way to make him regret it if he made Cody handle it all himself again--when he felt it. A disturbance in the Force.

Head snapping up, Obi-Wan searched the crowd of refugees. It had been very brief, a flash of Light presence as strong as Anakin, if not stronger--but it was gone now. His eyes lit on face after face--a blue-skinned Twi'lek boy tugged along behind his parents, clutching a small, soft blanket; a bearded old man wearing a hooded cloak, keeping it wrapped closely around himself against the chill, the fingers of his cybernetic hand just visible; a trio of Rodians that clutched at each other as they stumbled along. Obi-Wan shook his head. Whatever he had felt, it was gone now.

Anakin walked up, standing at Obi-Wan's left shoulder with his hands braces on his hips. "We're ahead of schedule. For once. Looks like we'll get out of here well before the Sepratists can send their reinforcements."

Obi-Wan felt a shiver settle at the back of his neck, and he sighed even as his eyes drifted over the crowd once more, his eye drawn back to the old man, though he couldn't say why. There was something about how he moved that screamed 'don't notice me'. "I certainly hope so, Anakin, and that you haven't just jinxed--"

The Force flashed a warning, and Obi-Wan spun, saber at the ready as one of the supply tankers blew, the fireball deafening and sending the refugees into a screaming panic. It was chaos in moments as the formerly orderly march became a frantic shove, the people's screams blending with the whining of fighter engines.

"Sithspit," Anakin swore.

"Go," Obi-Wan ordered, and Anakin leapt into the fray. Obi-Wan turned to the trooper next to him, Fives, he thought. "Our priority is the refugees," he yelled. "We need to get them on board."

"Sir!" Fives echoed, and called over more to lay down cover fire even as Obi-Wan did his best to deflect what he could. A canon bolt slipped through, there were simply too many, and the ground behind him exploded, scattering the refugees. More troopers poured from the ship, helping to pick everyone up and get them on board, but the chaos was too great and some refugees began to run from the ship in their confusion, disoriented from the sound and the smoke.

When it happened, the world slowed around Obi-Wan as he saw it all play out--

--the droid fighter, careening and billowing smoke--

--the Twi'lek boy, frozen in its path--

Obi-Wan began to run, but he was too slow, he wouldn't make it and--

--the old man, cloak snapping in the wind and hood blown back from his face, appeared suddenly
in front of the boy, hands raised in a gesture that was intimately familiar, and the fighter shuddered, slowed, and glided gracefully over everyone's heads to set down on the far side of the charred remains of the tanker as gently as an initiate playing push-feather in the crèche. For a brief moment, Obi-Wan felt that brilliant presence blazing like binary suns. Obi-Wan watched as the old man crouched before the boy and saw a warm smile crease his eyes as he spoke to the boy. The boy nodded, and the old man lifted him with ease, ticking him on his hip as if he was used to carrying a young humanoid of toddling age. Unable to hold his cloak closed, it fluttered around him, revealing an outfit of all black, the details lost to smoke, and a distinctive glint at the old man's waist--a lightsaber.

The Force screamed in. His attention snapped back to the battle, and his time was lost to the constant rush of defense. Some time later, the firing slowed and then stopped, and Anakin ran from the smoke, a group of troopers on his six. He waved at them to take off.

"That's the last of them!" he called out, and Obi-Wan nodded. They backed towards the ship as the troopers ran up the ramp, jumping up together even as it began to close, and then they were away.

It must have been a local attack, a pocket group that had survived because there was no resistance waiting for them in the skies above the planet, and they were in hyperspace before Obi-Wan and Anakin had made their way to the bridge.

Obi-Wan's crew were very efficient, and he had his status report within minutes.

"Anakin," he said, and jerked his head towards the door, tapping his datapad against his hand. Anakin frowned, but followed.

"Obi-Wan? What's wrong?"

Obi-Wan pursed his lips. "Did you feel it, back on the planet? That presence?"

Anakin frowned, shaking his head, and then paused. "Wait, yeah, now that you mention it. Just a flash, but it was strong." He raised his eyebrows. "Do you know what it was?"

"More than that," Obi-Wan said. "I know who it was--or rather, I know which refugee it was. His identity is rather a mystery."

A sly smile began to curl around the edges of Anakin mouth. "A mystery, huh?"

Obi-Wan felt his own lips curl upward in response. "Indeed. Shall we get to the bottom of this one?"

"After you, Master," Anakin said, and Obi-Wan felt a wave of warm affection for his former Padawan--his best friend and brother. For all their reputation as a dream team, they hadn't actually fought together much in this war--it made too little sense to keep them together when they could do so much apart. It was nice to have him near, for once.

Fives and another clone from the 501st were standing guard on the bay where they had housed the refugees for processing before they were moved into more comfortable quarters. They were to be in space for nearly two weeks, after all. There was no reason to keep them all in the hold like cattle.

"Fives," Obi-Wan said in greeting and Fives snapped to attention.

"General!"

"There is a man in there, an older man with grey hair and beard, and a metal hand. He was carrying
a young Twi'lek boy when they boarded, but I'm not sure if they'd still be together. I need you to bring that man to us in interrogation room Three."

Obi-Wan could feel the question burning behind Five's stern expression, but Five hadn't certified ARC for nothing, and he left to complete his task with nothing more than a crisp "sir."

"Interrogation?" Anakin said. "Isn't that a little harsh?"

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "I saw this man stop and redirect a crashing fighter with the same ease that Master Yoda would lift a flower blossom. I'm not taking any chances until we know exactly who, or what, we're dealing with."

Anakin's shock was clear on his face. "That easy?" He frowned. "I didn't sense any darkness in that presence, but I didn't feel it for long."

"Neither did I," Obi-Wan said. "Which is the other thing." He gestured with the datapad still in his hand, and he and Anakin began to walk to interrogation. "He's shielded his presence completely, and yet did not appear as a void in the Force. We're dealing with someone very well trained, and in this war the fact that he is a stranger is...troubling."

Anakin's brow remained furrowed. "Do you think he was a Sith? A plant or a ploy?"

"I don't know, Anakin. I don't know."

Fives was standing guard outside Interrogation Three, which meant the old man was alone inside. Obi-Wan turned to Anakin. "Why don't you step into the observation room. He may reveal something he wouldn't normally with only myself in the room."

Anakin set his jaw. "If he's as dangerous as we think he could be, you'll need backup."

Obi-Wan shook his head, holding up his hand to stall any further complaints. "Fives is just outside the door, and you'll be able to see everything. If things truly go south," Obi-Wan shrugged, "go through the glass."

Anakin made a face, showing just what he thought of that. Funny how this was the same Padawan who would jump from a moving hover car would be so against going through a window in an emergency. Still, he turned and entered the observation room, and Obi-Wan palmed his entry to the interrogation room.

The old man had clearly been meditating as he waited, the air in the room was filled with a deep peace Obi-Wan usually only felt in the room of a Thousand Fountains. Yet, when the door opened, the man opened his eyes and watched Obi-Wan enter with open interest. Still, Obi-Wan felt no maliciousness coming from the man, even though his eyes never strayed, barely blinked, as he watched Obi-Wan cross the room and take the seat across the table.

"Well," Obi-Wan said, his manner open and pleasant. He smiled. "I want to start by thanking you for what you did. You saved that boy's life."

The old man blinked, and Obi-Wan noticed that his eyes were very blue, pale like a desert sky, and unfathomably sad.

"Appreciated," the man said, and Obi-Wan was surprised to hear an Outer Rim accent, even one distorted by a voice rough from disuse. The man cleared his throat, and when he spoke again, his voice was a clearer tenor. "Though I don't need thanks for doing what anyone would have done."
Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "Redirecting a crashing ship to save a little boy?"

The old man smiled slightly, just the one corner of his mouth. "Caught."

For a moment, Obi-Wan thought the man meant that Obi-Wan had caught him out, but…Obi-Wan tilted his head. "Excuse me?"

"I didn't redirect the ship," the old man said. "I caught the ship, and then put it down." He shrugged. "It probably would have been easier to redirect the ship, but instincts--heat of the moment. I just…did." The old man shrugged, a wry smile apparent in the twist of his beard. "You know how it is."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, blinking. He had caught the ship? Through their bond, Obi-Wan could feel Anakin's surprise--and doubt. Obi-Wan wasn't sure even Yoda would have been able to accomplish such a feat. Anakin had the power, certainly, but not the focus.

This man carried a lightsaber, ostensibly as one of their Order. Who was he that he had such strength and yet was unknown to the Council and to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes. "Who are you?" He asked, hoping a direct question would yield answers. The old man seemed adept at sidestepping information when asked a bit more deftly. "I've never heard of a Master with your level of talent."

The old man seemed surprised. "If you've never heard of one like me, then what good would my name be? You wouldn't know it."

Obi-Wan felt a flare of irritation, and quickly squashed it. The old man blinked, as if he hadn’t expected to feel that, and he smiled, sadly. "My name is Luke," he said, as if a peace offering.


"Luke Skywalker."

Anakin’s reaction was strong enough that both Obi-Wan and Luke looked towards the opaque window that hid the observation room.

"Where do you come from, Master Skywalker?" Obi-Wan asked. "Who trained you?"

Luke raised his eyebrows, and Obi-Wan could feel the amusement bumping against his senses, along with a deep well of bitter sadness. "I am from Tatooine originally, my first teacher's name was Ben."

I am here because the Force willed that I be here," Luke said. "I do not know how I came to be here, only that I was sent here for a reason." He sighed, a resigned humor shining on his face. "At least, there had better be a reason." He turned towards the door as Anakin burst in.

"I'm the only Skywalker in the Order," Anakin said, his presence blazing. "I know it. I looked!"

Luke spread his hands. "I'm not in the Order," he said. "Never have been."

Anakin licked his lips, chewing his bottom lip as he thought. "You’re from Tatooine," he said at last, slowly. "Did you know a Shmi Skywalker?"

The sadness that lingered around Luke’s eyes deepened. "I never had the opportunity," he said, and
it sounded as if he deeply regretted it. “I’m sorry. Everyone said she was such a lovely woman.”

“She was my mom,” Anakin said, his voice nearly cracking, and he sat down hard on one of the chairs, leaning forward and resting his forehead on his crossed forearms. Obi-Wan lifted his hand, as if to settle it on his back, hesitated, then pulled it back. Not in front of the mysterious man in front of them.

“You said you’re not part of the Order,” Obi-Wan said. “Yet you carry a lightsaber.”

Luke nodded. “I can use it, too,” he said, and he smiled, quick and boyish, and Obi-Wan saw a familiar flash in that smile, someone he knew, but it was gone too quickly. “But I’m assuming that’s not why you bring it up.”

“Only Jedi can legally carry lightsabers,” Anakin said into the table, and Luke looked down at him for a moment. Then, without a word, he simply unhooked his saber and handed it to Obi-Wan hilt first.

Obi-Wan took it, nonplussed. To simply hand over his weapon—a Jedi’s saber was his life! But then Obi-Wan felt the Force resonating through the weapon, and he looked down at it in surprise.

It was a simple design—fairly rudimentary in fact, for all that it had obviously seen many years of hard use. Anakin had built better sabers as a Padawan, when he was replacing his saber every year or so due to how fast he grew. Yet it was solid in a way that echoed back through history.

Obi-Wan placed his hand on Anakin’s forearm, and Anakin drew himself upright, at last. He held out the lightsaber, and Anakin took it, frowning the instant it touched his palm. “This doesn’t have an Ilum crystal,” he said. “What did you use?”


“I didn't know the Emeralds were strong enough,” Anakin said.

“I didn’t have time to wait,” Luke said. “When I built it, access to Ilum was…highly restricted. Even for Jedi.” He shrugged.

“Which you said you are not,” Obi-Wan reminded him.

Luke stared at him, and Obi-Wan blinked. It had been a long time since anyone had looked at him like that, and he could almost hear the echo of Qui-Gon, “…really, Padawan?”

“I said I was not in the Order,” Luke said. “But I am a Jedi.” He didn’t elaborate, but he didn’t need to. The Force sang the truth of what he said.

“What you are is a mystery,” Obi-Wan said. “Luckily, we have two weeks to figure it out.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

MANY thanks to hobbystmarymorstan for the last minute beta! They also gave me a hand with chapter 1, so check it out it’s new and improved!

If not for the way his bones ached in the chill of space, Luke would think this a vision. It would not be the first elaborate vision the Force had sent his way, but it would be the most realistic.

Ben.

Father.

Young and alive, sitting before him, wary and disappointed, and really Luke thought he would be used to that by now. He was well aware of how unassuming he was, when he didn’t have the weight of his reputation preceding him—and he was used to the way people looked at him sideways, as if to say “that’s Luke Skywalker? I thought he’d be….taller.” But unlike before, in the senate and on the streets of the New Republic, where Luke could let their disappointment roll off of his back until he did something that made their eyes go round, and made the myth of him just that much larger, well—

Obi-Wan and Anakin were Jedi in a world of Jedi; what was extraordinary to people in Luke’s time was commonplace now, and as comfortable as Luke had gotten in his skill, there was that frisson of disquiet that he was not good enough, that he was pretending to a title that he had no right to.

Luke breathed deeply, keeping his face serene, and let his doubt go. It would do him no good, and would only fester. They would just have to live with the disappointment that Luke could not give them the answers they wanted; too much was riding on the ignorance of Anakin Skywalker.

Yet, as used though Luke was used to way Jedi shifted between points of view like screens on a data pad—Luke was a son of the suns, and a Freeborn child of a Freedman, and treasured his ability to speak freely. Aunt Beru had been careful to teach him the ways to say without saying, to hear what was said in the silences between words, long before he ever met Ben Kenobi. They were Farmers, Freemen, but life could change like the dunes on Tatooine, and no one who lived there was ever truly far removed from slavery.

If others thought him naive, then that was their failing, not his. Luke knew the value of honesty.


He turned, not seeing the way Obi-Wan watched him, concerned. Luke understood his urge to leave to compose himself, and it was telling that Anakin was getting food. Desert hospitality for an elder, doubly necessary to one who shared a name. It was comforting to see that some habits hadn’t left Anakin, though Luke was startled to realize that Obi-Wan didn’t recognize the behavior. (It was possible that Anakin didn’t either, and that was something to meditate on).

It was startling, as well, to see how easy Anakin’s face was to read, though it wasn’t surprising that he felt things so deeply. Obi-Wan, by comparison, could have been carved from stone, though
Luke knew he felt things no less deeply.

Luke wondered just what Obi-Wan had lost in the desert, scoured clean by the burning sands.

A blue glow appeared to Obi-Wan’s right, and Luke glanced up to see a man, tall and distinguished of face, with long greying hair half pulled back. He wore a beard, trimmed close, and the robes of a Jedi. He didn’t speak, just watched at Obi-Wan for a long moment. When he looked at Luke, at last, he seemed startled that Luke was looking back. He disappeared then, as if he had never been, and Luke realized that Obi-Wan had never reacted.

Could Obi-Wan not see him? It made little sense: most of Luke’s time with Obi-Wan had actually happened after Obi-Wan lost the duel with Vader on the Death Star. That Obi-Wan, who had guided Luke for years as a ghost, could not see them himself...

“I would very much like to hear your story,” Obi-Wan said, at last. His tone was mild—the same way it had been mild in Mos Eisley right before his lightsaber came out. Luke knew very well what kind of violence and steel that mild tone could hide. But how much could he say?

“There’s really not much to tell,” he said at last, and smiled ruefully at the waves of incredulity that practically radiated off of his former—future?—master. “Truly,” he said again. “I lived on Tatooine for most of my early life. Ben watched over me, and when he felt I was ready, he offered to train me.” Luke looked away. Even though death had not stopped him from talking with Obi-Wan, it still hurt to remember—the disbelief, the way his stomach dropped when Vader’s saber swung—the look on Ben’s face when he was let it happen. “When he died,” Luke said, much more softly, “I learned from a new Master. He named me a Jedi, though it took several years for me to really feel like a Jedi.” Some days, he still didn’t. Most days.

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Luke seemed caught in some memory, but when he looked up once more he smiled, and Obi-Wan was surprised with how boyish it was, how earnest. (How familiar, whispered the Force in his head, in a voice like his old Master) Luke shrugged

Obi-Wan smiled back, seemingly despite himself, and put aside his reaction to meditate on later. There was still no thrill of danger, like a plucked thread in the Force, and Obi-Wan could let himself be charming.

“You’re not alone in that,” Obi-Wan said. “Most transitions happen gradually—and one notices the change long after the change has finished.”

Luke nodded, and scratched at his beard. Obi-Wan frowned; if Luke had been in the refugee camp for long, certain grooming habits may have fallen by the wayside. At the very least, Luke must be desperate for a shower. Obi-Wan opened his mouth, to assure Luke that he would have a chance to refresh himself, and sleep, soon, when Anakin walked back in, followed by Kix. Anakin held a tray fairly overflowing with food, and Obi-Wan blinked at it in surprise. Kix had his portable medipack, and a determined scowl on his face. (The scowl, Cody had told Obi-Wan, wasn’t permanent, but Obi-Wan had yet to see evidence of that. Cody had informed him it was because he only ever saw Kix when he had injured himself and was actively refusing medical treatment. Obi-Wan had told Cody to mind his own business. He hadn’t been able to see his face, hidden in his bucket, but Obi-Wan was sure Cody had been laughing at him.) At least this time, Kix didn’t seem focused on him.

Luke raised his arm without complaint, pulling his sleeve back with his metal hand, and watching with an open expression as Kix pricked and scanned him with various diagnostic tools. While he worked, Anakin set about unloading the tray. When the food was placed in the middle of the table, Obi-Wan realized Anakin meant it to be a communal meal, and he raised an eyebrow at his former Padawan in a bemused question. Anakin flushed faintly, but he stared back at Obi-Wan with a resolved set to his jaw. Clearly, this was something important to him, and Obi-Wan was more than willing to follow his lead and see where this was heading.

“Physically, you’re a bit malnourished, a bit dehydrated, but nothing a few good meals won’t fix,” Kix said, pulling out a hypospray. He held it against the inside of Luke’s wrist and set it off before Luke could register it’s presence, and he flinched. “You’re also behind on some rather important immunizations, so I’ve given you a broad-spec. When you’re done here, I want you to report directly to medical so we can get you scheduled.” Luke nodded, and rolled down his sleeve. Kix eyed the prosthetic, but didn’t say anything.

“And you were supposed to report to medical,” Kix snapped turning to Obi-Wan, and Obi-Wan chuckled, awkwardly. Apparently, Kix was focused on him. Obi-Wan opened his mouth, but Kix cut him off. “I don’t care if you ‘didn’t get hurt.’ It’s S.O.P for a reason. I’ll see you there before the end of your shift.”

“Of course, Kix,” Obi-Wan said. Technically, as High General, Obi-Wan outranked Kix, but you didn’t last long if you didn’t realize that medical outranked everybody. Obi-Wan had learned that lesson as a Padawan.

It appeared Luke had learned that lesson, too. As unruly as his beard was, it did little to hide the smile he was trying to suppress.

Kix huffed, but he left with only a small muttering about there being too many kriffin’ patients to do house calls, even for Jedi.

Obi-Wan watched Kix leave, and looked back at the table. The plates of food were filled with common staples from the mess, protein rations and bottles of filtered water—though Anakin had managed to grab a few packs of flavor packets. Obi-Wan looked in interest: he always forgot to look for those, and he sent a small wave of gratitude to Anakin when he placed Obi-Wan’s favorite sour citrus flavor in front of him. There were also, Obi-Wan was surprised to see, a strange assortment of fruits and raw vegetables. Produce shipboard was usually a rarity, but there were more than a few clones who were not above a little black market trading for food that wasn’t rations.

Anakin sat, and waited, and Obi-Wan followed his lead. Anakin was not usually one to wait for others when he was hungry.

Luke reached out with his metal hand and picked up a ripe piece of fruit—an export of Naboo, Obi-Wan thought, some kind of plum. He looked at it for a moment, his eyes soft with wonder though his gaze was long, and then bit enthusiastically into the fruit. Anakin reached gratefully for food of his own, and then glared at Obi-Wan until Obi-Wan took something for himself. Obi-Wan settled on another of those plums and a protein ration (contrary to what Kix seemed to believe, Obi-Wan did know how to feed himself), and slowly began to dismantle and eat his food.

It was some sort of ritual, Obi-Wan realized. Or at least a custom. While obviously limited by what was on board, Anakin had done his best to mimic desert foods, with fruits and vegetables that were high in water content—the best kind of hospitality to offer on a desert world—and the deference to Luke while eating seemed like deference given to an elder.
Neither Luke nor Anakin spoke during the meal, and Obi-Wan was content to follow their lead – Anakin had thrown himself into Coruscanti culture, trying to adapt to Temple life as quickly as possible – Obi-Wan had let him, thinking it's the best choice for Anakin. Obi-Wan knew well how cool children could be when faced with difference.

Now, however, Obi-Wan wasn't so sure. Anakin moved without any of the self-consciousness of his Temple habits, despite what must be mixed feelings about the memories that this ritual must have dug up – and being that it gave Obi-Wan the chance to observe a new culture without the threat of war or failed negotiation. It was a welcome relief.

And yet...the ritual resolved without discussion, and Obi-Wan was left bewildered as Anakin smiled and begin to clear away the meal--Luke bashful, but clearly hopeful.

Just what had Obi-Wan missed?

He would have to ask Anakin later, as Cody's appearance at the door signaled that Obi-Wan's time was up – he and Luke were to report to the infirmary.

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Anakin watched Obi-Wan and Luke leave, even as he gathered dishes on the tray…


Despite his insistence, Anakin was sure Luke was a close relative. He sang in the force – as brightly as Anakin himself – and every instinct Anakin had was telling him to trust a stranger, that he was firmly in the light as Obi-Wan despite his haggard appearance.

There were something familiar about his eyes, too. Something Anakin couldn't place.

As it was, Anakin wasn't sure why he'd served a greeting meal. He had never – it was always his mother – (maybe that was why, the raw ache where her memory lived just a bit.)

It had simply been the right thing to do, accepting Luke is a traveling member of his clan, and for all that it probably made him a terrible Jedi, Anakin was glad to have family again.

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Luke tried not to stare as he walked with Obi-Wan and and one of the clones, Cody. The last time he had been on a star destroyer he was still a half-trained hotshot pilot wondering what was so special about him that Vader had made him enemy number one--and still wanted him alive. Seeing the troops and their white armor didn't help, and he knew he was far too jumpy – they looked nothing like stormtroopers, with the bright blue or orange paint. But it was close enough all the same.

Cody seemed nice enough though, and Luke was sure it helped that Cody carried his helmet in his arms, displaying a scar the crawled around his eye. He radiated a calm competence that meshed well with Obi-Wan's energy.

Even if said energy was focused on trying to gently wiggle his way out of visiting the Medcenter. Cody, to his credit, refused to rise to the bait.

The Medcenter was busy when they arrived, but not so busy that Kix didn't see them and wave them in. Luke and Obi-Wan were ushered to a pair of observation beds with a privacy screen. Cody stood guard while Kix dashed in to see Obi-Wan.
Luke linked his fingers together, thinking. How had he come here? Was he stuck? How did Leia fair? Han? Did Ben still want to watch the galaxy burn to ash?

What was next?

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker. The GAR – the Clone War--it was too fantastical – this had to be some Force Vision.

Would the man so close to becoming Darth Vader serve a stranger?

The Ceremony was an old one, its name lost to sand and time, but it established many things.

--you are welcome at my table as family until we part ways.

– Willing service of choice – I may have been a slave, or the child of slaves, but I am free and I serve you because I wish.

The Force pulsed around him, and Luke heard the memory of his father's voice – "… I must obey my master." His heart ached anew for the conflicted man his father had been.

There was a tremor, like a whisper of cloth but without sound, and Luke looked up to see the ghost once more.

Luke raised his eyebrows. "Hello," he said, quietly enough to not be heard next door.

The ghost’s frown deepened. "You can see me," he said. His voice was Core, but not Coruscanti, deeply afflicted and used to a considerable amount of deference. "Like a real Jedi master," whispered Luke's mind, and he pushed it aside as he nodded.

"Am I not supposed to?" Luke asked, mild and amused. And the ghost's face twisted in frustration.

"No one yet has," he said. "They're so blinded by rhetoric they can't see what's in front of their eyes. Even my own Padawan – " he cut himself off, but his eyes flickered to the screen next-door. Obi-Wan.

This ghost was Obi-Wan's master? But Master Yoda –


"I am Qui-Gon Jinn," the ghost said, inclining his head. Luke nodded back.

"Well met. I am Luke Skywalker."

Qui-Gon's face whitened, but then the curtain was whisked open, revealing Kix, Qui-Gon had disappeared.

Kix moved with the economy of movement that characterized all clones. (Luke had known a few during the rebellion – grey before their time, yet still fighters until their end.) And Luke fought the urge to raise his hands and surrender. He knew better than to argue with military medics--they’d saved Luke’s life far too often for Luke to chafe at their bedside manner.

Kix was nearly halfway through his exam before he realized Luke wasn’t fighting him, and his manner eased a bit. Still, he sniffed at the readout of his scanner. “Early onset arthritis, the beginnings of cataracts--your neurons are firing like crazy.” Kix looked at him sharply. “Are you in pain?"
Luke shrugged his shoulder, offering up a meek smile. “Usually?” he said. “It’s an ache. I thought it was age--I’m from a desert world, but I settled next to an ocean.”

“This isn’t age, this is long-term damage,” Kix spat, crossing his arms. “What happened? You get struck by lightning?”

Luke pursed his lips, and was satisfied when Kix’s eyes widened. “It was unavoidable,” Luke said. “But it was a long time ago: the medical droid said I got to the bacta soon enough to avoid long-term damage.”

“Apparently not,” Kix muttered. “Bacta won’t do anything for you now, not with the amount we’d have to spare. But I can give you a painkiller—”

“I’m okay,” Luke protested, and forced himself to hold his ground when Kix glared. “I mean it; anything other than the lowest dosage and I have a hard time thinking. I’d rather keep a clear head.”

Kix pointed at him with his stylus. “That’s another side-effect, you know.” Still, Kix sighed. “I can’t treat you if you refuse treatment, and something this mild, though it’s chronic and it will get worse, I’m just not equipped to properly treat. When you get to the temple, make an appointment with the Temple healers.”

Luke opened his mouth to say that he was pretty sure he wouldn’t have much choice, when the ship rocked, the deck tilting sharply and the lights going out.
Obi-Wan was halfway to the bridge when the ship rocked violently, tossing him against the bulkhead. He hit hard, grunting in pain as the impact jarred his shoulder. The emergency klaxons sounded as Obi-Wan reached for his comlink.

“Report!” He snapped.

“Sir! Separatists! They've pulled us from hyperspace!”

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth. Using gravity wells, now? On refugee ships? These damn clankers were getting worse all the time. “Get us free and out of here! Our priority is the refugees!”

“Sir!”

Anakin skidded around the corner, his hair a mess and his tabards crooked – looked like they'd woken him up from a nap. His comcall from Padme must have been short.

“Seppies?” Anakin asked, breathless.

“They've pulled us from hyperspace,” Obi-Wan said with a nod.

Anakin stopped, turning to head in the other direction. “I’ll grab my fighter –“

“No!” Obi-Wan said. “We are running, and nobody is getting left behind. Let's get to the bridge. Will have to trust the gunners.”

“Right,” Anakin said, and they took off towards the bridge.

Cody was there, fully suited, and he stood at attention when Obi-Wan and Anakin entered.

“Cody!” Obi-Wan said. “What's happening?”

Cody’s helmet shifted, and Obi-Wan knew he was frowning heavily. “Sir, it appears to be a single ship equipped with gravity well disruptors.”

“Only a single ship?” Anakin asked, eyebrows raised. Obi-Wan was surprised himself. It usually took at least three ships with disruptors to pull a ship from hyperspace; it was the triangulation of the net, like the Maw Cluster, that did the heavy lifting. To have a single ship capable of such a feat…

“How are they pressing the attack?” Obi-Wan asked, leaning over the display. They could worry about the ramifications later, once the refugees were safe.

“That's just it, sir,” Cody said, and Anakin and Obi-Wan looked to him. “They aren't. They're firing all right, but they're not attacking. They're just – holding us here.”
Holding them there for what purpose?

“That is very worrying,” Obi-Wan muttered. “Keep working on getting us free, Cody. The sooner the better.”

Cody nodded and turned away.

“Sir!” Specs, cried out from his station. “We've isolated the disruptors!”

“Take them out!” Obi-Wan ordered. “Get us free. Calculate the next jump; Cody, I want us out of here as soon as possible.”

“Sir!”

The ship rocked again, and Obi-Wan gripped the control board for balance. The lights dimmed, turning red as Sith ‘sabers.

“Hull breach! Sector C!” Cried another clone from across the bridge.

“That's near medical!” Anakin cried.

The refugees! And—“Come on!” Obi-Wan cried, already on his way there. He ran, lightsaber already in hand, Anakin at his heels. A half squad of clones fell into step behind them.

Obi-Wan followed the sound of fighting, rounding the corner to the infirmary, and blocking shots fired their way. Through the smoke that filled the hallway, Obi-Wan could hear the sound of droid voices, and the troops that faced them.

“Incoming!”

“Roger! Roger!”

“Clankers!”

“Get ‘em!”

“Protect the civilians!”

And then, as soon as it began, it was over. Before Obi-Wan and Anakin could jump into the fray, the droids that hadn't been vaporized retreated, the emergency shielding keeping the atmosphere from venting and aircon already clearing the smoke from the air. Obi-Wan raised his ‘saber high, the blue blade casting a light like a beacon for all who could see.

“Is everyone alright?” Obi-Wan called into the smoke. Details began to appear through the fog. Several of the beds had been knocked over, and the medical crew was busy setting them to rights. A few of the patients lay where they had fallen, stunned, but Obi-Wan didn’t think anyone had been too seriously hurt. Anakin had already joined them, moving the heavier equipment back into place with the Force.

“Sir!” Kix appeared through the smoke, waving his hand before his face. He had a blaster in his hand and streak of blood and soot across his forehead.

“What is it, Kix?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I saw the whole thing, sir. I know what happened.” Kix bit his lip. “It was Skywalker, sir. They came for him. He's gone.”
“Gone!” Obi-Wan cried. Sure enough, when he focused, Obi-Wan couldn’t feel his presence, muted thought it was.

“Surrendered,” Kix said, and shook his head. “Those clankers—they threatened to kill everyone if we didn’t ‘hand over the Jedi,’ and he went willingly enough; I’ve just never known clankers to keep their word like that.”

“They don’t usually,” Obi-Wan muttered. “That is strange news.”

“There’s more, sir,” Kix said, softly. “Before everything, I had gotten the results of the tests you wanted me to run, and…here.” Kix dug into his belt pouch and pulled out a data pad. “I think you should read this, sir.”

Frowning, Obi-Wan took the pad and began to read. His eyebrows shot towards his hairline.

“Oh…my….”

***

Luke sat in the hold of the droid ship, hands bound together in front of him. He had no blaster. Obi-Wan still had his lightsaber. The binders had some sort of Force dampening – he wasn’t completely Force blind, but he could feel little enough, and the strain brought sweat to his temples.

Still, he sat, offering no reason, no excuse. This wasn't the first time he had found himself prisoner, and he knew how to wait for the opportune moment. He would gain nothing by moving too early. His age had finally taught him patience, after all. (Though, he did hope the moment would come soon. Age had also brought him stiff knees).

Luke didn’t regret his surrender; his options had been clear, if this peaceful cooperation could help to save the lives of those who had already suffered…well—

If nothing else, Anakin had declared them family. Luke had a feeling he wouldn't be on his own for long. The Children of the Suns protected their own.

*Still.*

Luke leaned in towards the droid next to him. “Where are we going?”

“Quiet!” The droid snapped. Luke raised an eyebrow, and settled back. His silence only lasted for a moment.

“Is it Mustafar?” he asked. “I mean—I’ve always heard it was a Sith hideout, but—“

“Negative,” the droid next to him said.

“Quiet!” the Droid commander snapped.

Luke raised his hands and shut his mouth, settling back into the seat again. That was familiar, too, unfortunately.

Taking a deep breath, Luke closed his eyes and focused once more on his weak grasp of the Force. The work was slow, and required intense focus, but if he played this cards right, he’d have his binders unlocked before they arrived at their destination. He couldn’t shake the feeling that *that* was imperative.

***
Anakin stood behind Obi-Wan, watching as he reported to the council. As per orders, the ship had shot to hyperspace the moment they were clear, leaving the Seppie ship behind them. The fingers on his metal hand curled into a fist, the black leather creaking; they had left Luke behind. He was a Skywalker, and they had left him behind.

“More there is, I sense,” Yoda said, and Anakin focused once more on the meeting. Obi-Wan—

Obi-Wan hesitated.

“There is, Masters,” he said, slowly, picking his words as if entering a negotiation from a disadvantage. “But the time is not yet right to divulge that information, nor is it right to do so over comm channels like this. Suffice it to say that we must get their prisoner back; the Force is fairly screaming with it.

Mace’s ever-present frown, already deepened by the long slog of war, turned impossibly ever more grim. “We have checked the Order’s records. There is no indication of this new Skywalker at any temple—not a Knight, nor a Padawan, nor even an Initiate,” he said. “And you say he knew Master Yoda?”

The troll grunted, tapping his stick on the ground, but he did not say anything, nor lift his eyes to those assembled.

Obi-Wan spread his hands. “He did say he was not a part of the Order.”

Anakin bit the inside of his cheek. He knew that tone. That was Obi-Wan’s politician voice, the one he used when he was saying things he knew others would not want to hear—because Obi-Wan had already said them and had been ignored.

Yoda snorted. "A comfort that is not.”

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure it was supposed to be. It is simply what it is. Nevertheless, this Luke Skywalker is immensely powerful—and subtly skilled. We cannot risk letting Dooku get his hands on him—not having seen what he’s done to Ventress. To have that talent go dark…” Obi-Wan let the sentence hang, shaking his head, and the Council shifted, nervously.

Anakin refused to shift, himself. He…didn’t think that Luke was likely to fall. His Light was so strong, so steady, so much like…like Obi-Wan. Anakin was sure that Luke could look temptation in the face and not quaver. No, Anakin did not fear Luke falling, but he knew that if Luke didn’t fall, then Dooku would not stand to see Luke live. Anakin feared Luke was headed for certain death, and for some reason, that thought brought a chill to his heart and a fire to his blood.

Luke would not die at the hands of the Sith.

Anakin would lose no more family.

Yoda looked up at last. “Rescue him, you must. On this all depends. Cloudy is the Force around this new Skywalker, and yet a great part in the balance of the Force do I feel he has yet to play.”

“Balance?” Ki Adi Mundi said with some surprise, glancing at Anakin. Anakin looked ahead and pretended not to notice.

“Unclear much is,” Yoda said. “Very unclear.”

Mace cleared his throat. “Master Koon and Master Fisto, you are the closest to Master Kenobi and
Knight Skywalker. Rendezvous with them as soon as you can. Master Fisto, the Council imparts responsibility for those refugees to you; you must fulfill Kenobi and Skywalker’s original mission. Master Kenobi, you and Anakin are to pursue and recapture Dooku’s prisoner and bring him here to the Temple. Master Koon, you and your Wolfpack are to provide aerial support to Master Kenobi.”

Plo and Kit both bowed shallowly, accepting the assignment. Mace nodded.

“Then may the Force be with you,” he said. The Council bowed as one and the display went blank.

Obi-Wan stared into nothing for a long while, stroking his beard.

***

Luke knew the moment they left hyperspace, and not just from the way the ship shuddered at the sudden decrease in velocity. No, there was always something, a quaver in the Force, that signaled their return to real space, like a wind blowing over the surface of the dunes, leaving ripples behind in its wake.

His binders hung on his hands, the weight of them a heavy reminder of his precarious situation, and Luke was careful to keep his proddings at them small enough to mimic a dampened presence. He just hoped it was enough to fool his captors until he could figure out a way out of this mess.

Oh, he missed his lightsaber.

He missed Artoo.

The ship shuddered again, entering the outer atmosphere, and Luke clenched and unclenched his hands, trying to stretch out some of the stiffness that had settled in. Sands, he hoped this planet was warm.

And yet, for some reason, he had a really bad feeling about this…

***

Obi-Wan stood at the observation deck, staring out into the star-field. Kit and Plo, and by extension Ahsoka, were due to rendezvous with them within the hour. His crew had tracked the mystery ship’s escape vector, and highlighted a list of possible destinations.

There were so many--too many, Obi-Wan hoped, once everyone was assembled, that the Force would provide an answer.

"Yes, because the Force has been so good at that so far," he thought, and let a wry smile twist his lips. "Oh, Anakin…"

Kix’s voice echoed in his memory. *I think you should read this, sir.*

A blood test.

A paternity test.

A test so clearly showing a father and son that it took Obi-Wan far too long to realize what was amiss. Luke was not Anakin’s father, as Obi-Wan had suspected—had been so sure of. No.

Anakin was Luke’s father.
Oh, sweet Force.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

many thanks to my wonderful betas! You're the best!

There was no one to greet them when they landed, and the droids escorted Luke out into and through an empty landing platform.

How rude, he thought, feeling the weight of irony pressing down on him. It said something sad about his life that he’d come to expect celebrity treatment when he was captured by the enemy. It wasn’t that they’d done anything to ensure his comfort, far from it, but they were usually there to gloat. It wasn’t encouraging; without the “you are now my prisoner” orientation, Luke was still going into this completely blind.

Hopefully, he would be taken straight to a cell where he could be left alone long enough to remove the cuffs. He’d managed to find their release mechanism, and it wouldn’t take much to spring the lock, but it would be best if he was alone first.

Muted to a distant echo, Luke felt the dark ripples in the Force around them as they made their way into the main building. It felt like the dark tree on Dagobah, or the Imperial Palace on Coruscant--it felt like the Sith.

Not for the first time, Luke wished the Empire’s propaganda machine hadn’t been quite so efficient. Those, like Luke, who were raised in Imperial-subsidized schooling, were taught nearly nothing about the Clone Wars, and there weren’t many on Tatooine who would remember, let alone knew anything in the first place--but Luke knew the main enemy was the Sith: Palpatine before he declared himself Emperor, and his apprentices.

Luke was pretty sure who was missing, and why this little adventure reminded him so much of his youth: once again, there was a price on his head from Palpatine--to be brought in alive and turned, or dead as a trophy and reminder.

Luke hadn’t fallen when he was twenty-two, newly christened and near sick with worry and exhaustion. He wasn’t going to fall now, at fifty-two, with thirty years spent in the Light, fighting against the darkness. Still, as long as they thought he could be turned, they would keep him alive.

The building was--well, it was a castle, there was little getting around that. Instead of heading toward the central structure, however, the droids led him to one of the spires. With his senses dulled, Luke couldn’t reach out far enough to sense anyone living, and if there were people here, his droid captors never brought him near any as they walked down the corridors, each one identical to the next.

Still, Luke looked around as they walked, committing the turns to memory; he had a feeling he might need to make a quick getaway.

He was led to a simple holding cell complete with a pink-shimmering plasma door. The leading droid entered the key code as the droid next to Luke jostled him with its blaster.
“No peeking!” the droid commanded, and Luke stared back at him, eyebrows raised in bemusement.

“All right,” Luke said. He didn’t say that it would hardly matter; to him, the security was severely outdated. He wouldn’t need the keycode to unlock the door.

“Into the cell,” the droid said, gesturing with its blaster, and Luke, shrugging mentally, stepped beyond the plasma door. The shield sprang into place behind him, and Luke took a moment to look around the room before turning around.

“Count Dooku will be very glad to see you,” one of the droids said, and the others began to echo with robotic laughter, some joining in with a, “roger, roger.” The sound of their clanking grew fainter as they walked away, leaving Luke in his cell to wonder--

“What is Count Dooku?”

***

Anakin was waiting with Obi-Wan in the hanger when his padawan returned, and he watched as her ship landed in the bay. Ahsoka and Torrent Company had been on loan to aid Plo Koon’s Wolf Pack with some sorely needed air support. Anakin hadn’t like letting Ahsoka go off without him; he never liked when her missions diverged from his (she’s too young! his mind screamed. Were they not at war, there was no way she would be getting solo missions at her age, regardless of how qualified she was), but he couldn’t argue that she wasn’t capable of handling herself.

He just wished she didn’t have to.

Still, he couldn’t help but smile when the cockpit opened, and he saw her montrals peeking up over the top of her ship. “Hey Snips! Glad to see you back in one piece.”

“As if there was any doubt,” Ahsoka called back, her sing-song voice floating down to him as she sprang from the cockpit. Anakin felt the Force swirling around her as she landed gently in front of him, and absently sent a wave out to Echo, whose boot slipped on a damaged piece of his ship’s casing.

Like Ahsoka, the troops had decided to forego the ladders when they climbed from their fighters, but unlike Ahsoka they were free-falling to the deck. Anakin had to admit it really added to the image his 501st cultivated.

Plo and his Wolf Pack were a bit more pragmatic, sliding down the bars if not using the rungs of the ladders, Plo included. Anakin had a brief flash of Plo on a children’s playground, sliding down the slide and the straight pole, rocking on the rope bridge. Anakin closed his eyes and shook his head.

Obi-Wan stepped forward, formally greeting Plo with a gentle bow before his expression softened. “It’s good to see you again, Plo,” he said.

“Always, my friend,” Plo said, “May we soon start meeting under better circumstances.”

“Agreed,” Obi-Wan said. “I’m afraid we don’t have time to spare; we must be on our way.” Kit joined them, shaking out his tentacles. He had mentioned to Anakin once that being in a single fighter was a bit like being in a pressure-cooker, and it always felt better when he had room to move. “Kit, I’ll leave you with Cody. He’ll get you up to speed.”

“He may be a bit grumpy at first,” Anakin added. “He’s in a snit because Obi-Wan’s running off
without him again.”

Obi-Wan shot Anakin a flat look. “I’m hardly running off—” he cut himself off. “That’s neither here nor there. Cody will just have to learn that I am not only an adult, but a Jedi Master. I will be fine.”

Anakin didn’t have to say anything, but Kit had to turn away to hide a smile—though Plo didn’t bother to hide his amusement through the Force.

Anakin turned to Ahsoka, who raised an eyebrow at him. “So what’s going on?” she asked. “Everyone’s been real hush-hush.”

“That’s because it’s a real hush-hush type situation, Snips,” Anakin said, looking at the assembled members of Torrent Company. To be honest, fresh from the field or no, Anakin would rather he had his men with him; he never liked being too far away to call for aid. But the refugee ship had been attacked once, and it made sense to split their fighters, so Rex and the rest of Torrent were rejoining the 501st on board to protect the refugees while Anakin and Ahsoka went off with Obi-Wan, Plo, and the Wolf Pack to get their wayward Jedi.

The other Skywalker.

Anakin’s family.

Anakin clenched his fist and let his frustration simmer for a long moment before letting it go. “Rex, be a good boy for Master Fisto, won’t you?”

“Will I get a cookie, sir?” Rex answered, his voice tinny through his bucket’s comm, and Anakin snorted.

“This ends well, Rex, we all get cookies.”

***

Ordinarily, Obi-wan knew, Plo would fly his own fighter into battle with his troops, but Obi-Wan needed to get him up to date and didn’t want to risk speaking over the comms. So, Plo was with Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Ahsoka in the main transport while Wolffe and the others flew in formation around them.

It was a larger group than Obi-Wan preferred for stealth missions, but there was always the possibility of meeting Grievous, not to mention Dooku, and Obi-Wan did feel a bit better knowing they had a force in the air.

But before they could go anywhere, they had to figure out where they were going. Anakin was sitting at the control with Plo in the co-pilot’s seat and Ahsoka stood with Obi-Wan before the communications display.

“Cody sent us the last calculated routes for the droid ship,” Obi-Wan said, pulling up the information on the display. “There are several planets possible, and hopefully we won’t spend too long looking in the dark. Of course, enough time has passed that it’s possible that none of the destinations will bear fruit, but the rogers tend to be straightforward; it wouldn’t occur to them to change course unless someone told them to.”

“Or if they were laying a trap,” Plo said, and though his voice was low and mostly modulated by his vocoder, Obi-Wan could feel his excitement ramp up slightly.
“Then we spring the trap,” Anakin said. “At least if it’s a trap there’s a greater chance of Luke being there.”

“Quite,” Obi-Wan said. “The question is, where do we begin?” His eyes began to scan over the list when a wave of—of *something* flowed through the Force. Obi-Wan drew in a sharp breath; it felt like giddy excitement, like the euphoria that came from a sudden *loss* of pain, and Obi-Wan had to brace himself against the back of the chair. Next to him, Ahsoka had dropped into the seat and was giggling softly to herself. Plo and Anakin both turned to look at Obi-Wan, and Obi-Wan could see that Anakin was a bit flushed—he had felt that euphoria too, then.

“It had to be Luke,” Anakin said, and Plo looked at him.

“He is that strong?”

Obi-Wan nodded absently. Any offspring of Anakin would be powerful, and it seemed Luke was no exception. Add to that the sheer reserves it would take to survive whatever method of transport Luke had taken to get to the here and now—Obi-Wan didn’t believe in time travel, but barring a malfunctioning diagnostic machine, it was the only solution that answered more questions than it raised.

Plo cocked his head. “Then is it not heartening that we did not feel pain?”

Ahsoka’s giggles slowed. “Can anyone else still feel him?”

Obi-Wan stopped. Now that the euphoria had passed, Obi-Wan could feel Luke shining like a beacon, like a bright star in the distance. They hadn’t felt pain—they hadn’t felt anything—and then-

“They had him in dampeners,” Obi-Wan said. “They must have.”

“Well, he’s free of them now,” Anakin said.

“Quick!” Obi-Wan said. “Pinpoint his location in case he goes dark again!”

“Already on it,” Anakin said, and as he spoke, the coordinates flashed across the screen. Obi-Wan bent closer to look and felt a flash of resigned dread.

“He’s on Kohlma’s moon,” Anakin said.

Ahsoka looked between them all. “I don’t get it. What’s on Kohlma’s moon?”

Plo rumbled quietly, a low sound of anger. “Dooku.”

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan said. “Alert the others and plot the course. We cannot let Luke stay in Dooku’s clutches. Someone that powerful—”

“I know,” Anakin said.

***

It took maybe five minutes for Luke to will his binders open, and they fell to his lap with a muted thud. He was glad he’d had the foresight to be sitting, because the rush of the Force returning left him dizzy, and he giggled quietly to himself as he was filled with the familiar pulse of the universe.

He was equally unsurprised to see the ghost of Qui-Gon Jinn pacing the far end of his cell. Even in death, Jinn was a large man, and he reached the wall in only four steps. Luke watched him for a
moment, simply happy to not be truly alone in this dark place, for now that the initial buzz was fading, the oily sick feeling of this place was making him feel a bit ill.

“I didn’t think ghosts felt nervous,” Luke said, pressing his lips together to hide a smile as Qui-Gon visibly startled.

“Luke Skywalker,” he said. “How can you see me? You’re wearing--” Luke held up his bare wrists to show them, and then gently began to rub the skin to ease the red marks left by the binders. “Those were dampening cuffs. How did you get them off?”

Luke shrugged. “Dampened, but not gone,” he said. “Just takes greater concentration.” He looked toward the door and away from the befuddled expression on the ghost’s face. “So where are we, anyway?”

“You do not know?” Qui-Gon asked, surprised, and Luke glared at him, his eyes narrowed in a way Luke had often seen on Leia’s face.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked,” Luke said, dry, and Qui-Gon seemed like he wanted to be amused by Luke’s sass.

“We’re on Kohlma’s moon, in Dooku’s castle,” he said, and Luke nodded. He had never been to the moon of Kohlma himself, but he remembered talking to others who had--rebels who had fought in the clone wars before they fought the empire.

Standing, Luke pressed his flesh hand flat against the wall, behind where the keypad would be. He closed his eyes, feeling the plasma running through the wall, tracing the circuits. “And this Dooku, who is he?”

Qui-Gon was quiet for a long moment. “You don’t know? Truly?”

Luke nudged the first relay, triggering the first number in the lock sequence. “The purges killed more than the Jedi,” Luke said absently. “And rule number one for a fascist Empire is to control the flow of information.” The next number clicked. “All I know about the war I learned listening to spacer vets on Tatooine, and they talked more about fighting clankers.”

The third number tumbled; one more to go.

“Dooku was a master in the order, my master in fact, and Yoda’s last padawan--before he felt to the dark side and became Sidious’s apprentice.”

The fourth number clicked. Luke turned to look at Qui-Gon, his eyes wide. “Sidious’s apprentice?” he repeated. “But I thought my--” Luke stopped, biting his lip. The end of the war was still nearly two years away. There was no reason to speak of Vader until it was absolutely necessary. “Am I to be brought before the Em--Sidious, then?”

Qui-Gon just stared back, inscrutable, and Luke rolled his eyes. The last number slotted into place and the plasma door faded away. Luke grinned at Qui-Gon, and after a quick look around the corridor, stepped freely from the jail cell.

He had only taken a few steps, with Qui-Gon’s ghost a half step behind him, when he heard the distinctive snap-hiss of a lightsaber igniting, and the corridor was filled with an angry red glow. From behind him came a voice, a rasping woman’s voice that hissed.

“Going somewhere, Jedi?”
Luke stopped, turning to look. At the end of a hallway was the form of a Dathomirian woman, bald and sickly pale and filled with the wrath of the Dark Side, holding a lit ‘saber. Luke saw its twin still clipped to her waist, and he wasn’t at all sure they were the most dangerous thing about her.

“Oh, you know,” Luke said. “When nature calls. I’m an older man now, some things are--”

“Shut up!” the Sith snapped. “My master wants you uninjured, and I would hate to have to disappoint him.” Her voice hissed, and her speech was as melodramatic as any Dark-sider that Luke had ever met, but Luke had committed his own fair share of melodrama in his youth, so he could hardly criticize.

Time to change tactics.

Luke turned to face her fully, folding his hands into his sleeves. He had no weapons stashed away, and despite Yoda’s constant rebukes, Luke now regretted not carrying a blaster as matter of course. Still, he bowed to her shallowly. “I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage.”

Her lips curled in a snarl. “Jedi are always at a disadvantage when faced with true power,” she said, but she also started to walk forward.

“Her name is Asajj Ventress,” Qui-Gon said quietly from just behind Luke. Luke didn’t see the blue shine that signaled the presence of a Force ghost, and he wondered if it had to do with the way the Dark Side clung to and smothered the Light. “She is the apprentice to Dooku, who is called Tyrannus by his master, Sidious’s.” Qui-Gon paused. “From a certain point of view, she’s my sister padawan.”

“What?” Luke said, startled, but Qui-Gon was gone. Asajj, however, was not gone, and her sneer intensified.

“You heard me, Jedi” she growled. “You’re not going to escape that easily. You’re going to cave, just like the other one.”

Luke froze, feeling his heart pound as the Force screamed at him.

“Another one?”
I'm back! Thank you all so much for your patience!
thanks to hobbitystmarymorstan for the beta!!

“Oh,” Ventress purred. “Could it be? The Jedi doesn’t know?” She laughed, and Luke forced himself to take a deep breath. The world around him seemed to sharpen, coming into crystal focus as he reached for the Force.

Ventress was before him in an instant, the glowing red blade of her ‘saber a hair’s breadth from his neck. “Try it,” she sneered. “My Master will understand if I tell him you were killed trying to escape. It wouldn’t even be a falsehood.”

Slowly, Luke raised his hands, showing clearly his lack of weapon, but he did not breathe until Ventress stepped back, lowering her ‘saber from his neck to point down the hall, back the way they came.

Luke had no weapon; he could likely grab Ventress’s second saber with ease, but he had used Sith ‘sabers in the past and found the experience...unpleasant, to say the least. Assuming, also, that Ventress wasn’t strong enough to stop him.

He could try for the ship, but even if he managed to reach the ship unharmed, there was no telling what sort of traps were waiting for him, and that was not something he wished to attempt in a ship designed to be piloted by more than one with the enemy alert to his attempts to escape. (It wasn’t the first time he’d been in that situation, mind, but they had all been unavoidable).

Besides, if he ran, he’d never find out who this “other” was. Was it another Jedi? Another here, who did not belong?


***

Anakin sat in the pilot’s seat, staring out into the streaking vortex of hyperspace. Seven hours into a thirty-seven hour flight and he should have been sleeping, but he couldn’t sleep. There wasn’t enough room on the ship for a moving meditation, and he never had gotten the hang of sitting still.

_Staring out into the void is like meditation_, he thought to himself, and the voice in his head that sounded the most like Obi-Wan just snickered.

Figured; Obi-Wan wasn’t even there, and Anakin was getting a lecture.

He flexed his hand, listening to the servos whirring as he first extended his fingers and then clenched his fist. They were near-whisper quiet, and muffled further by the glove he wore, but they still echoed loudly in his ears; Healer Che had said it was because it was attached to him, that the vibrations were echoing through his own body. It actually _was_ louder to him.
Maybe he should let that problem rest for now: it never seemed to bother Padme.

Padme. *Stars,* he missed his wife; he missed the smell of her hair like spring flowers, the softness of her skin like warm silk. He missed the way she laughed and everyone laughed with her, and the way her smile brightened the room.

What would she think of Luke? She married a man with no family, after all, what would she think about him gaining a--an uncle?

Who was he kidding, Padme would love Luke. Anakin hadn’t spent much time with him, but Luke seemed to have the same kind heart, the same patience and warm humor.

They *would,* get him back.

Anakin was still there, circling in thoughts of his wife, when the door behind him opened and Ahsoka walked in, yawning and sitting heavily in the passenger seat.

“You’re up late, Snips,” Anakin said, keeping his face towards the view screen. Still, out of the corner of his eye he saw Ahsoka stick out her tongue at him, the gesture playful, and he turned to look at her. Togruta didn’t show tiredness the same way humans did--there were no dark circles under her eyes, her face didn’t have that tell-tale pallor, but her posture was slumped and she rested heavily against the seat back as she looked out at something only she could see with her eyes only halfway open. “You look exhausted.”

“That’s because I am exhausted,” Ahsoka said. “I couldn’t sleep in my fighter on the way back; too much to do.”

Anakin winced, and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. Ahsoka smiled at him, but it was interrupted by another jaw-cracking yawn.

“Go to bed, Snips,” Anakin said. “You’re going to need to be well rested.”

“I will, I will,” Ahsoka protested. “But I heard Master Obi-Wan talking to Master Plo, and he said we’re going after another Jedi named Skywalker?”

“And you wanted the details,” Anakin said.

“And I wanted to make sure you were okay,” Ahsoka said, and Anakin turned to her in surprise. “Family’s a touchy subject for you, Skyguy, and I thought this one might hit a little close to home.” Anakin continued to stare, incredulous, and Ahsoka shifted in her seat. “And I wanted the details,” she added in a rush.

*There it is,* Anakin thought, Ahsoka’s youthful exuberance giving him a foothold to regain his balance. It always threw him when he was confronted by Ahsoka’s compassion; it was humbling, and Anakin wasn’t convinced she had learned it from him.

“We found him in our last refugee evacuation,” Anakin began. “When Obi-Wan saw him catch a crashing clanker ship like it was pushfeather.”

Ahsoka’s eyes went wide, all signs of exhaustion fading. “That’s not easy.”

Anakin shook his head, and told her the rest; finding him on board, the revelation of his name, and his relation to Anakin, his status as a Jedi Master, no matter what he called himself.
“He says he knows Yoda, and learned from him directly,” Anakin said. Ahsoka frowned.

“I thought Yoda’s last Padawan was Dooku,” she said. Anakin shrugged.

“So did we, but there must be something to it—it would certainly explain why Dooku came for him, how he knows Luke exists.”

Ahsoka bit her lip as she thought—it was a tell Anakin was still trying to rid her of, but before he could say anything, she shook her head. “I don’t think we have all the pieces. Something’s not adding up right, and I don’t know what it is.”

Anakin looked at her in surprise; it seemed straightforward enough to him. But, then again, seeing the bigger picture from the details had never been his strength unless he was looking at technical readouts. People had always been Obi-Wan’s strength. In fact, “You sound like Obi-Wan,” he said.

Ahsoka preened, “Thank you,” she said, and was caught off guard by another yawn, and left blinking sleep away, vaguely stunned.

“Go to bed, Ahsoka,” Anakin said, gently this time. “I don’t want you emulating Obi-Wan in your sleep habits, too.” Ahsoka giggled, a sign of just how tired she was. Normally, Obi-Wan’s short nights were a cause for concern, but with Rex on board to play Cody for the night, Anakin was sure Obi-Wan would get some sort of rest. “Your questions will still be there in the morning.”

“Fine,” Ahsoka said though a sigh, and heaved herself to her feet. “But only if you get some rest, too.”

“Wolfe’s relieving me in twenty,” Anakin said. “I’ll be fine.”

Ahsoka pointed two fingers at him. “You better,” she said, and walked from the cockpit still yawning. When the door closed, Anakin covered his mouth with his metal hand as he yawned so wide his jaw ached.

“Damnit, Snips.”

***

Luke was in a new cell, this time, one with restraints bolted to the floor. Ventress had secured him, ankles and wrists, while Luke stood as still as he could. The Darkness rolled off Ventress in waves, but there was something different about it, something less like Palpatine and more like Vader.

It was enough to give Luke an idea.

He had let Ventress finish securing him, certain that, if he concentrated, he could free himself once more. If anything, the bonds were overkill, and Luke was pretty sure Ventress at least suspected as much. Still, Luke was also sure that this Dooku wouldn’t be kind to Ventress if she let Luke escape again.

He shouldn’t care, whispered the old bitter voice that had been his companion all his life. She was of the dark, and whatever punishment she got would be her just rewards.

Yet—yet, she paced outside of his cage, like a wild predator confined and anxious rather than collected and hunting. She would not leave until Dooku called for her or Luke or both, and it was the opening Luke needed.

from where it had been bent in thought or meditation, and met his eyes when Qui-Gon watched him, inscrutable. Ventress’s footsteps didn’t break pace, but Luke heard her snort.

“Why does anyone?” Ventress said. “For power.”

Luke titled his head, considering her words. “So everyone says,” he began slowly, talking to Qui-Gon as much as to Ventress. “But it never made much sense to me: if you desire power, why enslave yourself to the Dark.”

Ventress spun, her lightsaber out and lit, crackling against the force field, sending sparks big enough that Luke leaned back.

“Silence!” Ventress cried.

Luke raised his eyebrow, not saying anything, and Ventress growled, nearly feral, and slashed at the door one, twice, three more times. Each pass sent a rain of sparks, but Luke did not flinch from them again.

Ventress stood, chest heaving, breath heavily through her nose, and after a moment she grit out: “I will not listen to your lies.”

Luke shrugged, as if it meant nothing to him. “If you’re certain I’m lying,” he said, as if they had been discussing nothing more than the weather. “It’s just...” he trailed off, and Ventress leaned in, her ‘saber humming dangerously over the steady whine from the door.

“Just. What.”

“I am from Tatooine, Ventress,” Luke said, finally looking up to meet her eyes. They burned like binary suns. “I recognize slavery when I see it.”

Ventress snarled, and jerked like she would slash with her ‘saber again, but the strike never came. “I am no one’s slave!”


Now, Ventress did let loose, with a howl of fury like an omen of death, and Luke watched the storm and felt his heart ache.

“You know nothing!” Ventress spat. “You know nothing of power, and nothing of the Dark.”

She spun, her skirts flaring, and disappeared down the hallway.

Luke allowed himself to slump, covering his face with his hands. His metal hand was cold, it usually was and the castle had no heating system that Luke could fathom. More worrying, his flesh hand was cold, white and waxy looking, and Luke shivered as he pressed it inside the neck of his tunics as best he could. Luke had spent twice as long in space as on Tatooine, and still he had yet to adjust to non-desert temperatures.


“I told her nothing that was not true,” Luke said.

“There are truths and there are truths,” Qui-Gon said, and Luke sighed, rolling his eyes.

“Lies of omission are still lies,” Luke said. “And twisting the truth to suit one’s needs has never sat well with me.” Luke closed his eyes and focused on the cuffs. They were far sturdier than the ones
before, and with four of them, it would take Luke quite some time to free himself. He held his chagrin inside—perhaps he shouldn’t have been so complacent when Ventress locked him up. Still, Luke opened his eyes to Qui-Gon’s frankly disapproving look. “What?”

Qui-Gon shook his head. “I find it hard to believe that you’re Obi-Wan’s padawan. You’d be a terrible negotiator, with an attitude like that.”


“I see it now,” Qui-Gon said. “The resemblance to your father. You’re much more like your mother.”

Luke blinked at him, startled. Even in his own time, nobody ever compared him to Padmé—Leia, the senator with a passion for Justice, she was often compared to their mother, to Leia’s pleasure. (“She was a friend of my father’s” she had said, meaning Bail as she always did, “and I based many of my early forays into politics on her. She was my inspiration. To learn that she was my mother…” She had trailed off in wonder. Luke had slid his arm around her shoulder, knowing why it was easier for her to accept Padmé as her mother, but not Anakin as her father, and feeling the sting of it, regardless).

“You knew her?” he asked, settling back to the floor, and Qui-Gon nodded.

“When she was a young queen, no more than fourteen,” he said. “I was the Jedi sent to manage negotiations with the Trade Federation, along with Obi-Wan, my Padawan still. She impressed me as a quite capable leader, despite her youth, and cunning—it took me longer than usual to realize that ‘handmaiden Padmé’ was, in truth, the Queen Amidala.” Qui-Gon’s gaze turned distant. “She’s a good match for Anakin,” he said. “She keeps him even.”

Like Han for Leia, Luke though, and wondered, sadly, if that was still true. It had been years since he’d spoken with either of them, stuck as he was on Ahch-to, and things had been deeply troubled when he had left.

Luke missed them both dearly, his ache for his twin’s presence twisting his heart for a deep moment, before he could breathe again.

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Obi-Wan knelt in his rooms, the lights dimmed to fifty percent, and tried yet again to reach a state of meditative peace—and again, he failed to do so. It happened, from time to time—more in his youth, less as he had aged—but sometimes Obi-Wan’s mind refused to quiet, his anchor in the Force rocked and hard to reach. It had frustrated him to anger as an Initiate, and had frustrated Qui-Gon just as much when Obi-Wan was a Padawan, until they fell on a solution: Obi-Wan never had trouble after lightsaber practice. So, when his mind wouldn’t still, Obi-Wan would work his body until it would still his mind for him, and he could sink into a tired peace. It helped a great deal when Anakin was young, as well, and to this day, Obi-Wan was sure Anakin couldn’t meditate without movement.

But the ship was too small to spar, especially as full as it was, and so here Obi-Wan was, still unable to meditate and musing on his former Padawan instead of getting some well-deserved rest.

Obi-Wan sighed, and tried once more—slowing his breathing and humming the mantra they used to train the younglings...
It was the blasted paternity test Kix had shown him that was throwing him off--Luke Skywalker son of Anakin Skywalker--and Obi-Wan was the only one on board who knew.

Luke must have known--to not know the name of one’s father was not unknown to those in the Jedi Order, but Luke had looked at Anakin with a depth of pain that came not only from knowledge, but the danger that knowledge entailed. No, Luke knew who Anakin was, and for reasons of his own, was keeping that secret.

(And yet, Luke never outright lied, of that Obi-Wan was sure. He was less sure that Luke wouldn’t simply tell the truth if asked outright).

Thoughts of Anakin rolled through his head once more, and Obi-Wan sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face. The question of telling Anakin had been pressing on him since he learned the truth, and he was still no closer to an answer. He was sure he could work it through, if only he could meditate--but he couldn’t meditate until he had resolved on a path of action. It was a frustrating cycle, and Obi-Wan scrubbed both hands through his hair, a tell of stress that he hadn’t indulged since his hair was still padawan-short.

Should Anakin know they were going to rescue his son, as impossible as that seemed? Or should Obi-Wan allow him to continue thinking of Luke as simply a more distant relation?

Obi-Wan simply didn’t know.

When his com beeped the proximity alarm, Obi-Wan stood and tried to set the whole issue aside. With no decision, it was best to carry on as he had--if he was to tell Anakin, the opportunity would present itself as the Force willed it. Obi-Wan would simply have to have faith in the Force.

Resolved, Obi-Wan brushed a hand over his tunics and went to join the others. They were coming up on Dooku’s stronghold--he would need all of his focus if they were to survive the next few hours.

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Luke had barely worked through half of the first cuff when Ventress returned, her anger banked to embers. She opened the cell door and stepped through, pinning Luke with a superior sneer.

“My Master has returned, and has...requested your presence.” She gestured, and a team of battle droids stepped forward to undo his restraints. Once he was standing free, Ventress leaned in, her sharp teeth stopping mere centimeters from the end of Luke’s nose.

“I will enjoy watching you lose, Jedi,” she said, and Luke wondered if maybe he hadn't miscalculated.
Dooku’s palace was surprisingly light, for the lair of a Sith Lord, Luke mused as he followed Ventress up from the dungeons. Instead of the spidery reds and blacks that Luke had encountered in the years since the founding of the New Republic, it was made of airy sandstone, and rather open to sunlight. The lights inside were of a yellowed green that reminded Luke too much of the predators that stalked Dagobah at night.

Still, the whole affair was rather...civilized, and Luke was uncomfortably reminded of the various state dinners his status as The Jedi meant he had to attend (or, rather, that Leia insisted meant he had to attend. There were far too many, but Luke knew she tried to only insist on the most necessary of occasions). The last time Luke felt like this, he was being lead in front of Jabba the Hutt, a blind but awake Han Solo at his side.

By all accounts, this Dooku was far smarter than Jabba and was therefore a great deal more dangerous.

There was no way for Luke to slip his captors. Though Ventress walked ahead, she would twitch at every step Luke took slightly out of pace; she was watching far too closely, and Luke didn’t want to waste his energy fighting her when he was sure he would need it to face Dooku.

Luckily for Luke, his pace didn’t falter when Qui-Gon fell into step beside him. Luke glanced over, as much as he dared, but Qui-Gon wasn’t watching him.

It didn’t appear as if Qui-Gon would be talking, either, and ahead of them loomed a pair of highly ornate doors. The innermost chamber, Luke suspected. Dooku’s seat of power.

Ventress held out her hand, darkness writhing about her fingers, and slowly, the doors opened.

***

The plan was simple; the strike team would enter the palace. Anakin would take Plo to face, distract, and hopefully neutralize Dooku while Obi-Wan would take Waxer and Boil into the dungeons and retrieve Luke. Ahsoka would remain with the ship, keeping the engine warm and coordinating the aerial attack.

It was so simple, Obi-Wan thought, that it was doomed to go wrong from the start.

He paused, hoping the universe hadn’t heard him and would decide to favor them, just this once, and then continued the climb.

They were scaling the lower walls of Dooku’s palace, in a carefully constructed blind-spot in the castle’s outer defence. One line of fault code, and every droid in the facility would look away at exacting intervals. It was tedious and Obi-Wan’s arms ached and he was bloody tired, but they were still unspotted and there really wasn’t another way in without getting captured.
Above him, Anakin’s foot slipped, sending a small shower of dust and pebbles down on Obi-Wan’s head. Once settled, Obi-Wan glared up at Anakin.

“Sorry,” Anakin whispered loudly.

“You did that on purpose.”

“I said, ‘sorry!’”

Plo climbed up next to Obi-Wan. “Are missions with you two always this fun?”

As one, Anakin and Obi-Wan turned to look at Plo. Then, Anakin’s eyes, caught sight of something. “There!” He whispered again, and a moment later had leapt across, the Force carrying him, to cling to the grate of a window. After a moment, the place came free, and Anakin climbed inside, holding the crate from his metal hand.

“Come on!” he urged, and with a shrug, first Obi-Wan and then Plo followed. Once inside, Obi-Wan and Plo reached back and grabbed Waxer and Boil with the Force. Together, they carried the clones across to them. Waxer went easily, but Boil held himself very tightly, as if afraid to twitch.

It had to be an air vent of some kind, an older construction of large sections of seamless metal. This was not the senate building; anyone could navigate their system with ease. It was a long moment before they finally found a way down into the castle proper, but they did find it, and down they went.

Once on the ground, it only took a moment to review the plan. Before they split, Anakin turned to Obi-Wan. “Can you feel him?” he asked. “He hid himself so well on the ship, that I almost didn’t recognize him.”

“He might have been drugged,” Obi-Wan offered. It would account for the way his presence had flared quite so suddenly, and why it hadn’t faded back to what it had been before.

Anakin hummed, noncommittally, as if he didn’t believe that could be the answer. Obi-Wan gripped his shoulder. “Remember,” he said. “You are a distraction. Kill Dooku if you get the chance, but don’t go out of your way. We need you whole and alive at the end of this; if nothing else, there’s no way back out if you’re hurt.”

Anakin nodded, saluting with his unlit saber, and led Plo down into the darkened hallway ahead of them. Obi-Wan watched Anakin run off for a moment, feeling a pressing weight like prescience on his mind, but no vision came and Obi-Wan forced himself to focus on the present.

“Come on; the dungeon is this way.”

Waxer and Boil nodded, following Obi-Wan deeper into the Castle.

There was only one cell active, and they found it surprisingly quickly when the guard droids began shooting at them. Obi-Wan flowed into Soresu, sending back what blaster bolts he could as Waxer and Boil returned fire. The skirmish was brief, and Obi-Wan even managed, with the last bolt, to fry the door controls, shutting down the force field.

Obi-Wan was at the door a moment later, and stopped just at the threshold to see--not Luke.

The prisoner was a woman, middle-aged with long grey-streaked brown hair braided in a crown
around her head. She was small by human standards, and dressed in utilitarian grey and purple, but for some reason her guards had bound her hands with heavy plastisteel cuffs.

Her eyes, deep and dark, conveyed no small amount of anger even as they scanned him as a threat. Obi-Wan saw the moment she registered his lightsaber, the aborted flinch at the sight of Boost and Sinker behind him, and her mouth twitched.

“You boys are a little short for Stormtroopers,” she said, with the dry warmth of an old joke, but Obi-Wan didn’t get the reference.

Stepping forward, he powered down his ‘saber and hung it on his belt. “They’re hardly stormtroopers,” Obi-Wan said, and unlocked her cuffs with a wave of his hand. They unclicked, falling to the floor, and Obi-Wan was surprised by the strength of her sudden Force presence.

Dampener cuffs?

Still, he rallied. “I am Obi-Wan Kenobi. This is Waxer, and this is Boil. We’re here to rescue you.”

There was that laser focus again, tinged this time with bemused humor.

“My only hope,” she said, her voice wry, and then her eyes went distant, unfocused. “Luke,” she breathed, and then she was on her feet and moving, past Obi-Wan and between Waxer and Boil to the fallen shell of a battle droid. She grabbed its blaster, hefting its weight and checking its charge with familiar motions. Obi-Wan watched her from the doorway, frowning. There was something about the way she moved, the way she took charge, that was frightfully familiar.

An idea, a suggestion of an idea, formed in the back of his mind, and Obi-Wan pushed it back down. It was bad enough that Anakin had one offspring.

“Well?” She asked, turning back to them. “Luke’s in trouble. Are you coming, or not?”

“Oh, I like her,” Boil said, quietly, and Obi-Wan had to admit that she certainly had a presence. He held out his arm in a sweeping gesture.

“By all means,” Obi-Wan said, with a short bow. Her eyes narrowed; she recognized Courscanti manners, then. A senator, perhaps? Her accent placed her on Alderaan, but Alderaan’s senator was Bail. A puzzle.

There was little time for puzzles, however, as the woman took off down the hallway at a gentle jog, blaster held at the ready and eyes scanning for threats. Waxer and Boil fell into formation, flanking her and Obi-Wan as he kept pace a half-step behind. Obi-Wan kept his senses open to the Force to sweep for danger—he should be able to easily protect her if something came, but in the meantime he would stay out of the direct line of fire of that blaster rifle.

“I’m afraid I don’t know your name,” Obi-Wan said. “You weren’t exactly who we expected to find.”

The woman snorted. “You weren’t the only one,” she said. “My name is Leia.”

***

Ventress turned to face Luke, and gestured sharply at the droids with her chin. “Leave us,” she ordered. Qui-Gon, Luke realized, was already gone. Once more, it would seem that he was on his own.
Luke raised his chin, meeting her gaze, and stood taller. She was taller by several centimeters, even when he was at his full height, but he refused to let that affect him. He had been Jabba’s prisoner, and Vader’s and Palpatine’s—all had been larger than him, and he still remained a free man. She would see that.

Ventress *did* see that, from the way her face twisted, and--

“Uh, are you talking to us?” The droid next to Luke said.

Luke pressed his tongue to the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing as Ventress rolled her eyes.

“Yes, I mean you!” she snapped.

“Roger, roger,” The droids chorused, and marched away. Luke watched them go in their waddling gait, and wondered that these droids were the terror of the galaxy. Ben had been right; any idiot with a blaster could be dangerous.

“Laugh, Jedi,” Ventress sneered, and Luke turned back, cursing himself silently for his inattentiveness. “My master will ensure it will be your last.”

Luke met and held Ventress’s eyes. “Your master may try,” Luke said, his voice soft, and watched the way she twitched at his emphasis. “But greater than he have tried—and failed.”


Luke staggered forward, just catching himself, and he followed Ventress into the room under his own power. As he entered he could see Qui-Gon reappear, halfway down the hall, watching him with sad eyes.

The Hall was long, easily as long as the great hall had been in the Rebel Base on Yavin 4. That walk, in the rushed and giddy aftermath of the first Death Star, had been very long--too long, for a very different reason.

At the far end, a single throne was lit by a pillar of green light. An empty throne, Luke realized, and instantly his senses were on high alert.

“So,” a deep voice intoned, filling the room. It was easily as deep as Vader’s had been, without the mechanical edge of the vocoder and that terrible, harsh breathing. Luke looked, but he could see no speaker. “You are the one I have been searching for.”

“You have me at a disadvantage,” Luke said, his mind racing. It didn’t hurt to admit the truth, however cloaked in politeness as it was, especially not if it told Luke more about this Dooku. There was only so much hearing from Qui-Gon could help--and speaking of, Luke’s ghostly companion was frustratingly silent.

Could Dooku hear him, perhaps? Luke wasn’t sure what it would say about himself if the only other person who could sense the ghosts around them was a Sith Lord.

His eyes could deceive him, don’t trust them. Reach out with his feelings, stretch his senses, and--

There. In the shadows to the left of the throne. Luke focused on him, and waited.

“Of course I do,” Dooku said. “But then again, I have an advantage over any Jedi, bound as they are by their adherence to such stagnant *rules*. I would not take it...personally.”
“I dunno,” Luke said, noticing the way his casual slurring of words made Dooku’s presence flare red. “This feels pretty personal.” He raised his hands, letting his sleeves fall back and reveal his shackles. “I have no weapons. Is this really necessary?”

“A Jedi’s greatest weapon is the Force,” Dooku said, stepping out of the shadows at last. “And thus, they are never unarmed.”

Luke didn’t deny it, and simply stood still, arms outstretched, as he studied this new Sith lord.

He was unlike any Sith Luke had yet faced—though, to be fair, Luke supposed that his exposure was rather limited. Vader had been severely injured, and Palpatine had been rotting from the inside. Dooku, however, despite the white of his hair and a gravity to the way he moved, showed no such decay. His stride was powerful, purposeful, and Luke had no problems believing that this man was dangerous.

“My master’s preferred form of combat is the second form, Makashi, known for its deadly precision and immense skill. Before he fell, he was considered the master of the form,” Qui-Gon’s voice whispered quietly in his ear.

“Now you tell me,” Luke muttered half-heartedly. It was a moot point anyway, being that Luke’s lightsaber was currently in the possession of Obi-Wan back on board the refugee ship.

Dooku stared at him for long enough that Luke, who had grown used to the stillness of meditation at last, found himself wanting to shift where he stood. Finally, Dooku turned. “Ventress. Release him, and then leave us.”

Ventress startled. “Master—”

“Do you question me?” Dooku demanded, in a voice like rolling thunder. Ventress was silent for a long beat, and Luke felt hope beat in his chest. “No, Master,” she said, but Luke could hear it, the resentment, the repressed anger.

“Good,” Dooku said. Either he hadn’t heard it, or he had misinterpreted it’s cause. Luke wanted to shake his head; how oblivious some people could be. “A shuttle has landed. They are unaware that they have been detected. Doubtless, it will be a rescue party for Master Skywalker, here.” Luke started; how did he know Luke’s name and title? Somehow, Luke doubted that he had a spy on the ship.

“I can sense Kenobi, which means the other Skywalker is with him. Go, and show them the mistake they have made in coming here.”


***

Anakin could feel Luke ahead of him, shining like a beacon in the Force, and it was hard to concentrate on the passage before him with that brightness up ahead. Next to him, however, Plo didn’t seem to be having the same problems—he stopped, drawing his saber, before Anakin even registered that something was wrong.

Skidding to a stop, Anakin lit his blade, and in the blue light of their blades, he saw Ventress, waiting for them in the darkness.

Once seen, Ventress grinned, her teeth shining like a krayt, and lit her ‘sabers, filling the corridor with their sickly red glow.
“You shouldn’t have come here, Jedi,” she said. “For you come only to your death.”

“I don’t have time for this,” Anakin said, and struck. His ‘saber sparked, caught by both of hers, and they were pressed chest-to-chest for a brief moment before she spun, sliding his ‘saber down and away, to spin and counter Plo as he came up behind her.

“Make time,” Ventress hissed, and slashed out. Anakin jumped, the bottom of his boots just clearing the path of her blade, and came down to counter, but she was no longer there.

Anakin hadn’t fought with Plo often, but the Kel Dor moved with swift grace and was a canny counterpoint to Anakin’s movement. It wasn’t as effortless as it would have been with Obi-Wan, however, and Anakin vowed to practice more with Plo when they got out of this.

“You won’t defeat us,” Plo said, and struck. Ventress parried, and Anakin had a flash of insight.

“Dooku knows we’re here,” Anakin cried out. “She’s a distraction.” Then, he had to jump back or be sliced across the chest.

“It’s working,” Plo said, dryly.

“Drop!” a new voice called--Anakin’s mind registered a few details as he followed orders. Female, used to being obeyed, and directly behind him. There was the whine of a blaster-rifle, firing rapidly, and Ventress blocked the volly with sweeping arches of her sabers until one got through, clipping her on the arm. It was enough to make her falter, and the next blast that hit her spun her around and she fell.

Then Obi-Wan was there, putting his hand on Anakin’s arm and helping him back to his feet. “She’s just stunned,” Obi-Wan said. “Boil, restrain her. If we can grab her on the way out, we’ll bring her into custody.”

“Sir,” Boil said, and cautiously stepped forward to place Ventress in binders.

Anakin turned to the woman, to thank her for the assist, and stopped dead to see his mother’s eyes staring back at him from Padme’s face--but the eyebrow she raised, and the way her eyes narrowed--oh, he’d seen that look in the mirror too many times.

What in the Force was going on?
“Anakin,” Obi-Wan said, drawing Anakin’s attention with difficulty.

Anakin’s confusion must be strong enough to feel though their bond, the understanding that was beginning to form in his mind, but Obi-Wan showed no visible signs that he could read Anakin.

“This is Leia.” Obi-Wan gestured to her, and Anakin found himself staring once more.

Those were definitely his mother’s eyes, dark and wide and wary. All too easily, Anakin could picture them warm and worried, squinting against the Tatooine suns.

“Leia, this is Master Plo Koon,” Obi-Wan continued, and Leia looked away from Anakin at last, but it was no better. With her head turned, Anakin could see her resemblance to Padme more easily—the curve of her jaw, her chin. Her hair was braided strangely, but even that reminded Anakin of his wife.

Plo placed his fist over his chest and bowed shallowly, and Leia returned the gesture with the ease of a seasoned politician. Anakin’s heart was pounding behind his ribs; despite Obi-Wan’s doubt, Anakin had learned something of diplomacy, and he could recognize a senator’s manners.

What life had she lived that she carried her blaster like a seasoned Vod?

“And Knight Anakin Skywalker,” Obi-Wan finished. Anakin bowed, following not the Jedi tradition, but the Naboo style that Padme had taught him when they were first married. He could sense Obi-Wan’s surprise, and a brief flash of trepidation, though Plo remained placid. If he was aware of the undercurrents, he made no sign.

After a moment, Leia returned the gesture in the Alderaanian style. Anakin forced himself to remain impassive when the depth of her courtesy indicated a member of a higher rank acknowledging one of a lower rank.

There was a story there, and Anakin was sure he wouldn’t like it.

Obi-Wan was at Anakin’s side, and Anakin forced himself to focus. He’d been so drawn in by Leia, he hadn’t noticed Obi-Wan move. “We found her in the cells—Dooku’s already taken Luke.”

Anakin’s confusion was taken by sudden concern, and his eyes focused sharply. Suddenly, Anakin wondered just what features Luke was hiding under his beard. Would he have Padme’s smile the way Leia had his frown?

“Then we have no time to lose,” Anakin said.

***
Luke rubbed at his wrist as he watched Dooku; he hadn’t yet dared to reach out and confirm that Obi-Wan and Anakin had arrived. If they were here, they would make it to him. He had faith in that.

His focus had to remain on the Sith in front of him.

In turn, the Sith had his focus on Luke.

Not since his trial in the belly of the second Death Star had Luke felt such a malevolent presence focused on him. For all of Dooku’s poise and seeming civility, his presence in the force was roiling with white-hot hate.

But Luke was not the barely-trained youth he had been. Age had brought with it the patience that Yoda had long since despaired that Luke would never find, and the wisdom of when to use it.

If Luke had learned anything, it was that anger was rarely patient.

Sure enough, it was Dooku that broke the silence. “So. You are the one who will destroy Sidious.”

Luke’s felt his heart run cold. Luke, at this point, was not yet born. How could Dooku possibly know of Sidious’s end? (Though, Dooku knew Luke’s name, his title. What else could the Sith know?)

Dooku looked Luke up and down. “I admit, you’re not what I was expecting.”

Despite the severity of his situation, it was all Luke could do to keep himself from rolling his eyes. He closed them for a breath, letting his annoyance go, and refocused on Dooku. The Sith remained where he was, but now Qui-Gon was there as well, his usual blue glow faint in the presence of such darkness. The pained expression that he had worn while watching Obi-Wan was back, focused this time on his former master.

Dooku, it seemed, could no more see Qui-Gon than Obi-Wan could. Luke could not afford to expect help from that quarter.

Qui-Gon looked at Luke, pleading, and Luke looked back at Dooku. He cleared his throat quietly. “I’ve heard that before,” Luke said. In his youth, he would have added the challenge, from better men than you, but there was something in the loss on Qui-Gon’s face that helped Luke keep his tongue.

“Indeed,” Dooku said. He did not quite feign surprise, but his interest, Luke felt, was merely polite. Luke would have been surprised that Dooku would play that way, but then again, Dooku had the power, after all. He could afford to play the games that allowed him to indulge in his petty preferences.

“I admit that I don’t place much faith in Sith magics. I much prefer to use the Force directly. It’s...cleaner. More orderly. Less reliant on myth and legend, and more reliant on the wielder. And yet, when my research brought this particular spell to me, well. It seemed too good an opportunity to pass up.”

Dooku pulled an object out from the folds of his cape, and Luke recoiled. Seeped in darkness, the thing in Dooku’s hand was like a black hole in the Force—a far too familiar black one, and one Luke had hoped to never have to run into again.

A Sith holocron.
“A spell to bring forth the key to your enemy’s downfall,” Dooku said, as if he was a host at a feast, calmly and yet with hidden hunger. “So simple a concept, and yet so subtly complicated a casting.” Dooku’s fingers tightened as talons on the inky black pyramid. “I admit I first thought I’d gotten it wrong, when the other appeared instead of you.”

Luke stilled, a horrible suspicion growing in his mind, and it felt like ice in the pit of his stomach.

“But ultimately she had her uses.” Dooku returned the holocron to it’s hiding place with a showman’s flourish. Sleight of hand? Or darker magics? Luke couldn’t tell; with the Darkness pulsing through the room, it was hard to sense the more subtle manipulations.

“I was able to use her to locate you, after all.”

Dooku stepped closer, crossing the room in long, sure strides. He moved very well for a man of his advanced years, light on his feet in a way that marked him as a fighter of the highest caliber, and Luke remembered what Qui-Gon had said about Dooku’s mastery of Makashi.

Somehow, Luke didn’t think Dooku’s courtesy would extend to giving Luke a lightsaber for a fair fight, however one-sided his skills may be. (It wouldn’t matter, said a voice in the back of Luke’s mind. Lightsaber or no, if he hurt Leia—).

“You must tell me how you will do it,” Dooku said, coming to a stop a few steps from Luke. Dooku was much taller than Luke had anticipated, and even at farther than arm’s length away, he towered. This close, the black cloud that surrounded him was oppressive, choking, and Luke’s eyes began to water. He blinked rapidly.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” Luke said, and braced himself.

Dooku stepped closer, nearly close enough to touch, his face mere centimeters from Luke’s own.

“You will,” he said, and Luke very nearly believed him.

***

The tunnels under Dooku’s palace were labyrinthine, and, despite their proximity to the main hall, Leia found that they were nowhere closer to getting there. It grated against her already raw nerves, and she could feel her temper flaring.

Coming to yet another dead end, Leia had to close her eyes, breathing through her nose and counting to quiet her mind. As always she heard Luke’s voice in these moments, coaching her through her meditations. “Remember a time and a place where you felt the most calm. Picture it in your mind. Hear it. Feel it. Smell it. Let it fill your senses. When you breathe in, take that calm into you, and when you breathe out, let the anger and hate flow out.”

In Leia’s mind, the palace gardens sprung to life; She heard the cries of birds, the babbling of water. She smelled the green scent of plants and the sweetness of the flowers. She could taste the coming rain on the air, and she breathed in a little of the peace of Alderaan, and let go of her frustrations.

When she opened her eyes again, she found Vader watching her again.

It was unfair, perhaps, to think of him that way. Force know Luke had done his part to try and urge her to forgive him, to separate Anakin from Vader.

“Father was just as much a victim of the Emperor as the rest of the Jedi,” Luke had said. “He may
“have killed the Jedi, but he made Father a slave again.” He had spit that last part, the way he always did when the subject arose. Leia hated slavery, the way any raised on the values of Sentient Freedom did, but she could never match the utter hatred that Luke held, having witnessed it first hand.

Leia was tired and hungry, and scared for her brother, and not entirely happy to admit that Anakin Skywalker felt nothing like Darth Vader.

“This is getting us nowhere,” Leia snapped. “Did nobody think to bring a map?”

Evenly, she returned the looks of the Jedi, raising one eyebrow when she heard the one clone trooper (Waxer, she believed) snicker.

Vad—Anakin (She had to start thinking of him as Anakin, for Luke’s sake,) rolled his eyes and pulled out his comm.

“Snips, you there?” He asked. A moment later, the comm sizzled with static, and a young, female voice came on the line.

“I’m here, Master,” she said, and Leia blinked in surprise. She knew that voice; it was far younger than she’d ever heard it, but she had known Fulcrum her entire life. She knew that Ahsoka had been Anakin’s apprentice, Luke had told her as much after the Battle of Endor, but Leia had never quite let herself think through what that might actually entail.

“I need you to send us the schematics for the palace,” Anakin said. “And Snips? Make it quick.”

“Are you lost?” Ahsoka said, a teasing incredulity easily apparent in her voice.

“Of course not,” Anakin protested. “We just don’t have time to take the long way.”

“Uh-huh,” Ahsoka said. “Sending now.”

Anakin pressed another button on his comm, and a hologram of the palace appeared in the air above it.

“Thanks, Snips,” Anakin said, already spinning it around and looking for their location.

“Little ‘Soka,” Master Koon said into his comm. “How goes the aerial assault?”

“About as well as can be expected,” she said. “The palace defences are thick, but we’ve been out maneuvering them so far. Picked off a few heavy cannons as well. We’ll keep them nice and distracted for you, but uh...sooner would be best.”

“We shall endeavor to be quick,” Master Koon said.

“Got it!” Anakin cried. “This way!”

“May the Force be with you, Masters,” Ahsoka said through Master Koon’s comm, and signed off.

Leia hefted her gun, and followed Anakin down the hall.

***

On the ship, Ahsoka stared at the silent comm. A soft beeping from next to her made her turn and
smile sadly at Artoo.

“Hey, Artooey,” she said, and looked out of the viewscreen, where the WolfPack’s ships were fighting the palace’s defenses. “I hope they hurry, too.”

***

Luke stared placidly back at Dooku, cocking his head. He needed information, which meant he needed Dooku to say more than threats, and he needed time. The Force would provide a way, and then he could get his sister.

He only hoped this didn’t backfire on him.

“Funny,” Luke said, folding his arms into the sleeves of his robes. “Overconfidence was his weakness as well.”

Dooku straightened. The air around them crackled with anger, and when he spoke, his voice was cold.

“Was.”

Luke stretched his lips into a smile. Dooku wasn’t the only one capable of courtesy, though Luke doubted that Dooku would recognize this smile--the smile Luke had given Jabba, as he promised his demise, and the Emperor, too, when Luke had stood before him.

Leia was the diplomat, had been trained in saying the right thing at the right moment, but Luke was the one raised to speak in hidden meanings.

“Was,” Luke confirmed. “You were right in that I have seen the end of Sidious, but I cannot help you.”

Dooku stared down his nose at Luke. “He is the enemy of both of us!” Dooku hissed. “I have seen what the future holds! He seeks to declare himself Emperor, and will lay waste to any in his way.” Dooku pointed at Luke, his words ringing out. “The Jedi Order will fall, and you will not kill him!”

Luke remained still, the bedrock under shifting sands where the hidden rivers ran deep, and in an instant, saw the future branching before him.

On one branch, the past as Luke remembered; Dooku killed as Anakin took his first steps towards becoming Vader. The Republic falling away to the Empire. The Jedi hunted down and eliminated, save for a few broken survivors. He saw the Alliance spring like a firebird from the ashes of the Republic. He saw twenty years of resistance.

He saw the Death Star fall, only to be rebuilt.

He saw himself, half-trained by desperate Masters, witness the end of the Sith.

He saw Leia, pouring her all into the fight for freedom, rebuilding the Republic from the fractured shard of the Empire.

And he saw it all fall to waste, the truths he learned coming too little, too late.

But down the other path, the branch born from Dooku’s actions, with Luke here and now--and saw a chance.

A choice--

“Yes,” Luke said, and let the weight of his past lay heavy on his words. “He will call himself Emperor, and the Jedi will end, and I will not kill him.” Luke’s smile grew, twisting bitterly. All of it true, from a certain point of view.

In a flash, losing his temper at last, Dooku’s saber was lit and held a breath away from Luke’s nose. It was blinding, and the heat of it made Luke’s skin itch, but he refused to move more than a fraction away.

“Then who does?!” Dooku cried.

Luke settled himself in the Force, and for the first time, he reached out with the Force.

Behind him, the Hall doors burst open, crashing in the walls with a deafening cacophony.

“Dooku!”

Anakin Skywalker, lightsaber ablaze, strode from the smoke and rubble, a dark silhouette against the white smoke.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Waxer peered into the shadows of the abandoned catwalk, and when he was satisfied that the coast was clear, he signaled to Boil proceed forward with their...unintended package.

Said package (She said her name was Leia, but Waxer was pretty sure she wasn’t the type to have only one name), followed Boil onto the thin walkway, hunched down low and blaster at the ready. She didn’t make a sound, clearly used to technical ops, and Waxer found himself frowning.

Leia moved like the Generals did, all silence and grace that dared to break free of gravity, and yet she held her blaster like a brother. She spoke like a senator, but Waxer had never seen a senator dress more practically--not even Senator Amidala when she was on one of her adventures. No, Waxer couldn’t get a read on her, and he didn’t like it.

Not to mention the way she made General Kenobi tense, and General Skywalker look like he had seen a ghost.

And she was kriffin’ tiny!

Still, she took her position without question, familiar with their style of tactics, and readied her blaster. It wasn’t the right kind of blaster for sniper work, and they were certainly high enough that a sniper blaster would be useful, but Waxer had a feeling she would make any shot she wished to.

Waxer looked up at Boil and the two shared a look before they both turned back to the scene unfolding below.

**

“It’s over, Dooku,” Anakin said, pointing his ‘saber at the Sith. “Let him go.”

Dooku composed himself quickly, though his ‘saber did not waver from Luke’s face. Already Anakin could feel his anger roiling, and his senses were filled with the scent of sun-baked sand and scorched flesh. The air around him trembled.

Dooku would pay dearly for threatening Anakin’s family.

“Knight Skywalker,” Dooku greeted. As always, he said Anakin’s name as if it was the polite form for something to be scraped off the bottom of his shoe. The leather of Anakin’s glove creaked as he tightened his fist. “What an unexpected surprise. I see that my assassin has failed me. Again.”

“Oh you mustn't blame her,” Obi-Wan said, coming from the shadows behind Dooku, flanking him. His pace was sure, steady; he was Anakin’s other half in so many ways. The light to his darkness. “She really did try her best.” Anakin’s grin bared his teeth.

Dooku breathed heavily through his nose, as if seeking patience. “Kenobi,” he said, through gritted teeth.

“Count.” Obi-Wan’s grin was wide, nearly manic, and he thrummed with energy, a sparkling wildfire to counter Luke’s nova-presence in the Force.
“Enough of this,” Dooku said and raised his hand.

***

Luke’s eyes went wide as he realized a moment too late what Dooku intended to do.

***

Obi-Wan wasn’t fast enough. He heard Anakin scream his denial as Luke was thrown back from where he stood, crashing into the wall and falling limp against the floor. The roiling surge of denial and despair that followed and filled the room nearly sent him to his knees. Forcing himself forward, ‘saber raised to strike, Obi-Wan tried to not think about Luke, or the way darkness pulled around Anakin like a cloak. Dodging the blaster fire that rained down from the balcony above, he put on a burst of speed.

Obi-Wan struck, his ‘saber caught by Dooku’s own and twisted aside as Dooku spun to block Anakin’s blow. Obi-Wan twisted, bringing the Force to bear to increase his speed, trying to stay afloat in the maelstrom before him. Anakin had an expression of fury on his face the likes of which Obi-Wan had never seen. (But he had felt, in the depths of Theed’s power complex, oh yes. He was familiar with that expression).


As focused as he was, Obi-Wan could hear the augmented command in that voice. There was power there, but no grief.

Perhaps Obi-Wan had miscalculated the force of Dooku’s throw; perhaps his intention had not been to kill. Dooku was not one to waste resources willing, after all, and he wouldn’t go through all that to obtain Luke just to kill him.

Or would he?

Obi-Wan spared a moment to look where Luke had fallen, but it was a moment too long, and pain exploded in his temple, taking his sight with him.

***

Anakin’s mind cried out, but he couldn’t spare the breath for air. The last time he had dueled Dooku, the Sith had taken his arm and his dignity, thrashing him soundly.

This time, he aimed for Anakin’s family.

Anakin sneered, feeling his power coiling around him.

Dooku would not live past this day.

***

Leia fired shot after shot, snarling when her shots were blocked again and again. Dooku was actively fighting two Jedi; how was he still able to block her shots?

The clones on either side of her, Waxer and Boil, were focused on the droids that followed Anakin through the rubble had had made of the front door, keeping them from reaching the fight and giving Dooku a greater advantage.

It had been years since Leia had been in an honest to goodness firefight, and while she hadn’t
missed it, she would be lying if she said she wasn’t enjoying the rush. The complaints of her body faded away—the ache in her bones from the damp and the ache in her head from the inhibitor and the ache in her belly from lack of food—as she felt the Force flow through her like an old friend come home.

She could feel it, like a whisper in her ear, but it was enough:

She fired her shot, and Dooku staggered back, clutching his arm.

Anakin raised his ‘saber.

**

Luke floated in an absence of color, neither light nor dark, and crossed his arms over his chest. Although he couldn’t feel it, he could tell that his hand slid smoothly against his arm, and he paused. Since he had lost the synthskin cover, Luke’s hand had always caught gently on his skin. He’d grown used to it, but—

He looked down, and saw two flesh hands. They were both younger than they should be, but his right hand was older than he had ever seen it.

Where was he now?

“Still in Dooku’s stronghold, I’m afraid.”

Qui-Gon stood before him. He lacked the blue glow of a Force ghost, but was otherwise unchanged. Luke frowned.

“Am I dead?” he asked, and Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow.

“Do you feel dead?”

Luke thought about it.

“I don’t feel much of anything at the moment.” Frowning, Luke thought back over the last few minutes. He remembered Dooku and the red lightsaber that singed the tip of his nose. He remembered his father’s dramatic entrance and Obi-Wan’s eager presence. He remembered the surge of darkness. “I’m unconscious, aren’t I?”

Qui-Gon smiled faintly. “At the moment,” he said. “But you cannot stay that way.” Lifting his chin, Qui-Gon closed his eyes. “Reach out with your feelings, Luke. They will help you find the way back.”

Luke nodded, and tried to order his thoughts. It was hard, harder that it had been in a long time. *You did just hit your head,* he reminded himself, and breathed.

And breathed.

And reached out.

And there, beyond the void, was his own twinned sun.

*Leia.*

A moment’s breath, and then co-mingled relief and frustration. *Luke.*
Luke closed his eyes, letting his sense of his sister fill his mind, sinking into the bond between them. Leia, always so careful and steadfast with her shields, let them down easily. Luke could feel her relief at finding him unharmed, the depth of her grief for her son. For Han.

And, like a torch, there burned her absolute frustration with him.

Luke hid a wince and sent Leia his regrets. *I’m sorry—*

She cut him off. *Wake up!*


Luke opened his eyes and saw a stone staircase before him, like the steps of the Massassi Temple, cracked and covered in moss and vines. Taking a deep breath, Luke began to climb.

It wasn’t long until he realized he could be climbing for a very long time. The world shrank to the stairs that stretched before him and below him. He was getting nowhere. There had to be a way.

A third option.

“Of course,” he said. He looked out into the nothing around him, and took a deep breath. And another. And in the space between breaths, he jumped.

In Dooku’s palace, Luke opened his eyes.

***

Leia could have wept at the feeling of Luke’s presence in her mind after so very long, and when she saw him in person she would let him know *exactly* how she felt about that. She didn’t have long to recover, however, as a lightsaber snap-hissed to life behind her.

Spinning, she fired at Ventress, but the bolt was easily deflected. Waxer and Boil turned nearly as one, but were both sent flying off the balcony before they could fire off a shot, and Leia felt invisible fingers tighten around her throat.

Struggling, Leia fought to breathe before she realized that Ventress wasn’t blocking her air, simply holding her elevated and keeping her blaster from firing. Slowly, Leia floated through the air and came to a stop just short of Ventress.

Her eyes were not the sickly yellow that Leia had expected. Nor were they the blood red she had seen. Instead, they were a pale blue-green color--pretty, if not for the circumstances. It was enough to stop Leia from struggling.

Ventress stared at her for a long moment, face a fierce mask..

“Your brother called me a slave,” she said, and stopped. Leia’s blinked, realizing Ventress was waiting for Leia to answer.

“Well,” Leia said slowly. “Are you?”

“Never!” Ventress hissed, but her grip shuddered, and Leia choked on nothing. After a moment, Ventress pulled back again, and Leia focused on breathing.

“Can he really defeat Darth Sidious?”

Leia weighed her options. After a moment, she tried to nod, Ventress still held her firm. “Yes,”
Leia said. Cocking her head, Ventress eased back on her hold.

“Can he defeat Dooku?”

Leia took a deep breath and nodded.

***

Obi-Wan was very tired of head wounds. He wasn’t sure how long he was out—not long? When he pushed himself to his feet, the room swam about him, but settled quickly enough. He hoped it stayed that way, or Anakin was going to tell Kix on him. Or Helix. Or Cody.

He assessed the room. The blaster fire had stopped, and the only sounds of battle came from where Anakin was still engaged with Dooku. On the other side of the room, he saw Boil pulling Waxer to his feet, their main blasters missing but it seemed not too seriously hurt. Pushing himself to his feet and blinking to clear his vision, Obi-Wan watched.

Dooku had taken a blaster bolt to his arm; even if not for the charring on his clothing, Obi-Wan would be able to tell from the way he had switched dominance to his other hand. Still, it wasn’t enough to slow him. He managed to block each of Anakin’s blows, and Anakin—

Obi-Wan had never seen Anakin fight like that, back straight and movement direct. His saber swung around him in blue arcs of light, without his usual flourish and flair, and his anger.... Obi-Wan shuddered. Anakin’s anger burned cold, and as Obi-Wan watched, he could see tendrils of smoke-like darkness curl around his brother’s aura.

“No,” he whispered.

A sound, a groan off to Obi-Wan’s left, and Luke sat up, a hand at his head. Luke looked up, began to smile at Obi-Wan, then frowned. He turned and for a moment he watched Anakin toy with Dooku.

Luke stood, dusting himself off, and walked towards the fight.


Anakin snarled, his ‘saber locked with Dooku’s.

“Anakin, come back now. Please.”

Anakin’s eyes flickered over to Luke, and Dooku pressed an advantage, kicking Anakin away. His ‘saber came down, the arc clearly aimed at Anakin’s neck—

Luke’s hand flew out—

Obi-Wan felt a tug at his waist—

A flash of green as Luke’s lightsaber flew through the air—

Anakin fell safely out of harm’s way.

Dooku flicked his hand, Luke’s ‘saber knocked aside—

A blasterbolt whined from the balcony--

Dooky stooped and looked down, staring uncomprehendingly at the hole in his chest, and sank to
his knees. Shaking hands rose, but Dooku slumped forward even as his fingers grazed the wound. Within seconds, Dooku was dead.

For a moment, nobody breathed, but as the darkness leached from the room, Obi-Wan took a deep, gasping breath to ease the burning in his lungs. Turning, he looked towards the balcony, and saw Leia, blaster still raised. Behind her, in the shadows, Obi-Wan swore he saw Ventress.

Anakin pushed himself up on his hands, looking at the corpse of the Sith, his face deathly pale. Even with the world going fuzzy at the edges, Obi-Wan could still see the way Anakin trembled. He stepped forward, to comfort and collect his former padawan, but before he could go more than a step, Luke was there, reaching down a hand.

Anakin looked at the hand offered, then at Luke’s face. His eyes were searching, and Luke offered him a warm, sad smile, and nodded once.

“How,” Anakin breathed, and Luke spread his hands. Then, he held his right hand out once more. His mechanical hand.

Like his father’s.

Oh, Obi-Wan had a headache.

Anakin reached out and took his son’s hand, and let him pull him to his feet.

Chapter End Notes

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Luke half expected some sort of spark when Anakin took his hand, allowing Luke to lever him to his feet, but there was nothing more than the firm press of metal against leather-covered metal.

Steadying Anakin with a hand on his other arm, Luke looked him over, sweeping with his senses. Expression open, Anakin looked—very young.

_He’s younger than I was when I faced the Emperor_, Luke thought, and pushed away the tangled knot of emotion that raised in him.

There would be time to detangle that later.

Now, Anakin met his eyes, and Luke was overwhelmed by a flash of memory—watery blue eyes looking at him from a death pale face as the world exploded around them—and Luke knew Anakin knew the truth.

Luke didn’t know how Anakin knew, what had given him away, but it, too, would keep to be addressed later. Now that it had happened, there was no reason to keep denying it.

Besides, there were more…urgent concerns, currently descending the stairs in a righteous fury, as if leading a charge to battle.

Leia.

Her presence was a steady thrum in the back of his mind, her proximity like a gravitational pull, and Luke was _mostly_ sure she wouldn’t save him just to kill him herself, but…

“I could ask you the same,” Anakin said, and Luke blinked at as Anakin gestured towards him and Luke was brought from his worry. “Dooku tossed you clear across the room.”

“He did,” Luke said, belatedly straightening his clothes and shrugged. “I’ve had worse,” he said, smiling faintly.

Of course, now that Anakin mentioned it, all the various bruises and scrapes from getting captured and thrown in a cell and then tossed around finally made themselves known. It still wasn’t the worst he ever felt—that honor was reserved for the Force Lightning he had endured at the Emperor’s feet. He had been but the first in a long line of Dark users who had crawled out of the woodwork after the fall of the Empire, but none quite matched Palpatine for sheer cruelty.

But he didn’t feel great, either. More and more, he understood why Ben had often chosen to supervise his training rather than participate. Getting older was terrible.

Anakin rubbed his thumbnail across this eyebrow, scratching over the hairless patch created by his
scar. It wasn’t a nervous tick that Luke had expected his father to have, but Anakin’s confusion and longing were clear in the Force.


“Luke!”

Her voice echoed out across the room like the crack of a blaster rifle, the tone of relieved irritation more familiar, and more dear to him, than his own.


Leia didn’t step into his arms so much as impact at speed, rocking him back even as his arms closed about her. “Leia,” he said again, as if a third time make it more real.

He had missed her so much—he always missed her when he was away. In the long span of his life, they had been more apart often than they were together, but being in Leia’s orbit changed a person, no matter how briefly they were there. Even though they could reach across the stars and sense the presence of the other—had, in fact, been pressing against each other’s minds like they had been starved for touch since the moment Leia had been freed from her restraints—it was not the same.

“I’ve missed you,” Leia said into his shoulder, and Luke felt the weight of it in her voice—felt the depth of her presence, even when the words themselves failed to condemn—and wrapped his arms around her more tightly.

“I’m so sorry.” The words were nearly ripped from him, suddenly desperate to have Leia know, to have Leia understand that he didn’t mean to leave her, that his long absence wasn’t because of her. “I never meant—” but his voice cracked, and he found he couldn’t continue.

“I know,” Leia said, pulling back and cupping his face in her strong hands. “Luke, I know.” Her eyes searched his, and her words rang with sincerity in the Force around them. He could feel no condemnation, no resentment that he had feared would grow—only relief, and an the familiar weary joy of a soldier clinging to the few bright spots between dark battles. It was not a look that Luke ever wanted to see on his sister’s face again—To watch her feel like she had lost her entire family again, to the dark side. To death.

“We have a lot to discuss,” Leia said, and Luke nodded. At least his exile had not been in vain. He had discovered answers to questions he hadn’t known to ask, and a hint, perhaps, of how to rid the galaxy of Snoke. Leia shook her head. “But right now, I’m just happy to have my brother with me.”

Leia lowered her head when Luke tried to look away, not letting him drop her eyes, and it was the same look she had given him since they were nineteen and Luke knew there was no point in fighting it. He sighed and let it go.

Message received. Luke leaned in, gently bumping their foreheads together, a gesture of affection that, along with his accent, were the last remnants of his youth on Tatooine—and, in a quirk of fate, one of the last vestiges of Alderaanian culture.

Leia stepped back and Luke watched as she wrapped the General around her shoulders once more, before turning to face the others, who had gathered during their reunion. The troopers, Wazer and Boil, Luke thought he heard Obi-Wan call them, were almost impossible to read behind their
helmets. Obi-Wan’s face held the passive almost-smile of a trained diplomat rather than the fond warmth that Luke was used to, but Anakin was staring at them like a man in the desert stared at water.

Luke saw Leia notice Anakin’s look and in the same moment decide to ignore the naked longing on their father’s (far too) youthful face. Instead, she planted her hands on her hips in a posture she had worn since the early days of the Rebellion and looked over the rest of them, assessing.

“We have some more pressing concerns,” she said, and Luke would swear that even Obi-Wan stood a little straighter at the edge in her voice. “Our first priority should be getting us home. I don’t know that you ever studied temporal physics, Luke, but I read about it in my father’s library. The longer we’re here, the more we are a danger we are to the fabric of reality.” If Luke hadn’t long ago accepted that he’d always be missing something of context when dealing with his sister, he might be offended. As it was, he was mostly worried about the actions he had already taken. How would Leia react to knowing what Anakin knew?

“How would Leia react to knowing what Anakin knew?” Leia asked.

Luke looked down at Dooku and scratched the back of his head even as he nudged the body with his toe. Sure enough, it barely moved. “Uh, I think you just blasted him,” Luke muttered, and Leia blinked down at Dooku’s body on the floor, and then looked up at Luke, narrowing her eyes, though her lip twitched with a repressed smile.

“Pardon me,” Obi-Wan broke in. “But we are currently under siege, and our aerial support will not last indefinitely. I recommend that we depart, and quickly.”


“I disagree. This may be our only chance to learn just what...spell, for lack of a better word, brought Luke and I here. We cannot leave until we have at least looked.”

“We already know it was Dooku who brought us here,” Luke added. “He has to have a...holocron, or a datacard, or a book, or something.”

“We have to try,” Leia said, insistent.

“We could always ask her,” Anakin said, nodded his head towards Ventress. He had his arms crossed over his chest, his feet braced against the floor, and it was such...such a Vader pose, that even Luke felt the shock of it. It was not that Luke ever forgot how Anakin Skywalker had become Darth Vader, but to learn how many of Vader’s idiosyncrasies were really their Fathers...

Leia took a measured breath, and turned to Ventress, quickly walking to her. She stopped, just at the edge of Ventress’s reach, her hands folded together and held at her chest, the ring on her little finger catching the light.

“I am already in your debt,” Leia began, “and yet I must ask one more favor from you. You know as well as I do that my brother and I do not belong here. The consequences of our existence could unravel the very threads of this galaxy. It is imperative that we get home.” Leia paused, and Luke noted that, while Ventress didn’t uncurl from her defensive posture, her eyes remained fixed on Leia, and something about her softened, just a bit. “Is there anything, anything at all, that you can tell us that may help?”

Ventress glanced over at Obi-Wan and Anakin, but turned back to Leia to speak. “I’ll tell you what I know,” she said, and the emphasis on you was clear, “but only if I can leave, after.”
“Yeah, not a chance,” Anakin said. “The Jedi don’t make deals with the Sith.”

Leia tensed, and Luke spoke quickly. “But she’s not truly a Sith, is she?” He said, and turned to Ventress. “Are you?”

She sneered, but Luke knew it wasn’t truly directed towards him. “Close enough for them,” she said, and crossed her arms.

“It’s an unusual situation, to be sure,” Obi-Wan said, his cultured voice smooth, to soothe the ruffled feathers. “It’s hard enough for the Jedi to accept the return of one of their own, let alone the return to the light of one who has never trained at our temples.” It was not surprising, Luke thought, and was very much in line with the council he had received from Obi-Wan and Yoda on Dagobah. “But I promise, Asajj Ventress, to speak on your behalf before the council. That is the most I can offer.”

“Please,” Leia added. “It is your choice, but know that helping us now will only help you later.”

Ventress stared down at Leia for a long moment—long enough that Luke was acutely reminded that Ventres was at least a head taller than his sister, and Luke wasn’t as fast as he had once been.

“I accept your terms,” Ventress said. “I will help you because I choose to.” Was it Luke’s imagination, or did her eyes flicker to his for just a moment. “I do not know what he did—but I can show you where he did it.”

Leia smiled, genuinely warm. “Thank you,” she said.

Ventress looked at the others. “Skywalker,” she sneered, and it took Luke a moment to realize that she meant Anakin. “Where is your little tagalong?”

Anakin’s face could have been made from stone, but he pointed up, indicating the dogfight outside. Ventress hissed through her teeth, and turned on her heel to stalk to a before unseen computer terminal. “First,” she said, and typed a coded password onto the screen. “I’ve called off the droids. That should also give us the time we need, but we can not linger.” Ventress, tured towards the door, calling out and not waiting for them as they followed: “My codes are not absolute. Without confirmation from Dooku, the palace will assume I’ve turned traitor, and try to kill us all.”

“Of course it will,” Anakin muttered, under his breath, pulling his com free moments before it beeped. “Hey, Snips. It calming down out there?”

“What did you do?” Ahsoka asked. “The buzzdroids just turned and left!”

“Yeah, we had some help with that,” Anakin said, clearly not wishing to go into it at the moment. “Listen, Snips, I need you to land on the south platform, but don’t leave the ship: we may need a getaway pilot, and we’ll need that ship prepped.”

“Can do, Skyguy!” Ahsoka said. “I’ll pass on the word, and have them run a simple perimeter,” and then she ended the call.

“So, wait,” Anakin said, glaring at Ventress. “Were you just going to let us fight our way out of here when you could have stopped the attack?”

Ventress didn’t pause in her stride, but she sent a smirk Anakin’s way. “You are the invading party, remember?” she said, snide, and then gestured. “It’s this way.”

She led them down another hallway that looked identical to the one they just left, and Luke began to doubt that he’d be able to make it back to the landing pad without a guide. It wasn’t as bad as
Hoth, where the tunnels were not only uniform, but occasionally shifted due to cave-ins, especially in the early days when the Rebellion was still learning how to build with ice, and just how high they could turn their heaters. (The answer had been “not high enough,” and Luke’s memory of that time was a long string of cold punctuated by brief moments of warmth in his fighter).

Dooku’s halls, however, had a lingering malaise about them, designed to confuse and distract. Luke doubted that even if the hallways were all different, a stranger or uninvited guest would find themselves hopelessly lost anyway.

Leia walked beside him, chin high and pace steady; she always had been one to walk like she was running, and she usually ended up walking slightly ahead of Luke, rather than with him, save for those few times that Luke ran, too.

Luke’s eyes kept drifting to his sister; she was here, really here. Her hair was a little greyer, and the lines at the corners of her eyes were permanent, but her eyes burned with the same ferocity, and her hair was still styled in the elaborate braids of Alderaan.

“You’re staring,” Leia said, quietly.


There was quiet for a moment, and then Leia said, “If you ever disappear on me again, when I find you, we will both learn if you’ll vanish into the Force.”

Luke’s smile was so wide, his cheeks ached.

Boil glanced at Waxer. His vod was being awful quiet.

Too quiet.

Already regretting it, Boil opened a direct line. “What is it?” he asked.

“What is what?” Waxer answered, completely unconvincingly.

“You know what,” Boil countered. “Whatever it is that’s got you all...weird. You didn’t hit your head when we fell, did you?”

Waxer turned to look at him, and Boil could practically feel the sullen glare from behind his vod’s helmet. “I don’t hit my head.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

Waxer was quiet for a long moment, turning around to face front. Boil’s frustration softened, and he asked quietly. “It’s her, isn’t it?” Boil and Waxer both had their reservations at first, and not only about Leia. This Luke was something else as well, but he was a Jedi, and a savvy trooper learned quickly that Jedi worked under a different set of rules, so maybe his weirdness was just more expected.

Leia wasn’t a Jedi, though. Boil could tell that easily enough, though he wouldn’t be surprised if she could have been—Especially since her brother was.

Either way, whatever it was set their Jedi on edge as well. General Skywalker looked like he wanted to claim them as his own, and General Kenobi looked like he wished they were far, far away.
Waxer’s continued silence was telling. Boil sighed aloud; “She’s a lot older than little Numa, you know? She certainly shoots better than you do—”

“Hey!”

“She doesn’t need a big brother.”

“That’s not it,” Waxer insisted. “She’s grieving, can’t you tell? And Master Skywalker, too. I didn’t recognize it at first because he doesn’t grieve like a Jedi—he grieves like a civilian.”


Leia walked with her head high, one of the earliest habits instilled in her, and one that was often the hardest to maintain. Still, it had served her well during her tenure on the Imperial Senate. It allowed her dignity when faced with Vader and Tarkin, and authority when giving orders in the Rebellion, the New Republic senate, the Resistance. By now, she could slip deeper into her thoughts as she went by, her true feelings well hidden behind a mask of stern serenity.

She did; she needed to think.

When Ventress had caught her dead to rights, Leia had a thought that maybe, this time, her luck had finally run out. (Han’s had, after all these years. Suddenly, death seemed less like an old friend and more like a looming possibility). But Ventress had not killed her--had, in fact, helped Leia kill Dooku and end both of their problems. (That Dooku’s death had created a new problem for Leia was just the way her luck seemed to run, these days).

*When a door closes, a window may open,* her mother used to say, when she would find Leia hiding in the gardens, her skirts dirty and torn and her face red with frustration. (She could see things so clearly; why was it so hard for others to see it, as well?). *Wisdom is learning how to see the window*.

So, Leia had killed the man who definitely had answers. It wouldn’t be the first time their best source of information died before they could speak. They had figured it out before. She had hope that they would again.

Of course, not a small part of that was having Luke by her side once more. It didn’t escape Leia’s notice that Luke joined the Rebellion at the turning of the tide; that the victory of others allowed Luke to accomplish so much. Perhaps that was the Force at work, opening windows for him. (She never should have let him go away). Perhaps now, the windows would open for them both.

Anakin walked behind his children.

*His children.*

They were older than any member of his family he had ever known, greying and lined with deep loss, but they shined so brightly in the Force.

Luke was barely bothering to shield his presence anymore, and Anakin thought that Leia probably rarely bothered. They were bright as suns, (twinned desert suns, burning in the sky, stripping the land to sand, fierce and wild--but also, light that drove away the darkness of the palace like noon chasing midnight), and it hurt to look at them for too long.
Anakin glanced at Obi-Wan, who looked straight ahead as if he couldn’t see, and Anakin would have believed that if Obi-Wan’s eyes weren’t beginning to tear in their corners.

A trickle of fear shivered down Anakin’s spine. Obi-Wan knew, too. If he knew about the children, then he must know about Padme. If he knew about Padme...

“Through here,” Ventress said, gesturing at the door. “This was Dooku’s private study. If he used Sith magics or alchemy, it would have been in there.”

The door was innocuous, which fit Dooku’s subtle understatement. It was good camouflage as well; no one would expect grand things behind such a simple door.

The door was also stubbornly closed.

“Well?” Anakin said after a beat. He gestured with the handle of his saber. “Open it.”

Ventress raised her eyebrows at him. “I do not have my former Master’s access codes.”

A muscle twitched in Anakin’s jaw as he clenched his teeth. From the corner of his eye, he could see Obi-Wan cross his arms rather than cover his face with his hand, as he clearly wished to do.

“Fine,” Anakin said. “Then we’re doing this the hard way.”

In a single motion, Anakin lit his saber and lunged, singing the bright blue blade deep into the door next to the lock mechanism. The door, for as innocuous as it looked, was made of thick durasteel, and it resisted cutting even as the metal began to glow and hiss as it melted.

Behind him, Leia sighed. “This is faster?” she asked, low and with a bitter edge. “Compared to what?”

“Crossing systems at sublight?” Luke answered, his tone too innocent to be real.

“Cute.”

Yeah. They were totally his kids.

A moment later, Anakin cut through the locking mechanism, and deactivated his saber. He turned to the others. “You might want to step back,” he said, and raised his gloved hand. Reaching out with the Force, he tightened his fingers, and saw the dents appear at the top and bottom of the door. He brought his hand down, and the door tore from its hinges, flying into the corridor and narrowly missing Ventress. She snarled at him, and Anakin smiled, smug.

“There,” he said. “Door’s open.”

“Putting those problem solving skills to work,” Obi-Wan said, dry as desert dust, as he walked past.

“It worked,” Anakin countered, following him inside, nearly tripping when he heard Leia quietly say behind them.

“Well, now we know where you get it from.”
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

UPDATE: The first posting only had half the chapter. It's fixed now :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waxer and Boil may have had the right idea by standing guard in the hallway, but Leia had always been one to run towards danger, rather than away. It was a trait that had served her well in the Rebellion, when she was often running only half a step ahead of the Empire, forging her way on instinct and sheer stubborn will. It had been a cause of constant friction with her Papa, who would often say she was determined to turn his hair completely grey.

(Mama would laugh at him, kiss his cheek, and say his grey hairs made him look distinguished. He always grumbled, but there was no hiding the way his eyes lit up when Mama was happy).

It had taken years for it not to hurt when she thought of her parents, and even still the loss and grief would occasionally hit her with crippling intensity, stealing her breath and bringing tears to her eyes. Mostly, however, memories of her parents were warm, happy things that made her smile. She had told Ben the stories her father would tell, and sang him the lullabies her mother would sing (well--Leia would hum. Han had sung to Ben, old Corellian lullabies and the top songs on the holonet and sometimes even just narrating what he was thinking at the moment. He had a good voice, untrained and husky, but never off key. Those were the memories that she kept locked in her heart, lest they stop her cold when she could not afford it).

Still, not a day passed when she did not wish she could speak to Bail, to ask his advice or simply tell him about her day, and now...

Leia had thought she’d made her peace with her...complicated parentage years ago. It had always been easy enough to accept that Luke was her twin. From the moment they met, there had been a connection, a recognition of other like me and a flash of memory--a child’s dream of a young boy, white haired against a blue sky, flying through a sea of sand--but, even though Luke had told her of Vader’s death bed repentance, that he had, in his last moments, been Anakin once more...

Vader had been the one to hold her still while Tarkin destroyed her home, and her family, and she had never seen how regret could change the truth of the past. Anakin or Vader, the man had been the source of the greatest miseries of her life.

This Anakin was not Vader. The more Leia watched him, the clearer that was, and yet the less sure Leia was of anything she thought she knew about the past. Vader moved as if the galaxy would bend to his whim, and more often than not, it did. Anakin moved with confidence, yes, but it was the confidence of the awareness and skill that told his feet where to land to thread through the obstacles before him, like Luke had. Anakin used brute force, true, but not because it caused fear, or was the quickest way to his goals. Anakin, who was master to Fulcrum and brother to Obi-Wan —

And Obi-Wan. Leia had been raised with stories of Obi-Wan Kenobi, her father’s friend and Clone Wars General. Many of her own command decisions were informed by the figure of Obi-Wan that lived in her memory, given shape by her father’s words.
This Obi-Wan reminded her more of Han than her father’s tales—winning through luck and calling it skill, or Luke—doing impossible things simple because he never stopped to think he couldn’t. Still, there was something about him that was magnetic, that called for, not obedience, but allegiance. A natural born leader, and one who was not afraid to fight with his men. Once they had all entered the corridor, Obi-Wan had stationed himself in the rear. It made tactical sense, when entering unknown territory, to have their strongest fighters both in the advance and covering their backs, and that Obi-Wan took up position seamlessly spoke not only to his ease of working with Anakin, but his willingness to fight with those he lead. Too many Generals Leia had met never saw active battle, and it was a relief to know Obi-Wan had honestly earned his rank.

Luke was a steadying presence by her side, and Leia let his presence, filled with green and growing things (desert plants, scrappy and tough and yet all the more sweet and fragrant from the barren rocks that bore them, but jungle plants as well, lush green and overflowing), ground her in the here and now.

Hefting her blaster, Leia walked through the darkened corridor, much preferring the spotlight at the endow the muzzle to the more diffuse and profoundly eerie glow of the lightsabers. At least Ventress was behind her so she didn’t have to look directly at the sickly red glow of a Sith’s saber, the same poisoned red of the blast that had killed the Hosnian system. The same red of the persona her son had adopted to hide behind. The same red of the creature that had once claimed that there was no escape, this time.

Leia grit her teeth against a shiver, frustrated at herself and this entire situation. She had responsibilities, damnit! There were people back home counting on her to lead them, she didn’t have time to play at adventuring! (Though, she always did love field missions...)

And of course, because her life wasn’t filled with enough irony, Anakin led the way, his familiar blue saber held high. Leia never believed in talismans that weren’t deliberately crafted as such, but even she couldn’t deny that Anakin’s saber had taken on a life of its own that far outstripped the legacy of its creator—even considering how far that shadow reached.

(Was it because it spent so long with Obi-Wan in the desert? Did it share its creator’s power and awareness of the Force? Was it because it saw so much change in the galaxy, passed through so many hands...)

Either way, it was strange not to see it in Luke’s hands, for all that she was more used to seeing him with his green blade. Green made sense for Luke; for all that he was the product of a desert world, he had never felt like anything but the lush gardens of her home—her mother’s gardens, where her Aunts would teach her marvelous things to make her other lessons less dreadful, (things like how to hide a slim blade in an elaborate hairstyle without slicing through your own hair, and the best way to slice into a closed network undetected). At the time, they were exciting diversions to break up the boredom, but as she got older, they became vital, life-saving skills.

She missed them, her Aunts, and the way they would braid her hair (“As we braided your mother’s”) and play games (“Ha! Pure Sabacc!” “You’re cheating, and one day, I’ll find out how.”) and tell stories (“Long ago, on a planet far from here, there was a beautiful Queen, and she was kind and wise and snored like a falumpaset!” *giggle*).

They were gone, now. Like so much of her past, they disappeared into history, leaving Leia the guardian of their memory. Even the other survivors—

Leia stopped still, eyes blinking rapidly but not processing what was before her as her vision was filled with rapid images of green fields and blue waters, deep forests and alpine mountains.
And people—so many people, living their lives.

“Leia?” Luke, a warm hand on her elbow, and cool presence against her shields. “What is it?”

“It’s still here,” she whispered, and turned blindly toward him. “Alderaan—it’s still here!”

Instantly, the corridor dimmed as he shut off his saber, his arms wrapping around her. Leia pressed her face to his chest as the images played out, slowing to a trickle and leaving her, at last, in the familiar darkness of her own closed eyes.

“There was no time, before,” she whispered. Silent, Luke nodded his head, squeezing her tightly.

“If there’s time...,” Luke began slowly, and Leia shook her head, pulling back.

“No, no,” Leia said. “It...it would be Alderaan, but it wouldn’t be my Alderaan.” They would be her parents, but they wouldn’t be her parents. She smiled, wry and sad. “Besides, I learned a long time ago that you can’t go back home again.”

Luke huffed. “Yeah, until you end up sent back in time.” He raised his lightsaber once more, but he paused before lighting it. “Leia...” he began, but Leia hadn’t needed him to finish his sentences or decades.

“You don’t want to go back.”

Shaking his head, Luke tilted his head, the only tell he ever had that he was using the Force. “Not yet. he sent, and Leia shivered a bit, as she always did when she heard him without hearing. ”The Republic hasn’t fallen here, yet. Our Father has not fallen. I’d like to try and keep it that way.”

Leia raised her eyebrows. ”You can’t possibly--the past is the past, Luke!”

Luke simply stared back. ”Are you absolutely sure?

And Leia couldn’t say.

By her reckoning, it had only been a few days since she was pulled from her own bed--only hours after they learned about the destruction of the Starkiller, she had stumbled, heartsore and numb, to the standard issue pallet that was so familiar from her days with the Alliance that, on her first night bedding down, she was overcome by an unsettling wave of nostalgia--and into...this. The past, apparently.

Though...it couldn’t be the past; she killed Dooku. If she was in her own past, she would have been unable to kill the Count, unless it was always her that killed him, but it wasn’t.

So they couldn’t be in her past, but a past--an alternate past, where Dooku always called her and Luke, and where she always shot to kill, and where...

Where the war ends, and Anakin never becomes Vader, and the Republic never falls to Empire.

Where the First Order never rises and evils like Snoke are kept at bay by the light of the Order. Where her son never falls and Han—


Luke grinned. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”
Obi-Wan let Anakin take point; his partner wasn’t always good at springing traps without injury, but he was better than Obi-Wan at sensing them. One day, Obi-Wan may even tell him, when he could be sure Anakin wouldn’t let it go to his head and get cocky.

Cocky soldiers didn’t last long in war.

Up ahead, something caused Leia to pause. Instantly, Obi-Wan was on alert, but Luke was there, speaking to her in low tones. The Force swirled around them, like a beacon in the darkness, and for the moment, Obi-Wan let them be.

Hefting his lightsaber, Obi-Wan studied the corridor, keeping half an eye on Ventress. Dooku’s assassin--well, former assassin, now, he supposed--moved as slowly as they did, equally unfamiliar with this place.

“Dooku didn’t share much, did he?” Obi-Wan asked softly. Ventress stiffened.

“But do not presume to know me, or speak of that which you do not understand,” said Ventress, voice low, through gritted teeth.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. “Yan Dooku was the Master of my Master, and for the nearly twenty years that I was his Padawan, I saw him but once.” Ventress didn’t react visibly to the news, either she already knew or she was good at disguising her surprise. “It was at a distance,” he continued,” and I had to watch as he snubbed my Master.” He paused before the next part, unsure if he should share something so deep, but the words flew from his lips, bitter and crackling. “And, when my Master died and the whole Temple offered me their kind words, Dooku was nowhere to be found. My Grandmaster--a ghost, probably already Fallen.” Obi-Wan breathed through his nose for a moment, forcing calm. “I am very familiar with what that man would not share.” He nodded at Ventress as he stepped past to take a closer look at one of the walls.

Unlike the palace, this corridor appeared rough-hewn, as if done in haste, save for the intricate patterning that was visible if one looked at just the right angle. He had noticed it out of the corner of his eye, glinting at him in the light from his ‘saber. It looked like lettering, of a kind Obi-Wan almost recognized. He held his ‘saber right up to the wall, as close as he could, and reached out to trace his finger along the pattern, to see if that would, perhaps, clear it in his mind—

Ventress caught his wrist just shy of the wall. Her fingers were warmer than he expected, and strong. The look in her eyes, however, could freeze plasma.

“You don’t know everything.”

Obi-Wan refused to look away, but he crooked an eyebrow at her. Dropping his wrist in disgust, she stalked away. Gently, Obi-Wan rubbed his fingers over his wrist, deliberately not looking back to the writing, what he could now recognize as a rather nasty Sith trap. That he couldn’t feel the Darkness oozing from the walls before now was...rather disturbing, to be honest.

Ahead, Anakin stopped, raising his lightsaber, and Obi-Wan was moving towards him before Anakin even called, feeling like he was walking on more eggshells than a geejaw nest. As if navigating the possible Sith traps before them wasn’t bad enough, Anakin had been oddly quiet since they had entered the corridor, and only made worse when whatever it was had given Leia quite a shock. To have Ventress watching his back as well--it was making him rather jumpy.

But there was no time to hash it out now; the corridor was only so long, and they had made it, at last to the darkened doorway to Dooku’s secret workshop.
“Well,” Obi-Wan said. “At least you won’t need to open this door as well, Anakin.”

Anakin looked over, but didn’t rise to the bait. In the sharp light of his saber, his skin looked deathly pale and his eyes sunken. Obi-Wan took a deep breath and chased the image away. “What can you sense?”

“Nothing,” Anakin said, and shivered. “I don’t like it. It feels like a trap.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “Then it probably is a trap.” He looked up, seeing Luke, Leia, and Ventress join them. “Something in that room is blocking our ability to sense what is within. When we enter, we may be completely Force blind.”

Luke and Leia both nodded, eerily in sync, and Ventress merely glared, though Obi-Wan expected little different.

“So what’s the plan?” Leia asked, and Obi-Wan ignored it when Anakin snorted in fatalistic amusement to focus on her.

“It’s quite simple,” he said. “We walk through the door.”

Leia blinked at him, then looked at Luke, who raised his hands as if absolving himself of blame, and then at Ventress, who rolled her eyes. Really. Obi-Wan crossed his arms.

“Do you have a problem with the plan?”

“I’d hardly call that a plan,” Leia said, looking between him and Anakin. “Are all your strategies just ‘walk into danger and hope for the best?’”

“Basically,” Anakin said, before Obi-Wan could answer. “It’s worked so far.”

Leia narrowed her eyes, “You—” she managed, before she stopped herself and took a deep breath. “I don’t know why I bother.” She gestured with her hand. “After you.”

Obi-Wan bowed slightly to her, and turned to Anakin. “Would you care to do the honors?”

“Oh no, Obi-Wan, I couldn’t possibly. After you.”

“Oh, but I insist!”

“Age before beauty,” Anakin said, grinning.

“Skill before luck,” Obi-Wan snapped, and stepped through the door.

It was like stepping off the edge of the world.

In the course of his life, on the many and varied missions Obi-Wan had undertaken that had gone, for a while, horribly wrong, he had worn Force-dampening collars, and been subjected to various poisons that blocked his connection to the Light. These instances had been instructive in Obi-Wan’s self-reliance and ability to keep his wits, as well as to his own reactions under pressure—and were, therefore, not forgotten, per say, but regulated to the same part of his memory as were his first saber lessons where his partner’s skill far outshined his own, or where his failure had taught more than his success.

And still, with all of that, Obi-Wan’s first reaction was blind panic.

Stock still, Obi-Wan fought to calm himself even as he felt trapped in the confines of his own skin,
and it was several minutes before he was able to recognize that the lights in the room had been growing steadily brighter at his presence.

Movement to his right, and Obi-Wan turned his head to see Anakin step up next to him, pale to the point of looking green, his eyes wider than Obi-Wan had ever seen them. Anakin, too, had his own experiences with the collars and the drugs, but Obi-Wan always suspected that the strength of Anakin’s connection to the Force kept them from being one-hundred percent effective.

As always, it was his concern for Anakin that allowed Obi-Wan to calm the rest of the way; Anakin needed Obi-Wan to be calm, so Obi-Wan would be calm.

Reaching out, Obi-Wan gently squeezed Anakin’s shoulder, and Anakin shot him a shaky smile before his eyes darted away to take in the rest of the room.

Now that he could see, Obi-Wan did the same, noticing with a small pang that Dooku’s private workshop looked a lot like the workspace in the Temple Library, down to the tanks on the far wall that held golden lizards, about fifty centimeters long. There were three of them, watching idly with their four eyes.

Coming up on Obi-Wan’s right, Luke said, “Oh,” and then inexplicably sighed. “Ysalamiri.”


“Ysalamiri,” Luke repeated. “They’re from Mykr. One of the predators there hunt with the Force, so the ysalamiri have evolved the ability to emit a sort of Force-null bubble. It’s highly effective,” he offered, and then made a face. “But they are a pain, especially when there’s more than one. It amplifies the bubble.”

“Great,” Anakin drawled, walking forward. His movements were off, stiff and a bit jerky, as if he no longer was sure where his body ended. Obi-Wan wasn’t sure he would fair much better, so, for the moment, he stayed where he was.

“I’ve never heard of ysalamiri before,” Obi-Wan said, though that wasn’t surprising. He’d never been to Mykr himself, and it wasn’t a planet of which he could remember Qui-Gon speaking.

“Neither had I,” Luke offered. “But I ran into a nest of them soon after I was Knighted.” He paused, like he was going to say more, but fell silent instead, glancing quickly at his sister before moving to the raised table in the center of the room. Leia, for all that Obi-Wan could tell, had either not noticed, or was refusing to acknowledge whatever slight Luke had been about to make. Clearly, there was a story there, and if he had time, Obi-Wan wanted to know what it was.

“I don’t think their abilities are widely known,” Anakin said, peering closer at one through the glass. His forehead was beginning to perspire from the strain. “Or we would have seen more of them before now. They’d make good anti-Jedi weapons for the Separatists.”

“Except that the Separatists were being lead by a Sith,” Obi-Wan said. “While I’m sure they served a purpose here, I very much doubt that Dooku would employ a weapon that would also leave him at a disadvantage.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time someone more concerned with power than anything else developed a weapon they couldn’t actually control,” Leia said, lowering the blaster on it’s strap so it hung low against her back. “Or that they would come to rely to upon far too much.”

Luke waved a hand over a paper journal on the table. “I dunno. This Dooku didn’t strike me as a Death Star type.”
Death Star? Obi-Wan didn’t like the sound of that.

“No,” Leia conceded. “But his Master is.”

Anakin spun, crossing quickly to Leia—and stopping short when Leia stuttered back a step. Glancing quickly at Obi-Wan in confusion, as if he forgot how tall and imposing he could be when he wasn’t thinking, Anakin licked his lower lip in hesitation. “You--you know who the Sith Master is?”

Leia frowned at him. “Of course I know. You don’t—” she cut herself off, to look at Luke. “Everything you said, you didn’t tell them that?”

Luke shrugged. “I ran out of time. I was kidnapped, you know.” Then, he lifted a Sith Holocron. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Don’t touch it!” Obi-Wan snapped, even as Anakin spun, as if he would physically knock it from Luke’s hand. Eyebrows raised, Luke lowered the Holocron back to the table.

“It’s Zannah’s, isn’t it?” he said, as if he hadn’t just touched a Sith Holocron without the protections of the Force. He shook his head, crossing his arms over his chest. “He really did pull out all the stops for this, if he was willing to contact her.”

Yes, because that was the most disturbing part of all of this.

“We should leave,” Anakin said, echoing Obi-Wan’s thoughts. “Gather what we can, and get back to the ship.”

Obi-Wan nodded. He was better now that he had some time to adjust, but he’d much rather be back where he could feel.

Luke twisted his cloak, creating a sling that he held in his flesh hand, and quickly tossed in things from the table, touching them as briefly as possible. There was the paper journal and Zannah’s holocron and sheets of flimsiplast and datacards. Leia pulled a datapadd from her pocket, a smaller and sleeker model than Obi-Wan had ever seen, and began to take holos of the room, paying special attention to the table. Soon, Luke had gathered everything and Leia was tucking the padd away, leading them back out into the corridor, blaster once again held at the ready.

Obi-Wan staggered a bit when he walked back through the doorway, the world coming back in a welcome rush—even the Darkness that pulsed at the edges of his senses was preferable to that sickening void. Anakin was last through, coughing as the Force returned to him, though he waved off Obi-Wan’s concern.

Ventress was standing in the middle of the hall, ‘saber lit, but her stance was casual, unthreatening. Obi-Wan didn’t blame her; he wouldn’t want to stand in this darkness alone, either.

“How could we, without your shining presence?” Obi-Wan said, forcing himself to smile, and Ventress hissed.

“If you can flirt, we can leave,” Anakin said, brushing past. “Ahsoka is waiting for us.”

One by one they filed past, following Anakin back out of the secret corridor into the hallway. Once again, Obi-Wan followed up behind, and kept his eyes forward, ignoring the sense that there was something behind him, watching.
Ahsoka sat in the pilot’s seat, slumped down with her boots braced against the console, idly scraping her thumbnail across her bottom teeth as she watched the door to the landing bay. Next to her Artoo whined softly.

“I hear ya, Artooey,” Ahsoka said, quietly. “The sooner they’re back, the better.”

But a watched kettle never boils, and the longer Ahsoka watched, the less sure she was that anything would happen. Up above, the Wolfpack circled, and Ahsoka was just about to comm to tell them to land--who knew how long this would take--when the doors opened and Ahsoka’s boots hit the deck quick.

Her Master led the way, his tall form upright and assured, and Ahsoka felt herself breathe a little easier. Behind him, were two strangers--one must be their missing Master Skywalker. She could feel his Force presence from here, warm like Skyguy’s, but more like Master Yoda’s. He was shorter than she expected, and he was mostly hidden in the folds of his cloak.

Next to him walked a human woman, older than her master, judging by the grey in her hair, and shorter, even than Senator Amidala. She was carrying a clanker’s blaster and walked like a soldier, and there was something familiar about her that made Ahsoka like her immediately.

Behind them was—

_Asajj Ventress??_

The Sith Assassin was walking unfettered, still in possession of her lightsabers, and it was enough to propel Ahsoka out of her chair, racing towards the hatch. She flicked her hand at the manual control, lowering the ramp so she could run out and land on the platform just as it touched down behind her.

Arms on her hips, Ahsoka glared at Anakin. “What the hell, Skyguy?!”

Anakin smiled tiredly at her, wrapping his arms around her shoulders even as he guided her back up the ramp. “Hey, Snips. Good to see you.”

“Good to see you, too, now answer my question!”

Obi-Wan coughed from the rear of their group, where he stood with Waxer and Boil. “Ventress has agreed to come with us, of her own free will.”

Ahsoka stepped back, when Anakin let her go to head to the cockpit, and watched them all board. The woman gave a double take when she saw Ahsoka, which was a bit puzzling. Ahsoka wasn’t the only Torguta Jedi, after all.

“And Dooku?” she asked.

“Dead,” Ventress hissed through her teeth, and then dropped to a seat, strapping herself in for launch.

“Dead?” Ahsoka asked. Of all the outcomes, she had never actually considered that Dooku would die.

After a moment, she frowned. “Does this mean the war is over?”
The small woman snorted. “War is never over.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

many thanks to hobbitystmarymorstan for being a patient beta!

Things were quiet on the way back to the rendezvous point. There were questions, how could there
not be, after the events and revelations of the past few days, but nobody seemed willing to voice
them. Anakin had remained in the cockpit, although they had been free to move about for some
time, and Ashoka had rolled her eyes at Obi-Wan before going to prod Anakin into joining them.
Obi-Wan wasn’t sure if he wanted her to succeed.

Waxer and Boil stayed near Ventress, standing guard while not truly standing guard. Ventress
seemed all too aware of it, and was sitting, arms and legs crossed in an impressive impersonation of
a sulk. (Obi-Wan would never be so crass as to actually call it a sulk — not unless he wanted to
goad her into a fight).

Leia and Luke sat close together, each leaning in towards the other and pressed from shoulder to
knee. Leia’s blaster lay carefully across her lap, in a way that seemed casual unless you knew how
quickly she could bring it to bear. Luke’s lightsaber was once again at his hip, hidden like his
cache of pilfered dark objects by the fold of his cloak. (Obi-Wan’s mind recoiled from the thought
of them, a knee-jerk reaction to their seductive whispers. That Luke appeared unaffected by their
presence and proximity was something to watch). Luke’s flesh hand, however, was visible as it lay
atop Leia’s. A casual affection, to be sure, but one that spoke volumes about attachment.

Obi-Wan watched them as unobtrusively as he could, seemingly focused on the decking in front of
him, his fingers slowly stroking his beard as if in thought, as Leia slowly let her head rest on
Luke’s shoulder. Luke turned into it, pressing his cheek against her braids for a moment before
settling his head to lean on hers.

Perhaps casual wasn’t the correct word. Effortless. Yes, the affection between them was effortless,
and the Force around them fairly radiated with love and warmth and light.

A flash of something like blue light flickered in the corner of Obi-Wan’s vision, but when he
turned to look, there was nothing there. There was no reason for Obi-Wan’s heart to be pounding,
or for that familiar band of pressure around his head to be increasing. He closed his eyes and
breathed deep, pushing it all away and locking it down tightly until he could meditate and release it
into the Force, ignoring the voice that sounded so much like Anakin’s that commented on just how
large that particular cache was.

When Obi-Wan opened his eyes, he saw Luke watching him, expression serene but eyes warm and
understanding. He smiled, wry, and Obi-Wan found himself nodding back, and used it as an
opportunity to watch Anakin’s children openly.

Anakin’s children.

“You need a bath,” Leia mumbled, seemingly from nowhere, and Luke began to laugh, his smile
spreading over his face — Padme’s smile. Oh, and there was the other credit dropping. Padme and
Anakin. Obi-Wan had never been blind to Anakin’s...connection to Senator Amidala; it had
reminded him of his own connection to Satine.

His love for her.

Anakin hid many things well, but the way he light up when Padme entered the room had never been one of them. No, it was no great surprise that Luke and Leia’s mother was Padme. Obi-Wan just hoped that they would be smart about it, and would save anything too monumental, like the twins sitting before him, until after the war.

Obi-Wan resisted the urge to cover his eyes with his hand; of course they wouldn’t. This was Anakin and Padme.

Well, there would be no hiding it once they reached Coruscant. Perhaps he’d better tell Anakin to comm Padme and warn her. He smoothed his hand over his beard. Perhaps he’d better do it himself.

Either way, he had to inform the council of their success. Unstrapping himself, Obi-Wan bowed his head to the siblings, and escaped into the cockpit himself.

Obi-Wan didn’t flop into his chair at the navcomputer, the way Anakin had been known to do (Obi-Wan would, of course, never admit to such theatrics in front of his former padawan: Anakin never needed encouragement), but it was a near thing.

“Everything all right, Master Obi-Wan?” Ahsoka asked, and Obi-Wan nodded.

“Quite alright,” Obi-Wan said. “I simply need to update the Council.” He didn’t move, however, and Anakin looked at him over his shoulder.

“You know,” he said. “We’re going to rendezvous in a few hours. It can wait until we’re back with the ship.”

Obi-Wan hummed, continuing to stare at the panel.

Ahsoka looked between the two of them. “Is anybody going to tell me what’s going on?”

And wasn’t that the question. Obi-Wan wanted to fill her in, of course he did, but so much was riding on what the Council would say—

“Dooku did some Sith magic and pulled my children back in time from the future.”

Everything stopped as Obi-Wan and Ahsoka both turned to look at Anakin.

“...what?” Ahsoka said weakly.

Luke pressed his face to Leia’s hair, breathing in the familiar scents of blasterfire and Alderaanian Elderflower and underneath it all, pure sister that he would know anywhere. He had forgotten the depth of his missing her until he had felt her again; he had heard of missing someone like a limb, but this went so much further — he had lost a limb. He would know.

“Where did you go?” Leia asked, her voice pitched low, meant for just the two of them. “I looked and looked for you for years and couldn’t find you.”

Luke was quiet for a moment, pulling her closer in apology. “After,” he began, and his voice was rough and coarse. He cleared his throat, but didn’t finish. He didn’t need to. It hung in the air between them. “I went looking for answers. Yoda told me to pass on what I had learned, and I
tried, but...Jedi were trained for over a thousand years with no problems. Obviously, for me to fail so spectacularly, I must have been doing something wrong.”

Leia — sweet, stubborn Leia — was already shaking her head. “You didn’t fail. It wasn’t you. It was Snoke—”

“This time,” Luke said, voice firm. “Before Snoke it was Palpatine, and before him it was another. The voice, the call to the dark – it’s always there. You and I, we know how to not listen, to say no, but not everybody knows how.” Luke sighed. “Or even wants to.”

Luke sniffed, shifting in his seat; it had been a long time since he’d sat still for so long. As age and old wounds and the damp had crept up on him, he had slowly moved away from the traditional seated meditation poses that would leave him stiff and aching for hours after. Sitting here on this ship, especially after the fight with Dooku, Luke felt every day of his age.

Leia squeezed his hand, and Luke felt a warm rush, like hot cocoa on a cold day, seeping through his limbs and squeezed her fingers gently in return, thanking her: Leia’s skills were not as developed as Luke’s, having too many other responsibilities and demands on her time, but her strength rivaled his own, and it was always easier for her, between them.

“I went searching for answers, convinced that I had missed something. I thought, what better place to start than the beginning – so I went looking for the First Temple.” He closed his eyes, thinking back as he opened his mind to Leia, sharing the memory.

“It’s protected. The whole planet itself is charged with keeping the Temple safe from those who would do it harm. It’s not the first time I’ve visited a Temple that had gained a sense of autonomous self, and certainly not the first time the Temples had treated me as an outsider.”

“So you crashed.”

“Who’s telling this story?”

Luke narrowed his eyes at the display readings of his X-Wing, and tapped the screen with his gloved finger. It wasn’t actually surprising that an X-Wing that had flown against the Death Star would, by this point, have developed a few quirks so much as it was surprising that it still ran, but Luke was a child of the desert, and knew how to make his tech last and last. It felt wasteful to retire a ship that still flew just because it had a few decades under its belt, and besides: working on the ship had always been Luke’s favorite moving meditation.

Still, the ship’s personality was quite like Artoo’s – again, not surprising when Luke thought about it, but Artoo wasn’t here and Luke was so he needed the display to show him actual useful information such as – any detail about the planet before him.

His scanner registered only empty space.

It had to be a glitch, however, as his scanner also showed massive life sign readings, much like Dagobah. There was something there, and as much as Luke had finally learned not to trust his eyes (it was his eyes that had gotten him into his mess; what he had seen that had guided his actions so foolishly), it looked like he would have to go down manually.

“Well, Skywalker, you’ve come this far,” Luke said to himself, and guided the ship towards the planet’s surface.
Luke hit issues the moment he entered the atmosphere. His ship was blind, and he’d somehow managed to enter a surprisingly dense cloud bank.

“Just like Dagobah,” he spat between clenched teeth, and swore to himself when he realized. Of course – there was a reason his mind kept returning to that swamp. Taking a deep breath despite the rocking of his ship, Luke closed his eyes and reached out with the Force.

Immediately, the turbulence subsided, and the warning klaxons died away. Before him, the planet teemed with life, glowing in his mind like a star. Almost like a negative image, Luke could “see” the outlines of the world’s immense oceans, the way the water rippled with life both small and immense – bigger than the krayt dragons of his youth, or the sandworms of legend, and the brightest point, dead ahead.

Luke opened his eyes to see himself skimming across the top of the water, sometimes mere inches from the waves. The sun turned the sky a pale blue to counter the deeper color of the water beneath him, the ocean vast and filling the horizon in all directions.

All, save for one, a tiny spot in the distance that was growing closer – a landmass, of some kind. As they approached, Luke could see that it wasn’t a very large mass, about the size of the Massassi temple on Yavin 4, all told, and rocky. That could make it difficult to land, but Luke had landed his X-Wing on dune sand and swampland – he could find a place to land on this island.

It wasn’t until he was nearly there that he felt the darkness at the heart of it.

"Was no place spared?"

“I asked myself the same thing,” Luke said, “but made no progress until I realized that I was asking the wrong question.”

There was a thin strip of flat land just at the base of the island: he hesitated to call it a beach, as it was more of a cliff-side with a sheer, dropped edge, but it was the closest thing this island had.

Sitting for a minute in the cockpit of his cooling fighter, he listened to the ebb and flow of the Force around him, so much like the current of the waves. Luke wondered if the Force acted differently in different climates; he never remembered this feeling of push and pull when he was on Tatooine, even when he returned to his home planet more in tune with the whispering of the Force, and it had just rained enough to be dangerous. Instead, the Force there blew like the wind: sometimes cool and gentle against your sweat-drenched skin, and sometimes cutting and stinging and lethal like a sandstorm.

Something tapped on the side of his ship, and Luke jumped, twisting in his seat to peer out of the viewscreen.

Collected on the shore, staring up at his ship in confusion, were three aliens of a type Luke had never seen before. They were dressed in simple shifts of unbleached fabric, with white cloths covering their heads. Some had stone or bone pendants around their necks, and all of them stared up at him curiously.

Or perhaps it was crossly. One was staring at Luke in a way that he hadn’t seen since Aunt Beru, and he had a feeling that perhaps this wasn’t the best place to land. It was, however, the only place to land.

Nothing for it, Luke thought, and popped open the cockpit.

The ocean was loud, louder than he had expected as the waves crashed and echoed against the
rocky cliffs, but Luke climbled from his X-Wing all the same. He moved slowly — he had managed to wash the soot from his skin and change into clothing that wasn’t charred, but the smell of smoke had followed him through his flight, and not even Luke Skywalker could survive a building falling on his head without lingering bruises and stiffness. (It was worse than that, he knew — he’d been in and out of medcenters too much in his life to not know when he was worse off than he should have been, but there was nothing for it. He couldn’t go to a medcenter, and had spent most of the hyperspace flight in a healing trance. It would have to do).

Luke landed lightly on his feet, leaning heavily on the Force, and the aliens backed away a step, turning and chattering to each other. Luke watched them, hands empty and open, waiting.

Finally, one of the aliens, whose head scarf was taller, whose dress was darker, whose pendant was bigger, stepped forward, and held her own hand out, palm up.

In the air, just above the center of her palm, grew a bright spark of light, like a miniature twinkling star, and Luke felt his breath catch as the sheer beauty of it, of the way the Force sang in racing harmony, and when it faded, at last, Luke realized he was crying.

The aliens — caretakers, he knew now — watched him expectantly.

Letting the tears fall as they will, Luke closed his eyes and held out his own hand, his left, and pictured the way the Force had shined and danced, and when he opened his eyes, that same star danced in his palm.

The caretakers were chattering among themselves once more, but Luke wasn’t concerned. He’d never felt so grounded in the Force before.

The head caretaker gestured Luke forward, and he left the star fade; now that he’d done it, he could always call it up again. Following closely, Luke climbed the long and winding stair. It was treacherous — the stairs were steep, wet and covered in slippery moss and lichen, and in places crumbling. Still, Luke followed the sure-footed caretaker up and up and up.

(A voice in the back of his mind, one that was always creaking and confused in its grammar, found this entire situation amusing, and Luke’s ego was too bruised to not feel humbled. At nearly fifty years standard, Luke once more felt like a learner. How could you think to teach, if you know so little?, another voice asked, this one sounding too much like his own damn self, and Luke forced his attention outward.)

The top of the stairs opened to a small bluff — one that Luke was surprised he hadn’t seen. It would have been a much better place to land his X-Wing, after all, but then again, there was a clear reason why, he hadn’t noticed it at the far end of the bluff: the entrance to the Temple proper.

The head caretaker stopped at the doorway, gesturing for Luke to go through. He paused on the doorway, bowing to her in thanks, and after a moment, she nodded back to him.

Luke faced the doorway, centered himself in the Force, and stepped through.

"What did you find there?"

"Balance."

"Hey."

Ventress kicked out, the toe of her boot just grazing Luke’s ankle. It made her guard dogs twitchy,
but Ventress didn’t care. The Force was doing something weird with those two, something beyond whatever it was that they had taken from Dooku’s private lab. It had to stop. Ventress was only there because of them — she wasn’t about to be left with the rest of these *Jedi* without them.

After a moment, Luke raised his head, blinking as he focused on Ventress. (Ventress’s scowl nearly dropped as, for a brief moment, Luke’s eyes seemed to shine with some blue-white inner light. She’d seen the sick-yellow glow of Dooku’s eyes many times, but she had never seen a Jedi’s eyes glow before).

Luke smiled, just enough to make his beard twitch, and Ventress’s scowl deepened. Just who *was* this guy, that he earned her trust so quickly?

Off balance, Ventress blurted the first thing she thought of. “I thought you said you were Jedi.”

“I am,” Luke said, and his grin grew. “Master Yoda even said so.”

That...was an odd way to phrase it. She narrowed her eyes. “I’ve met many Jedi, and none of them were quite like you two.”

Luke nodded. “I’ve heard that before, too.”

Ventress turned to Leia, who snorted, folding her arms. “I never claimed to be a Jedi,” she said, her voice dry as desert dust, but no other information was forthcoming. She, Luke’s sister, was harder to read. It was clear that she was stronger in the Force than she admitted to, and she had obviously been trained in the mental arts of the Jedi...yet even as she resonated with the peace of the light, there were shadows lurking.

And yet, for some reason, Ventress didn’t think she was close to falling. She sat back in her seat, seeing the clones exchange a look out of the corner of her eye. So, they hadn’t expected that response either. Interesting.

Before she could think of a good response, the door to the front cabin opened, and Kenobi came back through. He was as buttoned up and calm as ever, but there was something, some little thing, that made Ventress think it was all a front.

Kenobi, unlike Leia, was always flirting with falling. It was part of what made their confrontations over the years so exciting.

He looked over the room, taking in everything with a glance, and said only, “We’re nearly at the rendezvous,” and sat, pulling out his datapad.

“...did you say your *children*?” Ahsoka asked, looking back at Master Obi-Wan. He didn’t seem nearly as surprised as Ahsoka felt. In fact, she wouldn't say he looked surprised at all. “Master Obi-Wan, you knew.”

Even Anakin turned to look at Master Obi-Wan then, and he sighed, turning away from the console.

“Before we left on this mission, Kix approached me with some of Luke’s tests. They revealed a few...inconsistencies in his story. Namely, that he was not a distant relative of Anakin’s but rather an offspring.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve known about his relationship for much longer.”

Anakin turned his face away, and Ahsoka repeated to herself, “...relationship,” as her mind spun. The answer came to her quickly, with the kind of absolute assurance that she had rarely felt. “It’s
Padme, isn’t it,” she said. “Why didn’t you tell me?” After everything they had been through, she’d thought he trusted her!

Anakin still wouldn’t look at her. “I don’t want you to have to lie to the council, Snips,” he said. “I remember what it’s like, to have to stand before them and lie through my teeth, knowing that they already didn’t approve of me, but that to tell the truth would be so much worse —”

Master Obi-Wan sat up straight. “Now, hold on,” he said, but Anakin shook his head, finally turning to look at them, but glaring at Mater Obi-Wan.

“No,” Anakin insisted. “I know when people don’t like me, Obi-Wan. I’m not blind; I could never afford to be blind. They’ve never liked me. Some of them are afraid of me, others disappointed that I’m not what they expected. I have no idea why Master Mace hates me so much—”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Obi-Wan broke in. “Neither do Ki Adi Mundi, or Plo, or Adi, or Kit. The others, well, even I don’t always get on with the others.”

Anakin rolled his eyes. “If you say so,” he said. “But promise me, when we go in there and introduce them to my children, to pay attention to how they talk to me.”

Master Obi-Wan opened his mouth, then paused, nodding his head. “I will,” he promised, quietly.

Ahsoka chewed gently on her thumb as she looked between her master and grandmaster. There was clearly something deeper here, something old that had been ignored for too long, but she had no idea how to address it.

So, she changed the subject. “But...they’re so much older than you!”

Anakin blinked at her, and then broke into soft laughter. “I know, right?” he said. “They’re even older than Obi-Wan.”

“Hey!” Obi-Wan protested. “I am not old.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“You implied it!”

Ahsoka hid a smile behind her hand. If they could bicker like this, then they’d be okay.

Lightyears away, in the darkness of his private quarters, the Sith Lord listened to the ripples of the Force, and raged.

All his careful planning, decades of waiting for the right moment, whispering in the right ears, being there at the right moment to size his chances — all of that, threatened in a matter of minutes because of the treachery of his own apprentice.

There was no room for pride in one’s apprentice, so he felt no pride that Darth Tyrannus had tried to overthrow him, only disgust that he had failed. (Of course he had failed; felling Jedi was a difficult shortcut to power — once fallen, they required less training, but they never truly stopped thinking like Jedi.

Sidious clenched his fist, twisting the threads of the Force to see further, to see more clearly, and saw, as he had for the last twenty years, only the figure of Anakin Skywalker.

Perhaps, this was not the setback it could have been. Sidious had not gotten as far as he had by not
turning the unexpected to his favor.

After all, the Chosen One was still there, ripe for the plucking.

And Sidious was never one to miss an opportunity.

On his desk, his intercom buzzed. “Excuse me, Chancellor. Senator Amidala is here to see you.”

“Ah,” Chancellor Palpatine said. “Thank you. Send her in, please. I’ve much to discuss with the Senator.”
Hey, I'm back! I'm sorry this chapter took so long to get out, and unfortunately, it may be a little while before the next one, too. I can't really dedicate the time I'd like until the end of the semester, but! We're rapidly approaching the crux of this story! Things are getting exciting!

Many thanks to hobbystmarymorstan for the lovely beta work!

Obi-Wan rubbed a hand over his face. The vaguely electrified feeling that had settled under his skin still hadn’t dissipated, but it had calmed once he and Anakin had spoken openly about Anakin’s relationship with Padme. He knew he still didn’t have the whole story, but he pushed that concern aside, for now. He was a Jedi. He could be patient. There would be time enough for those questions after.

“You may wish to call her,” Obi-Wan said, softly. “She may need to prepare herself.”

Anakin nodded, but didn’t reach for the comm controls just yet. Obi-Wan stood, ignoring the way his knees and hips protested. They were minor aches, the testament to the near non-stop fighting of the past few years, and Obi-Wan found himself as frustrated with them as he was calmed; He’d lived long enough to be pained by age.

“Come on, Ahsoka,” Obi-Wan urged, gently. “Let’s leave Anakin to his call.”

Anakin turned to him, the wry amusement on his face not quite fully covering the fear that lurked beneath. “Oh, I see. Abandon me to my fate.”

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. “She’s your...” he trailed off, unsure of just what her title would be. “Senator.”

Anakin closed his eyes, his mouth still twisted in a smile that looked more pained, now. “Wife,” he whispered. “She’s my wife.”

Oh.

Oh, well.

“Then I would hope you knew what you were getting into when you married her,” Obi-Wan said. When did they get married? They hadn’t spent much time with her since the Clone Wars began, and certainly Obi-Wan never noticed his Padawan turned partner act like a newlywed. (“How would you know; the Jedi don’t marry,” an achingly familiar voice said faintly in the back of his mind. “and you know nothing of Tatooine marriage customs.”)

Obi-Wan waved the thoughts away, and ducked back out into the main room.

Obi-Wan stood just to the left of the closed door, hand stroking his beard at the sight of those assembled. It took all of his focus to keep his hands steady, to keep himself from picking at his fingers, or gnawing at his nails. They were old habits, and he didn’t need them. Steeling himself, he
forced himself walk forward as if he wasn’t still quietly reeling.

The scene before him hadn’t changed all that much; Asajj Ventress still sat scowling in her seat like a chastised Padawan, and the adult twinned children of Anakin Skywalker sat next to her.

Luke sat much as he had before, as he had since he had first come to Obi-Wan’s attention little more than a day ago, calmly, with no outward signs of concern, and reminding Obi-Wan uncomfortably of his own master. Leia had leaned back, her arms crossed and her expression sardonic. She, too, was apparently unconcerned, if outwardly exasperated, and Obi-Wan knew that if hadn’t already been told, he would be able to see the resemblance between father and daughter in a heartbeat.

Still, Obi-Wan had the distinct and uncomfortable sensation of not quite living up to her expectations — which was ridiculous, frankly. What possible expectations could she have of him?

They all looked to him when he re-entered the room, so Obi-Wan made himself speak. “We’re nearly to the rendezvous.” He sat, pulling out a datapad and turning it on, though he couldn’t quite seem to focus on the screen. A moment later, Ahsoka came back into the main bay, and perhaps because Obi-Wan couldn’t pay attention to what was before him, he noticed Leia react to Ahsoka.

It was subtle, an involuntary twitch that Leia covered smoothly enough that not even Ahsoka noticed her mild alarm. No, not alarm: recognition, and yet there was no such moment from Luke. Perhaps he was just more like their mother, and was simply better at hiding it. Obi-Wan doubted that, however.

Hadn’t Luke said he raised on Tatooine? He certainly knew the desert customs and had hinted at knowing of Shmi Skywalker.

So, in whatever future, Leia knows Ahsoka. Why wouldn’t Luke know his father’s first padawan? It was clear that Luke and Leia both knew Anakin, but why would only Leia know Ahsoka?

At the moment, Ahsoka was standing in front of the twins, frowning as she studied them. Then, she sat next to Leia. Leia smiled at her.

“Thank you,” Leia said quietly, addressing Ahsoka first before looking up to include Obi-Wan and Anakin, who had appeared to hover in the doorway. “For coming after us.”

“We had to,” Anakin drawled. He was smirking, but there was a seriousness in his eyes. “You left us with too many unanswered questions.”

Luke looked over at him, raising a single eyebrow. “You just want to see Yoda react to me.”

“Well, sure,” Anakin said, crossing his arms. “It’s about time he picked on somebody else.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “Anakin—”

“I know, I know,” Anakin said, rolling his eyes. “Yoda doesn’t hate me, hate is of the dark side, blah blah blah.” His tone was careless, but there was a shadow of real hurt in the way his shoulders rose as he waved his hand. Surely, Anakin didn’t believe the Grandmaster of their order, the founder of his own lineage, would have such negative feelings towards him?

Ahsoka giggled “He just hates that you cause him extra paperwork,” she said, and Anakin cocked his head, agreeing — though Obi-Wan thought it was mostly to let the subject drop.

How often had Anakin done that? How much had Obi-Wan missed because he had assumed?
He didn’t have long to dwell in his thoughts, as they were interrupted by a rather theatrical sound of disgust. “Please, spare me,” Ventress sneered. “It’s bad enough that I have to be trapped here with you idiots without you forcing me to bear witness to this...saccharine display.”

“Apologies, my dear,” Obi-Wan said, placing a hand on his breast. “It was not our intention to make you uncomfortable.”

“Darling,” Ventress said, bearing her teeth. “Eat shit.”

Luke laughed out loud, the sound clear and boyish, a near direct contrast to the husk in his voice. Leia didn’t seem to care to bother to suppress a smile, though Ahsoka was staring determinedly at the floor, trying to hide her own amusement. Anakin seemed to be generally unhappy, but that was usually the case with Ventress.

Obi-Wan merely raised an eyebrow. “I’ve been in the field for several months, now. I guarantee you, I’ve eaten worse.”

Waxer snorted a laugh, stifling it quickly, but Obi-Wan was happy to feel amusement from both troopers. Goodness knew that Boil was more often than not in a dour mood.

“They’re even worse when they’re twenty years old,” Leia said, leaned back in her seat watching Obi-Wan through slitted eyes. “Or fifty.” Obi-Wan couldn’t hide the disgust he felt: Sure, the rations were designed to last, and fifty years was still within their shelf life — but still!

“Can’t be worse than gravel-maggots,” Anakin said, and Obi-Wan shuddered, involuntarily. It wasn’t that Obi-Wan hadn’t eaten bugs before, to survive, but Anakin took the practice to a higher, more cavalier level. Even Ahsoka turned her nose up at the gravel-maggots, however.

“Or womp-rat,” Luke said, and that managed to get a second look from Ventress.

“Aren’t womp-rats diseased?”

Luke nodded. “Some of them.” He shrugged. “A lot of ‘em. But they’re also about two-meters long, and that’s a lot of meat.” He looked over at Anakin. “And the maggots aren’t so bad, if they’re cooked right,” Luke said. “But the spices offworld...” He trailed off, and Anakin nodded in sage agreement.

Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes. He’d tasted food Anakin deemed “acceptable,” and the last time had nearly seared the flesh from his tongue.

Ahsoka turned to Leia, her expression troubled as she asked: “What did you mean, ‘war never ends?’ Of course the war will end; that’s why we’re all fighting.”

Well, that got everyone’s attention. Leia’s smile was sad.

“Battles end,” Leia said, “only to be replaced by another conflict and another. Those with power declare wars over, only the reasons for the next battle are still the same.” There was pain in her voice, and a kind of exhaustion that spoke of decades of conflict. Obi-Wan felt a chill at her words: how long could any war last? She went on, covering Ahsoka’s hand with her own, her manner strangely maternal. “In my lifetime, I have lived through the rise of two empires and a fall of one. I hope to see the fall of the other before I die. None of this has been peaceful.”

Ahsoka frowned down at the hand on hers, though she didn’t let go. “That doesn’t sound like a very Jedi thing to say.”
Leia raised her eyebrow, but there was affection behind her eyes. “As I said before,” she said, indicating Ventress with a tilt of her head. “I’m not a Jedi.”

“But you have Jedi training,” Ahsoka insisted. Out of the corner of his eye, Anakin shifted, but Obi-Wan did not yet want to look away.

“I have been trained in the Force,” Leia admitted, “but I don’t follow the tenets of the Jedi Order.”

Ahsoka shook her head. “How?”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth to speak, but was beat to it by Ventress, once again surprising him. Idly, Obi-Wan thought that, once day, he would have to stop being surprised by her; it could be deadly if she decided to turn against them once more.

“The Jedi are not the only Force wielders in the galaxy to use the Light Side,” Ventress said, her tone surprisingly patient, and was rewarded with Ahsoka’s frank curiosity. “Just as the Sith are not the only order to use the Dark.” She smirked, and Obi-Wan swore it was directed at him. “Neither likes to admit that, however.”

Obi-Wan found himself huffing a soft laugh in agreement. The Jedi knew about others who worked in the Light, and kept track of them, though the attitude tended more towards custodial than fraternal: The Guardians on Jedha, for example, were far more than the secular order the Jedi seemed to view them as. He had seen as much as a Padawan, when he and Qui-Gon had spent several months with them, trolling through their archives.

As always, the thought of Qui-Gon panged, a small yet sharp pain in his heart, and for a moment — the briefest of flashes — he saw him, looking as he had the last time Obi-Wan had seen him and ringed in blue light. There was an unfathomable longing on his face, but the second Obi-Wan saw him, he disappeared, like he was never there.

He was shaken enough that he remained quiet for the rest of the trip.

Their arrival at the rendezvous was both anti-climactic and — oddly — like returning home. Unlike Leia, Luke hadn’t spent much of the last few years living ship-to-ship, recruiting and acting as ambassador for the Resistance. He was out of practice.

He was also grateful that they couldn’t see when they entered the landing bay. Before the other day, it had been decades since he had last been on a Star Destroyer, and as tired as he was, he wasn’t sure how he would react.

It was bad enough when they disembarked, and Luke found himself in the hangar, surrounded by the clones in their white armor. Next to him, Leia was relaxed in posture, but her shields were up so tightly she was barely a presence in the Force. At least he wasn’t the only one.

There was a strange Jedi waiting for them, a species that Luke had never personally encountered. His pink skin was textured as though scarred, and most of his face was covered by a re-breather mask, his eyes covered by filtering lenses. He was dressed much like Anakin, in the darker version of traditional Jedi robes, with a pair of vambraces on his forearms. His arms were crossed over his chest as he waited, and his hand, where it rested on his elbow, had four clawed fingers.

He also wasn’t standing alone; a company of clones, most standing with their helmets off and tucked against their sides. Their armor, like others, was decorated with stripes and patterns of either blue or grey.
Despite the covering on his eyes, Luke knew the Jedi was watching him with interest.

“Master Plo!” Ahsoka said warmly, visibly restraining herself from hugging him. “I hope your travel was uneventful.”

“It was indeed, Little ‘Soka,” Master Plo said with obvious affection, reaching out with his clawed hand and placing it on her shoulder. “I trust yours was, as well?” Luke sensed the Jedi’s surprise as Ventress exited the ship behind him. “Somehow?”

Ventress narrowed her eyes, a mean smirk on her face, but she remained silent. “Piece of cake,” Ahsoka said, untroubled.

Master Plo looked at her fondly, and turned to Leia with a nod of his head. “Lady Leia, I am please to see you again, as well, and in better circumstances.”

Surprised, Luke turned to look at Leia, who was nodding back. “Master Jedi,” Leia said. “And it’s just Leia.” Again, that sense that Master Plo was beaming. “This is my brother, Luke. Luke,” she glanced at him. “This is Jedi Master Plo Koon. He was with Obi-Wan when they got me out of that cell.” Leia turned back to him. “I was surprised not to see you on the transport.”

“I flew out with my men,” Master Plo said. “In attempting to end the drone attacks, I found myself up in one of the spires when I saw your transport take off. Wolffe was kind enough to pick me up.”

The clone next to him, wearing a rather fearsome scowl made all the more so by the white of his scarred eye, just grunted. The force of the recognition was disorienting; this was the same Wolffe Luke had met during the Rebellion. His hair was still black, and he hadn’t yet settled into the muscled bulk Luke remembered, but this was Wolffe all the same.

“Oops?” Ashoka said, weakly, and Master Plo squeezed her shoulder, gently.

“Do not fret, little one. All is as the Force wills,” he said.

Ahsoka narrowed her eyes. “You’re going to hold this over Obi-Wan’s head forever, aren’t you.”

“Naturally,” Master Plo said, and Luke couldn’t help but crack a smile. He had heard so much about the Jedi during his years of research – they were cold, they were baby-snatchers, they were not of this plane – it was good to see them acting like people.

Then, Master Plo turned to Luke. “So you are the Jedi that has the Council in a tizzy,” he said said. “It is an honor to meet you at last.”


“I shall look forward to it,” Plo said.

Luke turned, sensing Obi-Wan’s approach, and his former master began to speak as he neared. “I don’t think I can delay any further,” he said. “We need to leave, immediately. We were supposed to head directly to Coruscant, but circumstances...” he gestured vaguely and Luke nodded. He was very aware of the nature of “circumstances” — sometimes it felt like his entire life was simply scrambling to recover from unexpected “circumstances.” “Master Plo, would you please inform the Council of our departure and the events of today? The demise of Count Dooku is a major blow to the Separatist effort, and the Senate should be told immediately.”

“Agreed,” Plo said. “The Council can also then advise on what to do with the Sith artifacts Master Luke is carrying.”


“The things we took from Dooku’s workshop?” Leia asked, and Luke held up his robe, showing off the pouch that he still had crafted. How had Obi-Wan not noticed it before.

“I…don’t remember that,” Anakin said slowly, fear a subtle edge to his voice.

Obi-Wan face was impassive in a way that spoke to the depth of his concern. “Neither do I,” he said.

Ahsoka shook her head. “I never knew that you had them in the first place,” she began. “But I also don’t remember you carrying them in your cloak, Luke.”

“It’s a defense mechanism,” Ventress offered, as if bored, and Luke turned to face her. He could tell that she was far from bored, but he respected her reasons for the front all the same. If Ventress though it was a possible concern, he would listen. She had earned that much. “Luke carries Darth Zannah’s holocron, and if she doesn’t wish to be noticed, she won’t be.”

Master Plo seemed to frown. “Darth Zannah’s holocron is safely locked in the restricted section of the Temple Library.”

Ventress just raised an eyebrow, and Master Plo stood a little straighter. “I see. I am curious as to why she is being selective, but perhaps I am not meant to know.” He turned to Obi-Wan. “I will call the Council. Commander Rex?” He asked, and to Luke’s surprise, Rex stepped forward. “How goes the shuttle preparation?”

“All set, sir. Just awaiting passengers,” Rex said. His voice was higher that Luke was used to, but it was familiar all the same — even the air of polite suspicion that was directed his way.

Luke shared a look with Leia; Rex was impossibly young, and to see evidence of how quickly he aged was disquieting.

“Excellent. We should move quickly. Please have your men escort Ventress—”

“I’m not leaving them,” Ventress said, and everyone turned to look at her. “You can try to lock me up, Kenobi, but it’s just going to make a lot of your troopers dead. I stay with Luke and Leia. I trust them.” Obi-Wan, for his part, looked honestly hurt by that.

“What,” Anakin said flatly into the silence that followed. As if it was some sort of signal, everyone began to speak at once.

“My dear, that’s not entirely up to you.”

“She’s a prisoner, therefore she’s going to prison.”

“Sir, there are so many regs against this.”

Luke simply looked at Ventress, opening himself to the Force to see the eddies as it swirled around her. There was pain, yes — scars from a past that would test even the hardest of souls. Stolen and abandoned, left half-trained twice over, left for dead — and then Dooku, with his offer of power. Luke knew the temptation of power to the powerless, knew the way it could make even the smartest of people willfully ignore the chains and shackles that came with it until it was too late.
and their line was played out with the water they so desperately needed just out of reach.

But more, Luke saw the way the doubt he had planted had broken through and allowed Ventress to see herself and her situation with clear eyes, possibly for the first time. With that newfound clarity, Ventress had turned to Leia and saved his life.

Behind him, they were still arguing, and Luke didn’t need to wonder why they couldn’t hear the way the Force was chiming around them, lending its own voice.

When did the Jedi stop listening to the Force?

There was a hand on his elbow, warm and familiar, and Luke didn’t need to look at Leia to know she approved of what he was about to do.

“She should come with us,” Luke said, and once again the room fell silent. “I don’t know yet what role she’ll play, but the Force is being pretty clear.” He paused. “For once.”

Obi-Wan crossed his arm, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Fine,” he said at last, though his voice was strained. “Rex, is the shuttle equipped for our change in passengers?”

“There’s no brig,” Rex said, tone sharp.

Obi-Wan sighed, and looked up to contemplate Ventress. He was still frowning, but no longer in displeasure. “I don’t honestly think we’ll need one,” he said.

Mace Windu woke that morning to the largest shatterpoint fracture to which he’d ever borne witness. He knew he screamed, only because after when he lay shaking in his bed, drenched with cold sweat, his throat felt raw.

The images he had seen were disjointed, and many were of people and places he did not recognize. He saw a desert with binary suns, a Sith Lord in black whose very breath echoed ominously through the hallway as he cut down combatants with his red lightsaber, a young Jedi throwing aside his lightsaber in defiance. Too, he saw images of those familiar to him: countless roopers in white on the march, Yoda in a swamp looking worn and immeasurably sad, Alderaan reduced to space dust, and Obi-Wan Kenobi struck down by the Sith.

Over them all, a faceless voice with a terrible laugh:

“Wipe them out. All of them.”

Mace rubbed a rough hand over his face and dragged himself from his bed, heading for his ‘fresher shower to wash the fear of those images away. It did not surprise him to find Yoda sitting at his low table when he returned, tea already brewed and steaming.

Without speaking, Mace sat next to Yoda, folding his legs in on himself to fit on the cushion, and drained his cup.

Yoda hummed. “To be savored, this tea is.”

“Disturbed, my nights are,” Mace returned, refilling his cup to sip more slowly. “The tea will understand.”

“Hmm.” Yoda gestured with his claws, and a pair of sugar cubes rolled out of their container, bouncing across the table to land in his tea with a light splash. It was a frivolous motion, one most
of the Order declared to be a misuse of the Force, but Yoda had never been one to let others opinions of the Force dictate his actions.

Or perhaps it was a side effect of having tea primarily with younglings.

Mace sighed. “It’s been years since I’ve had a reaction this strong,” he said. “I had forgotten how intense they could be.”

“Perhaps, stopped listening, you did,” Yoda said, a gentle and understanding tease in his voice. “Louder, must the Force become.”

Mace shook his head slowly. “How long have we been deaf to the Force, that it had to be so very loud?” Mace asked. How long was I? His entire life, Mace had been privy to the mutterings of the Force, nearly driven mad as a child by never-ending shatterpoints. He had been forced to learn how to tune them out, to shut his senses or be lost.

Not for the first time, Mace wondered what had happened when he was so young that had made the Force fracture as it had. He felt a tinge of regret that he had not been older, more trained so that he could understand the message the Force had seemed so desperate to tell him.

Had he grown too used to turning off his senses? Had he blinded himself too much? What warnings had he missed in his complacency? What tragedy could have been avoided?

He returned to from his musings at the sound of Yoda’s teacup softly clinking against the table. “What did you see?” Yoda asked, voice low with uncustomary control of grammar.

Mace looked down at his cup, seeing his reflection in the surface of his tea. He closed his eyes before the images from his vision could play before him. “I saw the end of the Jedi,” he said.

Between them, silence stretched brittle like strands of sugar glass. Echoing in his ears was background hum of the Temple, the ripples of Presence from so many Force sensitives like an audible mechanical whisper, and even this appeared to pause on — not a shatterpoint, but a moment all the same.

“Did you see it?” Mace asked, but Yoda shook his head slowly, “no.”

“Sense the disturbance, I did,” Yoda said, his voice quiet. “But see — cloudy, still, the future is, and yet changed, something has.”

“But what?” Mace asked, and the answer came to him like he had always known. “Skywalker,” he said with a groan. “Somehow, this has something to do with Skywalker.”

Yoda laughed, his delighted dry cackle grating against Mace’s frustration. “Yes, Skywalker, it is. Always Skywalker.” He narrowed his eyes, playfully. “When not Kenobi.”

Mace huffed a laugh, despite himself. “It’s your Legacy.”

“Hmm” Yoda hummed. “Proud, they have made me.” He sipped his tea, and the muttered, as if to himself. “Change, they bring, yes. Much change. Necessary change, I think, yes.”

Necessary change? Mace thought about it, about the possible future he had seen, and nodded shallowly. Yes. They would all have to change, if they were to survive.

For a moment, Mace would have sworn that he heard Qui-Gon laughing at him.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

At long last! This chapter is for loverofcake!

The shuttle’s departure was only slightly delayed, as preparations for the additional personnel — and the items they carried — would only take the better part of the next hour. Obi-Wan had spent most of that time preoccupied by paperwork that had been delayed by the rescue attempt.

*Force bless the clones’ efficiency,* Obi-Wan thought, as they finally managed to board the shuttle. Quarters would be tight, but they would manage not to step on each other’s toes as long as they managed to be civil — even Ventress, Force help him.

Once underway, Leia had taken one look at their accommodations and pushed her brother towards the small ‘fresher. Luke had laughed, a low chuckle that spoke of long familiarity and relief both — this was not new behavior for either of them, and Luke *really* wanted a shower.

Carefully, Luke put his bundle on the desk, his cloak wrapped tightly, and disappeared into the ‘fresher. Unlike older ships, this shuttle was a long ranger, had personal laundry ports as part of the ‘fresher unit. It was a welcome luxury, and would be quite beneficial with so many travelers.

Leia sank onto the common room couch to sit and wait, and Ahsoka sat next to her with a surprisingly sly smile for the normally effusive togruta — one that Leia returned, warmly if tiredly.

That left the desk or standing, and Obi-Wan was in no hurry to sit so close to such disquieting sith artefacts.

(Truth was, going to them was all *too* appealing. Now that he was aware of their existence once more, he could feel them calling to him, whispering to the pieces of himself that he kept long suppressed, promising a swift and decisive end to the war if he only gave in).

It seemed they weren’t hiding any longer.

Anakin, after leaving Artoo as copilot, had chosen a similar path, practically lurking in the doorway, about as far away from the objects as possible. Through their bond, Obi-Wan could feel Anakin’s conflict — to get away warring with the desire to whisk his children away — to keep them all safe, by force if necessary.

Obi-Wan frowned, looking at Anakin in concern, but Anakin wouldn’t look at him.

“Pathetic,” Ventress muttered and sank down into the seat at the desk, arms and legs crossed, smirking at Obi-Wan in taunting triumph. Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow in return.

“Maybe I should have gone first, Leia said into the quiet. “Farmboy always takes the longest showers.”

Ahsoka covered her smile with her hand, though Leia made no such attempt when Luke’s mental voice drifted through their minds.
'I can hear you, you know,'

“You were meant to,” Leia said aloud. “We have a limited time and I want to shower, too.”

“You should have thought of that before,” Luke sent, smug. And then, in an uncanny impression of Master Yoda, said: ’Patience, yes. A virtue, it is, when a queue forms.’


Still, not long after, Luke exited the ‘fresher, clean and still adjusting the fit of his robes. They were similar to Jedi robes, now that Obi-Wan could see them clean and unencumbered by his cloak, but there was something different about it, something beyond personal style.

His hair fell to his neck, flipping back in gentle waves. It wasn’t quite his father’s curls — or his mother’s for that matter — but it was possible it could be, if longer. He had taken the opportunity to shave and had cleaned up the beard he wore. It had cut off most of the grey, and Obi-Wan realized that Luke wasn’t quite as old as he first appeared.

Leia stood with all the dignity of royalty, and swept past her brother to take her turn, rolling her eyes when Luke half-bowed, presenting her to the ‘fresher. Her hand shot out, striking his shoulder in a fist, Luke’s smile held, despite the way Obi-Wan saw him flinch.

“Ow,” Luke protested, grinning when Leia’s only response was a rude gesture before the ‘fresher door closed on her.

With a sigh that spoke more of age than anything else, Luke sat at the desk, across from Ventress. Leaning his elbow on the table, he rubbed his mouth with his metal hand and then leaned on it for support, gazing calmly at Ventress.

Ventress scowled. “Don’t look at me,” she sneered, but Luke merely smiled at her, and turned to face the others.

“How long until we reach Coruscant?” Luke asked.

“Only a few more hours,” Obi-Wan said. “Possibly less, the way Anakin flies.”

The yawn came upon him suddenly, leaving Obi-Wan no choice but to hide it behind his hand. He blinked, startled, feeling Anakin’s concerned gaze on the side of his head, and then decided that a few moment’s rest probably wouldn’t hurt. With all the dignity he could muster, he sat on the couch, next to Ahsoka, who leaned into his side, as if seeking comfort.

...Or pinning him in place. Obi-Wan narrowed his eyes at Anakin, who looked far too innocent as he sat on Obi-Wan’s other side, insuring that Obi-Wan couldn’t move. This time, Obi-Wan caught the yawn before it happened, and was able to subvert the urge, breathing deeply.

“Oh, spare me,” Ventress muttered, and Obi-Wan looked up to see Luke absently poking at the Sith Holocron even as he patted her arm, seemingly unbothered when she shrugged him off, standing to stalk into another room. Obi-Wan thoughts about following, but...there was nowhere for her to go, and Artoo would alert them if she went into the cabin.

Perhaps it was alright for him to... rest...

Anakin looked down at Obi-Wan’s sleeping face, then up to Ahsoka. “I can’t believe that worked,” he said.
“He must have been more tired than we thought,” Ahsoka said, her voice soft.

Anakin frowned. It was worrying that Obi-Wan seemed better and better able to hide how worn down he was becoming, and Anakin honestly couldn’t say if it was because he was faking it better or if everyone was so worn down that his exhaustion was just less obvious by comparison.

“Is he alright?” Luke asked, and Anakin looked at his son. He was frowning, and though his beard hid the shape of his mouth, Anakin could see Padme’s heart playing out on his face.

When Anakin didn’t speak for a moment, Luke looked at him. “Father?”

Anakin closed his eyes for a moment; the name still made his head spin, and it was Ahsoka who said what he was thinking. “Weird,” she whispered, and Anakin had to laugh. It took him a moment to realize that Luke was laughing as well.

“It is, isn’t it?” Luke said. “I’m older than you are — hell, I’m older than you were then. It’s got to be confusing.” There was no judgement in his tone, no censure like he always expected to hear from the council. To have a Master, even his son, just admit confusion....

“It is,” Anakin said, and then sighed. “And it isn’t.” Both were true, of course — Anakin had always contained a contradiction. He’d been used to it on Tatooine, being a person and being property all at once. He’d maintained it at the Temple, feeling emotion and peace, passion and serenity. He’d let it subsume him: Jedi and Husband. And on Mortis...

Well.

But Luke was nodding, as if he knew exactly what Anakin was talking about, and Anakin wondered for the first time, with a dawning dread, just how close Luke himself had come to the dark side.

Did he have a Tusken Village in his past?

With Ahsoka there, he couldn’t just ask, and Luke’s expression, as open as it was, revealed nothing.

“We’ve had a longer time to get used to the idea,” Luke said, and Anakin was imagining the sorrow in his voice, wasn’t he? The darkened shadows on Luke’s face were just paranoia, right? Luke’s eyes crinkled. “You will too, in time.”

Anakin nodded, feeling cold as the desert night. You could get used to anything in time.

Asajj stopped just outside the room, unsure of which way to go. There was no way they would let her into the cockpit without a nanny, and they would never leave her alone again if she went to hide in the engine room. She needed space, a moment alone to center herself and come to terms with the way her circumstances had changed wildly. Again.

From the room behind her, she heard Skywalker speak, and she sneered, discomfort roiling in her gut. Her feet moved her forward, away from where the Force burned the brightest.

Skywalker was difficult enough to be around, his fire banked by Jedi discipline, but his children seemed disinclined to temper their presence. It was amusing, at first, to see the ever-serene Kenobi flinch away from them, but it was hell on Asajj’s shields.

Her feet took her to the galley, and she stopped just outside the bright lights of the room. It was a
typical ship’s galley: conservator and water supply line, a combined miniature thermal pad and nanowave stove, and automatic brewer. Everything was scrubbed clean, as if never used, and the sterility made Asajj twitch.

Their trip was only a few hours long. Nobody would mind if she brewed herself come caff.

She set about prepping the machine: it was a pod-type, and there was a collection of pods in the drawer beneath the machine. None of them were a brand she was familiar with, but at least a few were labeled “high caff”. Those would do. It was only a moment’s work to fill the reservoir with water, place the pod in the correct slot, and press the correct button. There was even cream in the conservator and sugar in the cabinet.

Mug in hand, Asajj sat at the galley table, slowly sipping the hot caff. It was not the best caff she ever had — Dooku was a man who demanded quality in all things, and though he did not drink caff himself, had his kitchens installed with the highest quality caff brewers.

Somehow, Asajj didn’t think either of the Jedi had “high quality caff” as a priority. In her experience, soldiers tended to run on whatever they could get their hands on, quickly becoming accustomed to poorer quality — and therefore cheaper to mass produce — food stuffs.

And slaves had no choice.

She snarled to herself, her grip on her mug tightening painfully. No, she wasn’t ready to think about that, yet.

But it did bring her to the topic of the *other* Jedi - the one Dooku had been convinced was Palpatine’s downfall, and the one that had proved to be his own. Leia was a soldier — a leader, but a soldier. Judging by her jewelry, however, one used to finer things. She, perhaps, would share Asajj’s taste in caff.

Asajj shook her head. Why was she focusing on their *stimulant habits* of all things.

_Because it’s easier than facing the truth_, said a voice in the back of her head, and Asajj grit her teeth. It was the same voice that told her to listen to Luke, to approach Leia. It had yet to steer her wrong, though it wasn’t particularly gentle about it. _Cowardice does not become you, Ventress. Do not give in to it._

“I am not a coward,” she grit out, her own voice shocking in the stillness of the galley. She looked around, but her words had raised no alarms. She sipped her caff.

Fine. She would prove that she was no coward.

Asajj had been a slave, stolen from her home when she had been a child. She had thought she had gained freedom and purpose under the tutelage of Knight Ky Narec, but he had bound her into chains of her own making, willingly subservient to and Order she never saw. She thought, once again, that she had been offered freedom when she had been discovered by Dooku, but it took so very little for Luke to open her eyes to Dooku’s falsehoods.

Had Asajj ever truly been free? She had always thought her freedom had been taken from her as a child, but what if freedom, true freedom, had to be earned? What would it even look like? Luke spoke of freedom, but even he was chained to the tenets of the Order.

Wasn’t he?

The thought made Asajj pause, her mug halfway to her face. Of all the Jedi she had known, Luke
was the first who never quoted dogma, who was silent when face-to-face with the tenets of the Sith. And what of Leia, who was clearly a Force user, for all that she claimed not to be a Jedi.

Asajj used to dream of returning home to her sisters and Mother, themes of rescue shifting to prodigal welcome as the years passed — and, if she made it out of this alive, she probably could.

**But would you still want to?**

Raising her mug, she realized her caff had gone cold. She stood to make herself a fresh cup.

Leia stepped from the ‘fresher, feeling much more human. Sonic showers weren’t her favorite, having grown up on a planet where water was plentiful, and there was nothing quite like a good, long soak in a tub filled with hot water, sweetly oiled.

That and it was nearly impossible for sonic showers to treat her hair with any kindness. She had kept her hair braided atop her head, as that would at least keep it out of the way and cleaner until she had the time and resources to wash it properly.

At least they weren’t heading to an ice world like Hoth. None of the humans had been able to bathe properly in the extreme temperatures, and Leia had gone weeks with her hair in the same braid. She was lucky her hair hadn’t been permanently damaged.

Still, the experience had given her both a deeper appreciation for proper hair care, and a new threshold of endurance. Dressing quickly, she stood in front of the small mirror to assess the damage. It would hold, and after her practiced fingers tucked the worst of the strands back into place, it looked relatively normal.

At least something did.

Leia sighed, watching her expression play out in the mirror before tucking it away once more. It had been mere days since her world had fallen apart, but there was no time for sorrow — not yet. There would be time for grief and rage and sorrow later.

Once more in control, Leia left the ‘fresher and returned to her brother. Luke was sitting at the table, studying the items on the table in front of him, though he was careful still not to touch them with his bare skin. On the couch, it seemed that Ahsoka and Anakin had trapped Obi-Wan — who was fast asleep. Leia raised an eyebrow, and looked to Ahsoka, who just shrugged with one shoulder.

“We have time, if you want to rest,” Anakin said, voice low. Obi-Wan didn’t so much as twitch, but Leia found herself shaking her head. She had rested in her cell, and while she had developed a wartime ability to sleep whenever she could, events were still too close together for her to trust herself sleeping. She shook her head, lips pressed together.

Instead, she sat across from Luke and looked down at the objects before him. “I thought you were going to put these in the lockbox.”


In the aftermath of Endor, Leia had been too busy running from the truth of her parentage to listen to Luke when he tried to talk to her about the Force — and she didn’t get less busy as the the war gave way to the building of a new Republic. She wasn’t lying when she said she wasn’t a Jedi.
...but Luke had eventually cornered her, teaching her to center her focus, to reach out with her feelings and sense the Force around and inside of her. She could shield her mind, speak to Luke across great distances, and even “lift rocks.” Luke had even shown her how to build a lightsaber, but there was nothing more conspicuous than a lightsaber after two decades of Imperial rule. It had stayed with him when he left to build his training grounds, and for all that Leia knew, it remained there.

Leia looked up at her brother, the familiar crease between his brows, the slight frown hidden by his beard. “Talk me through it?” she sent along with a tendril of mixed curiosity and concern.

Luke’s mouth twitched, like he almost smiled. “Alright,” he said then he did.

Leia almost wished he hadn’t, but oh, it made so much more sense.

Later, after Obi-Wan had woken, breaking Luke’s concentration, and they had gone different ways - Luke first to the lockbox, and some to the ‘fresher, other to the galley where they found Asajj on what very well could have been her fourth cup of caff, Luke found Leia at the viewport, watching their approach. She stood as she always had, arms crossed and hip cocked — it was her thinking pose, and Luke’s mind’s eye flashed through the years of watching her stand in that very pose, her head at that angle.

There were little differences. Her crown braid changed after she married Han, and again after Ben was born. She wore more, and larger, jewelry — cultural relics of Alderaan that was, gifted to her over the years by Alderaanian ex-pats who wished to show solidarity in what she represented: Alderaan, unbowed.

Leia always was good at standing tall.

Luke came to a top next to her, looking out at Coruscant below.

“I expected it to look different,” Leia said, her mouth twisted into something wry. “Papa often told me that Coruscant changed little during the rise of the Empire, that the occupation was in the details. I know how little it changed when the New Republic began, before it moved to a new system. Too many ghosts,” she said, her voice dropping into familiar sarcasm. Luke huffed a soft laugh. The ghosts at Ahch To were part of its appeal, but then not everybody saw the galaxy as the Jedi had.

“I still expected it to be different.”

_The galaxy doesn’t change_, Luke thought. And, in his experience, that was true. The government bickered and the people in power thought they were making a real difference, while on the ground, the common people lived as they always had: bringing in the same harvest, fighting off the same enemies and threats to their livelihood, absorbed by the same local life as the generations before them. It was clearest to see on the Rim, but even on the lower levels of Coruscant, away from those who made the laws, life continued unchanged.

But Leia knew all that. It had been one of their biggest stumbling blocks in the rebellion: people only fought for change when their circumstances changed for the worse. Leia didn’t need Luke to remind her.

“It feels different,” Luke offered instead, wrapping his arm around her shoulder until she leaned into his side. “The Jedi Temple is like a beacon.”

“It’s still dark, though, underneath,” Leia said, softly. “It still feels like...him.”
Luke nodded; Palpatine had been seated on Coruscant for nearly two decades by this point, and his touch was on everything, coated like oil...but it wasn’t the only source of Darkness on the planet. Luke wouldn’t have recognized it before, when the Alliance had come to Coruscant at last, and Luke had lead a team through the lower halls of the Imperial Palace: what had once been the Jedi Temple. Palpatine’s reek had been thick, and he had many of his senses turned down or even off, and he had missed it, the subtle difference in shade.

There was a Darkness underneath the Jedi Temple, a shadow that cast their light into stark relief, and Luke was caught up in a sudden flash of vision: the pyramid he had climbed, and the well that had nearly swallowed him. Behind it all, a tree with massive roots and branches that reached up so high that they began to curl downward once more.

In his pack, the Holocron of Darth Zannah seemed to humm, as if pleased.


“Not for long,” Leia said, and Luke could feel the warning in her words echo through the bond between them, full of the thoughts and theories they now shared. “We don’t have much time.”

Luke chuckled. “I somehow doubt ‘time’ will be our biggest problem.”

Yoda had been dreaming.

In nearly 900 years, this was not hardly the first time Yoda’s life had been disturbed by dreams that were more than dreams. In sleep, his mind buyed on the currents of the Force, he had dreamed the past that was, the present that is, and the future that had yet to be. He had dreamed of blessings and warnings, guidance and distraction.

Yoda no longer put much stock in dreaming.

This time, however, his dreams would not leave him. There was something coming, a change on a scale he had not seen in his lifetime. The Force spoke to him when he slept at night, and sang for him during his waking hours. It invaded his lessons with the younglings, his meditations, his meeting with his men.

Change was coming, and, Yoda conceded as Mace came to a stop next to him on the temple’s landing platform, it was on that ship.

Mace was a pillar next to Yoda, as he had been these last several years, a focus point in what would otherwise could be a swirling torrent. Truly, the Temple and the Order worked to calm the chaos of the planet on which they lived, but even within the calm of the Temple, Mace was as a tree, swaying yet unbroken and firmly rooted.

Yoda wondered if those roots would help him, now.

The ship landed with a gentle firing of thrusters, proof yet again of Anakin Skywalker’s skill with machines that flew, and the speed at which the hatch opened spoke of nothing more than the soundings of fate.

Obi-Wan exited the ship first, cloakless as he often was when on Military transport, leading two beings whose presence in the Force nearly eclipsed that of Anakin and young Ahsoka as they escorted Asajj Ventress from the hold of the ship. Her presence wasn’t a surprise, that much had been in Obi-Wan’s report, but there was something in the way the Force swirled around her that spoke of potential. Ventress was on the cusp of something greater than herself, and Yoda would
wait and see what it could be.

Mace swore gently as they approached, his voice not loud enough to carry across the winds of the platform, but Yoda’s sensitive ears picked it up anyway. There was no doubt the two before them were the source of Mace’s shatterpoints, or the confounding knotwork of Yoda’s dreams.


“I find that I’m not entirely comfortable bringing ...” Mace began, speaking of his desire not to being a potential threat into the Temple, where the young and grounded were kept safe, but Yoda tuned him out as he stepped forward. These strangers were dangerous, yes, but in the way that fire was dangerous only when treated poorly.

They were human, the twin suns that filled his vision, and as he approached, one — the male in the cloak — knelt before him. It was a familiar gesture, performed with ease despite the age and injury in his knees, though Yoda was sure this was the first time this had ever happened.

The man reached up with his hands — one flesh, one bare metal, and pulled back his hood to reveal a bearded and weathered face, with blue eyes the color of a Guardian’s saber. He smiled, the eddies of the Force swirling between them, and said, “Greetings, Master Yoda.”

And Yoda looked up into this face that he knew so well, and yet did not know, and said to the last of his Padawans: “Greetings, young Skywalker.”
Chapter 14

Hey everyone! Sorry for the long hiatus! I've begun a new job, and the learning curve for this semester has been steep. However, winter break is close upon us, and life is settling down again. Enjoy the next chapter, and hopefully it won't be so long until the next one!

The wind was biting cold at the highest peak of the island, dryer without the ocean spray, but Luke's bones, forever baked by twinned desert suns, felt the damp all the same. Save for the wind that roared and the waves that crashed, it was silent — meaning, of course, that it wasn't silent at all; but that Luke could barely hear anything over the hum of the Temple.

Years ago, during the Rebellion, when Luke was merely a pilot with a famous name, and the X-Wings would scramble, the cacophony of the engines, the way the air shuddered with the energy ricocheting off of his chest, making his ribs vibrate and his heart pound — the Temple felt like that, but on a scale Luke had never felt nor imagined. In the lonely years after the war, when Luke had traveled to the edges of the galaxy looking for the scattered remnants of the old Jedi Order of which he was the last, striving to cobble together something for the order of which he would be the first; he had seen and imagined a lot.

He took a deep breath, reaching for calm, and slowly, he let his body began to resonate with the Temple, with the Force as it spilled forth from beyond.

In harmony, Luke walked through the door.

“What.”

Luke smiled at the flat statement from the other Jedi Master on the platform.

Mace Windu.

Luke had found corrupted datafile that must have contained meeting minutes, recorded by the one time head of the Jedi Council during the early days of the war, and had been impressed by his bearing, the way wisdom and serenity aided the dignity of his expression. His regard had only increased, however, when his father’s ghost had told him, in a rare moment of nostalgia, how Windu had attempted to arrest Palpatine and very nearly succeeded.

There was little serenity at the moment, however, and Master Windu seemed to be doubting his wisdom — or simply his sanity.

Master Yoda was looking at him like the ghost of a long dead friend, which wasn’t helping the complicated swirl of emotions behind Luke’s own shields. Yoda had been his teacher, and guided him to many of the greatest lessons that Luke had learned, but his decision to leave Dagobah still weighed on his heart, all these years later, despite how often Yoda’s ghost had appeared, like a spirit in a desert tale.
“You heard him,” Leia said, her voice dripping with wry amusement, and Luke bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. In front of him, Yoda’s ears rose with interest, and he reached out a claw to gently touch the side of Luke’s face, dragging it across Luke’s beard.

“Pah,” Yoda said, his voice wavering. “Always this, my Padawan’s grow. But on you, it does no favors.”

Luke’s mouth dropped open even as Leia lost it next to him, bending double in her laughter — Mace, Father and Obi-Wan seemed gobsmacked, but Ahsoka covered her mouth to hide her giggles, and Yoda’s eyes were sparkling through the depth of his emotions. Luke gave in and had to chuckle.

“Everyone’s a critic,” he said, and offered Yoda his arm.

To the clear surprise of most gathered, Yoda accepted his offer, climbing up to settle on Luke’s shoulders. If Luke used more of the Force to keep himself upright as Yoda settled and balanced, that was his own business. He turned to face the stunned gathering.

“To the Council, we must go,” Yoda said, his voice a familiar rumble in his ear. “Many thing, we have to discuss, and introduce them to my last Padawan, I must.”

“Last—” Mace started, cutting himself off. He turned a suddenly stern look on Anakin, who froze in place before raising his hands to show they were empty.

“He said his teacher’s name was Ben!” Anakin protested, and Mace just looked at him, exasperation finally showing on his face.

“I don’t think that’s the point, Skyguy,” Ahsoka muttered.

Between them, Ventress began to snicker softly. “You sure know how to make an entrance,” she drawled, smirking at him.

Luke looked back at her over his shoulder, feeling a bit wild in a way he hadn’t since he was in his twenties. “You have no idea.”

Mace turned to Leia. “And who are you?”

She looked him up and down, and then glanced at Luke. “Leia,” she said, and gestured forward. “Shall we?”

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Luke looked around in amazement. No Jedi had set foot in this temple in decade, perhaps centuries, but it didn’t feel abandoned. There was no dust, no remnants of insects or any of the miraiid of slimy things that liked to grow where is was cold and wet and dark. All he could sense was the bare rock, the hum of the water, and the Force.

His footsteps echoed around him his boots distressingly loud—

The sound changed, and Luke looked down to see mosaic tile underfoot; a circle of light and dark, woven around each other to form a figure of both, flanked by sun and moon, and centered on a lightsaber. It was familiar, somehow, though Luke would swear he had never seen it before.

A wave and whisper along the currents around him, and Luke looked up, seeing the doorway and sunlight for the first time.
The door opened to a small courtyard. A crescent wall curved out to meet the cliff face on the other side, split in the middle by the oldest tree Luke had ever seen, its leaves dancing gold above him, swaying in the breeze.

It was that chill that told Luke of the tears streaming down his face. Never before had he been in the presence of such pure light. A wellspring - it had to be. Perhaps, it was the first wellspring ever.

**Overcome, Luke sank to his knees and let himself feel.**

Leia had grown with stories of Coruscant, told to her by her father and The Aunts. He told her of the glory and splendor that had pervaded the Republic, the way art and beauty had been built into the very buildings before they were replaced by Imperial “efficiency.” When she had first set foot there herself, as a Junior Senator, she thought she could see the cracks where the New couldn’t quite erase the Old. It had firmed her resolve to bring down the Empire and see the Republic restored.

The next time she saw Coruscant was after the war, when Alliance forces finally broke what remained of the Imperial navy and regained control of the Galactic Capital. By that point, what had once been the Jedi Temple had been the Imperial Palace for over twenty years. When before she would have gone with Luke and the excavation teams, she had, her heart heavy with the knowledge of her true parentage, let Luke handle it alone, to the surprise of many.

Therefore, while she had lived on Coruscant for years, she had never been to the Temple before, and she couldn’t say that she was that impressed by the experience now. It was grand, in the way that all self-important buildings are grand, with towering walls and staircases that arched into the air above their heads. Everything was sandy pale or muted pastel, brightly lit with somehow still soft light. It should have reminded her of Alderaan, of peace, but it lacked a vitality, a natural wildness that gave life to emptiness.

It was, perhaps, too serene, and Leia had a sudden understanding; with so many centuries dedicated to peace and with those who actively fought so restricted in their actions, the inhabitants raised within this Temple had no defences against the wilds of war. They couldn’t have. Uneasy and heart aching, Leia felt twice her age.

No one stopped them as they wound their way through the halls, though they must have looked a motley crew, and Ventress alone would have been enough to draw the eye a second time. She seemed aware of it, too, sneering at their surroundings, and widening her eyes at some of the more curious children just to see them jump, though she stopped when Ahsoka slowed her steps to keep pace with her.

Children. Leia watched as a harried Wookiee Jedi hurried a group of younglings though the hall, not one of them more than six years old, and a swaddled babe in the Wookiee’s strong arms.

Ventress’s voice, when it came, was soft next to her ear, but it was the content of her words that made Leia shiver.

“And they wonder why the galaxy calls them baby snatchers. There’s only one reason to raise them that young.”

Leia’s mind flashed to her last days in the New Republic senate, when the first reports of The First Order began to cross her desk. Supply lines raided. The black hole of funneled funds. The sharp uptick in reported pirate activity, targeting families and passenger lines.
Reports of missing children.

Her contemporaries had thought it a new slave trade, another head of the hydra the Senate was too toothless to wipe out, but Leia had spoken her fears: spoken and found herself exposed and ostracized and leading yet another guerilla war.

Finn’s arrival on base was both a blessing and a curse: a confirmation of her worst fears, but that vindication would not keep her warm at night. It was a confirmation come too late, at least: her own son a casualty years before.

A hand at her elbow, and Leia looked up into the scarred and impossibly young face of her father.

How had she never realized how young he was? He couldn’t have been much older than she had been when she had ferried the Death Star plans and sealed her fate — perhaps no older than she had been on Endor, watching as the second Death Star vaporized above her, feeling her brother make the long trek back to them. She had felt so old then.

They had been babies. All of them.

Anakin was frowning at her, and Leia quickly assessed her shields. Was she leaking? How much had he heard?

No, her shields were intact. Perhaps something had let slip on her face - or maybe it was just that she had stopped dead in the middle of the hall, with only their surrendered Sith by her side.

She smiled at Anakin, a politician's reflex, but if anything he only seemed more concerned. Still, he allowed her to pass, and she continued on wooden legs, willing her gait to be even, to ignore the ice deep in her belly.

She met Luke’s eyes, seeing such profound sadness, and beneath, like a single candle flame against the coming night, a durasteel resolve.

As they moved on, apparently towards the main Council chamber, Leia finally noticed guards, faceless behind featureless masks, following them at a distance.

‘Of course,’ she thought, and filed the information away, her mind beginning to run with plans.

Luke was only aware of the passing of time when he smelled grilled fish, and he turned to see one of the caretakers with a plate of food, still steaming hot. Stomach growling audibly, Luke took the plate with a deep bow of thanks and ate with gusto, his appetite returning for the first time since...

Since Luke’s greatest mistake.

Luke lowered his spoon, mind caught up with the images and fears of that night. The tree faded behind him, and from the shadows of the temple, Luke felt a pulsing, like a beacon.

Dinner forgotten, Luke wandered back into the main temple. Night had begun to fall, and while the moon and stars were enough to steer by outside, the darkness inside was near absolute. Pressing his hand to the wall, Luke followed it inside, drawing closer to the siren call that began to pulse with color in his mind - swirling lights, like the starstuff between systems. Luke went to it like moth to flame.

Crack!
Luke stopped, feeling the stick beneath his foot, the dried wood now broken in half. Still, Luke breathed, and fumbled at last for his belt, pulling free a one-use glow stick. He cracked it with one clean motion and shook the stick until it began to shine, and stumbled backwards.

The crumbling precipese seemed to mock him as he stared at the Dark well that opened in the ground at his feet — one more step, and Luke would have fallen, perhaps forever.

The mosaic flashed in his mind, a moment of insight, and he should have known: There couldn’t be such a spring of Light without an equally strong well of Dark.

Wishing he could close his eyes, but not trusting, Luke turned and fled.

Luke got some sideways looks for carrying Yoda on his shoulders, surprisingly more looks than Leia the stranger or Ventress the Sith, but when Yoda himself did not seem concerned, most let it pass. It was clear that Luke had done so before, and it was yet another mystery to their strange retinue.

What was interesting, however, was the way Anakin reacted to Mace Windu, especially after drawing Leia out of her preoccupation. There was deference and then there was submission, and Leia had seen enough of each to tell one from the other. It unsettled her, to think of the man who would become Darth Vader as submissive to any but the Emperor, a perversion of respect as that was—

In the back of her head, Luke felt smug. Rolling her eyes, she flicked the back of his head, making him flinch, but the smug feeling only grew, now accompanied by his laughter. Another presence, mild and green like the royal gardens in late summer, when the plants were at their fullest just before they fell to autumn, and deep like the mountain lakes, brushed past her senses, leaving behind a faint trail of surprise mingled with amused resignation. Yoda’s ear twitched in her direction, and Leia flicked the back of his head too, much more gently this time, and Yoda cackled aloud.

She felt Windu’s eyes on her as they finally reached the Council Chambers, but her face remained in its senatorial mask, and the great doors opened without further comment. Years of politics was all that stood between Leia and the awe she felt.

The Council Chambers were in the uppermost levels of the South East Spire. The room wasn’t the largest she’d been in, but the ceiling was high, and the external walls were all transparent duristeel, showing a breathtaking view of the city skyline. Twelve chairs stood in permanent semi-circle around a decorative pattern in the floor - the symbol of the Order.

The chairs were half filled. She recognized the species of a few of them, but knew none of the faces. So much had been lost.

The room resonated with the presences of the Masters assembled, filling the room like an echo chamber. It was far from the peaceful serenity that she had expected based on their journey so far. Luke didn’t seem to share her surprise, but that wasn’t anything knew, so she was definitely put on edge when Anakin next to her began to radiate tension.

Leia used the novelty of the place as an excuse to look around, and glance at Anakin. His face was the same stiff mask that Leia had seen on the Jedi in the halls as they passed, and he wore his calm like a cloak, but Leia could still feel that tension. Who did he think he was fooling?

Another glance and Leia confirmed: he wasn’t fooling Ahsoka. She kept nervously looking his
way, although her attempt at calm was more natural.

Funnily enough, the best calm mask had to come from Ventress. She gazed about lazily, as if she hadn’t just been marched into the enemy’s stronghold. Former enemy, anyway. Maybe. Eventually.

“What is the meaning of this?” A voice, unpleasantly nasal (and weren’t they almost always? Leia had often wondered if a bad temper left one with sinus problems), snapped, the words echoing across the room. The Iktotchi Master who had spoken was leaning forward in his seat, the Force around him quavering from the depth of his upset, though he managed to restrain himself from leaping to his feet.

Luke bent and Yoda hopped gracefully to the ground, making his way to his own chair with the aid of his walking stick. Mace walked with him, and Leia could suddenly see the depth of the relationship between these two. So much.

Obi-Wan stepped forward as well, taking his seat next to Mace and slouching down, crossing his boot over his knee. In the moment he looked less like a Jedi and more like a pirate king, and Leia bit her lip to keep from smiling. That was not the posture of hide-bound rule-follower, no matter how much this younger version seemed to take comfort in rules. Her father’s friendship with the Jedi Master made a bit more sense, now.

“You’ll need to be a bit more specific,” Obi-Wan said, just a hint of a laconic drawl to his words as he waved his hand to indicate Leia, Luke, and Ventress.

The quivering intensified, “That is a Sith” he hissed, pointing a thick finger at Ventress. Ventress bared her teeth, snapping them almost playfully and smirking when the Master flinched.

“She is a person,” Luke said, with the same dangerous calm that had informed Jabba the Hutt of his impending demise. “And she has a name.”

“And who are you, who claim to be a Jedi?” The Master snapped, turning his bad temper on Luke. “You wear the trappings of Mastery, but there is no record of you in any Temple.” Luke crossed locked his fingers together in front of his waist, saying nothing and giving nothing away, letting the Councilor run his mouth.

“And who is your companion?,” said the Tholothian, one of three women on this Council, as she looked at Leia. Her presence was warm, like a shallow pool in the depths of summer, and Leia liked her, despite herself.

“And why has he brought the Sith!” The Iktotchi Master insisted, and Windu raised a calming hand.

“Peace, Master Tiin,” he said. “You objection has been noted.”

Plo spoke for the first time; “Let the record show that Asajj Ventress is here of her own volition, having renounced the ways of the Sith and aiding in the final confrontation with the Sith Lord Count Tyrannus, otherwise known as Count Dooku, having resigned his place in this Order.”

Leia stared at him. Dooku had been a Jedi? In hindsight, it explained so much, not only of his behavior and arrogance, but of the way the Civil War had unfolded. The Council room was in an uproar once more, but they, again, rather missed the point.

“Sith do not renounce their ways,” Master Tiin thundered. “They all kill their Masters for power. You’ve fallen for her trap, and lead her right here!”

Stumbling down the stairs in the dark, eyes open but barely seeing, Luke barely made it back to camp. The caretakers found him, brought him to an empty hut, and lay him down on a low pallet covered in furs.

He slept, fitful, until dawn, when he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Sometime after noon, Luke woke, mouth dry and stomach aching, and pushed himself upright. He felt encrusted, covered as he was by a fine layer of salt, and he scrubbed a hand through his hair, scratching at his beard. His body ached, but his mind was the clearest it had been in a long time.

Licking his lips didn’t actually help, and he needed to take care of himself, and quickly. His back protested the night spent on the pallet bed as he pushed himself to his feet, but he pushed that away: he had spent the night in worse places.

The settlement was bustling when Luke opened the door. It was a familiar sight: most rural settlements were busy with people gathering and preparing food, mending or crafting replacements to the various textiles and tools needed to sustain the village, children at play. They went about their business as if he wasn’t there, and it was a relief. For so long he had been Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master — to be yet another nameless pilgrim felt better. Right.

Motion caught his eye, and he saw the caretaker from the night before approaching — at least, he thought it was the same one. He had not yet been there long enough to tell their differences though anything but the Force, and yesterday had been tumultuous.

Thankfully, she lead him to where he could bathe and relieve his most pressing concerns, and when he felt more human, she brought him to where he could eat. It all had the air of ritual to it — no, not ritual. Procedure. It was fascinating.

Cold fish for breakfast was less fascinating, but it was fresh and filling and Luke had grown up too poor to ever turn his nose up at food. Once he had eaten, the caretaker bowed and took her leave.

After a moment’s thought, Luke returned to the stairs.

Quickly, a pattern developed. Luke would wake and bathe and eat before returning to the Light Tree. There, he would spend the next few hours in meditation before his caretaker would bring him lunch. After lunch, Luke explored, climbing rocks and cliff faces, seeing what he could of the island. Dinner was by the fire, and sleep was deep.

He discovered the books by accident, seeking shelter in the tree after the grey skies opened to a deluge. A little drizzle of rain was fine, but a sudden soaking was something else all together.

Sopping wet and standing in a hollow formed by a great split in the trunk of the tree, Luke looked out to the storm. He was never good at predicting water-based weather, but he didn’t think the storm would last too long. Hopefully.

Looking around for a place to sit and wait, Luke noticed the shelf and the familiar shape of leather-bound pages. Growing up, he hadn’t seen a physical book until he inherited Obi-Wan’s journals, as datafiles were inexpensive and plentiful, but he was always fascinated by the style of them. He was leery about touching them, however - after so much time in the wet, he had no idea of their condition.

His resolve lasted fifteen minutes.
Carefully, Luke pulled the first tome from the shelf, noticing the same symbol from the floor embossed on the cover. Slowly, he opened the book...

And frowned, staring down at the pages. He tried again, later in the book, but the result was the same. Luke put the book back, trying another and then a third - the same thing happening each time.

Staring open-mouthed at the bookshelf, Luke began to laugh. The earliest teachings of the Jedi at his fingertips, and he couldn’t read the language.

Somewhere, Yoda was laughing at him.

In that moment, the well called to him, promising answers to his questions, solutions to his problems. Luke ignored these whispers — he had been tempted by Darkness before. He knew how to resist.

And so, another task was added to his day. After lunch, before Luke would travel, he spent an hour with the books, deep in meditation, looking for a way to understand their contents. Days turned to weeks and weeks to months. Luke sat vigil every morning, and every morning the answers would not come.

Three months in, Luke stopped trying.

That day’s wanderings had brought him once more to the Temple, and this time, Luke was certain that he was being herded, down the mossy rock, slippery from the morning’s rain. Past the tree, which seemed to be waiting, breath held, for his decision to be made, Luke walked with sure steps. Once more, Luke found himself on the cusp, staring down at the Dark.

His nephew, who had never wanted for everything, parents who loved him and family that cared, had been led willingly into the Dark, and found everything he thought he wanted suddenly out of his grasp, no matter how hard he tried.

Father, who had so much to lose, who was so tired of the constant fight and the unending fear, had let himself be pushed, and lost everything to the constant struggle, his fears made manifest.

Luke, who had lived with temptation all his life, wanting so much and witness to the horrors this life could bring, who had nearly given in only once, afraid for his sister, only to be pulled back from the precipice, this very edge, by his father. Luke, who had lived so matter-of-factly in the Light that it had never occurred to him since to fall, You have failed, your highness. I am a Jedi, like my father before me. —

Luke took a steadying breath and jumped.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

It has been *forever* and I’m so sorry everyone, but I *did it!* It’s *done!* And hopefully, it wont take me this long again.

Many thanks to Markwatnae for beta'ing, and confirming that yes, this was a finished chapter.

_Darkness spilled like ink across Luke’s eyes, absolute and burning. Inescapable._

_He’d been falling for hours, or perhaps minutes. Time had no meaning here, in the infernal black._

_Honestly, Luke wasn’t entirely sure he was falling, exactly. He certainly jumped, had felt gravity take hold, but…. _

_There was no wind. He did not feel weightless; he’d been in zero gravity, and it had felt entirely different. This was an absence._

_Yes… an absence of light, of sound, of gravity, of reality as he knew it._

_He wasn’t even sure he was on Ahch-To anymore. It didn’t seem possible, but he very much doubted that he was. It wouldn’t be the most incredible story he had heard – there had been references to a realm between worlds, a labyrinth of paths through time, linking key moments in history, weaving a web between past, present, and future._

_Luke looked, but there were no paths._

_He squinted, though he knew it was useless. His eyes, desperate for input, played shadows against the darkness, like clouds against a moonless night. They remained amorphous, distant, and absent in the Force._

_Or perhaps it was the Force that was absent._

_Luke felt like he should be panicking, to feel so cut off from the light, but he had jumped to darkness willingly. He had felt darkness before, had danced along its edge, fever bright. It had felt nothing like this void._

_He should have been afraid._

Silence echoed in the chamber, a heavy punctuation to Luke’s last statement. It wasn’t often that the Council was told as a body that it was wrong, or at least, Obi-Wan amended, not by one who spoke with such weight behind his words.

And make no mistake, there was power behind Luke when he spoke.

Obi-Wan had seen the strength of his connection to the Force more than once: the way he caught the fighter, the way he recovered during the fight with Dooku, the way he handled the Sith.
Artifacts with ease, but this? Obi-Wan wondered just how deep his wells ran.

Just how much was Luke hiding?

”I hope you know what you’re doing,” Leia murmured, leaning into his side, her voice filled with the same dry amusement in her voice that Luke remembered from the first moment they had met in truth. Aren’t you a little short for a Stormtrooper?

“I always know what I’m doing,” Luke murmured back, lying outright, but Leia just chuckled and stood back.

He held back a sigh. This wasn’t going anything like Luke had anticipated, though, to be fair, he hadn’t really planned beyond getting to the council and telling them about Palpatine. He really should have guessed that they would get stuck on Ventress – she was a recognizable threat, but merely a symptom, a symbol of the larger problem.

Palpatine.

Luke knew that blame didn’t rest solely on Palpatine’s shoulders; he had pieced together enough from salvaged data files, and talks with Leia and Han and Chewie, to know that the Republic was, at the very least, stagnating. They had ceded part of the rim to the Hutts centuries before, and the Hutt influence had only grown while the Core remained focused on their own comforts. The Jedi, who were never supposed to be anything other than themselves, were stretched far too thin. And Palpatine had wormed his way into the cracks and flaws in the system – exploiting what he could and manufacturing the rest.

There were times, before he took his leap of faith, that Luke wondered if it wouldn’t be better to let the Order die – if their presence wasn’t exactly the fatal flaw of the republic.

He couldn’t think that way now. Not after what he had seen.

Again arguing between themselves, it was clear that most of the council did not believe him about any of it - being from the future, the Dark returning to the Light: how could they, when he and Leia arrived telling stories of truths that had long since thought to be lies?

How could they not, when the proof of them was right before their eyes.

Your eyes may deceive you. Do not trust them.

Luke sighed at the memory. It was perhaps the first lesson he had learned about the Force, and here he was, several decades later, still making the same mistakes. His life, it would seem, was a series of repeated mistakes.

Of course, that was when Master Tiin had to open his mouth. ”If you are not a Sith trap, then you are nothing more than a fraud.”

“He is not!” Anakin burst out, and then bit his tongue, swallowing back the rest of what he wanted to say with clear difficulty. Luke sent him a gentle smile, fleeting and yet earnest.

”Knight Skywalker,” Windu said, cutting through the growing tension with the heavy weight of authority. “You will have your chance to report, but there is protocol to follow.”

That, at least, seemed to be a censure for the cranky Master as much as for Anakin. Luke smiled at Windu, who looked honestly a little bewildered at Luke’s reaction.
“I think now is as good a time as any,” Obi-Wan countered, gently. “Perhaps once the Council understands the series of events, the circumstances that have bought Ventress to our doorstep will appear less impossible.”

“I agree,” Kit said, and there was a round of nods from the younger councilors.


Anakin stepped forward, coming to stand between his children, hands hidden in his cloak sleeves, and he bowed to the council, the depth of respect clearly practiced though badly worn. As he watched, Luke felt a pang of longing, echoes of his long ago wishes of youth. *I wish I’d known him...*

And here he was, an Anakin who had never been Vader, who had never fallen and clawed his way back to the light.

Who did not know what it felt like to fall. In fact, between the two of them, at this moment, Luke knew far more about the darkside than his father.

Leia leaned back at that moment, raising her eyebrow at him, and he felt a tendril of her concern reach towards him, questioning. He met her with gentle reassurance, and wondered, idly, what Leia would think about the story their father was about to tell.

Anakin began without preamble, posture straight and overly formal, and very reminiscent of the way Vader had stood, the few times he and Luke had met. “It started during the last stages of the evacuation, when we were interrupted by a separatist attack. Most of the evacuees were already safely aboard transport, but subfighters appeared to fire on those still on the ground. We began our defense immediately, but one of the fighters broke through, and was headed straight for one of the children. That’s when Luke,” he hesitated, as if unsure how else to name him, before he continued on. “...caught the fighter and landed it on the other side of the fighting.”

“You mean he redirected the fighter,” said the Togruta Master, taking advantage of the pause to clarify. The strength of the flicker in her blue hologram testament to the distance between them.

Obi-Wan shook his head. “No, Master Ti, he meant ‘caught.’ I witnessed the act myself. It was most impressive, and a feat that I previously believed only Master Yoda capable of.”

Well that set the womprat among the banthas, as the councilors exchanged uneasy looks. They held their peace, however loud it was, and looked at Luke with new, assessing eyes. It was enough to make Anakin shift, subtly, and Luke wondered why his father felt such a need to protect Luke from the Council.

Still, he had faced far worse than the Council of Jedi Masters. Luke smiled, holding back his laughter as the feel of his sister’s exasperation, and said simply, “Size matters not.”

There was a story there, he knew, and knew the rest of the council would pick up on that, at least. There was no mistaking Yoda’s inflection, after all. Yoda, at least, appeared pleased that his lesson had been learned so well.

“It is quite the impressive feat, size or no,” said Master Rancisis, and Obi-Wan rolled his eyes, not caring who saw. They were past this! “But we knew this much from the report. What we don’t know is who you are or where you came from.”

Luke turned to Mace, an expression of false innocence on his face so familiar, that Obi-Wan nearly...
had to close his eyes against the coming headache.

“Did I not say?” he asked. “My name is Luke Skywalker, Jedi Master. I was introduced to the ways of the Jedi by Master Kenobi.” He nodded at Obi-Wan, who felt his vein pulse in his temple. “And trained under Master Yoda.” He grinned. “And we,” he gestured to Leia, “are from the future.”

Obi-Wan did shut his eyes, then, as the Council room exploded into chaos once more.

Then, into the rabble of the room, came a wholly unexpected sound; Yoda began to laugh. It started with a dry cackle, like the first push of a long-dried spring through baked earth, and like the spring, it soon grew into a torrent. For a moment, Obi-Wan could do nothing but stare at his great-grandmaster, aware that the rest of the Council was similarly bewildered – none matched the look on Ventress’s face, however, and Obi-Wan was going to savor that memory.

“Wrong, you say?” Yoda said, through his laughter. “Called that before, the Council has. Ignored it then, we did, and we should not.” Yoda tapped the ground with his gimmer stick in emphasis. “Skywalker, he is. My Padawan, he is, for time — pah!” Yoda hit the ground once more. “Time means nothing in the Force.”

Then, to the surprise of the council, he stood and made his way over not to Luke, but to Ventress, who was staring back with wide, shining eyes.

“Dark have been our dreams,” Yoda said. “Fear, anger – in they creep, with no rest. Yes – no rest.” Yoda raised his claw, and it hovered in the air between them. “Always running,” Yoda said. “Darkness creeps.” He lowered his hand.

“My choice,” Ventress, her harsh voice shaking.

Yoda’s ears lowered, in a display of profound sadness and grief. “Yes,” he agreed. “But not a choice that should have been put before you.”

“Choices are not locked in time,” Luke said. “They are built up though the past and extend into the future. Life is choice – is constantly choosing the path to walk, and as long as one lives, one can choose to leave one path to pursue another.” For the first time Obi-Wan heard the Master speaking. This was a man who had learned his lessons, who had in turn taught them to others.

Force, Obi-Wan was reminded so forcefully of Qui-Gon, he nearly couldn’t breathe.

“What’s to stop her from falling in the future?” Master Mundi asked, and Obi-Wan could hear, beneath the cool serenity of her tone, an honest inquiry. It was an important question, and one Obi-Wan very much wanted to hear the answer to. “She’s succumbed to darkness before – what’s to stop her from succumbing again?”

“What’s to stop you from falling now?” Leia asked, voice sharp-edged. “The galaxy is in chaos, Darkness is everywhere, every victory is met with two defeats…what keeps you in the Light?”

He sat back, as if stunned. “I am a Jedi!”

“So was Dooku,” Obi-Wan said, but gently. “We are trained to pursue the light – trained from infancy, so that it no longer feels like a choice, but becomes a habit, and then spend our Padawan years learning to understand our connection to the greater world, to know oneself and one’s connection with the Force. But you cannot fully know yourself until you are aware of the choices you make, unconsciously, every day.” He met Mace’s eyes. “The Order is in crisis,” he said, echoing arguments that stretched back farther than his own knighthood. “There is not a Jedi in the order who has not faced Darkness. Sometimes more than once,” Obi-Wan added, with a wry nod at
Ventress, who had regained enough of her composure to smirk back at him. Force help him, Obi-Wan was beginning to like her.

Mace sighed, and Obi-Wan heard warning bells begin in the back of his mind. “Several nights ago, I was woken from sleep by the worst shatterpoint that I have ever witnessed. I saw several things, horrors that I hope never come true, but the sum of what I had seen was clear: the end of the Jedi Order.” Mace turned to Luke. “Isn’t it?”

It was an odd request from Mace, who, despite his ability to see, refused to put much weight on future visions.

“It is,” Luke said. “A choice stands before you: listen to us, and change your path, or the Jedi, the Republic is serves, the galaxy itself – will fall.”

Sabé frowned at her wrist chrono. Padmé was late, and that wasn’t like her - not without Anakin here, to distract her. She looked over at Moteé, where she was sitting at her desk, quietly typing up her report.

Sabé liked Moteé. All handmaidens must be sharp, quick witted and decisive, but Moteé was particularly astute when it came to the workings of the Galactic Senate. It was why she most often accompanied Padmé to the senate meetings.

It used to be Sabé herself who went, but if she was honest with herself, Moteé was better at it. Sabé preferred the courtly proceedings on Naboo, and had quite had her fill of the senate at 14, during what she believed to be an opening salvo of the war in which they currently found themselves. (It wasn’t a common opinion, she knew, but it was one the handmaidens all shared).

She checked her chrono again. Padmé was still late.

“Checking your watch won’t make her appear.”

Sabé looked up. Moteé was peering at her from over her screen, calm expression not quite masking the tension around her eyes. Sabé signed. At least Moteé saw it too.

“It’s just not like her,” Sabé said, sitting heavily on the low couch in the middle of the room. As head of security, Padmé’s safety was her prime concern. Frustrated, she crossed her arms. “I knew I should have gone with her. She gets into enough trouble—”

“At the Chancellor’s office?” Moteé asked. “The same Chancellor who has been her mentor for years?”

Sabé knew what she meant. If anybody would take Padmé’s safety seriously it would be Chancellor Palpatine, but that didn’t stop an uneasy ache from forming in Sabé’s gut.

And she had long ago learned to trust her gut.

Sabé was on the verge of saying kriff it and heading over to the Chancellor’s office herself — better to be embarrassed because she was concerned than have something happen because she was —

The door swooshed open, and Padmé strode in, as if she wasn’t several hours later than she should have been. Sabé sprung to her feet, smile already growing as she took a step towards her friend...

...but Padmé didn’t stop walking. She didn’t take her cloak off, or pause to remove the heavy
uppermost layer of her headdress. She didn’t tease Sabé for her worry, or ask Moteé about the latest episode of Love Among the Jedi, which all of them watched and none would admit to any except each other.

She didn’t say anything to Sabé at all, or even acknowledge Moteé’s existence. She swept by, as if she were walking along the senate corridor, and headed straight into her personal office, leaving Moteé and Sabé to look at each other in confusion and concern.

Sabé’s gut was all but screaming at her now.

Without taking her eyes from the door, Sabé pulled out her communicator, thumbing a code she never thought she would have to use.

In the chaos of the council chamber, Anakin’s comm began to flash.
If Ahsoka had any lingering doubt that Luke and Leia were actually Anakin’s children, the way they almost casually sent the Council into fits would have been enough to convince her. For the moment, however, the chamber was quiet as the Council processed Luke’s warning.

For herself, Ahsoka didn’t know what to think; nothing had made sense since Skyguy had told them the truth about everything. About Padmé (which, honestly, she already knew. Everyone already knew. The shinies on Kamino knew about Anakin and Padmé.)

...it was possible that Obi-Wan hadn’t known. He’d looked rather pale, when Anakin had told them.

Ahsoka peered around Anakin to look at her Grandmaster. He still looked pale. She frowned, betting on the Council’s distraction to keep them from noticing her obvious unease. Something was happening, something bigger than she had realized.

And it wasn’t just because Ventress was standing before the Council and hadn’t, you know, burst into flames or anything. No, she was free and rejecting the Dark. Or, at least, rejecting the Sith. Ahsoka had caught that little distinction, even if it seemed to pass by most of the Council.

Either way, Ahsoka knew that in the Force anything was possible, and if the Force was telling her of Ventress’s sincerity...well, it was no more weird than having Skyguy’s adult children here, berating the Council.

Honestly, time travel seemed to make more sense. After all, there were three days missing from Ahsoka’s memories, spent on a planet that never existed, so time travel? Not that as far a stretch as a Ventress’s personality transplant.

Almost as if she had heard Ahsoka’s thoughts, Ventress turned to her and sneered, showing her teeth.

...Okay, so her personality hadn’t changed that much, but from everything she had been told, a Sith killing their master for power was one thing, but betraying them to join the opposition? Was nearly unheard of.

In the tense quiet, Anakin’s comm alert was staggeringly loud, making even him jump. He quickly reached for the device that sat at his belt, and though their bond, Ahsoka felt his alarm spike.
“Pardon me, Masters, I have to...” he said, distracted enough by what he read that he didn’t finish his thought, turning and quickly leaving the chamber to answer the call. Ahsoka moved to follow, bowing to the Council, and slipping through the closing door before they could stop her.

Anakin had made it as far as the other side of the entrance hall, his body silhouetted against the skyline and his face in shadow, hidden so she could not see his expression. She hardly needed to; his shoulders were tight and he had curled protectively over his comm.

Padmé Ahsoka thought, worry following quickly. There were only a few things that could get Skyguy looking like that, and both she and Obi-Wan were fine.

She caught the tail end of the call as she jogged up.

“I’m on my way,” he said, and ended the call.

“What’s the mission?” Ahsoka asked, and Anakin startled. Dread formed in the pit of her stomach — it was unlike him not to notice her — and she frowned. “What’s wrong with Padmé?”

Anakin shook his head. “Sabé didn’t know for sure, but she said Padmé’s not acting like herself, and I believe her.” He paused, and looked at Ahsoka. “How did you know it was about Padmé?”

Ahsoka raised her eyebrow at him, and Anakin sighed, nodding. “Fine, fair. For the record, you look like Obi-Wan when you do that.’

“Good,” Ahsoka said. “I’m coming with you.”

“No,” Anakin raised a hand to stop her. “I need you here.”

“But—”

“But they’re expecting me, alone,” Anakin pressed, speaking over her firmly but not unkindly. “If I show up with reinforcements, it may tip our hand.”

Ahsoka leaning back to consider her master. “Now that sounds like something Master Obi-Wan would say.”

Anakin smiled, wryly. “Despite his insistence otherwise, I do listen when he talks. Just because he disagrees with my plans doesn’t mean they’re not strategically sound.” He sobered. “But I also need you to help keep the rest of my family safe.” He took her by the shoulders, squeezing gently. “They may be adults, but they are still my children, which means they are magnets for trouble.”

Ahsoka blinked. “What kind of trouble could they get up to in the Council chamber?”

Anakin blinked twice before he smiled tiredly. “I keep forgetting that you never knew Master Qui-Gon,” he admitted, and Ahsoka perked up. Neither Obi-Wan nor Anakin spoke of Obi-Wan’s training master often, but she had head stories in the creche. If this was to be anything like those stories, it wouldn’t be dull.

“My children are about to tell the Council several things that they do not want to hear,” Anakin said, “and because they are my children, they will be met with suspicion when they should be heeded. I need you to keep an eye on them, and make sure they don’t end up in trouble that they can’t get themselves out of.”

Ahsoka tilted her head, considering. “Deal.” She held up her hand to shake. “But I’m telling Master Obi-Wan.”
Anakin grinned, shaking her hand by clasping just past her wrist. “I'm counting on it.”

Leia stepped forward, hands folded together in front of her, in the pose of a traditional storyteller. She wasn’t, actually, a skilled storyteller, not compared to the storytellers of her youth, who had been known to make entire audiences weep with a well-placed word, but the art shared much with political oration, and *that* she was good at. When she spoke, her voice was pitched just loud enough to be heard in the silence, drawing all attention to her words.

“The official story was one of a long-awaited victory and a quickly countered betrayal. Peace, with the surrender of Sepratist forces, only to have the Jedi stage a coup in a desperate bid for power. They were quickly defeated by the loyal forces of the Army of the Republic, thus saving the citizen another long and bloody war. The Chancellor, though weakened by the attempted assassination, declared the newly reformed Republic the Galactic Empire - a new age of peace and unity in an age without the Jedi.”

Leia paused, letting the news sink in. She saw the frown form on Master Windu’s face, the dawning horror on General Kenobi’s, and spoke before she could be interrupted.

“It was all lies, of course. Propaganda to hide the truth of what occurred - that the Jedi had discovered a plot that would destroy the Republic from the inside, and that tried — and failed — to defeat the threat that loomed over us all.

“There were only a few who survived who knew the truth — who were there when the troopers turned on their Jedi at the order of their true Master, the Sith Lord Sidious, or when his apprentice, Darth Vader, stormed the Temple...*this* Temple, and left it nothing more than a burning pyre. My father, Senator Bail Organa, was one of them. General Kenobi. Master Yoda. You both survived, and lived long enough for Luke to find you for his training.”

She felt the unease at the back of the room, and Leia felt for Rex and Cody at the back of the room. Rex, at least, Leia knew had taken no part in the purges, but did not know what happened to Cody.

“There were some who, tired of the civil war or simply too weakened to resist, welcomed the Empire’s rule. But there were also those who did not take to oppression so readily, those who had begun to see the downward spiral of the Republic and sought reform — only to turn rebel after the official declaration of the Empire. Together, they formed an Alliance - the Alliance to restore the Republic.”

“For twenty-five years we fought against the Empire,” Leia said, and stopped. They were still fighting against the Empire. Palpatine was dead, but those who followed him, those who reveled in the fear and the hate, those *pathetic* life forms who would rather crush others under their heel than reach out a hand to raise them up, and allowed to fester they fought on, fueled by anger.

“The galaxy is broken,” Leia said, the truth of her words echoing through the Force like the ringing of war bells — there was more at stake than a system of government. “In some deep, fundamental way, there is a crack through everything. I have screamed myself hoarse trying to get those with the ability to *do* something to take action before it was too late.” She raised her head. “I am not screaming any longer.”

Sabé was waiting for him when he landed on the speeder platform, looking unruffled in the way that all handmaidens had mastered, but her unease was still palpable in the air between them.

“Thank you for your swift answer, Knight Skywalker,” Sabé said with a faint bow. “I hope my fears are for naught.”

The formality rankled — and told Anakin what he needed to know. Someone may be listening — someone with ill-intent.

“The Senator’s safety is of no little importance,” Anakin said, kicking himself for not paying closer attention to Obi-Wan’s lessons when he was younger. He was so much better at this sort of covert conversation then Anakin. “Best to be sure now, rather than be sorry later. And besides,” Anakin risked a familiar grin. “It wouldn’t be the first time the Senator’s life had been threatened. You did the right thing, Sabé.”

Sabé’s lips twitched. Message received.

“The Senator is in her office,” Sabé said. “I’ll be in the room next door, if I am needed.”

“Well don’t leave us all in suspense, Junior,” Ventress drawled, and Obi-Wan looked to her in surprise, having become so accustomed to her presence that he had nearly forgotten she was there.

Luke’s beard twitched as he suppressed a smile, but he nodded at Vantress all the same, as if thanking her for the reminder. He cleared his throat before he began.

“For reasons that I desperately hope never again become necessary, I was forced to search the galaxy for... remnants. Pieces of Jedi history that had been forgotten in this time, or believed long-since lost.” He paused, head bowed and eyes shadowed. “It was in the early days of my search that I discovered Ach-To, and in my arrogance, I did not recognize the importance of that planet for decades to come.”
Obi-Wan frowned. Ach-To? The name was familiar, but vaguely, like the name of a character on a child’s holodrama. Where had he heard the name before? A quick glance around showed similar confusion for the other councilors — save for Yoda, who had his face bent to hide his expression in shadow. It was very unlike the Grandmaster, and Obi-Wan frowned to see it.

“When terrible circumstances demanded my return, I entered what very well have been the first Jedi temple, long abandoned save for the caretakers who toil there still, doing what they can to eek out a simple life among the rocks.”

Luke paused, but Obi-Wan sensed not the timing of the storyteller, but a hesitation born of pain.

“I went, looking for answers about the Dark Side,” he said, and behind him, Leia closed her eyes, as if feeling his pain. No — as if feeling her own.

“To my horror, I found them.”

Gasping for breath, Luke clawed his way from the Abyss, soaked with sweat or saltwater, or blood, it made no difference. It was all. It was none.

Spilling over the edge, he lay sprawled, chest heaving as he stared at the ceiling, mind reeling with horror almost too great too comprehend. Already, his mind shied away from what he had seen, as if his primitive, fleshy brain was trying desperately to protect him.

He had done what he could, but it wasn’t enough. As vast as his connection to the Force, it wasn’t enough. Not to stop, or leave.

He could never leave.

More, no one could come to him. Leia would try. He knew there was no Force in this galaxy that could keep her from him if she put her mind to it. So, she could never know where he was, could never find out, or she would learn the truth of his exile too late.

He could withstand many things, but to lose his sister to what lay beyond was not one of them.

Luke couldn’t risk it.

Tears streamed down the sides of his face, mingling with the ichor that clung to him, as he reached for his connection to the Force.

Heart breaking, Luke severed the connection.

Silence echoed loudly, trapped as he was for the first time in his life within the confines of his own mind — separated, finally, in truth.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to the air above him, and dissolved.

“I had discovered a rift,” Luke said, and his own voice echoed hollowly in his ears. “No — I found a wound, a gasping tear in the very fabric of reality that ached, like it was infected.”

He paused, considering. “Maybe it was infected, considering what oozed out.”

“What came through?” asked the Noutolan councilor. His good cheer had disappeared, and he
gripped the sides of his chair firmly, though he gave no other indication of distress. Luke felt a little bad for knocking out his good mood — as far as Luke was concerned, this whole council would benefit from a little more good-cheer. Or at least, a halfway decent sense of humor.

Luke met his gaze head-on. “Darkness. Not the Dark Side as we know it, with the Sith or any of the known Dark Side cults. Those are all disciples of the Dark Side of our reality, the other side of the spectrum from the Light, decay to counter the Light’s growth, but still the same spectrum. This was something... other.”

His words stumbled to a halt as his mind skittered over his memory of what he had seen. The more time had passed, the less he could remember — and aside from that odd vision in Dooku’s fortress, none of his memories were particularly visual.

“Whatever it was, it was hungry. It eats the Force, breaks it apart and unravels time and space and reality itself. It breaks the bonds of the Force, leaving only void.”

He looked at Leia. “And it was aware. Already, it’s tendrils have seeped into the galaxy, though it doesn’t have the stranglehold it will should the Emperor come to full power. It feeds on the chaos of the Sith — the fear and the terror, but it also feeds on the Light.”

“Snoke,” Leia whispered.

“A servant,” Luke confirmed. “Or, a mouthpiece, perhaps — one who pretended to more authority and power than they actually had.”

“Are you saying,” Master Windu began, sounding far too tired for a man of his years. “That this Sith Lord is being fueled by some extra-planar reality-eater?”

Luke looked at him, eyebrows raised, as if to say ‘So what if I am?’ but what came out of his mouth was far less caustic. “I’m saying, the lack of action on behalf of the Order has allowed for abuses to breed within the galaxy, allowing the Sith to manipulate and take advantage of the failures within the Republic — and the failure to achieve balance, and the chaos that erupts when the Sith’s plans come to fruition, has allowed this entity to take its first steps into our reality, making balance impossible. The Sith must be stopped. Balance must be restored.”

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, that particular phrase a refrain that haunted his dreams. Balance.

“Tell me, Master Skywalker, how exactly does one achieve balance?” Kit asked, and to his credit, he seemed to mean his question in truth. “It has been a contested concern of this Council for generations, and we are no closer to the truth.”

“Where has Knight Skywalker disappeared to?” Master Tiin said. “Restoring Balance is supposed to be his responsibility.”

“Oh, come now,” Obi-Wan protested, though it was drowned out by Leia’s sharp “What?”

The Council turned to him, and Obi-Wan felt a deep sense of deja-vu as he found himself cursing Qui-Gon Jinn’s more impulsive actions. He cleared his throat, gaining Leia’s attention.

“There are many of us, myself included, who believe Anakin to be the fulfillment of a prophecy - a jedi born of the Force who will defeat the Sith and restore balance to the galaxy,”

“Well he could get on that at anytime,” Tiin grumbled, quieter but still clearly audible.
“He’s a bit busy fighting in our war,” Obi-Wan snapped, patience worn thin.

“Are you saying,” Leia began, voice cold, “that you left the fate of the galaxy in the hands of one person?”

Tiin sniffed, on surer footing with Leia, who seemed to eschew being a Jedi, though Obi-Wan wasn’t actually convinced that she wasn’t. Obi-Wan thought about intervening, but honestly, Tiin had called this upon himself. “It is his destiny.”

“His—!” She cut herself off, throwing her hands up. “The fate of that galaxy is too big to leave in the hands of any one person! You might as well say you would welcome absolute rule!”

“There is a great difference between following the will of the Force and authoritarianism.”

“I don’t see why we should pin this on Skywalker,” Rancisis said. “It is clear that he failed. The very presence of his children prove that he is unqualified for the life he is living.”

“Unqualified!” Obi-Wan snapped. “Anakin is an exemplary Jedi! The brightest knight this Order has seen in decades!”

“You’re not listening,” Luke pressed. “If Anakin Falls, so does the galaxy.”

“The floor fell from beneath Obi-Wan. “Falls?” he asks faintly, question going unheard beneath the shouting of Rancisis and Tiin.

Mace called for quiet. “What aren’t you telling us?”

The only thing that made traveling so much worth it, was the way it felt coming home. Seeing Padmé’s smile light up her face. Feeling the warm weight of her in his arms. Smelling the sweet flower of her perfume. The taste of her lips.
So far, there had been nothing out of the ordinary — Padmé had looked up when he had entered, a brilliant smile crossed her face as she stood to greet him, fairly throwing herself into his arms. He had caught her with ease, holding her tightly to him.

“I’ve missed you,” Padmé moaned in his ear. “So much.”

“I missed you, too,” Anakin breathed.

“Show me,” Padmé demanded, smile curling wickedly.

Anakin grinned and carried her to the desk.

“You asked before, if there was a way to restore balance,” Luke began. Leia looked at him sharply. She hadn’t heard that tone of voice often — and rarely since Jabba’s death.

“I do know one way. You can continue to do nothing,” Luke began, almost pleasantly, if you didn’t know him. “You can sit here, away from the galaxy — except when you go out and fight a losing war — a war designed not to keep a fractured galaxy together, but to cause as much damage to as many lives as quickly as possible — and, as isolated as you are, the lasting memory of this conflict will the the way the Jedi sweep in and leave disaster in their wake.

“Then, when the galaxy has been chewed up and spat out, when victory, as much as it could be, is at your doorstep, you can die.”

Unlike his sister, Luke was a natural storyteller, raised as he was on desert stories, and the weight of his presence only amplified his skill.

“It happens suddenly. Exactly how was lost to the casualties of the conflict, but within minutes the Jedi are declared traitors to the Republic, and are executed en mass — falling where they stand, their blood spilling across the known galaxy, fueling the Sith’s final push for total control.

“The Order dies to birth the new Sith Empire.”

“Impossible,” Obi-Wan whispered, giving voice to the unquiet in the room. “There are too many of us.”

“There are a few survivors,” Luke admits. “Most last only a few years, hunted down by the Emperor’s Inquisitors, and his chief enforcer, Darth Vader.”

There, Luke faltered, falling silent. “He survived, too, though that wouldn’t be clear for decades. I have often wondered if the strain of survival didn’t help fuel his Fall.”

“That is the second time you’re mentioned this Vader,” Adi said. “Who is he?”

Luke gazed at her. “Isn’t it obvious? Darth Vader is Anakin Skywalker.”

The pressure in Obi-Wan’s head was only getting worse. There was something he was trying to remember — something important. If only he could....

“Focus on the present, my Padawan,” Qui-Gon’s voice echoed in his mind. “The memory you seek belongs to a time that will no longer happen. The past is gone and the future unknown. All you have is this moment. Breathe.”

Years of reflex kicked in, and Obi-Wan breathed. What did he know about the present moment?
The Galaxy was in chaos. He, Anakin, everyone was exhausted, and that lead to mistakes. To Falling.

Anakin had married Padme. They will have children. Powerful children, who, like their father, were not understood by this Council, and were, therefore, being treated as hostile when not openly ignored.
Something happened and Anakin Fell.
And Obi-Wan understood.
It was all going to happen again.

Kissing Padme always felt like a circuit being completed, an electrifying sense of wholeness that filled Anakin’s senses, blinding him to all save the vast ocean of the Force, and the rising tide of the love between them.

So, when kissing Padme turned sour, Anakin noticed.

Pulling back, klaxons blaring in the back of his mind, Anakin frowned softly. He raised his flesh hand, running his thumb across her cheek. “What’s wrong?” he asked, quietly.

“Nothing,” Padme said, leaning in. “Except that you stopped kissing me.”

Anakin ducked back, avoiding her kiss. “Angel, it’s me. Tell me.”

A shadow crossed her face, a seething anger that Anakin had never before seen. When Padme’s temper was roused, her anger was incandescent. This was...foul.

“There’s nothing to tell,” Padme insisted, but Anakin could hear the hollow ringing of her words now, could feel it like Boontaspice on his lips when she kissed him.

Anakin gripped her shoulders, holding her still, feeling the Force tremble in his words ”Tell me.”
Padme stared back with wide eyes, and when she opened her mouth, nothing came out.

“There is another way to stop it,” Rancisis said, though even he no longer seemed certain. “Kill him now, and avoid the whole issue.” The Council didn’t like that, and protests came from all quarters.

“He hasn’t done anything!” Kit protested.

“You cannot execute the innocent!” Deepa added, censuring.

“Is he?” He turned to Obi-Wan. “Has Skywalker truly done nothing that would speak to his path to the Dark Side? No one Falls suddenly.”

Obi-Wan swallowed, thinking of Anakin’s haunted eyes, and the unbearable heat of twinned suns. “No one’s Fall is assured,” he said, voice dry and cracking. “This war has been pushing us all past our limits. Show me one Jedi who has never raised their blade in anger, and you can make them councilor!”

“I Fell suddenly,” Luke said, and the room stopped. “I jumped in with two feet - or did you not
hear what I said before? Falling is not the end. I returned. *Father* returned. Ventress is climbing as we speak. Is it easy? — no. It is a choice, a constant choice to stay in the Light. The sway of Darkness is like the call of spice — once Fallen, you know exactly what it is you reject.”

Luke must have taught a padawan, the way he delivered lectures. Obi-Wan wondered what they had been like — and if Luke had ever worried that they would Fall.

“But,” Luke continued, “you also know exactly where the tipping point it, how near you can go without sliding down again. Since my Fall and return, I have been only more assured of my position in the Light. I cannot be tempted by an outside force, for I have faced the Darkness within me and I know myself.”

Mace sat straight in his chair, a silent signal that drew attention to him. It was moments like this that reminded Obi-Wan why Mace was such an excellent choice for Council head, the way he drew attention and command so effortlessly. It made him an effective arbiter, and a decisive general.

“You have given this Council *much* to debate,” he said with an air of weary finality, and Obi-Wan noticed with a little amusement that Luke did not look at all sorry for that fact. Neither did Leia, in fact, and Obi-Wan got the impression that these two would like nothing more than to continue this *discussion* until the Council were forced to admit defeat.

Finding himself agreeing with them, Obi-Wan almost wanted to watch it happen, but his comm signaled once again at his hip, and Anakin’s alarm was sounding clearly through the Force.

“Oh, Mace,” Mace said, and Obi-Wan raised his chin, knowing none of his distraction showed on his face, but also knowing that Mace knew of it anyway. “I leave them in your care.”

Obi-Wan nodded, getting the message clear: Make sure they don’t cause any trouble.

Commands like that didn’t use to *chafe* this badly, surely.

Either way, the meeting was over, and Obi-Wan stood, raising his hand in a smooth gesture, hoping to quickly usher them out of the chamber before anyone else opened their mouth and rubbed the Council’s faces in centuries-old flaws in their thinking.

“Kenobi,” Master Tiin said, coming up behind him. Sighing, Obi-Wan closed his eyes, hopefully out of view, and turned to face the master with a smile.

“Yes, Master Tiin?” Obi-Wan refused to forget Tiin’s rank when addressed, mostly because he refused to lose whatever advantage such a deference gave him, even though Tiin rarely used Obi-Wan’s rank in advance. “If it’s something that will take longer than a moment, I request that you come find me later.” He gestured vaguely in the direction of the party behind him. “I have some pressing responsibilities.”

Tiin blinked, as if he hadn’t realized that Obi-Wan would choose Anakin’s children over himself, and Obi-Wan had to push down his frustration. He frowned, and then waved it off.

“Later, then,” he said, and bowed shallowly. Obi-Wan nodded in response, and watched for a moment as he tottered off, some vague concern swirling. Almost absently, Obi-Wan lead his charged from the room. For once, the atrium outside of the Council chambers was empty – even the senior padawan who often worked as Council secretary was absent from his desk, giving Obi-Wan a much-needed opportunity to think, to *plan*—

But as always, there was no *time*. He shook his head, clearing his thoughts as Ahsoka approached.
“Ahsoka,” Obi-Wan greeted, “Anakin—”

“Went to Padmé,” she said quickly, keeping her voice low. “Sabé commed earlier. Something is wrong, but she didn’t know what.”

“Wrong how?” Obi-Wan demanded, but was answered by a buzzing at his hip. He shared a look with Ahsoka, nodding towards the others. “Watch them for me – I have a bad feeling that I’ll have to leave in a hurry.”

Ahsoka nodded, saluting with two fingers in a gesture that just screamed Anakin in so many ways that made Obi-Wan’s heart ache, but there was no time for that now. Obi-Wan activated his comm, and the glowing blue image of Anakin’s torso appeared in his palm. He seemed harried, yet whole, his attention split between Obi-Wan and something off to the left, where Obi-Wan couldn’t see.

“Master,” Anakin said, and Obi-Wan blinked, alarm rising. Anakin had never been one to call Obi-Wan by his official title, preferring his name, or a series of shortened monikers, and so it had become a signal between them, especially once Anakin had passed his trials. Something was very wrong, and Anakin couldn’t be honest about how bad the situation was. “I could use some assistance at Senator Amidala’s residence, if you are available.”

“Knight Skywalker,” Obi-Wan began, message received. “You know my work on the Council keeps me busy.” Is this an official request, or something to be kept from the record?

“I would never wish to come between you and your duties to the Council, Master.” Top secret, and urgent.

“I’ll be there when my schedule allows. I am on my way, as fast as I can. “Kenobi, Out.”

“Thank you, Master.” Please hurry. “I will patiently await your arrival.”

Obi-Wan shut off his comm. “I have to go,” he said aloud. “Cody, stay with Ahsoka and Rex.”

“Sir,” Cody protested, but Obi-Wan was already leaving, putting on just enough speed to clear the doors before he chose a conveniently abandoned balcony and leapt.

It was the fastest way to the shuttle bay, but Obi-Wan didn’t need Ahsoka picking up any more bad habits.

“Where’s he running off to?” Leia murmured quietly, and Luke shook his head, watching Obi-Wan walk quickly from them.

It was still odd to see Obi-Wan this young. Tired and pained as he currently was from the war, there was a vitality, a confidence to him that Luke had only ever seen in shadowed glimpses. As powerful a figure as Obi-Wan had been in Luke’s past, he had been diminished, by the loss of Anakin, the Jedi he had grown up with, had fought beside, and felt die. What had remained had been scoured clean by the desert, shrunk down to its essential parts like the bones of the Kryat returning to the sand from which they had been formed.

“That was pointless,” Ventress hissed. “They didn’t listen to a word you said.”

“Oh, they listened,” Luke said, and smiled when Ventress turned her glare on him. Luke had always promised to not be as opaque as his own teachers had been, but he had to admit, speaking in riddles and contradictions was entertaining, especially with a student as responsive as Ventress.
A student. How in the seven hells did Luke end up with a student?

“‘We have much to discuss’ is fancy diplomatic speak for ‘we don’t like what you’re saying so we’re kicking you out,’” Leia explained. “They absolutely listened; the real question is if they will allow the truth to change their current course of action.”

Ventress snorted, making her opinion on that clear. Luke couldn’t say he disagreed with her, necessarily. The Council, like Obi-Wan, wasn’t anything like he had believed. More petty, for one. Hidebound. Assured of their own superiority.

Oh no, Skywalker, he thought to himself. You wouldn’t know anything about that.

Then again, considering the confused way Obi-Wan, and then Yoda, had viewed Luke as a student, the sense that Luke was both not meeting and far exceeding expectations at the same time… Perhaps Luke was the one not seeing the truth before his own face.

It certainly wouldn’t be the first time.
Obi-Wan hit the side of the temple running, opening his awareness of the Force wide to guide his steps and gather greater speed. It had been years since Obi-Wan had put the more…unorthodox lessons of his youth to use with such frequency, but he remembered the way well enough. He dropped several stories to the top of the ziggurat, boots hitting the smooth panels that lined the steps, sliding down from there. The wind gathered in his cloak as it billowed behind him, slowing him like a parachute so that when he jumped, he landed gracefully on the landing platform.

The padawan on duty watched his approach with gratifyingly wide eyes, though Obi-Wan was regretful that the lad couldn’t seem to find the words to speak. Still, Obi-Wan was in his speeder car quickly, and was off to the Senate district.

Even if Obi-Wan hadn’t known where Padmé’s apartments were, there was no mistaking the Jedi craft that was parked just outside her door. There would be no escaping that fact that there would soon be two such vehicles, but there was no faster way that would avoid it. Obi-Wan parked, much more carefully than Anakin must have – and thankfully there was enough space for a second speeder car.

Jumping down to the platform, Obi-Wan was surprised to see no one to greet him – it was by no means a formality that Obi-Wan insisted upon, but it was a precaution of Padmé’s. Worrying still, the door opened when he drew near, with no need for a security pass.

Obi-Wan drew his lightsaber from his belt, though he did not yet ignite it – the Force was urgent around him, but there was no immediate danger.

Well, not yet, at least.

Obi-Wan entered Padmé’s apartments and upon seeing the common area empty, reached out his senses to find Anakin. The other Jedi was agitated, so much so that Obi-Wan had to pull back, and he shook his head, ears ringing. Anakin’s presence had filled the rooms – Obi-Wan couldn’t get a pinpoint on his location.

Well, only thing for it.

“Anakin?” Obi-Wan called out, thumb on his lightsaber’s power switch. “Where are you?”

To his left down the hallway, a door opened and a familiar head, uncowled for once, peered out at him. Sabé. Obi-Wan spread his hands, and she gestured him forward.

“Sabé, where is—” He stopped short as he hit the doorway, seeing the scene before him. “What in the seven hells is going on here?”

He had found Anakin, alright – Anakin, Padmé and Dormé as well, all crowded into the room that must be Padmé’s office.
The woman herself was bound to her office chair with what looked to be duct bonding tape, her mouth stuffed with a colorful cloth that Obi-Wan thought he vaguely recognized as a scarf that she had worn once when visiting Anakin. Her eyes widened when she saw Obi-Wan, and the volume of her muffled words increased. She leaned forward, as if she was trying to stand, bindings be damned, but Dormé placed a hand on her shoulder and pushed her back down.

Obi-Wan glared incredulously at Anakin, even as he moved forward to undo Padmé’s gag. “There had better be a good explanation for this!” Thankfully, Sabé and Dormé both let him: he had no desire to fight with Padmé’s handmaidens – even with the Force, it would be a close fight.

“There is!” Anakin insisted. “But I also may have…panicked.”

“Clearly,” Obi-Wan ground out, fighting with the knot. While Anakin’s skills had always leaned towards the mechanical, he had turned to knot tying as a “helpful” hobby while testing and refining the dexterity of his left hand. Then, he had gotten bored and his knots had gotten inventive. He looked at Padmé. “I am sorry – we will get to the bottom of this, I promise.”

Padmé narrowed her eyes, but thankfully didn’t try speaking though the gag again.

After a moment of awkward silence, Obi-Wan looked up. “Well? Is someone going to explain?”

Sabé stepped forward. “I called Anakin here,” she said. “I was concerned for Padmé when she returned early from her meeting. She wasn’t acting herself. Dormé agreed with me, but when we approached her, she waved it off. I thought perhaps that Anakin could at least confirm that nothing had been done to her.”

Just then, the knot gave way beneath Obi-Wan’s fingers, and he eased the gag from Padmé’s mouth. She worked her jaw for a moment – just how long had she been trussed up like this? – and resumed her glare.

“I was fine before the people I trusted decided to treat me like some sort of enemy agent! This is not how civilized people settle their concerns!”

Anakin winced, and Obi-Wan couldn’t blame him. He better have a very good reason for this, or they would all be in a world of trouble.

“But you weren’t fine,” Anakin said, insisting. “Padmé, we’ve been together for years; I know the patterns of your mind. You may not have felt anything wrong.” Here, he turned to Obi-Wan. “But someone” he said with an unsubtle lean on the word, and Obi-Wan rubbed a hand over his mustache (message received), “has tampered with your thoughts.

“What?!” Padmé hissed, and for the life of him, Obi-Wan couldn’t tell if she was more angry or more horrified. “You’ve been in my mind—”

Obi-Wan cleared his throat, and Padmé turned to him, not bothering to cool her temper. Wonderful.

“I am sure Anakin hasn’t gone digging — he has better morals, and better manners, than that,” he began, trying to allay her fears and explain. “But the stronger one becomes in the Force, the more aware one is of its flow and in tune with its will – the less boundaries such as the mind seem to exist. We are trained from an early age to shield our thoughts, as much to keep ourselves in as the rest of the galaxy out. It is a reality all Jedi must grapple with, though, as I’m sure you’ll understand, not a reality we like to make public.” He smiled, reassuring. “It’s more akin to being familiar with one’s body language than true mind reading.”

Padmé blinked, as if she hadn’t been expecting an explanation – or, at least, an explanation that
considered her own feelings on the matter. Obi-Wan resisted the urge to frown. He understood now what Sabé and Anakin had meant. On the surface, there was nothing overtly off about Padmé’s behavior, but there was a subtlety, a *nuance* that was off somehow – though he couldn’t put his finger on it. Then, she frowned.

“Are you saying another Jedi did this to me?” She asked, teeth bared.

Obi-Wan leaned back in surprise. “That’s highly unlikely,” he said. “But there are other Force users in the Galaxy, and I would put little faith in *their* motivations.”

“It’s impossible,” Padmé said. “The only Force users that I have been around are *you* both.”

“That you know of,” Anakin countered. “Even Jedi get caught by surprise sometimes.”

“I am not talking to you,” Padmé countered, frostily. Anakin stepped back, as if struck.

Obi-Wan wished he could say that there was little doubt that someone had tampered with Padmé’s mind, but honestly, her reactions were very reasonable for someone who had been falsely accused and detained. “It’s quite simple to check,” Obi-Wan offered. “And then, either we have the proof we need and a better idea how to undo whatever damage may have been done, *Or,*” he spoke a little more loudly, to prevent Padmé from arguing. “We have proof that everyone over reacted, and Anakin, Sabé, and Dormé may dutifully begin their groveling.”

Padmé’s scowl didn’t change. “This is not funny.”

“Senator, I am not laughing,” Obi-Wan countered and ran his senses over the outermost layer of her mind- the public layer that was what any sentient not a psychic null would perceive simply by being nearby. It wouldn’t tell Obi-Wan anything detailed, but Padmé, and all the Handmaidens, had received basic psychic training in the form of meditation, to help protect state secrets from prying minds. It was nothing compared to the more focused training or shielding of a Jedi, but it was more than the average civilian. If there had been a breech, even a clever breech, there was always the possibility of a hole or weakness left in her defenses. If he found such a spot, it may convince Padmé to let him have a closer look.

“Padmé, we are your oldest friends,” Sabé said, quietly. “You must know that we would not resort to such methods if we felt there was another way and expect that you would do the same for us.”

Padmé’s thoughts rippled in irritation, and – there. If physical, it would be no more than a pin prick, but it was there all the same, still oily with the dark side. Obi-Wan breathed through the dread.

“Senator,” Obi-Wan began, glancing at Anakin, who straightened in alarm. “Padmé,” he met her eyes, still guarded by anger. “I know you have some experience with guarding your mind, which is why I know you’ll understand when I tell you that there is a *hole* where there should be none.

Padmé stared at him, and Obi-Wan wondered with rising alarm if he hadn’t mistakenly tripped some sort of failsafe – that in telling Padmé what had been done to her, he was dooming her mind – but then she blinked, and for a moment he saw the fear mingled with relief before it was washed out again.

“There is nothing wrong,” Padmé said, but this time it felt hollow.

Obi-Wan stood. “I’m sorry, Padmé, but I’m afraid there is.” He turned to Anakin and Sabé. “We need to get her to the mind healers in the temple. Now.”
Luke was pulled from his musings when Ventress tensed beside him. He looked for the threat, and saw only Cody standing before him, his presence in the Force swirling with anger. Just behind him stood Rex, leaking horror, and Ahsoka, who looked mostly concerned. Luke’s eyes flicked to Leia, who met him, and then raised her chin.

“Is something wrong, Commander Cody?”

“What do you mean, ‘when the troopers turned on their Jedi?’” Cody spat out, nearly growling the words.

“We are loyal to the Republic,” Rex added, his censure clear.

“Of course you are,” Leia said, and meant it – no diplomat’s twisting of words. “It was clear to anyone who cared to look that the troops – you and your brothers – were badly used. You were set up to fail, like so many in this farce of a war.”

Cody stared for a long moment. “I think I’m going to need more detail, if you don’t mind General.

Ahsoka cleared her throat. “Why don’t we go to the mess hall? There are smaller rooms we can use, and I’m thinking this conversation may go better if we’re not all hungry.”

Leia gestured for Ahsoka to lead the way, and once again Luke found himself gawking like the backwater tourist that he often felt like as they wound their way through the Temple. There was so much light, here – so much life. That was not to say that Luke couldn’t see where they were worn thin – there was much more space than there were beings to occupy it, and those that were there were very young, very old, or very wounded. Even the Force felt tired, here – but it was still a miracle compared to the husk it had become.

The mess hall was a…unique experience. It was clear that the gossip that Asajj Ventress was in the Temple had made the rounds well ahead of them, and the room fell silent when they walked in. Only Leia managed to walk in without hesitation, though Ventress’s pause was more to sneer at those bold enough to stare. Ahsoka led them to the food line, to gather what the service droids had made for lunch. Luke wasn’t about to argue – it had been field rations while on the ship, prison rations in Dooku’s palace, and before that several years of fish, porg, and green milk. When he had found himself longing for some spiced womprat jerky, he knew he was desperate for some variety.

He wasn’t entirely sure of what every dish he chose was – it didn’t seem to matter how widely traveled he became, there was always something new -- just that all bore the little symbol indicating it fit for human consumption.

He tucked in as soon as they were all seated, tasting each dish, and if it was to his liking, eating all he had taken. It was a habit he had picked up during the rebellion, and even when he knew everything on his plate, tended to eat in sections. Leia, on the other hand, had a tendency to eat with a single-minded focus, everything set before her, with a swift economy, and little attention paid to what she was eating, unless it was a favorite of hers. In fact, of everyone at the table, only Ventress seemed choosy about her food, and Luke was sure that was more out of distrust of the Jedi who had been – and perhaps in some small ways still were – an enemy, than out of any real hang-ups about the food. Picky eating was a luxury afforded to those who had only known plenty and peace.

Silence, save for the clatter of utensils, reigned in their small room, enough that Luke was able to tell that the main mess had was still unusually hushed, though the doorway afforded them at least a modicum of privacy. It was easier, not being able to see their faces.
Rex was the first one finished, pushing his plate away a fraction, but thankfully he held his peace until the rest of them had finished. Luke and Leia both had grown up in cultures where serious business was conducted only after the meal was finished – to show courtesy and honesty, respectively. Hurting one who fed you was certainly a way to avoid the cost of reciprocation, but the desert dealt harshly with those who betrayed hospitality.

“So, I promised an explanation,” Leia began, folding her hands. It was odd seeing the large ring on her finger, spanning from joint to joint. During the rebellion, and again when Ben was young, Leia had hardly worn jewelry, opting instead for elaborate braids and hairstyles. He wondered when, exactly, she had made the switch.

“We’re all ears,” Rex said, when Cody didn’t seem keen to respond.

Leia smile, rueful. “As I said before, I don’t have all of the answers. The official records – if there ever were any – were destroyed long before I began my career as a spy in the Imperial Senate. And, by the time I was with the Rebellion full time, well – there was no one left alive to ask. So, what I know has been cobbled together from stories I have heard, data sets that I was able to extrapolate, and you, Rex,” she said, turning.

Rex started. “Me?”

Leia nodded. “You were one of the survivors who joined us in the fight against the Empire. We didn’t work closely together, but we were both on the ground at Endor, when the Emperor died.”

Leia looked at Cody. “Much of the Alliance was run on plausible deniability. I’m afraid that if you were in the Alliance, I would not know unless we served together.”

Cody nodded, and Luke turned his attention back towards Leia, even as he opened his senses to the Force as it flowed through the room.

“I’ll start with what first caught my attention,” Leia began. “It was standard Alliance policy for any clone joining the rebellion to have their bio-chips removed.”

Surprise. Confusion. No shock, and from Rex a sense of startled realization.

“Tup,” Rex breathed, eyes distant. “They’re programming chips, aren’t they?”

Leia looked a bit started at having her explanation cut short, but she nodded. “Yes. They exactly what they were said to: to decrease aggression, but there was a second level of coding that turned the entire army into a massive sleeper cell, waiting only for proper activation by their leader – Chancellor Palpatine.

“Our slicers studied the chips. There were almost a hundred orders included, but the one that was activated was sixty-six: Eliminate the Jedi.”

Cody shifted in his seat. “That’s in direct contradiction to our main programming. We’re loyal to the Jedi – each and every vod!”

“Except Slick,” Rex said, voice pale. “And when Tup got hit on the head, he killed General Tiplar. We thought the chip was malfunctioning, but it must have just resorted to its secondary programming.”

Cody shook his head. “I just don’t see it happening – the thought of turning on Kenobi – I would rather point a blaster at myself.”

Leia sighed, looked tired. “Many did, when the effects wore off and they realized what they had
done. Others defected. Most were drawn into the new Imperial Army and were the first to die in the ensuing conflicts and skirmishes."

“We would get runners at our farm on Tatooine,” Luke said, voice soft as he remembered. “Our Grandmother had been freed, and she helped turn the farm into a waystation. Each season, we would hire “hands” – some to help with the harvest, and some to help get off-world. A few times, we would get clones from the war. I wasn’t often allowed to help, but if Uncle Owen was in the field, I had to help my Aunt,” he offered up a sad smile. “Brain surgery is tricky enough when you’re not doing it in secret on a backwater.”

Luke sighed. “She never used my name in front of them, but I never knew why. The fact that I was a Skywalker, the way she was a Whitesun, was usually one of the first things the runners were told, to let them know they could trust us. I never realized why.”

“But everybody died, however,” Leia said. “There were Jedi who escaped: who hadn’t been with their unit or had enough warning in the Force. They scattered to the winds, but the Empire sent out Inquisitors to round them up and end their line. By the time Luke finished his training, he was the only Jedi left.”

“The only Force user who would use the title, anyway,” Luke said. “I scoured the galaxy for years, searching for whatever scraps of information had been lost or hidden away or collected.” He shrugged at Ahsoka’s horrified stare. “There was a lot of context missing.”

Luke wasn’t surprised when Cody leaned in. He had seen such ferocity before, after all.

“Get this krffin’ chip out of my head.”

Luke was surprised, however, to find Kix waiting with the healers. Well, waiting was the wrong word. He was busy, helping where he could, but there was a peace to these halls. This wasn’t the frantic pace of a battlefield triage, or even the malingering despair of a sick ward – this was a place of convalescence, of healing after the hurt. As such, Kix seemed to be a bit on-edge.

Which may explain the way he zeroed in on Luke when he saw him. “You!” he barked, volume only moderately controlled in respect to the rooms. “How long have you been on planet? You were supposed to report here immediately.”

Luke winced automatically, highly aware of the look he was getting from his sister.

“It’s only been a few hours, Kix,” Luke said, hands empty and raised. “And we were tied up with the council.”

Kix pointed his finger. “Fine,” he said. “But if I notice you showing any of Generals Kenobi or Skywalkers’ bad habits—”

“Don’t worry,” Leia drawled. “He has all of his own bad habits.’

“Hey!” Luke protested, but Kix’s attention was drawn to Leia.

“Have you been checked out?” he asked.

Leia, the traitor, nodded. “On the way here. A bit dehydrated and in need of a good meal, but otherwise fine. What’s wrong with Luke?”
“Nothing’s wrong with me—”

“Several things are wrong with you,” Leia shot back, but it was teasing. “I was asking which Kix picked up on.”

“Lingering and Chronic damage as a result of prolonged exposure to lightning,” Kix grit out.

Great. Now everybody was staring at him.

“Who was it?” Ventress asked, voice mild. Luke looked at her, but she did an admirable job of hiding whatever she was thinking.


“And you lived?” she demanded.

“He was interrupted,” Luke offered, and when Kix came forward, Luke went without complaint. “Is this something they can join us for?” he asked Kix. “There’s something we need to tell you about.”

“It’s not normal procedure,” Kix said. “But since nothing is normal here, I don’t see why not.” He looked over at Rex and Cody. “Are either of you bleeding?”

“No,” Cody said, clipped.

Kix blinked. “Are they?”

“Not yet,” Rex said, when Cody just glared. “There wasn’t a fight, Kix. But it’s related to Tup.”

Kix looked at Luke, surprised, then Leia, Ventress, and Ahsoka. “Where are the generals?” he asked, at last.


Kix looked him over. “We’ll have the time.”

Kix, like his brothers, had been bread for combat, but even the Kaminoans knew that soldiers needed medics. So, when he had shown the correct aptitude, he had been shunted with the others into medical training. It had been fascinating, and Kix had powered through his training with the same zeal Heavy had for his weapons.

But being a medic was different than training to be a medic. Kix knew his bedside manner was a taste acquired by only a few, but he felt that he more than made up for it in his ability to be adaptable in his diagnoses. Being in the field, Kix had quickly learned that the universe was much more diverse, and much more bizarre, than they had been trained to believe – and that went double for medical mysteries.

So, when Kix had finished the testing that revealed Luke Skywalker to be the offspring of Anakin Skywalker, he had gritted his teeth and chalked it up to some weird Jedi nonsense. It made sense, after all, the way Luke brushed off decades old electrical damage like it was a minor inconvenience.

When Kix learned that the bio-chips – including the bio-chip in his own damned head were programmed for complete and total override, he was so incandescently angry that every Force
sensitive in the room stepped back from him.

It wasn’t just that the clones were made for the Jedi, were designed to fight with them and for them and beside them in a way that was deliberately symbiotic.

Kix was a medic.

He had sworn an oath.

This kriffin’ chip could make him an oath breaker - would make all of his brothers oath breakers.

Kix may have had no choice in being trained as a medic, but when he had taken the oath, he had made a gods-damned choice.

And Luke fucking Skywalker was watching him from the medical bed, waiting as Kix struggled to think through his rage.

“I can take theirs out,” he said at length, jerking his head towards Rex and Cody. “But I can’t perform surgery on myself. And I can’t remove the chip from every brother by myself.”

Ahsoka stepped forward, “We worry about the greater galaxy second – first, we need to remove the chips from you three. Once they’re studied and sliced, we can go to we need to with proof.”

“We’ll need a plan,” Leia said. “There are certain people who take too great an interest, and their attention could prove fatal or a lot of innocent people.”

“I may be able to offer some assistance,” Ventress – fucking Ventress?! Had the world gone mad?

Kix rubbed his forehead, covering his eyes with his palm for a brief moment. He needed to think, he needed to gather supplies. What did he need to do? Triage, Kix.

“You,” Kix pointed at Skywalker. “You need to sit there and let the scanners work. I need to know if you need any more boosters, or if we need to move straight on to more therapeutic measures. You,” he pointed at Rex and Cody. “I’d prefer isolated rooms for the both of you, but if we’re doing this in secret, we’ll have to do it here,” he gestured vaguely at the second, empty bed. He turned to the medical droid that was overseeing Luke’s assessment. “I’ll need a scanner and a mobile surgical unit, with the proper bandages for cranial surgery.”

“Right away,” the droid said, and whirred softly from the room. Kix looked after it, thinking of the much more utilitarian models that populated the medical centers on the ships. “With the resources in this place, it should be an outpatient procedure – or close enough to one.”

Luke coughed, gently. “I’ve done this before, if you need me.”

Kix narrowed his eyes. “Are you a medic? A healer?”


“But nothing,” Kix said. “Patients heal. They don’t heal other patients.”

Luke nodded, cowed. Kix glared a moment more, for good measure, and then met his sister with the same look.

“What?” She asked. “I said I wasn’t hurt.”

“You’re a Skywalker, aren’t you?” he asked, “I don’t want you getting any ideas.”
Leia looked affronted, but Luke was clearly laughing behind his metal hand, so Kix hadn’t been that far off. Kix made a mental note to review that piece of tech as well – as old as General Skywalker’s offspring were, the technology should be far more advanced than what Luke was sporting. Not to mention the obvious wear and tear.

The medical droid returned with the first piece of equipment, the scanner that would allow Kix to see what, exactly, he would be doing in his vod’s head, and Kix gestured for Cody to take his place on the bed. Before Cody could move, however, there was a commotion in the entrance to the healing wing, and a very familiar voice could be heard protesting, loudly, that –

“There is nothing wrong with me!”

And right after, the missing Generals.

“Then there is no harm in getting checked out, just to be sure.” Kenobi

“Stop struggling, you’re going to hurt yourself!” and Skywalker.

Ahsoka gestured with both hands. “I’m just gonna…” and she was gone. In the corner, Ventress huffed a sarcastic laugh.

“Well, looks like things are finally getting interesting around here.”
Ahsoka moved quickly through the Halls of Healing, but it wasn’t hard to find the commotion. She stopped in the doorway, battlefield habits causing her to pause to get the lay of the terrain.

Skyguy and Master Obi-Wan were both flanking Padme, physically keeping a hold of her. Ashoka could see the tension in Master Obi-Wan’s arms, though Anakin was cheating and using his mechanical hand. Trailing behind Padme were two of her handmaidens – Sabé and Moteé. They looked worried, and Ahsoka frowned. It wasn’t like a handmaiden to show visible concern – not when it wasn’t required by some state manners, anyway. Padme had explained it, once, when Ahsoka had asked about her time as queen, but to be honest, there was a lot to tell.

Facing off with Padme and her…entourage, was chief Healer Tokba. Like most healers in the Temple, they radiated peace and Light, but like every healer Ahsoka had ever met, that peace and Light was wrapped around a pure durasteel core.

“Enough!” Healer Tokba said, raising their voice only the tiniest bit. Still, it was enough to quell those shouting. “Now. One at a time. Someone tell me what’s going on.”

“I will tell you,” Padme declared, standing up to her full height. It wasn’t much, not compared with Anakin and Master Obi-Wan, but she always managed to pull an air of authority down with her, and it usually made her seem taller. Today, it made her seem almost arrogant. Ahsoka frowned. That wasn’t like Padme.

“I have been accosted and forced here against my will. I do not consent to treatment, for there is nothing wrong with me.”

Healer Tokba blinked slowly, the motion all the more obvious by their species’ wide eyes. “I hear what you are saying,” they said, and then turned to Anakin and Obi-Wan. For a moment, when Healer Tokba looked at Anakin, there was a fission of distaste that flashed across their features. Ahsoka frowned – that was a lot like what happened with the Council. How oblivious had Ahsoka been to the way the other Jedi related to Anakin?

“What is your side of the story?” Healer Tokba asked, clearly addressing Obi-Wan. It seemed Master Obi-Wan understood some of what Ahsoka noticed, as his eyes narrowed a sliver, and then he differed to Anakin.

“I was called in later. Anakin, you were there from the beginning. What did you notice?”

Anakin looked at Obi-Wan, like he knew what his former master was doing. “I was called by Sabé, who first noticed the issue,” Anakin said, giving a pause to see if he, too, had successfully passed this story on. Sabé looked up, but the healer never looked away from Anakin. “She had been acting strangely,” Anakin continued. “Not overtly, but there were signs, little things, that Sabé recognized as warning signs. She contacted me, as I have provided security for the Senator in the past, and

many thanks to the wonderful punsbulletsandpointythings for being such an amazing beta and cheerleader :D
Sabé thought that a Jedi may be able to stop whatever was happening, or at least be able to point them in the right direction.

Anakin paused, but when Healer Tokba just blinked at him, he continued. “I noticed the same as Sabé – there was nothing wrong at first glance, but the more you looked, the more odd the entire situation felt. When I looked more closely, I saw evidence of mental tampering. Someone, or something, is trying to exert their will over m—the Senator,” Anakin said.

“And I can confirm,” Obi-Wan said, stepping in. “Anakin called me when the Senator appeared to be resistant to seeking medical attention. When I looked more closely, I saw that same tampering. We then escorted the Senator here, as this is a Jedi matter and must be dealt with accordingly.”

“I see,” Healer Tokba said. They turned back to Padme. “There’s an easy way to settle this. It has been known for soldiers to jump at shadows in civilian life; with our knights out fighting this war, it’s possible that they are seeing threats that don’t exist at home.”

Padme stood straighter, as if vindicated, and Ahsoka frowned. That really wasn’t Padme’s body language at all. Or was she, too, seeing things that weren’t there simply because she was expecting a battle?

“Of course,” Healer Tokba continued. “If we do find evidence of tampering, then you are in the best possible place for it to be handled thoroughly and safely.”

The next few moments happened very quickly – Padme’s face darkened, and she turned, hitting Anakin in the stomach hard enough to make him stagger, bend clear in half, losing his grip in the process. Her momentum pulled her from Obi-Wan’s grasp, and the moment she was free, she was running – neatly avoiding her handmaidens, and heading for the door. She turned abruptly when the temple guard stepped into the room and aimed directly for Ahsoka.

Ahsoka stood tall, taking half a moment to wonder how she was going to deal with this threat without her lightsabers, when a gust of wind nearly knocked her over. When she regained her footing, Leia was standing between her and Padme. She skidded to a halt, but when she turned again, Luke was there, appearing as if from nowhere from the speed of his Force-enhanced run. He placed his hand to her forehead, and she stopped moving.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Leia breathed.

“I have,” Luke said.

“See what?” Ahsoka said.

“Darkness,” Luke answered. “Like spines that stick and tear the wound worse if tugged free.”


Ahsoka looked between the twins, giving voice to the question no one else was asking. “Who?”

“Darth Sidious, but you’d know him better by a different name.” Luke looked over at a stunned Healer Tokba and the others. “Could we get a stretcher? It’s really not safe for me to hold her this way much longer.

Seconds later, a padawan learner rolled a gurney into the room, complete with the bindings that were an unfortunate necessity when a patient was deemed a danger to themselves or others. Padme was strapped to it, and Ahsoka looked up in time to see the look of utter devastation on Anakin’s
Padme was wheeled into one of the side rooms, a few doors down from where Kix still stayed with Cody and Rex. Ahsoka followed the procession behind her, falling into step next to Anakin, offering him her silent support as Padme was attached to the monitoring systems, a faint and rhythmic beeping sounded, indicating her heartbeat.

She wasn’t even sure Anakin knew she was there.

Padme was fighting against her bonds, beyond the point of speech, and the healer looked strangely disturbed. It wasn’t right seeing that level of emotion on a healer’s face.

“What’s wrong with her,” Anakin said, and Ahsoka didn’t like the tone of fear in his voice – it was too much like anger.

“She’s fighting it,” Obi-Wan said. “She’s strong, Anakin.”

Ahsoka only hoped she was strong enough.

“Possession,” Healer Tokba said with a bewildered sigh. “I haven’t heard that one since I was an initiate – a scary story we would tell each other before bed.

“Oh, it’s real,” Leia said, her fury only just banked enough to speak. “And this sleemo is too good at it.”

“I understand that the Senator is important to you, but I’m going to have to ask you all to leave this room,” the healer said. “We’re going to need focus, and you will be a distraction.

Ahsoka wasn’t exactly ready to leave Padme in such a state, but she wasn’t given much of a choice as Master Obi-wan wrapped his arm around her shoulder, leading her away.

“I’m afraid I asked you to leave,” the healer said behind him, and Ahsoka turned to look. Luke was there, arms tucked into his sleeves, watching as his mother thrashed helplessly on the bed.

“I’d rather stay,” Luke said, mild, as if there was no chance that he wouldn’t be allowed. Clearly, Healer Tokba didn’t agree, because they gestured to the others to remove Luke and Leia from the room.

From where she stood, Ahsoka couldn’t see Luke’s face, but she felt the change in the room when he eased the holds on his presence in the Force, the weight of it like a loadstone in the center of the room. It was enough that the orderlies stopped, and even Padme calmed on the bed, her attention drawn to him, her breathing heavy.

She barely looked like herself anymore – there was nothing of Ahsoka’s kind, compassionate friend in the mask of absolute fury that fell over her face.

“So,” Padme said, but the voice was not hers – Ahsoka had never heard a voice like that – not Maul, not Dooku, not even Ventress held such malice in their tone. “You are the one who has been meddling in my plans.”

Luke didn’t appear to be bothered by the sheer hate that was pouring off of Padme, saturating the Force around her. He shrugged a shoulder. “I help where I can,” he said, a picture of modesty.

Padme sneered – or, Ahsoka guessed whoever was talking sneered through her. “You have to know that you will not win. Your meddling will ultimately fail. You will lose.”
Luke smiled, and it was mostly teeth. “You’ve said as much to me before. You didn’t win then. You will not win now.”

The sneer fell, and Ahsoka stepped back into Anakin when she saw a shadow of the Darkness that lay beyond her eyes, and the mocking sympathy that filled her face – an insult to Padme’s honest emotion. “Oh, Young Skywalker,” it said, sounding strangely like a frail old man, and Ahsoka saw Luke stiffen. That, more than anything, made her fear. “I’m afraid you are still the one mistaken. About everything.”

The heartbeat monitor shrieked a warning as Padme’s eyes rolled back, her back arching as she seized and then just as suddenly went limp.

“NO!” Anakin cried, racing forward to grab her, Obi-Wan reaching for him. In the same moment Luke and Leia reached out to Padme, and Ahsoka, caught in the middle, tumbled along with them.

And the world went black.

Even as a child, when flights of fancy were often in conflict with an utterly literal view of the world, Luke never had much of a firm grasp on the concept of reality. Oh, sure, he understood the importance of the harvest – the harvest meant food and credits which meant they got food and water and could pay off the officials that needed to be encouraged to look the other way – the life or death consequences of a dogfight – even when flying meant submerging himself to his eyeballs in the Force, letting it guide his movements even as it obeyed his commands – and the grand and melodramatic fate-of-the-universe consequences of the battle against the Empire and the fall of Palpatine – a fight that he, apparently, continued to wage – but he had never been grounded in reality.

Ben had tried to train it out of him, and barring that, how to use it towards his advantage. Yoda had despaired of him, when he had gone off on his own. Trying to piece together such a fractured system, it had become an asset, letting him see the pieces as they were, are, and could be again. He could see behind the scenes of the universe, the Force shining through it all.

So, when Luke found himself pulled out of his physical reality for the third time in as many weeks, into the in-between realm of the Force, he was quick to find his feet. Leia had appeared with him, still gripping his arm, and she nearly toppled them both in the half-second before she, too, found her footing.

“Where are we?” Leia asked, looking around them.

“We’re in the Force,” Luke answered, shrugging helplessly at the glare Leia sent him. “I don’t have a better way to describe it,” he protested with little heat. Believe it or not, he knew what it sounded like without Leia picking up her ongoing diatribe that vague is not the same as wise. “From what I could gather, the Jedi had stopped believing that a place like this was real centuries ago.” He smiled, wan. “So of course, I’ve spent a lot of time here, recently.”

Leia huffed a small laugh, understanding the great irony that was their lives, and Luke was filled with such love for his sister, he had to turn away, blinking suddenly wet eyes.

While Luke had spent much time on this plane, this specific location was new. They were in a desert, one that felt more barren that the Dune Sea on Tatooine, or the junkyard wastes of Jakku, for all that there were still things that may at one point have been plants. The ground seemed burnt, cracked like the dried up remains of a riverbed, though Luke doubted water had ever flowed.
The sky above them was thundering, a roiling mass of black clouds lit by near constant streaks of lightning that never seemed to reach the ground. The air was thick, neither with rain nor ash, but with the oppressive Darkness around them.

“This is terrible,” Leia said, with the same bland understatement as Hoth is cold or Yavin is humid, and Luke chuckled, losing himself in his slightly hysterical mirth for a moment. Force, he was tired. “Where are the others?”

“I’m not sure,” Luke said. The only feature in this landscape other than themselves were the pyramids floating in the distance.

Leia seemed to notice them at the same time. “There?” She said. “Even if they appeared elsewhere, they might head there themselves.”

Luke shook his head. “That’s not how travel here works,” he said. “We could walk for days and never move. I got stuck on the side of those of those pyramids once – or one like them, anyway – and no matter how I climbed, I never ended up any closer to the top.”

“How did you get out, then?” Leia asked.

“I jumped off.”

“You—” Leia cut herself off, clearly checking her temper with great difficulty, and Luke practically felt it when Leia understood, her eyes flying open. “You changed the parameters,” she said, wonder in her voice. “What didn’t I think of that?”


Leia looked around again. “We don’t have a staircase, here – no clear direction they want us to head in – how do we change the rules?”

“The Dark is isolating,” Luke said. “We need to find the others.”

“How?” Leia asked, but Luke was already reaching out, searching for a tether – a bond that he hadn’t felt since the destruction of the last Death Star, didn’t understand then but knew clearly now. Leia felt him reach, added her strength to his, and together they pulled--

And found themselves in motion once more.

Ventress sat in the exam room, hidden from the clones and their healer by a surgical curtain, and senses open to feel the medical wing around her. She couldn’t hear anything with her ears since the party in the entrance moved into a private room of their own, and she resigned herself to waiting, again, forgotten for now. If not for the fact that she knew that Luke wouldn’t leave her here for long – she would have left by now.

...And the fact that she was so sure of him so quickly was sickening, but she was too tired to really question it. It had been so long since her trust was so readily assured and rewarded.

Her open senses were the only reason why Ventress knew the exact moment when Sidious decided to make his presence known…and the moment when he triggered the kill-switch. It wouldn’t kill him, of course, he’d just float back to whatever body he currently inhabited, or had waiting for
him, but his temporary vessel – Senator Amidala – wouldn’t be quite so lucky.

Ventress bowed her head. They had been on opposite sides, and Amidala’s optimism was often grating, but there was ruthlessness to her that Ventress could appreciate. She had been a worthy opponent, and Ventress would mourn her passing. When she had the privacy, she would say the appropriate prayers – as many of them as she could remember, anyway.

She wasn’t surprised when the door to the room opened, revealing the diminutive head of the Jedi Order. After several occasions where she had tried – and failed – to kill him, she wasn’t sure she would be truly surprised by anything Yoda could do.

Of course, it shouldn’t surprise her that he managed to do so, anyway.

“Come,” he said, his voice graver than Ventress had ever heard. “Needs you, your teacher will.”

She raised her eyebrows, not bothering to hide her disbelief. “I didn’t think the Grandmaster of the Order would stoop so low as to fetch me.”

“High? Low?” Yoda made a tisking sound, waving his claw dismissively. “Thinking like a Sith still. A need there was and answer it I could. There is no value higher.” He tapped his stick lightly on the ground. “Many years, I have lived. Many, I have lost. Of my line, you now are, student of my student. Twice now. And needed, you are.”

After a long moment, she stood. “What can I do?”

Darkness. Ahsoka brought her hand to her face; her eyes were open, but still, she could not see. All around her, the Dark Side seethed.

“How?” she called out. “Skyguy? Master Obi-Wan?”

Silence. Not even an echo of her voice.

How had she gotten here? Last she could remember, she was…

She was…

I can’t see! How am I supposed to fight?

The voice came from nowhere and everywhere; young, almost painfully so – frustrated and desperate, with the pain of grief fueling it. And familiar – even without his characteristic roughness, Ahsoka recognized the voice of Luke Skywalker.

But why was she hearing it? Why him? Why now?

Where was she?!

Your eyes can deceive you. Don’t trust them.

Ahsoka felt her heart clench. Older, Core World accent blurred, but still that sense of bemusement with his student. Master Obi-Wan. Knowing that, she knew what he would say next. Reach out with your feelings, and act on instinct.

Ahsoka closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and reached out…
Obi-Wan could see nothing, hear nothing, feel nothing, save for Anakin’s tunic in his fist in the maelstrom around them. The winds roared in his ears as he clung desperately – he did not know what was happening, but he would be damned if he let go, if he lost Anakin now.

*I lost him once,* he thought, though his own voice was much rougher than it was now, older. *I will not lose him again,*

“Anakin!” he called out, trying to be heard above the noise, but if Anakin heard him, he made no sign.

*I can’t lose her,* too Anakin’s voice, panicked.

“You won’t, Anakin!” Obi-Wan tried. “I’m here! Let me help you!”

No! Anakin cried out, his voice deeper, as if mechanized, and Obi-Wan felt the fear stab him cold through his heart.

“Father!” Luke called through the storm, as if in agony. “Please!”

For one, brief, shining moment, everything stilled – the silence almost as deafening as the din – and in the quiet, he heard Leia, as if from so very far away, “Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You’re my only hope.”

“You’re my brother, Anakin,” Obi-Wan heard himself say, the words echoing around them. “I love you.”

Anakin opened his eyes, and Obi-Wan could finally see.

Mace was near out of breath by the time he reached the infirmary, but the distress call that had echoed through the Force wasn’t one he could ignore. Doing his best to see past the fracturing futures all around him, he found himself the last to enter the room.

It was a flurry of activity, last seen in front-line triage. Healer Tokba was barking orders, directing their healers, interns and orderlies like so many ants even as they focused their energies on Padme Amidala. Mace blinked. Why was she here?

Around her in various beds were Kenobi, all three Skywalkers, and Padawan Tano. That was less surprising, as was Yoda’s presence between Obi-Wan and Anakin. More surprising was Ventress, between Anakin’s time-traveling children.

The headache from before that never quite left, pulsed behind his eye.

“What’s happening?” he demanded.

“She coded, and they collapsed,” Healer Tokba barked. “I got her heart beating, but the minute I stop, it stops.”

“Give them time, we must,” Yoda said, not opening his eyes. “On this, all depends.”

Mace looked around once more, and took a seat next to Padawan Tano, the only one left. He took her hand and closed his eyes.
They were in the pyramid. They had to be, Leia reasoned, as they could no longer see the sky, but there was something above them, up beyond where the light failed. She hesitated to call it stone – the colder, darker version of stone, perhaps, like the stones of underground crypts that never saw the sun and to which a chill forever clung.

From what she could tell, they were in some sort of amphitheater, empty of spectators, but with more seats than she was comfortable seeing. There were enough to fit an army, certainly, and Leia was about to say as much, to wonder aloud just what sort of place this could be, when she felt it arrive like ice down her spine.

She turned, seeing for the first time the dark throne. It was raised on a dais, made taller and wider both by broad spikes that curled around it like a sandviper’s tail, and looked not unlike the officer’s chairs on Imperial issue ships…and Leia was just now realizing why, her disgust at such bald-faced hubris was palpable.

It was a distraction – her mind’s way of protecting her from the reality before her. Palpatine, as he truly was in the Force, the Dark Lord Sidious, a dark and swirling mass that sat upon the throne with a casual possessiveness. The surface of him undulated, rippling as if with breath as smoky tendrils branched out, waving gently as if on a breeze.

Then, it laughed.

It wasn’t the first time Leia heard the Emperor cackle, and judging by the way Luke stiffened beside her, she wasn’t the only one who felt it like fist to the chest. Anakin and Obi-Wan were both already standing, lightsabers raised, and Leia wanted to shake her head. She was sure the quick reaction was a function of the war, but what good would a lightsaber do against that? A Jedi’s lightsaber was a tool, but just like trying to sew a dress with a spanner, it was useless unless employed at the correct task.

“At last,” Sidious drawled, his words scraping over stone and Leia shuddered. “You cannot imagine the plans that are finally coming to fruition. There is no victory here, for you.”

She had never had patience for the Grand Imperial Speeches, and even when she had begun her dual role as a senator and as a spy, when she combed these speeches for clues, meaning, and weakness, she had found them fundamentally repulsive. Now, thirty years after she thought she had listened to her last Imperial Speech, here he was. Monologuing.

Leia turned to Luke, putting as much incredulity in her voice as possible. “Do you believe this?”

Luke tilted his head. “I believe that he believes it,” he said. “But we’ve been told victory was impossible before. It didn’t stop us then.”

“Never has, never will,” Leia agreed.

“You won’t get away with this!” Anakin called out, raising his saber and holding it two-handed and at the ready, and Leia squeezed her eyes shut. It truly was like he had walked out of a Corellian HoloDrama. At his side, Obi-Wan leaned back, holding his saber out parallel by his ear, his other arm pointing at Sidious, and his face, washed by the blue electric light, was furious.

“My boy.”

Leia clenched her fist, unsurprised to find it wrapped around a lightsaber hilt of her own. Looks like it was the right tool for the job after all.
From deep within him, Padme screamed.

Thunder crashed above her, below her, through her, but when Ahsoka opened her eyes again, she could see. She only wished she couldn’t.

The sky was red like thick blood, with dark storm clouds that cracked with blue lighting. The ground was blackened and cracked beneath her feet, covered with a thick coat of ash, and though it should have been hot, Ahsoka was freezing cold. In the distance, she saw pyramids, each floating above the ground as they slowly spun, uncaring of the tumult of the weather. Her ears roared, and the stench was like sulfur.

She put her hand over her mouth, spinning around to try and see the others, but for the moment, she was alone.

She closed her eyes again, reaching for the calm and the Light, but her efforts fizzled before she got more than a whisper. She tried again and got nothing.

“Sithspit,” she muttered, opening her eyes once more. She looked around – there wasn’t even the remains of scrub brush on the ground, no footprints to disturb the dirt to tell her where the others had gone – only her own boot prints, sinking into the ash.

She still had her lightsabers, however, and that was a comfort. At least she would be able to see if whatever passed for a sun in this place went dark. She pulled one from her belt, holding it ready in her hand, and picking a direction, set out to find the others.

There was something funny about this place, Ahsoka thought as she walked along. Like something half-remembered from a dream.

“Or a nightmare,” she muttered.

Wherever she was, it wasn’t anywhere real, or at least not physical. She had been walking for what felt like hours, and felt neither tired nor thirsty – just lonely, like every step was taking her father away from anything and everyone she ever loved or who had ever loved her. It felt a lot like despair, and it weighed on her, pressing her more deeply into the ground beneath her.

Her feet dragged to a stop, and she swayed, falling to her knees. The ground tilted sideways, rising to meet her, and in the distance, the pyramids continued to float, never nearer than they were before.

She was so very, very lonely.

Perhaps that was why she didn’t notice the hand at first. Her awareness flickered, and she was lying on her side in the dirt, aware of a familiar presence, focused on her palm as if someone was holding her hand.

She curled around her palm, holding that warmth close, using it to drive away the darkness and reaching for the light.

There was a crack like breaking glass, and suddenly Ahsoka was surrounded.

“Let her go!”
“Watch your left!”

“He’s too fast!”

Ahsoka fell back on instinct, rolling out of the center of the tumult until she could get to her knees and assess the situation.

Anakin, Master Obi-Wan, Luke and Leia were facing off against a writhing black mass, blue, green, and yellow sabers flashing in the shadow. It didn’t look like any sentient race that Ahsoka had ever seen – it barely looked solid, resembling crude oil. As she watched, Anakin’s saber slashed through a large tentacle, which fell to the ground and twitched before turning back to slime that slithered away to rejoin its host – but in the brief moment where it was severed, Ahsoka saw Padme, trapped at its center.

Ahsoka lit her sabers and leapt into the fray.

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