Heretic Pride

by Fialleril

Summary

Like most Republic citizens, the Naberries have never spent much time thinking about the Jedi. But that changes with the birth of their daughter Ilaré.

(Or, the AU where the third Naberrie daughter is a Jedi, Padmé offers Naboo as a sanctuary for runaway slaves, Shmi is a conductor on the Tatooine freedom trail, and Anakin jump starts a reformation. Or maybe a heresy. It all depends on your point of view.)

Notes

Several months ago, @becauseforoncethisisme over on tumblr sent me the following ask:

How would your Naberrie family react to a surprise baby; one twelve years younger than
Padme? What would they name her? How would they take it if she was born with enough midichlorians to be taken by the Jedi? How would Anakin react if he met Littlest Naberrie while he was in the Temple? If he met her before AOTC, how? If he tracked her down after AOTC, why?

I started answering it as a tumblr post, but then it ballooned into an actual fic synopsis, which eventually ballooned into a full fledged fic. If you follow me on tumblr, you'll know this as **The Jedi Reformation AU**.

This will be a multi-chapter fic, rather than a series of one shots like DAV. Because of multiple requests, I've decided to start posting it now, but it is a work in progress. I have 12 chapters already written, but I am a slow writer, so updates will probably be pretty spaced out, once I've posted everything that's currently written.

I went ahead and tagged most of the major relationships that will eventually appear in the story, but the first several chapters are completely gen. Tags may be updated as I continue to write.

The title is from the Mountain Goats song of the same name, and all the chapter titles will be Mountain Goats lyrics.

Also, there are quite a few similarities between this fic and my outline for **The One Where Anakin and Padmé Are Pen Pals**, for those who were interested in seeing an expansion of that fic.

And finally, I know there's some disagreement in the fandom over the status of Tatooine in relation to the Republic. My take is that the name "Outer Rim Territories" means exactly what it says: these are territories, not member states, of the Republic. They're subject (at least in theory) to Republic jurisdiction, but have none of the rights of member worlds.
Like most Republic citizens, the Naberries have never spent much time thinking about the Jedi. But that changes with the birth of their daughter Ilaré.

All children born in the Republic have their midichlorian count tested at birth. Ilaré is no different. The only difference is that her count comes back above the cutoff point. For the first time, the Naberries are thinking about the Jedi.

It’s an honor, they’ve always been told, to have your child accepted by the Jedi. And of course it ought to be. It is. The Jedi are a noble institution. It’s just…

They don’t dare talk about it aloud. But at night, in the dark and secret, Jobal whispers it to Ruwee, and Ruwee to Jobal. They don’t want to lose their daughter.

They don’t have a choice.

When Ilaré is just shy of two years old, the Jedi come for her. Padmé, newly elected queen, comes from the palace, giving all but one of her handmaidens the slip, to see her sister off. The Jedi who takes her is a tall, narrow-faced Quermian, and Ilaré shies away from him, tries to hide behind her mother’s leg. For one wild, impossible moment, the young queen thinks about fighting back. But this is Republic law. This is the way of things. It can’t be otherwise.

It should be otherwise, a tiny part of her thinks. She holds that thought secret and buried deep, like a seed asleep beneath winter snows. She thinks, perhaps, that she has buried it forever, but seeds hidden in the dark have a way of growing.

Ilaré wails as the Jedi takes her away. Ruwee clings to his wife and Jobal stands like an unmoving stone. Sola is sobbing quietly. Padmé watches it all and feels strangely distant. Her sister is going away, going forever. They will never see her again.

It’s only a few months later that she meets a slave boy named Anakin, a selflessly kind and prodigiously talented child who offers her friendship when she needs it most and saves them all by destroying the Trade Federation’s control ship.

He wants to be a Jedi. He was taken from his mother, too, but she sent him full-willing, because even the unknowns of Jedi life in the Core had to be better than the life of a slave. Padmé can’t stop thinking about that. She can’t stop thinking about Shmi Skywalker’s face, and remembering the look on her own mother’s face when the Jedi took Ilaré away.

She doesn’t trust the Jedi. She didn’t to begin with, though she’d tried to work with them because they were the Chancellor’s ambassadors. But what she saw of Master Qui-Gon on Tatooine – willing to gamble on her ship, willing to gamble with and on a child’s life, simply because he trusted in the Force – did nothing to reassure her. And Obi-Wan, while polite and more open to discussion than his master, is cool and distant. She wonders if Ilaré will be like that, someday, and the thought aches in her.

Anakin wants to be a Jedi, but it seems they don’t want him. He’s withdrawn and apologetic – it must be his fault, he tells her. There’s something wrong with him that makes them not want him. Master Yoda said so.

And Padmé is furious. How dare they! How dare they take her sister, who was so wanted in their family, who never had any choice, and then refuse this boy, this kind-hearted and wonderful boy
who has never owned anything in his life, not even himself, and yet has given more generously than anyone she’s ever known?

She tells Anakin that he can stay with her. That she’ll do everything she can for him. And she prepares, against the advice of her royal council, a strongly worded letter of protest to the Jedi Council.

But she never sends it. Because Qui-Gon is killed fighting a Sith Lord on Naboo, and suddenly the Jedi have changed their minds. Now they want Anakin after all.

Padmé almost hopes that he’ll refuse out of spite, but of course he doesn’t. He wants this, and he’s terrified and uncertain of his place and, she can almost see him thinking, at least with the Jedi there will be order. Someone to give him orders. The thought makes her shudder, and she’s not sure where it came from.

She tells Anakin about Ilaré. It’s the first time she’s talked with anyone outside her family about her lost sister, and she’s surprised by just how much it hurts. How much she hasn’t forgiven, and how much she still doesn’t understand.

They don’t know anything about Ilaré’s life now. Jedi initiates aren’t allowed to contact their families, and families can’t request information about them. That’s how it goes. She knows that. It’s the law of the Republic.

Anakin nods. That is how it goes, he says. Masters don’t let separated families keep contact. Everybody knows that.

Padmé shudders again. She thinks that she should tell him this is different, that the Jedi aren’t like the masters of Tatooine. She doesn’t, though.

He’s being apprenticed to Obi-Wan. Padmé asks if he’s excited, and watches the careful way he picks his words in answer.

She gives him her comcode and her datapad’s code before he leaves for Coruscant. They’re the private, encrypted channels she uses to talk with her family. She gives him a secure datapad to go with the code, and watches as he hides it in the folds of his new Jedi robes, twisting and wiggling to make sure no movement will show the shape. They both know he’s not supposed to keep in contact with her.

“I’m going to find your sister,” he tells her. “I’ll let you know when I do.”

Padmé hugs him fiercely. “And I’m going to free your mother,” she says. The Jedi won’t do it. She has no illusions about that.

Anakin goes back to Coruscant with the Jedi, and she doesn’t hear from him for a long time. Padmé goes back to her palace, to the slow and painful task of rebuilding. It takes her a while to convince her council, but after all Anakin is a hero and the people of Naboo are horrified to think that their hero’s mother is still a slave. Padmé gets authorization for a mission to Tatooine. She leaves Sabé wearing the queen’s face and goes herself, back to the dusty little hovel in Mos Espa.

Shmi is surprised to see her, and even more surprised by why she’s there. Padmé hates the idea of buying her, hates the idea of placing a bet on a person’s life even more. She doesn’t know what else she can do.

Shmi looks at her for a long time. There’s a calculating kind of gentleness in her eyes, something that reminds Padmé oddly of the person Anakin could be, someday. It’s nothing at all like the wisdom she saw in Qui-Gon.
“Do you really want to help?” asks Shmi at last. “Or do you simply want to do right by Ani?”

It’s a devastating question. Padmé’s first instinct is to answer quickly, all outrage and moral certainty, but she respects Shmi too much for that.

Finally, carefully, she says, “I want to want to help. But I’m not sure what’s best to do.”

Shmi gives her a warm, approving smile. “That’s a start,” she says.

Padmé gives her a datapad, the twin of the one she gave Anakin. Shmi closes her hands around it like it’s the most precious thing in the universe.

Padmé also has several hundred thousand Republic credits, converted into the currency of the Hutts. She gives it all to Shmi. It’s enough to free her, and Kitster too, and enough left over for a small place in Mos Espa, not far at all from the slave quarters, and a variety of medical equipment. The equipment looks rudimentary to Padmé, but Shmi seems pleased with the technology.

“Do you really want to help?” she asks Padmé again, the day before Padmé is due to leave.

This time, Padmé says, “Yes.”

“Give us a place to go,” Shmi says, raising the datapad Padmé gave her. “Ani’s told me about your world: a green place flowing with water. The desert road is dangerous, but if there’s green at the end…”

“There will be,” Padmé promises.

She goes back to Naboo. There’s resistance, as she expected there would be. Few Naboo politicians would claim to support slavery, but then, few want to risk the possibility of conflict with the Hutts, not to mention the risk of offering sanctuary to a group of people the Republic Senate has made no move to protect.

But Anakin is a hero, and a recent hero with the kind of story that inspires sensation and pathos. The people of Naboo love him, and the people of Naboo know, too, something of what it means to be captives. The survivors of the camps are many, and their healing will take much longer than rebuilding the damaged architecture of Theed.

Padmé sends Anakin a message when the bill passes. It takes him three days to reply, but when he does, she can feel his exuberance in every letter he writes.

But he’s apologetic at the end of his message. He finally managed to make a visit to the crèche, he says, and there are eight girls from Naboo the right age to be her sister. But none of them are named Ilaré.
It turns out that an Anakin who never loses his connection to his mother or his culture, or the support network that goes with them, is a much more grounded and chill person than his canon counterpart. And quite possibly every bit as dangerous as the Council in TPM feared he would be...

There’s no Ilaré Naberrie anywhere in the Jedi Temple. Anakin’s visited every crèche, and he’s even checked the full roster of Jedi in the Archives. (He’s pretty sure he shouldn’t have been able to do that, but Madame Nu likes him, and Anakin isn’t above using that.)

He’s not really surprised that there’s no Ilaré listed, though. The way Padmé talked about her sister, Anakin thinks that her family probably didn’t want the Jedi to take Ilaré. And he knows what that means.

Jedi aren’t supposed to have contact with their families. Anakin learns, in his first several weeks in the Temple, that most Jedi don’t even know who their families are. It helps to keep them from developing attachments, Master Obi-Wan says. A Jedi must be completely devoted to the Force. Attachments are a distraction, and they can lead to anger, fear, and other negative emotions. That’s the Dark Side.

And sometimes, Master Obi-Wan adds when Anakin asks, if a Jedi is taken from a well-known or important family, their name will be changed, to protect them from the temptations of attachment.

Anakin nods solemnly when Master Obi-Wan asks if he understands. He does. He understood even before Master Obi-Wan explained, but the explanation was interesting, and he knows better than to interrupt a Master. He does wonder, though, if Master Obi-Wan really believes all of that. If he’s ever questioned it. If, maybe, Master Obi-Wan has ever wondered about his own family. He doesn’t ask.

It’s a common enough thing on Tatooine. When the Masters separate people, especially when they take a very young child and sell them away from their family, the new Master will change the slave’s name, and usually they’re robbed of a surname entirely. The Nameless, they’re called. People cut off, with no family and no history, except the ones they make for themselves.

Anakin knows that one of his ancestors was Nameless, once. She named herself Skywalker, and now that is his mother’s name and his too. A name with Ekkreth’s blessing.

He wonders if the Jedi let their Nameless choose new names for themselves, or if the choice is made for them. Probably the second, he thinks. Especially for someone like Ilaré Naberrie, whose sister is the queen of Naboo. They’d have to give her a new name.

So there are eight possibilities. Eight girls from Naboo who are the right age, and none of them with a name that sounds anything like Ilaré. Five of them look nothing like Padmé, so he can safely rule them out. Padmé said her sister was related by blood, so they probably look at least a little alike.
And that’s about as far as he can get, for now. There aren’t many excuses Anakin can make for visiting the crèche, and if he tries too often that will be suspicious. So instead he waits.

He keeps in touch with Mom and Kitster on Tatooine, and with Padmé on Naboo, even though he’s not supposed to talk to any of them. And he practices really hard at all of his exercises. Master Obi-Wan says he’s doing well, that he’s showing impressive talent, especially for someone who started too old. Anakin thanks him.

He doesn’t see Padmé for years and years, but he gets messages from her all the time. She’s passed a sanctuary law on Naboo, and Mom and lots of other freedom runners are smuggling people there.

Anakin finally manages to scrape together enough parts to start working on a scanner again. He keeps it hidden in a hollowed out space in his mattress, and sometimes he works on it when Master Obi-Wan thinks he’s meditating.

He’s twelve years old when he finishes it and tells Mom, Kitster, and Padmé about it on their secret datalink. Mom is so proud, and Anakin aches a little, because he hasn’t seen her in three years now, and sometimes he’s afraid he doesn’t quite remember the shape of the wrinkles around her eyes or the warm strength of her hands.

He sends the schematic to them, and a couple days later Mom sends a message back. They built a scanner to his specifications, and it works. Mom’s performed seven surgeries already. Three of them are on their way to Naboo now.

When he’s fourteen, Master Obi-Wan says he’s progressing so well, learning his place in the Order, that he’s ready now to start taking on some duties of his own in the Temple. Anakin’s excited and for once he doesn’t bother to hide it. Master Obi-Wan rattles off a whole list of possible assignments, but Anakin already knows what he wants to do. He wants to work with the ki– the younglings.

Master Obi-Wan looks bemused by his choice, but he says he’ll talk to the crèche master, and it must go well, because two days later Anakin is standing outside the crèche, ready for his first assignment.

The younglings are working on their lightsaber form, Master Yoda said. He’d eyed Anakin with barely disguised suspicion as he said it, but Anakin is really good with his lightsaber exercises and even Master Yoda can’t deny it.

Thirty seven-year-olds stare up at him nervously as he opens the door. “Hello, Padawan Skywalker,” they chirp dutifully.

Anakin glances quickly around, just to be sure there are no Masters nearby, then offers them an easy smile. “You can call me Anakin,” he says.

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Her name is Aloo Darie, and she’s the best duelist in her youngling group. Master Windu himself told her so once. She’ll be ready to build her own lightsaber in a few years, he said. If she stays focused, she could be one of the best in the Order someday.

Everybody knows that Aloo loves lightsaber practice. Most of the younglings do, but they still tease her about it and call her Master Windu’s favorite, even though everybody knows Jedi Masters don’t have favorites.

Aloo likes Master Windu, and his praise leaves her feeling warm and proud, though she knows
she should release those emotions into the Force. Jedi shouldn’t be proud. They serve the Force, and that’s enough.

But Aloo’s favorite person in the entire galaxy is Anakin Skywalker. She keeps that a secret – Jedi aren’t supposed to have favorites, and definitely not favorite people – but she always looks forward to the days when all of the masters are engaged with other duties and Anakin comes to teach their class instead.

He’s good with a lightsaber, which is why they let him teach of course, but more than that, he’s fun. Aloo keeps that word a secret, too. Jedi probably aren’t supposed to have fun. She’s never heard one of the masters talk about fun, anyway.

Anakin does, though. He tells them stories to go with their lightsaber exercises, exciting tales of knights and clever queens and dragons. Aloo doesn’t know how many of them really happened, and how many are legends, but she doesn’t think that really matters. The stories are what matter.

He laughs a lot, and he has them call him Anakin, not Padawan Skywalker, the way all the other padawans do. He always asks what else they’ve been learning, and once, when Ahsoka complains about the dance lessons they’ve been having all week and how boring they are, Anakin makes a big show of looking around to be sure there’s no masters in the room before he says, “That’s because they’re teaching you boring dancing. Not the fun kind.”

They all eye him with open skepticism. “There’s a fun kind?” Ahsoka asks, clearly not convinced.

“Sure,” Anakin says. “Back home on Tatooine we have lots of fun dances. My brother Kitster is the best dancer in the Quarters. I’m not as good as him, but I’m pretty decent. I’ll show you.”

He talks about home and his family a lot, Aloo thinks. No other Jedi does that. No other Jedi even knows who their family is, she doesn’t think. Certainly Aloo doesn’t. Sometimes when Anakin says things like that it makes something in her ache with a longing she’s sure a Jedi isn’t supposed to feel. She tries to release it into the Force, like Master Yoda says, but it doesn’t always work.

They’re all used to Anakin talking about his family and his home planet by now, though, so no one really comments on it anymore. There are much more interesting things right now, anyway.

“What about lightsaber practice, Padawan Skywalker?” Ras asks shyly.

“Well, that’s half the fun,” Anakin says with a grin. “Dancing teaches poise and coordination, and with this kind of dancing, you can even adapt some of the moves to use with a lightsaber. It will give you an advantage over an opponent, because no one will expect it.”

Then he shows them several of his Tatooine dances. Aloo and her friends watch in amazement as he spins and leaps and lunges and kicks in a whirlwind of motion that flows smooth as water. Anakin’s gotten a lot taller recently; his legs are too long for his body and sometimes he trips over his own feet. But all of that awkwardness disappears when he dances.

It’s not nearly as easy as he makes it look, but Anakin walks them through every move, and they spend the whole two hours practicing Tatooine dancing. Anakin was right. It is fun.

For the rest of that week, Aloo uses her free meditation time to sneak into one of the practice rooms with Ahsoka and Miik, and they practice dancing until it starts to feel easy and almost natural. The next week, Aloo shows off one of the dance moves during lightsaber practice with Master Windu, and he’s surprised and impressed. He asks where she learned that, and Aloo almost answers, but something stops her. The Tatooine dancing is Anakin’s, and he shared it with them but she doesn’t think he’s shared it with Master Windu. And that’s…important. It matters.
She isn’t sure why.

So she shrugs and mumbles out, “I…I don’t know, Master,” and Master Windu eyes her with almost fond exasperation and lets it go.

One day when they’re supposed to be practicing meditation, Master Yoda is called away for Council business and there’s no other master to fill in, so someone goes and gets Padawan Skywalker. Aloo listens to him talking out in the hall with Master Yoda. He’s supposed to change the lesson, to do more lightsaber practice with them instead. She hears Anakin acknowledge this, then Master Yoda departs and Anakin comes in and says, “So? Meditation today, huh?”

Aloo and Ahsoka exchange a glance. Lightsaber practice sounds a lot more interesting than meditation, and anyway – “Aren’t we supposed to do lightsaber practice with you?” Ras asks tentatively.

Anakin curls his long legs beneath him and sits on the floor. “Nope,” he says cheerfully. “You’re doing meditation today, so that’s what we’re going to do.”

Ahsoka lets out a little groan of disappointment, and Anakin laughs. “It’ll be fun, I promise,” he says. Aloo and Ahsoka look at each other again, deeply suspicious, but Anakin is the padawan here so he’s in charge.

Dutifully, they all sit on the floor. Anakin smiles at them. “I’m not very good at most meditation,” he says with an easy shrug. “But this is one that works well for me when I’m feeling too much. Maybe it will work for some of you, too.”

Anakin says things like that. Like feeling too much. Aloo can’t imagine any of the masters, or even the other padawans, saying something like that, but she likes it. Because sometimes she feels too much, too.

Anakin’s meditation isn’t like any meditation Aloo’s ever practiced before. Most of the masters tell them to clear their minds, to be blank and open to the guidance of the Force. Anakin tells them to visualize their own minds. He talks them through it, asking guiding questions and offering suggestions in a slow, soothing voice. His mind, he tells them, is a desert, like Tatooine. The very center, the core of himself, looks like his mother’s house, and smells like her cooking. He describes it all in vivid detail, then has them all close their eyes and try to find their own centers.

Aloo thinks vaguely that this is not the kind of meditation Master Yoda would probably approve of. But she likes Anakin’s descriptions. They feel warm and safe and she thinks she can almost picture his mother. She wonders what it’s like to have a mother, or a brother or sister.

She closes her eyes and lets Anakin’s questions direct her. She’s expecting to see a desert herself, because his description was so real, but to her surprise the image that forms in her mind and slowly grows in clarity is a green and vibrant place full of flowers. They’re every color and shape she can imagine, and the smell of them washes over her, so real and so strangely, impossibly familiar that she feels a sharp ache in her chest.

The image solidifies and Aloo sees that she’s in a garden, a garden in the back yard of a well-built stone house. The air is temperate and she can hear birds singing. She looks up at the back of the house, through a window into what must be the kitchen, where a woman is standing by the sink, washing some kind of leafy vegetable. She can’t quite see the woman’s face, but she wants to, suddenly and desperately. She feels safe and sad all at once.

When the meditation is over, most of the other younglings file out of the room, chattering excitedly about the places they saw. It’s time for the midday meal, and Aloo is hungry, but she
hangs back anyway. Ahsoka waits too, glancing questioningly at her, but Aloo waves her off. She wants to talk to Anakin alone.

Ahsoka frowns but goes, though Aloo knows she’s waiting just outside the door. She smiles thinking about it.

“Are you all right, Aloo?” Anakin asks, crouching down a little so he doesn’t tower over her.

Aloo bites her lip. “I… I don’t know,” she says.

Anakin winces. “Too much?” he asks, waving a hand in a way that she knows is meant to indicate their meditation.

“Yes. No.” Aloo frowns and starts over. “I saw a house with a garden. And – and people. I could feel people there. One of them was – ” She can’t say it. It’s probably wrong even to think it. Anakin has a mother, but that’s only because he came to the Jedi too old. None of the rest of them have mothers. They have the Force.

Anakin only waits, and Aloo thinks that, even if this is probably wrong, well, after all, he does have a mother. So maybe he’ll understand.

“I think – I think I felt my mother,” she whispers, and looks down in shame.

But Anakin doesn’t scold her, or tell her to release her thoughts into the Force. He only asks, “Was it a good memory?”

Aloo looks up at him in surprise. He’s smiling at her, and he’s waiting, but she knows if she decides not to answer, that will be okay too.

“Yes,” she admits in a voice barely above a breath. “I think it was.”

That night, Padmé gets a message on her private encrypted datapad. It’s unsigned and further encrypted, and it brings an instant smile to her face. It’s been a horribly long week, between ongoing tensions with the Trade Federation, a seemingly intractable budget debate in the ruling council, and news of a new bounty on her head from the Hutt clans. She could use a friend right now.

But Ani isn’t available to chat for long. He’s apologetic about it, but it seems Obi-Wan has some assignment for him and he can’t get out of it. But he’s got a quick message, and he couldn’t wait any longer to tell her.

“I found your sister,” he says.

Padmé sits there for a long time, staring down at her datapad. She sits there so long that Rabé has to come looking for her, and then Eirtaé scolds her for ruining her makeup when she still has another council meeting to get through before the end of the day. Padmé blinks, and realizes that she’s been crying.

She wants to tell them, but…well, her sister is a Jedi. Jedi don’t keep contact with their families. That’s the way it is. It’s the law of the Republic. Everyone knows that. Padmé is pretty sure that what she’s doing, what Anakin is helping her do, is some kind of crime. And she won’t bring her handmaidens into that.

You brought Anakin into it, some part of her thinks. And another part, a part that she sometimes
thinks sounds a lot like Shmi, says, No. He brought himself. The boy who built a podracer and a protocol droid in secret, who risked everything on a scheme to help her, even when he and his mother had nothing, that boy has been a criminal all his life.

So she smiles, and apologizes to Eirtaé and puts her Queen’s face back on, and she arms herself for another round of budget negotiations.

Much later that night, she calls Sola, and then their parents. “We found her,” she says.

Chapter End Notes

At first I wondered if it was really realistic to have Anakin left with a bunch of younglings unsupervised. Then I remembered that the Council and Obi-Wan canonically left Anakin himself unsupervised with a much older man who claimed to be interested in "his career," simply because that man was the Chancellor and he asked.

So yeah. Of course they would.
dreamed a dream of where I come from

Anakin writes to Mom and Kitster in Amatakka, and with Padmé he uses a code. They talk about the freedom trail, about the people who are running on it, about Shmi and Kitster’s new house in Theed that’s become the base for their operation on Naboo. Kitster tells Anakin, with excitement that practically bleeds through the words on his datapad, that he’s going to school now in Theed, learning about music and math and theater and science and politics. They even have a class for learning how to fly a speeder, which Anakin and Kitster both agree is hilarious. Kitster confesses that he sometimes messes up the simplest things, just to see the instructor’s frustration, and Anakin sits alone in his room in the Temple, laughing quietly and wishing that he could be there, too.

Once, Master Obi-Wan catches him writing to Mom – he’s telling her about a couple of mods he’s developed for the scanner, things that will make it safer and easier to hide, and she’s telling him about a family of Twi’leks who will be coming on the freedom trail to Coruscant in about a week, and they’ll all need documentation. Anakin is just assuring her he can handle it when his Master walks in.

Master Obi-Wan asks Anakin what he’s writing and if he can see it. Anakin nods and dutifully hands his datapad over, careful to look just a little nervous, but not too much. Master Obi-Wan studies it with a raised eyebrow, and then he turns to Anakin and smiles. “What’s this?” he asks.

“It’s a meditation journal,” Anakin says, scuffing his feet in that way that always makes Master Obi-Wan frown. “Master Yoda suggested it.”

“Hmm,” says Master Obi-Wan. “What language is this? I can’t read it.”

“It’s what I grew up speaking,” Anakin says, a careful lie that is not a lie.

Master Obi-Wan looks puzzled. “It doesn’t look like any dialect of Huttese I’ve seen,” he mutters, mostly to himself.

Anakin only shrugs. “Master Yoda thinks I’ll progress faster if I work with something I already know,” he offers.

“Yes, that’s certainly likely to be true,” Master Obi-Wan says, stroking the beginnings of the beard he’s been growing for a few weeks now. “Will you teach me to read it?”

Anakin holds his face carefully blank and counts to ten in his head just to be sure he won’t say anything too incriminating. When he knows he can pull it off, he shoots Master Obi-Wan a cheeky grin and says, “I don’t know, Master. I’m not much of a teacher.”

Master Obi-Wan laughs. “That’s not what I hear from the crèche masters,” he says, eyes twinkling.

“Well, that’s different,” Anakin says, just a little sly. “They’re younglings. You’re much too old to begin the training.”

For a moment he thinks Master Obi-Wan will call him on it, but he only laughs again. “All right, keep your secrets,” he says. “I’m just glad to see you meditating voluntarily.”

“This helps,” Anakin says, hefting the datapad. It’s another truth told to lie, and he doesn’t regret it. He likes Master Obi-Wan, likes him quite a lot more than any other Master he’s ever known, maybe even loves him. But Anakin’s no fool. He knows better than to ever really trust a Master.
Aloo can’t stop thinking about the woman she didn’t quite see in her meditation. She can’t stop thinking about Anakin’s stories, either, the ones he tells about his mother. Sometimes the masters say that the bond between a master and padawan is almost like a parent-child bond, but Anakin’s stories don’t sound anything like that. The way he talks about his mother is... warm. He uses words like love and pride, and he talks about his mother like she’s his best friend, too.

Aloo’s closest friend is Ahsoka, though of course she gets along with everyone in her youngling group. But she and Ahsoka like all the same jokes, and they’re the two best duelists in their class, and neither of them really likes meditation much. And they still like to practice Anakin’s Tatooine dances together, even after Miik loses interest and stops coming.

Once, when they’re ten years old, they’re slipping quietly through the halls toward the central conservatory and checking every few minutes to be sure there are no masters around, because they’re supposed to be in free meditation right now. They’ve almost made it to the conservatory when Ahsoka hisses a warning and drags Aloo behind a pillar. They wait, hardly daring to breathe, as a set of footsteps approaches, hesitates for a moment, and then moves on again. Aloo looks at Ahsoka and offers a shaky smile. Ahsoka, always daring, grins back at her and peeks her head around the pillar.

And then, to Aloo’s shock, she steps boldly out.

“What are you doing?” Aloo whispers, but Ahsoka only smirks and grabs her hand, pulling her out too.

The passing master has turned back to look at them, and for a moment Aloo feels unreasonably terrified, but then she sees it’s not a master at all. It’s Anakin.

She didn’t recognize him at first, because he’s been away with Master Kenobi on a mission for months and months now, and in that time he’s somehow gotten even taller.

Anakin grins when he sees them, and then grins even wider when he sees where they’ve come from. “Am I interrupting a secret mission?” he asks.

Aloo rolls her eyes, but Ahsoka gets into the act, glancing conspiratorially up and down the empty hall before stepping closer to Anakin to whisper, “Top secret. We’re going – to dance.”

“Scandalous,” says Anakin, though the way he says it makes it sound more like, “Excellent. I’m in.”

Ahsoka grabs Aloo’s hand in one of hers and Anakin’s in the other, and drags them both the rest of the way to the conservatory. Anakin pretends to complain the whole way. “This is a kidnapping,” he says, though he says it quietly enough that the sound won’t carry. “You’re kidnapping a representative of the Republic.”

“It’s for a very important cause,” Ahsoka says cheerfully.

They’ve reached the conservatory now, and she leads them quickly and furtively into a lush, densely green room full of ferns and the sound of trickling water. Anakin stops just inside, closing his eyes and breathing in long and deep. “I missed this place,” he says, mostly to himself.

“Where’d you go, Anakin?” Aloo dares to ask.

He opens his eyes again and smiles down at them. “Can’t tell you,” he says, but it’s an apology, not a boast. “But it was awful. Lots of rich people, lots of expensive food and shiny buildings and
sla– servants. I don’t think they had a single plant in the place. Even on Tatooine we had plants.”

Aloo looks at Ahsoka, and they grimace. Some of the other padawans talk about diplomatic missions like they’re the greatest honor. Padawan Mottin, who taught them Chandrilan etiquette last week, always makes them sound wonderfully distinguished and important. Anakin’s the only person she’s ever heard describe a diplomatic gathering as a “rich people party.”

“Well,” says Ahsoka, drawing them all back to the “mission” at hand. “We were planning to practice Tatooine dancing. If you want to join us.”

Anakin perks up at that, all the weariness seeming to drain out of him. “I’d be delighted,” he says.

*  *

“Master,” says Anakin rather abruptly over breakfast one morning, “what do you think is the most important thing for a Jedi?”

Obi-Wan looks up from his tea and the morning’s holonews report with a bemused smile. He’s drinking tzai, actually – Anakin’s been making it for both of them for a few years now. Obi-Wan says he likes the warm, slightly spicy flavor, and after that first time, he’s never asked Anakin for the recipe again. Anakin in turn hasn’t asked him why. He hopes it’s because his Master respects Anakin’s secrets, even if he doesn’t understand why he keeps them.

During his first several years with the Jedi, Anakin had made tzai sparingly, only for himself and in secret, because the ingredients that comprise his family recipe, all cheap or downright worthless and easily obtainable on Tatooine, are outrageously expensive on Coruscant, where they’re considered specialized and exotic imports. If they can be found at all. But once Shmi was established on Naboo, she’d begun sending him a supply of their blend every month, shipped to one of the freedom runners who lives in Cocotown. Anakin only has to find some excuse for leaving the Temple to go pick it up.

He’s pretty sure Master Obi-Wan thinks he’s sneaking out to race in the illicit swoop bike contests held in Coruscant’s underbelly, and okay, maybe he has done that once or twice, but it’s mostly to create a cover. Mostly.

And as covers go it’s effective. Just dangerous and forbidden enough to be believable, given the reputation he’s developed in the Temple. But not nearly as dangerous as the truth. His ongoing communications with his mother are far more illicit than any swoop race.

His Master is still studying him intently. Anakin holds his face in an expression of not entirely innocent curiosity, because that will be the most believable. And because it’s true.

“That most important thing?” Obi-Wan asks with an arched brow. “What do you mean, padawan?”

That’s a good question. Anakin’s not really sure he knows how to explain it. He’s not even sure he meant to ask Obi-Wan at all, though he is certain he wants to know the answer.

“Well,” he says haltingly. “I mean, what – what does it mean to you, to be a Jedi? At the core of it, I mean.”

Obi-Wan looks no less puzzled by this line of questioning, and Anakin hides a grimace in his mug of tzai. He should have kept his mouth shut.

But then Obi-Wan sets his own mug down with a thoughtful sigh. “I suppose it’s good to see you taking an interest in philosophy, even if it is a bit sudden,” he says dryly. “But surely you know
Anakin groans and waves an impatient hand. “Not that, Master,” he says. “I want to know what it means to you.”

A flash of something Anakin can’t name shines briefly in Obi-Wan’s eyes before it’s hidden again. “Oh,” he says slowly, thoughtfully. “Well, I do strive to follow the guidance of the Force.” He catches the look on Anakin’s face and smiles wryly. “And yes, padawan, I do consider that central to my life, as I should think all Jedi do.”

Anakin nods quickly, because he thinks he may actually get something from Obi-Wan, as long as he can keep this from turning into another lecture. His Master’s face is open and even a little teasing, and he seems almost excited to be having this conversation. Anakin wonders how long he’s wanted to talk like this, and feels a momentary surge of inexplicable guilt.

“I serve the Republic,” Obi-Wan is saying, “and I do so because that is the calling of a Jedi, and the best way for us to achieve the will of the Force.” His smile turns just slightly self-deprecating. “But I must admit I do derive a personal satisfaction from that service. When I follow the will of the Force I’m at peace.”

“And…how do you know what the Force’s will is?” Anakin asks hesitantly. It’s a question he’s asked before, though never so directly. There’s probably good reason for that, he thinks now as he watches a veiled disappointment appear in Obi-Wan’s eyes.


Ah, thinks Anakin, but this time he manages to hold his tongue, and his expression. Well, his expression anyway.

“But…what if they disagree?” he asks, though the words feel dragged out of him. “What if your meditations lead you in one direction, and the Council says the opposite?” He watches Obi-Wan’s growing frown and, half-desperate to keep the conversation going, grasps at his trump card. “Like Master Qui-Gon, when he wanted to train me.”

Obi-Wan’s face goes suddenly and startlingly blank. He’s silent for a long time.

“Yes,” he says finally, slowly. “There are times when the will of the Force is…unclear. And reasonable masters may disagree. But the members of the Council are chosen for their wisdom, and we must always respect that, even where we disagree. And we must believe that, through discussion and further meditation, the will of the Force will be revealed. As it was in your case, padawan.” He smiles, just slightly. “After all, here we are.”

“Here we are,” says Anakin with a faint smile of his own. But their conversation settles in him like a stone beneath the sand, a constant presence throughout the day, unseen but always felt. Obi-Wan believes that the Council’s wisdom is preeminent. He also believes that it is the will of the Force that Anakin be trained. He didn’t specifically say that he believes Anakin to be the Chosen One, but it’s pretty heavily implied. Anakin knows Qui-Gon believed that, and that the Council ultimately came to be convinced of it when they agreed to his training.

And Obi-Wan believes all of that too. It shouldn’t be surprising, and it isn’t. What is surprising is Anakin’s realization that he doesn’t agree.

That realization follows him into his meditations, and it waits there for him for weeks, growing stronger seemingly every day. Once, as he sits in stillness with Obi-Wan, seeking the will of the
Force, the image that comes to him is his mother, smiling softly as she brews a pot of tzaï and tells him the story of Tena the Unfettered, who walked with Ar-Amu in the desert and returned again and again to free hundreds of her people.

The image shifts, Shmi and their little kitchen fading away, and he’s in the desert, engulfed in a storm, watching a woman who looks like and yet unlike his mother as she breathes deep through fire scarred lungs. “Yes, Mother,” the woman says. “I will free your people.”

He comes out of meditation with those words still ringing through his mind, and when Obi-Wan asks what insights he’s gained on their mission, it takes Anakin a moment to remember what mission his Master is speaking of.

“I think,” he says slowly, “that I’m meant to be there. That…that there’s something I have to do on this mission. But I don’t know what. It’s elusive.”

He starts speaking simply to answer Obi-Wan, to offer something sufficiently vague but appropriate enough to avoid a lecture. But as he speaks, the certainty grows in him that he’s telling the truth. That he is called.

Yes, Mother, the words sing through his blood. I will free your people.

*

When she’s eleven, Aloo finally gets up the courage to tell Anakin about her dreams.

She’s been having them almost as long as she can remember, but she didn’t start understanding them until he taught them that meditation. Before, she’d wake from deep sleep with only a vague feeling of something lost. But Aloo finds that the longer she practices with Anakin’s meditation, the more she can remember of her dreams.

Most of the time, she sees the stone house with the beautiful garden. The woman who must be her mother is there, sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes working in the garden itself. There’s a man, too, sometimes helping her mother, sometimes reading a datapad beside a pink flowering tree. And there are two other girls, laughing and playing in the garden. Aloo wants to join them, but something always holds her back. It’s not for her, that garden and those girls. She knows that. Jedi don’t have attachments, and this definitely feels like something dangerous.

But she doesn’t want to let it go. She likes the dreams, even though she knows she shouldn’t.

She tells Master Windu about them once, though only in the vaguest terms. He frowns and looks very serious, and he tells her that every Jedi faces these temptations, but that if she releases them into the Force, she’ll be a stronger Jedi for it. She can’t make the dreams stop, but they will pass in time.

Master Yoda says something very similar. He suggests that she meditate, practice clearing her mind completely, so the dreams will fade into the oneness of the Force.

Aloo thinks about the meditation technique Anakin taught them, and now she’s sure that it’s something the masters definitely wouldn’t approve of. So she should probably stop using it.

She doesn’t.

Instead, she tracks down Anakin in the Archives. He’s doing some kind of research, but he sets it aside when he sees her.

“You still talk to your mother, don’t you?” she demands quietly. It sounds more like an accusation
than she thinks she meant it to, but then maybe she does mean it. She’s almost certain that his answer will be yes and it ignites a fury in her she doesn’t understand.

He gives her a little half smile. “Jedi don’t have contact with their families,” he says.


Anakin’s smile only widens. “No,” he says. “It’s a Jedi answer.”

She has no idea what that means. He’s infuriating.

Aloo grinds her teeth. “What’s it like?” she blurts, before she can lose her nerve. “Having a family?”

Anakin’s quiet for a long time. Finally he says, “Do you want the Jedi answer, or the truth?”

Later, Aloo will think that she probably could have guessed he’d say something like that. Maybe that’s why she asked him in the first place.

She takes a deep breath and says, “The truth.”
The last few months of Padmé’s second term as queen pass with stunning speed, and as she begins working on her farewell address and the myriad ceremonies surrounding it, she’s left with a strange feeling of mingled pride and loss. For eight years she’s dedicated her life to Naboo, to rebuilding in the wake of the Trade Federation’s outrages, to strengthening the relationship between Naboo and Gungans, and to the ever-expanding Tatooine freedom trail. She’ll continue to be involved with those causes even as a private citizen, of course, but everything will be different then, and the thought sits strangely in her stomach as the weeks pass ever more quickly by.

Her handmaidens feel it, too. Even as they go about the daily business of governing, they’re all concerned with the future that’s approaching so rapidly. Eirtaé is applying for medical school. Saché is considering a long-term career in politics, submitting her name for consideration for several staffer positions on the Royal Council. And Rabé, Yané, and Sabé are talking increasingly about the freedom trail.

They’ve all done some work with Shmi on the trail, and most of them have actually made several freedom runs themselves. Padmé never has. Captain Panaka tells her it’s far too much of a security risk, and an inexcusable one for the elected monarch to take. Padmé knows he’s right, but that’s never made her any less frustrated about the fact.

“You should come with us on a run, after,” Sabé says one afternoon as she’s twisting Padmé’s hair into yet another gravity-defying style. She doesn’t have to clarify what she means by “after.” They all know. “Panaka won’t be able to stop you anymore.”

Padmé laughs at that, but the idea is genuinely appealing. This is something she knows she can do, something that will matter, that will help people in a concrete way. She’s believed all her life in the principles of democracy, and fought for them as queen, and she can’t imagine leaving that fight just because her term in office is ending. Working with Shmi, too, is an opportunity she would treasure.

But her parents aren’t likely to be thrilled with the idea. She tries to tell herself that’s not part of the appeal, but her argument isn’t entirely convincing even to herself.

It’s not convincing to Ani at all. He sends her a long string of laughing faces when she writes to him about her dilemma, and he leaves it at that for a few hours. Padmé knows he’s probably been called away by Obi-Wan or the Council for some Jedi duty, and that he’s almost certainly not leaving her to stew in his teasing, at least not on purpose, but she’s still a little annoyed.

By the time he sends another message, she’s in session with her own council, and it’s not until much later in the day that she gets a chance to read it.

“Sorry for the wait,” Anakin writes, followed by a grimacing face. “Obi-Wan and I got called in to the Council. Got a new assignment.”

“Anything interesting?” Padmé asks, smirking to herself as she types the response, even though he can’t see her. “Or is it all classified?”

It is, of course, and he knows she knows that. So she’s not surprised when he ignores her question.
and instead writes, “Anyway, I didn’t mean to tease you too much. You’ve always been an ally for us on the trail, so I know you have good reasons. But I also know that sometimes you have to do things not just because they’re important, but also because your parents won’t like it.” He follows that up with a winking face, and Padmé laughs about that for longer than it probably deserves.

Part of it is the realization of what he must mean. At first, she’s confused by his statement because she can’t imagine Ani ever doing something just to annoy Shmi. That’s not the kind of relationship they have. Sure, she remembers Shmi telling Ani to go to bed all those years ago on Tatooine, but most of the time, they seem more like friends and equals than like any other parent-child relationship Padmé’s ever seen.

But it all clicks when she realizes he’s not talking about Shmi at all. He’s told her more than once that he sees Obi-Wan as a father figure, and Anakin doing something mostly for the fun of annoying Obi-Wan is easy to imagine. It’s also a reminder that he’s very much a teenager now, and in spite of all he’s been through, he’s not so different from any other teenager. That’s a surprisingly reassuring thought. Maybe all the more so because Padmé herself has never really engaged in any teenage rebellion. It’s difficult to do so when you’re governing a planet.

“Well,” Ani says when she gives him a much abbreviated version of her thoughts, “maybe now’s your chance. You’ll be a private citizen, so you can rebel all you like, and it will only cause a minor scandal.”

Padmé laughs so hard that it attracts the attention of Sabé and Yané, who are on desk duty outside. Sabé pokes her head around the door of Padmé’s office and raises one imperious eyebrow. “And what is so funny, Your Highness?” she asks severely.

Wordlessly, Padmé waves her in and hands her the datapad.

Sabé reads it with a snort of laughter she makes no attempt to hide. “Oh dear,” she tuts. “It seems Governor Bibble was right. That boy is a terrible rapscallion.”

Padmé snickers. She’s quite fond of Sio Bibble, really, but he has to be the stodgiest man she’s ever met. He once accused Sabé of scandalous and improper behavior after catching her sneaking a shuura pie out of the kitchen long after the facility had closed for the night. Why he was going to the kitchens himself at that hour, he never did say.

Yané, evidently deciding that her need to find out what’s so funny outweighs the risk of a lecture from Panaka about abandoning her post, slips through the door a moment later, and Sabé hands her the datapad in turn.

“I don’t know, Padmé,” Yané says with a teasing grin. “I’m not sure I’d trust Ani’s definition of a ‘minor scandal.’ He’s part of the criminal underground, after all. Sentient smuggling, forging documents, defrauding honest businessmen of their property…” She clucks her tongue. “A bad influence in my opinion, Your Highness.”

“And what does that make you?” Padmé laughs.

“Experts in scandal,” Sabé says with an absurd waggle of her eyebrows. “And extremely poor role models for children, of course.”

“Well,” says Yané, “it’s your policies that have led to a deplorable breakdown in social mores, Your Highness.”

Since there’s no one else to see her, Padmé allows herself to roll her eyes. Fortunately, all the polls
show Jamillia favored to win the queenship over Padura by a margin of at least fifteen points, so she isn’t too terribly worried about Naboo’s future. That doesn’t make Padura’s comments any less outrageous, though.

“Oh yes,” she says archly. “I’ve allowed the unwashed masses to pollute our sacred and unblemished land. Naboo may never return to its ancient ways.”

Sabé and Yané eye one another for a moment, straight-faced, until Yané cracks first. “I certainly hope not!” she says, and then all three of them are laughing.

Padmé’s parents have always assumed she’ll retire from politics after her second and final term as queen, and she’s done nothing to disabuse them of that notion. It’s hard for them, she knows, especially after the loss of Ilaré. When she’d first decided to run for princess of Theed, and later queen, her parents had been nothing but supportive, encouraging her to pursue the love of public service awakened by her time in the Legislative Youth Program. But that was before the Trade Federation invasion. Before the generally safe role of the nominal head of state, traditionally seen as a kind of high profile political internship, had quite suddenly transformed into the deadly position of leading an armed uprising to retake her planet.

Padmé is proud to say she rose to the occasion, but she understands why her parents are now terrified of the prospect of their daughter pursuing a life in politics. And at twenty-two, when she looks back on her first year as queen, even she thinks she was probably too young. Maybe not for the traditional role of the queenship, but certainly too young for the role she’d ended up having to play. And her handmaidens had been just as young. They’d been children fighting a battle, with no support from a Republic that has yet to acknowledge how it failed Naboo, even with a native son of Naboo in the Chancellorship now.

And Ani was even younger. He was still younger than she’d been as Queen, if only by a year, when he went on his first deadly mission as a Jedi. She still has the message he sent her after, saved under layers of encryption. Thirteen years old and a killer. She remembers how he described it as his “first” kill, and how that made her stomach churn, just the way he described. She wonders, sometimes, how long it will be before Ilaré makes her first kill.

Mostly, though, she tries not to dwell on it. The Jedi are a religious order, governed by their religious code and by the Republic Senate. There’s little that even the Queen of Naboo can do to influence their inner workings, and even less information available to her. Jedi operations are highly classified. Only Republic senators at the highest levels of clearance have access to them.

And, of course, Padmé won’t even be a queen for long now. She knows her parents are looking forward to that day, to the day they get at least one of their daughters back. Her mother has already started trying to play matchmaker for her, in hopes that a romantic relationship will encourage her daughter to settle down.

But Padmé’s not sure if she’ll be able to live as a private citizen anymore. Maybe that makes her sound self-important, but it’s true. She’s grown used to the voice that her position gives her, to the ability to enact change directly through policy, and the thought of losing that is hard.

Which is exactly why she’s refused to allow a vote on the proposed constitutional amendment that would allow her to extend her time in office to a third or even a fourth term. The possibility is too tempting.

That’s something Anakin doesn’t fully understand. His view is that it’s better to have someone in
office who will genuinely take into account the needs of all people, even if that means ignoring term limits.

“But that’s not democracy!” Padmé writes, indignant in spite of herself. “What you’re describing sounds more like a dictatorship!”

Anakin doesn’t reply for a long time, long enough that Padmé’s afraid she may have offended him, even though she knows the odds are he’s been called away by Obi-Wan again, and anyway, she certainly didn’t say anything wrong.

It’s not until the next morning that she gets an answer, and even in written form his words sound terse.

“Does it?” Anakin writes. “I thought I was describing the Jedi Council.”

That stops Padmé in her tracks. She has no idea how to answer him. She doesn’t know how seriously he means it – maybe he wrote that just to be flippant, though that doesn’t seem like him. But even if he did, there’s enough truth in his statement that she can’t simply dismiss it.

The Jedi Order is the preeminent defender of the Republic and its democracy, but the Jedi Council is not democratically elected. She knows that because Anakin told her, years ago now, and the shock of that realization led her to her own research. It’s astonishing, she thinks now, just how little the average Republic citizen, or even the average Republic lawmaker, knows about the Order.

The Jedi Council elects its own members. Some of those members serve for limited terms, but some are appointed for life. And Yoda, the Grandmaster of the Order, has served in that position for well over seven hundred years.

That’s a mind-boggling number. Of course different species have different life spans, and it’s naturally difficult for a human to imagine such a vast span of time being encompassed by a single life. Yoda probably remembers things that to Padmé are long-past history.

And he’s been the Grandmaster of the Order for seven hundred years. The Republic itself has only existed for about a thousand.

Those thoughts continue to build in the back of her mind throughout the day, even as she moves from meetings with Boss Nass and the Gungan High Council to a review of Naboo’s planetary defenses to a series of planning sessions for her farewell ceremony. By the time she has a chance to glance at her encrypted datapad again, over a hurried dinner in her private quarters before the official state dinner she’s scheduled to attend in less than two hours, she still isn’t sure what to say.

Anakin, though, seems to have had a minor panic about her reaction during her absence, because she returns to a flurry of messages from him.

“I’m sorry,” he writes. “I’m frustrated with the Council but I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. I know how much you care about democracy. It’s not something that really makes sense to me, I admit, but I know it matters to you and you’re probably the most decent Core Worlder I’ve ever met so if it’s that important to you then there must be something good about it and maybe I just can’t see it. Maybe it’s harder in the Order because we deal so much with the Senate and I see so much of what really goes into Coruscant politics, but maybe you’re right and it doesn’t have to be that way. I know I’m not an expert. Anyway, I’m sorry, and if you want to retire from the throne you certainly deserve it.”

Padmé imagines she can hear him babbling, and it’s cute and a little sad at the same time. He’s
always been too quick to apologize.

So she writes, “Relax, Ani. I’m not angry – just busy. You don’t have to apologize. You’re allowed to have your own opinions. We don’t always have to agree.”

His response is instantaneous, and that does make Padmé laugh. It must be very late at night in his part of Coruscant now, and she imagines him sitting in bed when he should be sleeping, waiting impatiently for her answer.

“I know that,” he writes. “It’s just I realized I probably sounded flippant, saying that about the Council, when you were talking about something you really care about.”

Padmé chews her lip momentarily, then shakes herself and takes another bite of dinner instead as she considers her reply. Finally, she settles on, “I think you were talking about something you really care about, too. And you weren’t wrong. About the Jedi, I mean.”

This time there’s a much longer pause on his end. His reply comes just as she’s about to head to her dressing room to be decked out in the evening’s finery.

“Thanks,” he says simply. “For what you said about opinions. Sometimes it’s hard to remember that here. Jedi are allowed to disagree too, of course, but…well, Master Yoda is always the wisest.”

She doesn’t really have time to reply, but if she’s a few minutes late, well, she’s the outgoing queen. She can be allowed a short delay, surely. “You know,” she tells Ani, “the Naboo believe that while age often brings wisdom, the young possess a wisdom of their own, an openness to change and new ideas that older generations are sometimes reluctant to see. I’m not a Jedi, of course, but it seems to me that the Order is maybe a little out of balance that way.”

Anakin sends back a series of laughing faces, and then, “Well, they do keep telling me I’m destined to bring balance to the Force.” He follows that up with a wink.

Padmé smiles to herself. She’s quite certain that’s not what the Jedi Council has in mind when they talk about balance.

“Sorry, Ani, I have to go,” she taps back quickly, because Eirtaé is glaring at her from the doorway. “Big state dinner and a ball tonight.”

“Step on a few toes for me?” Anakin says, and Padmé laughs aloud.

“I’ll do that,” she says, before setting the datapad aside and surrendering to her handmaidens’ ministrations.

Chapter End Notes

I know that "someone wise" bit in AOTC was meant to be sinister (at least for the audience), but in context I’ve always thought the someone Anakin meant was not Palpatine but Padmé.
Okay, kids, it's evidently time for my standard disclaimer:

I do not follow the Expanded Universe, either the old one or Disney's new one. I don't consider it canon and don't use it in my writing, and I have no patience for people who try to play canon police with EU materials. Please stop commenting to tell me, "Actually, in canon..." No, that's not canon, and no, I don't care.

I'm quite happy to ignore this (although it does get annoying when it keeps happening again and again no matter how many disclaimers I make) because I've been writing for a decade and a half at this point and I've got a pretty thick skin. But canon policing can and does drive a lot of new writers out of fandom, and it stifles the creativity of those who do stay. No one should have to read through reams and reams of secondary material they're not even interested in just to be allowed to write fic about some movies they like. No one should be obligated to ignore their own reading of a text or film in order to comply with the reading of someone else that just happened to be published in an "official" form rather than as fanfic. I'm not going to put up with this policing nonsense when it's directed at me, but more importantly, I'm tired of seeing it happen to other writers.

On a somewhat happier note: most of this chapter appeared as a snippet on my tumblr, but I've added several important things. Including one very important moustache.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Anakin’s transponder goes off almost the minute they dock on Brundia. He hesitates a moment after settling the ship and powering down, just long enough that Obi-Wan looks over at him with a raised brow and a wryly teasing smile.

“I know you’re not excited about this mission, padawan,” he says dryly. “But I do hope I won’t have to drag you off the ship. We don’t want to keep His Majesty waiting.”

“Of course not, Master,” Anakin mutters, exaggerating his sigh just that much more than necessary. It makes Obi-Wan roll his eyes, and he misses the way Anakin taps twice against a pouch on his utility belt as he pulls himself to his feet with a groan.

King Marlonartan the Seventh, formally styled His Royal Highness, Lord of the Fifteen Mysteries, Prince of the Infinite Isles, August and Radiant Fount of Wisdom, Crown of Justice and Throne of Mercy, King Ordained by All the Powers of the Cosmic Oneness, Marlonartan, Seventh of that Line, is not someone who likes to be kept waiting. He’s also, apparently, one of those people who believes that on time is in fact late. It’s a common belief among Masters, though they never seem to apply it to themselves.

Obi-Wan and Anakin present themselves before the August Presence at exactly 17:00 galactic standard time, just as they were scheduled. The Fount of Wisdom glares down at them from his jewel encrusted throne and mutters, peevishly, “I had understood that Jedi were always punctual. You disappoint me, Master Kenobi. I would expect to be shown more respect by the emissaries of
the Supreme Chancellor.”

“I do apologize, Your Highness,” Obi-Wan says, bowing deeply. His annoyance is obvious in the Force, though nothing of it shows in his outward bearing. Anakin follows his lead, teeth gritted to hold back a scoff. He’s already imagining how he’ll describe this scene to Kitster. The king is thin and pinch-faced and entirely unimpressive, apart from his moustache, which is very impressive indeed. He’s more moustache than man, Anakin thinks, imagining Marlonartan staring intently into a mirror as he twists the long black strands into tight coils on either side of his mouth, nodding smugly at a job well done. He has to bite his tongue to keep from snickering aloud.

Their assignment is simple enough: they’re on security detail for the duration of Brundia’s week-long celebration of the Exalted and Most Holy Day of the Birth of the King. The Council believes that King Marlonartan, who has a history of predicting threats against his person, may actually have reason to be concerned this time, so they’ve sent Obi-Wan and Anakin to babysit.

“This assignment is fairly routine, and we don’t expect much resistance,” Master Windu had said. “But Brundia is a strategic world in our efforts to combat the spread of the Separatist movement.” Then his eyes had narrowed and he’d added, “And Padawan Skywalker could use the practice in diplomacy.”

Obi-Wan had agreed of course, his embarrassment not quite hidden in the Force, and Anakin had bowed and said, “Yes, Master,” and that was that.

Later, when he messaged her with the news, Padmé responded with a series of laughing faces. “Someday,” she wrote, “we’re going to attend the same diplomatic summit, and I’ll get to see the show in person.” She always calls it “the show,” mainly because she finds it absolutely hilarious that the Council still believes Anakin causes diplomatic incidents out of ignorance, rather than out of very deliberate choice.

Padmé had offered a bit of teasing advice, too. “I’ve met King Marlonartan before,” she wrote, followed by a grimacing face that made him laugh for longer than it probably should have. “It’s pretty much impossible to do too much bowing and scraping, as far as he’s concerned, so you can get away with quite a lot there. Just…try not to call him a rich Core Worlder to his face. If only because he’s likely to insist that the Core has never given Brundia its proper due, and that’s a monologue you’re better off avoiding.”

“That does sound pretty bad,” Anakin wrote back, but he couldn’t resist adding, “Still, no promises.” Now, seeing the illustrious king in person, it’s very easy to imagine that monologue. Anakin’s fighting a laugh just thinking about it.

But he manages to mold his face into an expression of deep contrition as he bows low, his right palm pressed to his brow, in the proper display of Brundian fealty. “Please forgive us, Most Merciful Highness,” he says, eyes trained on the marble floor. “I am only a learner, and I fear my awe of your magnificent palace caused my Master to be delayed.”

He can feel Obi-Wan looking at him, and his Master’s curiosity prodding at the edges of his mind. Anakin hides a smirk and lets his thoughts fill with the pious desire to do well, to have a successful mission and meet the Council’s expectations. That makes Obi-Wan even more suspicious, but as a shield it’s effective, and a moment later his mind withdraws. Anakin’s glad that he’s looking down, so the laughter doesn’t show on his face.

The truth is, the obsequious bowing and constant use of flowery, inflated titles come easily. Resistance in the form of scrupulous obedience is a lesson older than his oldest memory, and in a place like this, where even the hint of a double meaning is completely lost not only on the king but on Anakin’s Jedi Masters as well, it’s almost fun.
King Marlonartan nods graciously and offers his forgiveness, and then they’re dismissed to meet with the king’s security team.

“What was that, padawan?” Obi-Wan hisses the moment the ornate doors of the throne room close behind them.

Anakin offers his best innocent, eager to please smile. “Diplomacy, Master,” he says. “I really am trying to do better. I know how important this mission is.”

Obi-Wan looks at him for a long moment with narrowed eyes. Finally, he sighs. “Just try not to cause a diplomatic incident this time,” he says wearily. “That’s all I ask.”

“Yes, Master,” Anakin says dutifully.

He doesn’t manage to slip away until nearly midnight, after they’ve gone over King Marlonartan’s security arrangements twice and established a shift for both regular guards and Jedi protectors.

Obi-Wan’s on watch now, and Anakin is supposed to be sleeping. He’s going to be horribly tired through his shift, he knows, but he’s run on less sleep before and this is far more important.

Rabé and Yané are waiting for him in an all-night diner that’s half the city away from the palace and might as well be on another planet. The streets here are narrow and dingy, lit by sporadic stabs of blindingly bright light that serve only to cast the rest of the street in deeper shadow. The air is full of myriad food smells, some more appetizing than others. It’s a far cry from the perfumed air of the palace. Anakin breathes it all in with a sigh of pure relief.

He spots the two Naboo women instantly, though they’ve gone to some pains to make themselves unremarkable. Without the makeup and fine clothes, neither of them looks all that much like Padmé, which helps.

He slides into the booth next to Yané without a word, and just manages to hold back a laugh when they both simply blink at him.

“Can we help you?” Rabé asks at last, her voice pointedly cold, and a snort of laughter escapes Anakin in spite of his best efforts.

“Well I hope so,” he says, grinning, as he reaches up to tap a finger against his padawan braid, tied up and around the short tail of hair at the back of his head.

Their eyes widen, and Yané blurts, “Ani?”

“Uh, yeah,” he says, laughing again. “Do I really look that different without the braid?”

Rabé snorts. “It’s not the braid,” she says. “I swear, Ani, the last time I saw you, you were still shorter than me. What the hell happened?”

That’s an exaggeration, of course, but she does look a good bit shorter than he remembers, so Anakin lets it go.

“Jedi nutrition,” he says dryly. “It’s very exact.”

“I’ll say,” Rabé mutters, eyeing him up and down. “You ought to market that diet.”

“A Jedi never strives for profit,” Anakin says piously.

“Oh, sure,” Yané says, nodding sagely. “That’s why you have a major fundraiser every year, and
that charity gala in the Senate.”

“Well, the generosity of the people of the Republic is different, of course.”

“Of course,” Rabé says. She smiles wryly and slides a datareader containing the diner’s menu across the table to him. “Are you eating?”

“Troona, yes,” Anakin says. “The king had a feast tonight, and Obi-Wan and I had to work security. They served caviar and a bunch of little things on sticks that probably cost more than everything in this place. It was awful.”

“Poor baby,” Yané says, patting his arm. “We picked the right place, then. My sources tell me the Aldoshan curry here is enormous, and hotter than the lava pits of Mustafar.”

Anakin orders the curry, and when the waitress comes back a few minutes later to see how they like their meals, he asks if she has any hot sauce. Rabé and Yané stare at him, aghast, and even the waitress looks impressed, but Anakin just shrugs them off. “I’ve been cooking for Obi-Wan for years now, so everything’s been mild. I’m not going to miss my chance at real food.”

“It’s amazing you have any taste buds left,” Rabé says with a laugh.

“Core Worlders are just weak,” Anakin says, grinning around a mouthful of curry. “So, what have you got for me?”

“Big news,” says Yané. “But before we get to that, I’ve been carrying this around for months on the off chance we run into you.” She draws a small package wrapped in brown paper out of a pocket and hands it to him with a rueful smile. “You’d think with all our technology there’d be an easier way to deliver a secret gift.”

“What’s this?” Anakin asks, turning the package over in his hands. It’s smaller than his palm, and doesn’t weigh much, but the simple square shape isn’t giving him many clues.

“Open it and find out, silly,” says Rabé. “It’s your birthday present.”

“My birthday was three months ago,” Anakin says with a smirk, but he unwraps the present slowly, taking care not to tear the paper and ignoring the way Rabé and Yané are hiding their laughter behind their hands. Padmé did that, too, he thinks, and wonders vaguely if it’s a Naboo trait or something they picked up from one another.

The paper successfully removed, Anakin folds it carefully and sets it aside. It’s a decent quality flimsi, nice and thick, and it will make good drawing paper. He’s not about to waste that. The square box he’s unwrapped will be useful, too.

Inside the box there’s a japor snippet, carved with the powerful signs of umakkar, the mighty storm, and the combined mark of Ekkreth and their mighty daughter, Leia. He doesn’t need Yané to tell him that this is from his mother. The lines are gouged deep into the wood, and she’s filled them with rich blue and red pigments. Anakin traces the signs slowly, reverently, and presses the wood to his forehead. Across long lightyears, the warmth of Shmi’s blessing envelopes him.

“Thank you,” he whispers to Rabé and Yané, tucking the snippet of japor away in a pouch at his belt before reaching again for what’s left of the package.

The other item is a small square of dull grey metal, about the size of a datastick but thin as a sheet of flimsi. There’s no markings or any other distinguishing features, apart from a slim line scored into the outside edge of the metal. He turns it over in his hands and raises an eyebrow at the two Naboo women, but they only smirk at him as if to say, “Figure it out.”
“What is this?” Anakin mutters, sliding the nail of his little finger along the groove in the metal. “Some kind of Naboo spy tool?”

That gets a burst of laughter from Rabé, and a more reserved chuckle from Yané, who adds, “Well…you’re not entirely wrong.”

At that moment, Anakin’s finger strikes a tiny, hidden catch, and the entire device springs open.

It’s an impressive feat of engineering. The little metal square seems to unfold from itself, expanding and reforming until Anakin finds that he’s holding a recognizable data analyzer, complete with a miniature screen and audio setting. “Wizard,” he breathes, already eager to take the thing apart and see how it’s made.

From the corner of his eye, he can see Rabé and Yané snickering at him again, but he ignores that. The analyzer is wizard – maybe more than wizard. After all...

“There’s no way this is commercially available to civilians,” Anakin says.

The two women look at each other for a moment, and then Yané grins and says, “Well, it’s a good thing you’re not a civilian, then, Jedi Skywalker. And if you’re really worried about it, Padmé assures us she got it cleared through the security council and approved by the incoming queen, so everything’s official.” Her grin turns wryly teasing as she adds, “Even if it is all…well, let’s say classified.”

“This was Padmé’s idea?” Anakin asks. He hopes he doesn’t sound quite as pathetically pleased as he feels, but the knowing look in their eyes says he’s not fooling anybody.

“We all went together on it,” says Rabé, taking pity on him. “But yes, it was her idea. It’s currently connected to the Naboo database, I believe on the basis of the fact that you are a vital if unrecorded member of the Naboo Resettlement Program. Any other databases you choose to add will be entirely up to you.” She follows that with a wink.

Anakin grins, pressing the tiny button that causes the device to fold up again and secreting it in the pouch just beside his mother’s japor snippet. “Thanks,” he says. “This is…it’s a lot more than I expected. I’m sorry I don’t have anything –”

Rabé waves an airy hand at him. “None of that,” she says with a laugh. “We get the pleasure of your company. And the pleasure of creating a bit of mayhem for the local slavers, hopefully.”

“Oh?” asks Anakin, leaning forward eagerly. “What is it you two are up to this time?”

“The usual smuggling and sedition,” Yané says, glancing around surreptitiously before sliding a datastick to him. “We’ve got a group of twenty-three coming along the Ryloth trail next week, and half of them need ID. Think you can manage that?”

“Oh?” asks Anakin, pretending to be affronted that she would even ask.

Yané pays his antics no attention at all. “But the more immediate concern is right here on Brundia,” she continues. “And it’s going to complicate things for you.”

“Ah,” says Anakin. “I knew I had a bad feeling about this mission.”

Rabé rolls her eyes. “No, you just picked that up from Obi-Wan,” she says. “He always has a bad feeling about everything.”
Anakin snorts. “True. Okay, so approximately how many of the king’s servants are actually slaves?”

For a moment Rabé and Yané both just stare at him. Then Yané shakes her head. “You picked up on that, huh? I don’t know why I’m surprised. Our sources say there are nineteen people working in the palace who…didn’t exactly choose to work there.”

“How diplomatic of you,” Anakin says dryly. “And you’ve got a contact?”

“Dinsa Atray,” Rabé says. “She’s a Twi’lek woman, not much older than you. The information’s all there.” She gestures vaguely at him, but he knows she means the datastick.

“You’ve got a transport ready?” he asks.

“Ready and waiting,” Yané says. “We just need the passengers. But we haven’t been able to get admission to the palace, and Dinsa and her people can’t get out.”

Anakin smiles. Maybe there’s a reason he’s here on Brundia after all. Even if it does mean he’s almost certainly going to end up breaking his promise to Obi-Wan. And he’s not likely to do himself any favors in Master Windu’s eyes, either.

Oh well. He’s got a reputation by now, so they won’t exactly be suspicious if another of his diplomatic missions goes awry.

“Leave that to me,” he says with a grin.

* * *

Dinsa Atray isn’t hard to spot, once he knows who to look for. She seems to be always present at every banquet the king holds, and he holds a lot. She’s Marlonartan’s personal server, evidently, and that could be a problem. Anakin watches her, demure and silent as she serves her master another glass of sparkling wine, and wonders how he’s going to explain Marlonartan’s assassination, if she moves before he has a chance to talk to her.

One thing he knows for sure: if she does move, he’s not going to stop her.

But two days go by, and no one tries to kill the king, and finally Anakin manages to catch Dinsa alone. They’ve just endured yet another feast, and the king’s gone off to bed with Obi-Wan on guard duty. Anakin’s meant to be sleeping, but he has much more important things to do, and anyway the food at tonight’s so-called feast was even worse than usual, so maybe he has an ulterior motive for visiting the kitchens. Or maybe it will just make a good excuse.

Dinsa starts when she hears him enter, then spins around with a knife in her hand. Startled or not, she holds the knife like someone who knows what she’s doing.

But her eyes widen when she sees who he is, and she drops the knife to the counter and her eyes to the floor. “I’m so sorry, Master Jedi,” she whispers. “What can I help you with?”

Anakin winces. He can’t help but wonder how many Jedi she’s met before. How many Jedi have come here and left again. I didn’t come here to free slaves, the memory of Master Qui-Gon whispers in his mind, and Anakin grits his teeth and blurts, “I came to help you, actually. And my name is Anakin, not Master.”

He says it in Ryl, and he thinks it’s that more than the words themselves that gets her attention.

Dinsa looks up sharply, eyes narrowed and expression unreadable. She’s silent for a long moment.
And then, slowly, she smiles.

“You have a Tatooine accent,” she says.

“Mos Espa,” he says, smiling back. “I learned from Grandmother Imayli.”

Her brow arches again, and he knows she understands the full significance of that. But all she says is, “I didn’t know there were any Jedi from the Territories.” There’s not a trace of emotion in her voice.

Anakin is impressed, and maybe a little jealous. “There’s not,” he says, and tells himself there’s no hint of bitterness to his smile. But he can see in Dinsa’s eyes that she knows. “There’s just me.”

He tells her that he’s in contact with her transport, and asks what it will take to get everyone out.

Dinsa eyes him for another long moment. “All I really need is a thorough distraction,” she says at last.

“I’m good at distractions,” Anakin says with a grin.

“And the other Jedi?” Dinsa asks, and Anakin’s smile falls.

Obi-Wan is a true Jedi. He’ll prize the mission over everything else, and his mission is what they were assigned by the Council: to protect King Marlonartan. Assignment or not, that’s not Anakin’s mission.

“He’s…good at responding to distractions,” Anakin says, and feels a little guilty for not feeling guilty.

Dinsa only nods. “I understand,” she says. “So we’ll give him the kind of distraction he can react to.” She eyes him slyly and adds, “I have access to more than enough chemicals. All I really need is a detonator. I don’t suppose you have one lying around?”

“Give me an hour and I will.”

*

The explosion goes off in the middle of the next evening’s feast. Anakin will discover later that it takes out the majority of the Royal Atrium, where they’d feasted only the night before. But tonight they are in the Gilded Ballroom, on nearly the opposite side of the palace. The assassination attempt has been foiled chiefly by the assassin’s bad information, and no one is hurt in the blast.

Obi-Wan instantly springs into action, taking up position at the king’s side and ushering him rapidly from the room and into a secure, undisclosed location. Anakin yells that he’s going to secure the perimeter, and ignores Obi-Wan’s questioning glower as he dashes from the room.

It’s almost disappointingly easy to disable the security cams when the palace is on lockdown. The array is pretty sophisticated, and the coverage is extensive, but the entire system goes down if both the power and the backup generator fail. Obviously, whoever set off the explosion must have known this. It’s unfortunate that, whoever they were, Anakin must have just missed them – the system control room is dark and empty when he arrives. At least, that’s what he’ll tell Obi-Wan and the king later.

Anakin’s duty, of course, is to get everything up and running again. That will only take him a few minutes. So he takes his time examining the system and looking for clues in the room. The door hasn’t been forced. It’s almost as though there wasn’t anyone here before him at all.
Less than ten minutes later, he gets a secure transmission from Dinsa. “We’re out,” it says. Anakin smiles to himself and reboots the security system.

An hour after that, there’s another transmission, this one from Yané. “And we’re off. Sorry for blowing up your mission.”

Anakin erases the message immediately, but he’s still laughing to himself about it days later as he and Obi-Wan are on their way back to Coruscant, King Marlonartan’s rather peevish thanks still ringing in their ears.

Chapter End Notes

King Marlonartan is more moustache than man, twisted and evil. :(  

Some notes on Tatooine culture:

Ekkreth is the shapeshifting genderqueer trickster of Tatooine. The name means "Skywalker" in Amatakka. Leia ("The Mighty One") is a name for Krayt Dragon, Ekkreth's eldest daughter.

"Troona" is an expletive more or less akin to "shit," often used as an amplifier. (As in, "troona yes.")
think I’ll catch fire and burn up

Chapter Notes

This chapter makes references to my one-shot fic Biscuits in the Library, in which young Anakin meets Jocasta Nu for the first time. It's not necessary to read that to appreciate this chapter, but if you're one of the folks who wanted an AU sequel to that fic, here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Padmé really had thought she might retire permanently from politics after her two terms as queen. Certainly her parents had thought that. In the year since she left office, she’s spent time with her family, joined Shmi on several freedom runs, taken a couple of courses at Theed University, and ultimately taken a job with the Naboo Resettlement Program, the innocuously named agency she herself created as queen to assist refugees and asylum seeker from Tatooine and, increasingly, many other worlds in the Outer Rim Territories.

It’s important work that she loves, and she knows her mother, especially, is hopeful that she’ll settle down in this role. It’s certainly not without danger, and a Hutt bounty is nothing to laugh about, but she has a much lower profile than she did as queen, and that can only mean she’s safer. And Jobal knows her daughter too well to expect her to settle into anything completely devoid of danger.

But when Queen Jamillia asks her to accept the position of Republic Senator, Padmé finds it impossible to refuse. She’s seen remarkable success with the Tatooine asylum program, as well as the development of equalized relations between the Naboo and the Gungans, but the Trade Federation remains a serious problem, and slavery is no less prevalent on the Outer Rim than it ever was. These are issues that can only be truly addressed at the galactic level.

There’s also the fact that the senatorial position would, of course, be based on Coruscant. Coruscant, the home of the Jedi Order.

That’s not the deciding factor for her. Padmé has searched her own thoughts exhaustively; she couldn’t accept the position if she thought that was her main reason. But it’s not. There’s so much good she can do in the Republic Senate – good for the people of Naboo, for the Outer Rim, for the galaxy as a whole, she hopes.

But she won’t deny that the idea of seeing Ani again brings a smile to her face. They’ve been exchanging messages for years, of course, but she’d like to actually see her friend, to have a chance to catch up on inconsequential things for once.

She tries to focus on that desire, on that Jedi, because the truth is that her other reason for wanting to be on Coruscant, so close to the Jedi Temple, is even more dangerous.

She knows that the odds she’ll ever even see Ilaré are slim. Her sister is still a youngling at this point, not yet apprenticed, and Padmé would have no valid reason for asking to meet Aloo Darie. Worse, if she did ask, the Jedi Council would no doubt be suspicious of how she’d learned her sister’s identity at all, and she might get Ani in trouble.

He isn’t concerned about that prospect, of course. In his last message, he’d sent her a series of
laughing faces when she brought it up, and then said, “I’m smuggling people to freedom without Republic sanction, I forge documents at least once a week, and I still talk to my mom and Kitster almost every day, not to mention you. I think finding your sister is pretty far down the list of my indiscretions.”

She can’t imagine him saying something like that when he’d first joined the Jedi, but that was a long time ago now, and the frightened, determined little boy she met on Tatooine has grown into someone remarkably confident and fearless in his rebellion. He can laugh off almost anything, but under the laughter Padmé can see that there’s a core of steady, unshakeable purpose that shines through even in his writing. In that he reminds her of Shmi, Shmi who has a residence on Naboo but returns regularly to Tatooine to guide her people on the freedom trail, who has led more than three hundred people to freedom and has a bounty on her head even larger than Padmé’s.

Anakin has a bounty on his head, too, but it’s unlikely he’ll ever be caught, because the Hutt bounty is set on someone described as a child. He used to complain about that, but lately it’s just made him laugh. It makes Sabé and Yané laugh, too, and the first time she heard about it, Rabé burst into loud guffaws, so startling that it left the rest of them gasping with laughter at her.

Padmé hasn’t seen Anakin since he joined the Jedi, but her former handmaids, now engaged fully with the underground freedom trail, see him fairly often. Apparently, Ani’s grown up. “And up, and up,” Rabé says with a snicker.

“You should catch up with him when you move to Coruscant, Padmé,” Sabé says, wiggling her eyebrows ridiculously. But her tone is much more serious as she adds, “And...maybe he could bring Ilaré, too.”

Padmé shoots her a tight smile and doesn’t reply.

Anakin’s the one who told them about Ilaré. He’s still horribly embarrassed about that fact, because he’s normally very good at keeping secrets, and she knows that his culture values them religiously. But the truth is he wasn’t aware that Ilaré was a secret.

She knows that Sabé and Yané still tease him about that sometimes, but Padmé tries not to, because she can tell that he feels genuinely guilty, and ultimately she thinks his mistake may have been for the best. Her desire to find her sister is against Republic custom and maybe even illegal, and she hadn’t wanted to involve her handmaids – her friends – in that. But, as Yané said, they’re already involved in a large-scale people smuggling operation. Wanting a little information about one particular Jedi is nothing compared to that.

Padmé’s not sure that’s really true. Although the Republic Senate and the Jedi have made no efforts, so far as she can see, to curb the slave trade on the Outer Rim, they’re also very unlikely to prosecute anyone for combating the slavers. A forbidden contact between family members and a child taken to be a Jedi, however, could have consequences.

She’s never spoken to Ilaré herself. She doesn’t think Anakin has even told her about Padmé, and really, she understands why. Ilaré – Aloo, that’s her name now – knows nothing about her family, and she’s been raised in a culture that discourages her from wondering. Someone from the outside asking about her would probably seem very unusual, maybe even upsetting. Padmé doesn’t want to upset her sister.

But she misses her. Maybe that’s strange – she only really knew Ilaré for two years – but it’s true. She feels like a piece of herself is missing, has been missing ever since the Jedi came to take her sister away. Sometimes she’s pathetically grateful for the scraps of information Ani can give her, and sometimes she’s almost jealous of him, because Padmé only has her memories of Ilaré, and he has Aloo, not a memory but a reality, someone he can talk to and laugh with and befriend. And
she wants that, wants that so much that it aches.

And then she feels guilty for thinking such things, because after all she has Shmi and Kitster. Anakin hasn’t seen his mother or his brother since he was nine years old, but Padmé saw them regularly on Naboo, and even now that she’s preparing to move to Coruscant, she knows that she’ll be able to keep up communication with Shmi on her freedom runs, openly and easily, and she’ll never have to lie about it. And that’s something Anakin doesn’t have.

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After that first conversation with Obi-Wan, Anakin starts to think of the question as a self-assigned project, not unlike the projects he used to be given by Obi-Wan and the Council when he was still a new apprentice. When he was thirteen he had to interview at least five Masters about their preferred style of meditation. Now, Anakin decides he’ll ask every Master who will speak to him what it means to them to be a Jedi.

Most of the answers are similar if not identical to Obi-Wan’s. Anakin expected that, though he still finds it a little disappointing. He’s not sure if the disappointment arises from the fact that all of the Temple-raised Jedi seem to have the same answers, or from the fact that Obi-Wan is no different than the other Masters. His mother always used to say that lies to one’s Master were one thing, but it was best not to lie to oneself, and Anakin avoids doing that whenever possible. So he can admit, if only to himself, that he wants Obi-Wan to be different.

But there’s a value in learning just how uniform the proper Jedi answers are. And, perhaps, just how far his own answers are from that norm.

“I always strive to follow the will of the Force,” says Master Unduli. “Only when we are in tune with the Force’s will can we achieve balance and peace.” She looks at Anakin rather pointedly as she says this, and he smiles cheerfully back. When he asks how they can know the will of the Force, she looks disappointed, and her answer is exactly what he expected: meditation, consultation with other Jedi, adherence to the guidance of the Council.

“The Force leads us,” says Master Mundi. “And we follow the Force’s guidance. Even when, perhaps, that guidance does not align with our preferred course of action.”

Just last week, the Council had denied Anakin’s fifth request to send a fact-finding mission to Tatooine.

Anakin smiles brightly and thanks Master Mundi for his time.

“The life of a Jedi is a life of sacrifice,” says Master Shaak Ti. “We give up much, some would say, to dedicate our lives to the Force and the defense of the Republic. But that is the will of the Force, and it is our duty as Jedi. A duty that brings peace, both to the Jedi and to the Republic.”

“And to you personally?” Anakin asks, and watches Master Ti blink in surprise.

“Well…yes,” she says slowly. “I suppose so.” But she doesn’t sound nearly as assured about that. Anakin thinks it’s probably not a question she’s ever been asked before. Maybe she’s never even asked it of herself.

Master Windu eyes him with open suspicion when Anakin sits next to him in the refectory one afternoon, and his expression doesn’t change when Anakin asks him what being a Jedi means to him. Usually, Anakin is better at leading up to that question, but there’s something about Master Windu that still makes him feel like a dusty nine year old boy freshly won from Watto and uncertain of his place with his new Masters.
“You’ve been asking this question quite a bit lately, Skywalker,” Master Windu says. Anakin has no idea how to interpret his tone.

“Well,” he says carefully. “I’m… aware, Master, that I didn’t exactly enter the Order in the usual way. And I never had any of the instruction that younglings usually receive in their training groups. So I… I want to understand what it means to be a Jedi, from an insider perspective.”

A very small part of him is hoping that Master Windu will correct that designation. But most of Anakin is unsurprised when he doesn’t.

Master Windu frowns for a moment longer, then lets out a slow breath in thought. “The Force binds the galaxy together,” he says at last. “It unites us, far more so than the structure of the Republic or the ideals of democracy or any other concepts. And my life is dedicated to the Force, and through it to the preservation of this Republic, which unites us because the Force wills it. That is my duty as a Jedi, Skywalker. To hold the balance of the center.”

There’s that word again. Anakin’s starting to wonder if maybe he shouldn’t be asking all the Masters just what they think Balance means. But it’s clear enough in their answers to this question.

And what if the center is false? he thinks but doesn’t say. What if it can’t hold, and shouldn’t? What if you strive to follow what you think is the will of the Force, but you’re wrong?

He knows better than to ask those questions, though. Master Windu seems almost pleased with their conversation, and Anakin’s not going to press his luck.

Master Yoda’s answer is a bit more substantial than most of the others he’s heard, though not substantively different. In fact, Anakin thinks he could trace all the other answers back to this one, like following an evolutionary chain back to a common ancestor.

“At one with the Force, a Jedi must always strive to be,” the Grandmaster says, tapping his gimer stick for emphasis. They’re in Master Yoda’s private meditation chamber, and the sound echoes and bounces back again, filling the whole room. “Wisdom you will find there, hmm, and balance. A Jedi must have the greatest commitment, the most serious mind.” At this, Master Yoda leaves off tapping his stick against the floor and instead pokes at Anakin with it. “Only then will he be at one with the Force. The work of a lifetime, it is, but no more important work is there. On this, all depends: the fate of the Jedi, of the Republic, yes, even of the galaxy itself! The guidance of the Force I seek always, and my ally it is, a wise and powerful ally.”

Anakin isn’t entirely sure if Master Yoda’s words are meant as a stern lecture, an attempt at encouragement, or even a warning. He’s never been very good at reading Master Yoda’s expressions, and he doesn’t have the nerve to ask now.

Madame Nu gives him an answer much the same as all the other Masters Anakin has asked, though she adds that, for her, the will of the Force, and therefore her role and duty as a Jedi, is the pursuit of knowledge. Several of the other Masters have mentioned wisdom, but Anakin thinks that she means something rather different.

“That’s not quite what Master Yoda said, Grandmother,” Anakin says with a teasing grin.

Jocasta snorts. “No, I don’t imagine it is. Perhaps that’s why he’s not an archivist!”

Her right title is Master Nu, of course, though generally she’s called Madame Nu by everyone in the Temple, even the members of the Council. She’s old-fashioned, she told him once, mischief dancing in her eyes, before admitting the truth: that she likes having a title that even Master Yoda
himself is forced to acknowledge. Master Nu is just another Jedi Master among Jedi Masters. Madame Nu stands out.

She doesn’t make him call her that, though. The very first time Anakin ventured into the Archives, he called her “Grandmother” by accident, and she offered him an illicit biscuit. Once she learned enough to understand what that title meant to him, she told him he could call her that any time he liked.

Now he thinks of her as Jocasta, most of the time – the only Master other than Obi-Wan who sometimes makes him forget.

She’s still smiling slightly, maybe even smirking, but the mischief in her eyes gives way to something sharper as she asks, “And what about you, young one? What do you think is the most important aspect of being a Jedi?”

Anakin blinks. Of the dozens of Masters he has asked this question, she is the first to ask it of him.

He opens his mouth to give something resembling the proper answer, and finds that he can’t. He can’t make himself lie to someone he’s called Grandmother.


And instantly he knows what story he has to tell. The first story, and the most important.

“On Tatooine,” he begins, voice soft but steady, “we have a story about Tena the Unfettered. She was…I think in Basic you would call her a prophet. She walked with the Mother in the desert.” He can see the curiosity in Jocasta’s eyes, but she doesn’t interrupt, and because she doesn’t, Anakin adds, “The Great Mother is the mother of all the slaves. She protects us and guides us, and she’s promised that we will be free.”

He realizes too late that he used the word “us,” and it’s clear Jocasta noticed, too. Anakin swallows and hurries on.

“Tena had angered her Master. There are a lot of versions of the story, and every story gives a different reason for her Master’s anger. Maybe she shared food with another slave who wasn’t supposed to receive any that day. Or maybe she lied to her Master to help another slave, or she stole medicine from her Master’s stores. My mom used to say that there were so many different versions because the truth is that Masters don’t need a reason, just an excuse. Sometimes not even that. So whatever the reason, Tena’s Master ordered that she be taken out into the desert, and that her transmitter be detonated and she be left there to die.

“But just as they triggered the detonator, a great storm blew up, and her Master’s enforcers fled from it. So Tena lay there bleeding out into the sand. And the storm whipped around her but beneath the roar there was silence, and in the silence she heard the voice of the Mother. ‘Daughter,’ said the Mother. ‘Get up.’ Then Tena stood, and she found her bones knitted together again and her skin whole, though it had turned rough and hard as dragon scales where the fire touched her.

“And the Mother said, ‘Daughter, do you know what I have done for you?’ ‘You have saved me, Mother,’ said Tena. But the Mother said, ‘I have made you free, so that you may go and free others.’ And Tena did. The stories say that she went back, again and again, and led nearly a thousand people to freedom before she was captured by the Hutts. They planned to execute her, in full view of all the people, but as she was led onto the platform, fire fell from the sky and Tena was caught up.”
Jocasta is studying him intently as he finishes, but Anakin can’t decipher her expression. “It’s a martyrdom story then?” she asks.

Anakin blinks. “No,” he says slowly. “Tena didn’t die. The Mother took her, with the storm and with fire.”

Jocasta is frowning now, but it’s a thoughtful frown, and there’s no trace of the disappointment he’s seen in other Masters’ faces. “And that’s what drives you, young one?” she asks. “The Jedi freed you, so you are driven to be a Jedi?”

He should say yes. That would certainly be the safest answer, and no matter how she sometimes makes him forget, Jocasta is not really a Grandmother. She is a Jedi Master. His yes would be the only acceptable Jedi answer here.

But Anakin is tired of giving Jedi answers. So, just once, he lets himself answer as if she really were a Tatooine Grandmother.

“The Mother freed me,” he says. So that I may go and free others, he doesn’t say. He can tell by the spark of surprise in Jocasta’s eyes that he doesn’t need to.

*

For someone who likes to talk about his family on Tatooine, Anakin knows a surprising amount about Naboo.

Maybe that’s not really surprising, though. He fought in the space battle there, when Master Kenobi killed the Sith Lord, and Aloo knows that the Supreme Chancellor, who is also from Naboo, likes to keep up with Anakin’s progress.

Aloo was born on Naboo. She knows that much from her records, and because, when she was ten, they were assigned a research unit on their birth cultures. It was very interesting. Aloo remembers being fascinated by some of the Naboo ideas about flowers.

And she guesses that the beautiful garden and its stone house, the ones she still sees in her dreams, must be on Naboo, too. Anakin says there are all kinds of gardens and green and wild places on Naboo, because there’s so much water. He says that like the idea of that much water is the most amazing thing in the universe.

He likes to talk about Naboo’s queen, too, and the things he says are so glowing that Aloo’s half convinced she can’t be real, that he’s making everything up. She sounds more like one of the clever girls in his desert stories than a real politician. But Aloo doesn’t mind. She likes all of his stories, but she especially likes the ones about Queen Amidala, because they feel like stories meant just for her.

Aloo is twelve years old when her world breaks apart. She’s still the best in her youngling group with a lightsaber, and she keeps hearing rumors that she’ll be apprenticed soon. She’s not sure how to feel about that. She should be pleased, probably, and it is encouraging, but…well.

Everybody says Ahsoka is one of the most promising younglings in their group, too, and when they’re both apprenticed they’ll have to stay with their masters, and they’ll have missions, missions that take them away from the Temple, and they probably won’t be assigned together very often and –

And Anakin’s nineteen and he’s still a padawan and she knows it will probably be a few years yet before he’s knighted, of course, and besides she’s heard that Master Windu might take her as a
There are a lot of things Aloo shouldn’t want. She tries not to think about them most of the time, but she doesn’t always succeed, and releasing things into the Force is a lot harder than the masters make it sound.

Today her thoughts refuse to be released, and the last thing she wants is to talk about them with the crèche master or worse yet, Ahsoka. So instead she’s slipped away to the Pool of Serenity.

The Pool of Serenity is tucked away on a quiet floor of the Temple reserved solely for meditation. There are gardens on the same floor, and several small, unadorned rooms dedicated to emptiness, and there’s the pool. It’s shallow and clear and perfectly still, and the masters say that gazing into that stillness can help you center yourself and release everything into the Force.

Aloo lets out a slow breath just outside the door, then waves it open. And stops, startled, in her tracks.

Anakin Skywalker is sitting there, splashing his feet in the Pool of Serenity.

He looks over at her and grins.

“What are you doing?” Aloo demands, though she’s not sure if she’s horrified or if she wants to laugh.

He goes on splashing his feet unrepentantly and raises a datapad. “Watching the holonews,” he says.

“That’s…not really an answer,” Aloo says with a snort, but she steps into the room and sits down beside him at the edge of the pool anyway. She doesn’t dip her feet, though. “This is the Pool of Serenity, you know. It’s supposed to be, well, serene.”

Anakin snickers. “I don’t know,” he says. “I think this place is too serene sometimes. It could use some stirring up.”

She doesn’t think he’s talking about the pool.

“What’s on the news?” she asks, an awkward and obvious change of subject, but she thinks it will at least be less awkward than whatever conversation could have followed his statement.

As it turns out, she’s wrong about that.

Anakin looks at her for a strange, serious moment of unnerving silence. Then he says, “Senatorial confirmations.”

Aloo knows she’s making a face, but she can’t help it. “Ugh. Really?”

He doesn’t laugh, though. “Naboo Senatorial confirmation,” he says, like that changes things, and okay, maybe it does.

“Oh,” Aloo says, shooting him a teasing grin. “That’s your Queen Amidala, right?”

“She’s not my queen,” he says, but he says it easily, and that’s no fun. He’s supposed to be embarrassed.

Still, Aloo’s never quite been sure she believes any of his stories about the kind and wise and brave Queen Amidala, so she snatches the datapad from his hands, just to see if there’s any truth
to his stories, and –

And she’s looking at a face from her dreams.

The world narrows until there’s nothing but the image on the datapad. Queen Amidala – Senator Amidala now – dressed in the splendor typical of a Naboo politician, her face solemn as she takes her oath of office. She has brown hair, and warm brown eyes, and she looks kind and fierce at the same time.

“Aloo?” Anakin says, gently, like he’s afraid of startling her.

“I – I know her,” Aloo whispers. “Somehow. I don’t – how do I know her?”

“She’s your sister,” Anakin says. Just like that.

Aloo would turn to stare at him, but she can’t look away from the image on the datapad. The image of her sister.

“I – I know,” she breathes. “Somehow I – ”

She can’t finish, and Anakin doesn’t press her. He sits in silence while she watches the newsfeed, and then when it’s over she replays it again and again.

Jedi don’t have families. They don’t have sisters, or mothers, or brothers. The Order is her family, and the Force is her ally and her guide. That should be everything she needs. Aloo shouldn’t want anything else. That way lies the risk of attachment, and the Dark Side.

“You could talk to her,” Anakin says at last, an offer that’s also a confession. “If you want.”

She should refuse. She should probably report him to the Council, too.

Instead she says, “Yes. I want to.”

*

Padmé’s only been on Coruscant a week and she’s already exhausted. She likes the work, and she thinks she’s making good progress toward developing the kind of political relationships she’ll need, but she’s not too proud to admit that she misses Naboo and her family.

So she’s intensely glad when she receives a call on her encrypted com. It’s a private line, one that only a very few people have access to. She’s still surprised to see that her caller is Anakin, though. He always contacts her through their datapad link, which is both cheaper and more secure.

“Ani? My goodness, you haven’t commed me in years!” she laughs, delighted.

But a long silence follows on the other end of the link, and Padmé starts to worry that something is wrong. “Ani?” she asks again.

She hears a sharp inhalation of breath, and then a voice, young and definitely not Anakin’s, says, “Um. Is – is this Senator Amidala?”

Padmé feels herself freeze, caught between fear and hope. “Yes,” she says carefully.

“I – my name is Aloo,” the girl says, and Padmé’s breath catches. “I – Anakin says – he says you’re my sister.”

“Yes,” Padmé whispers. “Yes, I am.”
Anakin Skywalker splashing his feet in the Pool of Serenity is probably my single favorite image I’ve ever written.
children by the water banks

Chapter Notes

I've always thought Anakin's ideas about compassion in AOTC are really interesting and offer an important insight into his character, but they're usually dismissed as just flirting. (And he was flirting. However, this is literally the only time he's actually kind of smooth, which says to me that he wasn't only flirting, and that this is something he's thought about and sincerely believes. Because smooth Anakin is not, except occasionally by accident.)

So I wanted to revisit that conversation in a setting absolutely devoid of flirting, and the end of this chapter happened.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Master Yoda is teaching their class the next day, and Aloo is terrified that he’ll see how everything has changed for her. How she’s not the same Jedi youngling she was just yesterday, when he taught them to sense the Force in inanimate stone. Yesterday she was a Jedi youngling like other Jedi younglings, but today she is a girl with a sister, no, two sisters, and a mother and a father, and an uncle and two nieces. They all have names. She has another name, too. She has parents who named her Ilaré Naberrie.

Who is Ilaré Naberrie? Aloo finds herself wondering as she’s meant to be concentrating on the flow of the Force between herself and the stones she’s lifting. Ilaré Naberrie feels like someone else, someone she met long ago and nearly forgot. And yet the name seems to ignite something in her, too. Ilaré Naberrie is a stranger, but she is a stranger whose name could only belong to Aloo.

Somehow, she manages to make it through the whole day of class and meditation. And to her surprise, none of the masters see what Aloo thinks must be so obvious in her face.

Ahsoka does, though.

“Hey,” her friend says, nudging her shoulder as they head to the refectory for evening meal. “You okay? You've been kind of…strange all day.”

Ridiculously, Aloo is almost relieved to know that someone noticed. But for the first time she's not sure how much she should tell Ahsoka.

So she sidesteps the issue and instead blurts out, “Do you – do you want to practice dancing?”

Ahsoka’s eyes narrow for just a moment, and then she nods decisively. “Sure. Let’s go.”

The movements are almost second nature for them now. Aloo lets herself sink into the motion, centered in the feeling of freedom. Anakin told them once that Tatooine dancing, at its heart, is about creating a new reality, but Aloo doesn’t think she’s ever really understood that until now. Now, this dance feels like tearing through a wall and out into some brand new terrifying unknown world.

“Do you ever wonder?” she asks Ahsoka. “About your family? About where you came from?”
Ahsoka misses a step at the question, and Aloo drops back to avoid kicking her friend in the face.

“Sometimes,” Ahsoka admits in a whisper, her gaze skittering away from Aloo’s face to fix on the floor. Aloo’s eyes follow Ahsoka’s, tracing desperately over the patterns in the carpet.

Neither of them says any more about it. But it’s enough, somehow, to know that they share this shameful secret.

*

Anakin likes Chancellor Palpatine, appreciates his willingness to really listen, even somewhat admires him. But there are times when the Chancellor is all too obviously a Core Worlder.

“I am trying, my boy,” Palpatine says kindly. “You must know that. But the situation is complicated, and I’m afraid there are many members of the Senate who are, unfortunately, entirely dedicated to careers of obstruction. And there are a great many economic interests in the Outer Rim, of course…”

Anakin sighs. “I know that, Chancellor.” Of course he knows that. He still knows the number those economic interests assigned him. A lot number. 4726339. 2899353 for Mom. 4728871 for Kitster. He knows all about economic interests in the Outer Rim.

It’s times like this, though, that he’s not at all sure Palpatine really does. And he’s getting tired of swallowing that question.

Palpatine always says that he wants Anakin to be able to speak completely freely with him. For some reason, the image that comes to Anakin’s mind is Aloo, determined and frightened at once, her shoulders squared and some brand new defiance in her eyes, asking to contact the sister she was never supposed to know about.

Aloo has never been to the Outer Rim, but she understands something that Anakin is beginning to think Palpatine, for all his encouraging talk, never will.

Well. Maybe it’s time to test that.

“I do know that, Chancellor,” he says, training his eyes on the deep red carpet of Palpatine’s office. “But…you must have some influence, right? You can lend your support to Pa– to Senator Amidala’s bill. People will listen to you.”

Palpatine offers him a sad, apologetic smile. “I will certainly do my best, my boy,” he says. “But I’m afraid the commercial interests in the Senate often carry more influence even than the Chancellor. The corruption of the Republic is deep-rooted and not easily weeded out.” He shakes his head ruefully. “Still, we mustn’t give up hope.”

“No, of course not.” The disappointed but grateful smile Anakin offers him is well practiced by now; it forms on his face without any conscious effort. “And I do appreciate you trying, sir.” A thought that sounds suspiciously like Kitster whispers in the back of his mind, and before he can think better of it, Anakin adds, “You know, we have a word for people like you, on Tatooine.”

“Oh?” Palpatine looks intrigued. Anakin’s inner Kitster is already snickering. Anakin can’t decide if he’s disappointed or just unsurprised. Maybe it’s even funny.

“Well, it’s a phrase really. Tematta nel uttar,” he says, still smiling his best grateful, shy smile. “Help from the Core.”

Palpatine beams at him. “I certainly hope I can live up to that promise,” he says.
“I’m sure you will, Chancellor,” Anakin says, and that is completely true.

Later, as he’s leaving the Chancellor’s office to return to the Temple, he stops long enough to send Mom and Padmé a quick encrypted message.

*The Chancellor won’t help*, he writes. *We’re on our own.*

* *

The first bill Senator Amidala introduces in the Republic Senate calls for the emancipation of the Outer Rim and the admittance of the Territories as full-fledged member states of the Republic.

It receives minimal support and almost no media coverage. The motion dies before ever coming to a vote.

But in the week between its introduction and defeat, Naboo offers sanctuary to nearly two hundred people. This, too, goes largely unreported.

* *

Anakin is in the Archives when Miik finds him. He’s been seconded to Madame Nu for the week, something that most of his peers have been teasing him about continually. He rolls his eyes and glares at them for effect, because the truth is he can’t talk about what he’s really working on and it’s better to let them draw their own conclusions.

Someone has been deleting information from the Archives. And they’ve been smart about it, too. If Anakin hadn’t needed to plot a particularly secure and unusual route for a group of runaways desperate to avoid any Hutt-controlled space, the missing information might never have been noticed at all.

Jocasta took some convincing – she takes incredible pride in the extensive collections of her Archives – but when she saw the evidence she was incensed. She’d requested his help and, just as importantly, she hadn’t asked how he’d discovered the deletions in the first place.

She’s been working closely with him most days, and Anakin guesses Miik must have been scoping them out for a while, because the minute she leaves today to assist Master Billaba with a question of diplomatic protocol, the Rodian boy appears seemingly from nowhere at Anakin’s side.

“Padawan Skywalker?” he asks, his hands twisting in his tunic and his eyes trained on the floor.

“Anakin, Miik. You can call me Anakin, remember?”

The boy looks up with a bashful wiggle of his antennae. “I wasn’t sure if you remembered me,” he admits.

Now that Anakin has regular field assignments with Obi-Wan, he hasn’t had a chance to teach a youngling class in a couple of years. The first group of kids he worked with are nearly old enough now to be apprenticed themselves. It’s a startling realization.

“No, of course I remember you,” Anakin says with an encouraging grin. “You always asked good questions.”

Naked surprise shows on Miik’s face. “Oh,” he says. “Well. I – I have another question.”

“I’ll do my best to answer it,” Anakin says.
“Um,” the boy says. He glances rapidly around, and even though no one is in earshot, he steps closer and lowers his voice to a whisper. “I heard – I heard that you can help people find their families.”

“I am pretty good at research,” Anakin says. It’s a simple fact, simply stated. He learned this trick long before he knew anything about the Jedi.

“Can you – Do you think you could find mine?” Miik whispers.

Sometimes, a real answer is worth the risk. “Yeah,” Anakin says. “I can do that.

* 

Aloo has talked with Senator Amidala five times now. It’s…interesting. She still isn’t sure how to feel about it.

She likes Padmé, she thinks. The woman who is her sister is surprisingly easy to talk to, for a politician, and she’s clearly trying not to press Aloo too much. They don’t really talk about the rest of Padmé’s family (of her family, some part of Aloo whispers), and they usually don’t talk about politics or the Jedi, either. Mostly, Padmé seems to like to hear about Aloo’s hobbies, the things she enjoys, her friends, her favorite places in the Temple. So many questions Aloo has never really thought about before, at least not in those terms.

They talk about Anakin, too, which is probably inevitable. Padmé is her sister, but she’s also a stranger, and Aloo is a stranger to her. But Anakin is a friend to both of them. And that in itself is a revelation. Aloo had known that Anakin still talks to his mother, but she’d always thought that Queen Amidala was someone he knew and admired only from a distance. It’s a little unnerving to realize that Anakin and her sister are actually close friends.

It does make Aloo wonder about the Code sometimes. She’s almost certain that Anakin’s friendship with Padmé – and definitely his continued communication with his mother – is forbidden, and she knows that she shouldn’t be speaking with Padmé either. But…what does that mean for Aloo’s friendship with Anakin? Her friendship with Ahsoka, or with Miik or Ras? Are they forbidden too? And if not, what makes one relationship different from another? She doesn’t know how to answer any of those questions.

The fifth time Aloo coms Padmé, her sister asks about what she’s been learning this week. Aloo wonders if that means Padmé is less afraid of upsetting her now, but she almost wishes that wasn’t the case, because she really doesn’t want to talk about this week’s lesson with Master Windu. She doesn’t even want to think about the lesson with Master Windu: not about his warnings of the dangers of emotional attachments, and definitely not about the…other temptations he warned them about.

So instead she stumbles through a recounting of last week’s meditation exercises, and Padmé seems to find that interesting, and Aloo survives the conversation with her dignity mostly intact.

But the fact that she doesn’t want to think about Master Windu’s lesson doesn’t actually mean she succeeds in not thinking about it. Unfortunately. So, later, Aloo gives in and goes to find Anakin.

He’s only just returned from some mission on the Outer Rim, and she’s heard a rumor that he’s being assigned to Madame Nu again, at least for as long as he’s in the Temple. Aloo and Ahsoka had a good laugh about that only this morning. Anakin must have done something really egregious for the Council to keep assigning him to the Archives. It’s certainly not the kind of assignment anyone asks for.
But he’s either got a few hours of downtime before resuming his archivist duties, or else he’s skipping out on them entirely, because Aloo searches the whole of the Archives for him without success. She finally gives up, only to nearly stumble across him fifteen minutes later, lying on his back on the mossy ground in the conservatory’s fern room.

Anakin sits up when he hears her coming, then takes one look at her face and offers his condolences. “You survived Master Windu’s lecture, I see.”

Aloo can feel herself blushing. It’s stupid. She doesn’t even know why she’s embarrassed.

“Padmé asked about what I was learning,” she mutters, plopping down gracelessly on a mossy stone. “I told her about meditation because there was no way I was going to tell her about that.”

Anakin snickers. “Come on, be fair. Master Windu’s sex education course is very…educational.”


“Hmm,” says Anakin. “The Dark Side, that is. Beware your feelings, young padawan!”

His Yoda impression is absolutely terrible. Aloo shouldn’t be laughing.

“So,” says Anakin. “You survived Master Windu’s lecture – congratulations, by the way – and you survived not talking to Padmé about it. And then you came to find me.” He looks at her with undisguised mischief. “Is this about Ahsoka?”

“No!” Aloo squawks. Now she’s definitely blushing, and the realization only makes her blush harder. Which is stupid. Like his suggestion. That’s stupid, too. She doesn’t even know why he’d mention Ahsoka.

“No,” she says again, glaring at his smirking face. “It’s about you. And my sister.”

“Oh?” he asks. He doesn’t look at all embarrassed, though. This is not what she signed up for.

“You like her,” Aloo says. “Don’t you?”

“Well of course,” Anakin says. “We’re good friends.”

She keeps glaring, and he keeps smirking. “Just like you and Ahsoka are friends,” he adds, and Aloo wishes that she was actually capable of glaring harder. But it probably still wouldn’t have any effect.

Because he’s got her there. She could call him on what she’s pretty sure he feels for her sister, but if she does it will look like she’s admitting – well. She doesn’t have anything to admit. His suggestion is ridiculous.

“You know what I mean,” she mutters.

“Yes,” says Anakin, and to her surprise he’s not teasing. “I know.”

“But…that’s against the Code. It’s an attachment. Right?” Aloo asks, plucking up a strip of moss and then patting it back into place. She keeps her eyes trained on the ground.

“Well, I don’t know,” Anakin says slowly. “My mom always says that caring about other people is what makes us people. Besides, isn’t that what Jedi are supposed to do? We’re supposed to be compassionate, right?”
Aloo frowns. That’s true, but…

“So what’s compassion?” Anakin asks.

Aloo hesitates. It’s a pretty simple question, and she’s sure it should have a simple answer. Jedi are supposed to show compassion, after all. She’s heard that in countless lessons from countless masters. Compassion is central to a Jedi’s life.

It’s just, she realizes for the first time, she’s not sure she’s ever heard one of the masters actually define that word.

“I – I don’t know,” she admits. “I suppose it’s, uh, service?”

“Okay,” says Anakin. “So who are you serving?”

That one, at least, has a clear answer. “The Republic,” Aloo says.

Anakin smiles, but there’s something old and bitter in it that surprises her. “The Republic,” he says. “Okay. What does that actually mean? Who are you serving? Which people count as part of ‘the Republic,’ and who decides?”

Aloo looks over at him, startled by the sudden passion in his voice. Usually Anakin is all laughter and mischief and clever stories, but now he sounds almost angry, and she’s not sure how they got from Master Windu’s agonizingly embarrassing lecture to…this. Whatever this is.

“I suppose…the Council does,” she says slowly. “And the Senate, of course.”

“Of course,” he says darkly.

“Well, what do you think compassion is, then?” Aloo asks. Her words emerge sounding more frustrated than she’d really meant to let on.

“Unconditional love,” Anakin says promptly, like he doesn’t even have to think about it. “It’s caring enough about someone else to want the best thing for them, even if it’s not what you want. Like…like a slave woman sending her child to be a Jedi, even if she thinks she’ll never see him again.”

He’s talking about his mother. Aloo isn’t quite sure why, but the thought ignites something in her. She wonders what her own mother might have thought, what she might have felt, when the Jedi came to bring Aloo to the Temple.

“That’s what I think compassion is,” Anakin says, drawing her back to the moment. “It’s…it’s looking at someone else and seeing a person. Not a queen or a slave or a Separatist or even a Supreme Chancellor. Just a person, no matter what. And I think it’s something you have to – something you have to grow. To train. Just like we train in the Force. And there are other kinds of love, too. Friendship. Family. Romantic love. But if they’re real, they all have that core of compassion.” He stops then, drawing in a quick breath and looking perhaps a little sheepish. Aloo isn’t sure he really meant to say so much. But he doesn’t take any of it back. Instead, he shoots her a cheeky grin and adds, “So you could say we’re encouraged to love.”

Aloo snorts. “Okay,” she says, “that’s definitely not something Master Yoda would agree with.”

Anakin laughs. “No, probably not,” he says, completely unapologetic. “But who says he’s always right, after all?”
“He’s the Grand Master!” Aloo says, gaping at him. “Of course he’s right!”

Something in Anakin’s face turns closed and distant, and for the first time in a very long time, she thinks he looks like any other padawan. The thought leaves her cold.

“Masters always want you to believe that,” he says.

Aloo can’t understand what he’s talking about. “It’s not about believing,” she snaps, angry without quite knowing why. “And he is the Grand Master.”

“Yes,” says Anakin. “He is.”

Chapter End Notes

Concerning Palpatine: In this universe, where Anakin has a full support network and is still very much grounded in his culture and his relationship with his mom, and where Padme and Naboo are actually actively in support of Outer Rim emancipation, Anakin's view of Palpatine is very different than in canon. He still thinks he's a good man, but Palpatine's encouraging talk (not coupled with any real action) doesn't look nearly as good to someone who has real allies. Canon Anakin was desperate enough for someone to listen to him at all that Palpatine merely had to talk a good game. In this universe, that's not really enough. But this Anakin is also much more leery about people in power in general, and his first instinct is still the slave’s instinct to hide his true feelings and say what he thinks the Masters want to hear.

"Tematta nel uttar" is Amatakka and does indeed translate literally as "help from the Core," but that's...not exactly a compliment. It's an idiom that's most commonly used to mean either "help that is never coming" or "help that just makes everything worse." Palpatine accepting it at face value means he failed a test he didn't even realize Anakin was giving him.
rocks in the pathway break my skin

Chapter Notes

Although I occasionally make use of elements from the Clone Wars show (mainly Ahsoka, because I love the idea of her), I'm generally working with film canon only. And in the places where the movies and the show contradict one another, I go with film canon.

Thus, Barriss Offee in this chapter (and all future appearances). There are two distinct and incompatible versions of Barriss's character in Star Wars canon: the Barriss of the films, who is Anakin's age, knighted at roughly the same time he is, and dies on Felucia during Order 66; and the Barriss of the Clone Wars show, who is Ahsoka's age, never knighted, and tries to blow up the Jedi Temple. For more on the two Barrisses, check out this post on my tumblr.

I mention this only to say that the Barriss in this fic is the film Barriss. So she's Anakin's exact contemporary and friend, and you can expect that none of her TCW plotline is going to happen here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first padawan his own age who comes to Anakin is Barriss Offee. He’s surprised by that – he likes Barriss pretty well, and they’ve shared some fairly substantial conversations, but he’s always found her very by the book, driven by the ideal of the perfect, detached Jedi. She’s a much better padawan than he is.

By now he’s tracked down the families of origin for more than a dozen younglings, and it’s obvious they’ve been talking to each other. He’s starting to think they may even have a secret network of sorts, though he won’t let himself investigate further. Their secrets are their own, unless they choose to share them.

But Barriss is not a youngling, and at first Anakin isn’t even sure he can trust her. She could be seeking information for the Masters.

They’re in the fern room, which might be a point in her favor. It’s his favorite place in the Temple, but not many people know that. Even Obi-Wan would probably expect him to choose the sparring rooms, or possibly the Archives.

And she just comes right out and asks him, which may also be a sign of sincerity. Anakin and Master Obi-Wan have shared a couple of missions with Barriss and Master Unduli, and he knows that when Barriss is working an undercover angle, she’s always very meticulous about disguising her true motives. A boldly stated lie isn’t her style, but he doesn’t think she’s the kind of person who would use the truth as a lie, either.

Still, he can’t be sure. So he says, “Jedi don’t have families. We’re dedicated to the Force.”

Barriss laughs softly, and it’s shockingly bitter. “If I wanted to hear that, I’d have asked Master Luminara.” She holds his eyes for a long moment and then says, “I came to you because I’m not looking for a Jedi answer, Anakin.”
“Aren’t I a Jedi, then?” he asks with a wry smile. It’s a question he feels like he’s asked some variation of in nearly every meeting he has with the Council, but they both know the context here is very different.

Barriss only looks at him, a faint twist to her mouth that can’t really be called a smile. Finally, without a word, Anakin nods.

It takes him a while to track down the answers she wants, in part because they’re both assigned separate missions with their Masters, and they’re not in the Temple at the same time for another two months.

When they do meet again, Barriss is obviously agitated, pacing in an ever-widening circle around the small fountain in the center of the conservatory’s orchid house.

“There were pirates,” she tells him, voice hushed with shame. “Five of them, and they wouldn’t surrender. I had to –”

She doesn’t finish. Anakin doesn’t ask. It was on one of their shared missions, when they were thirteen, that both of them made their first kills. After, he found Barriss sobbing in a closet on the passenger deck of their transport, and they sat together in the dark for hours without saying a word.

She’s older now, and he is too, but she still cries the same way: silently, with only the barest movement of her shoulders to give her away.

Master Unduli, and Master Obi-Wan too, would tell her to release her feelings into the Force and be at peace.

Anakin says, “You have a mother named Kalhran Offee. She’s a healer, like you. A surgeon. She has a practice on Mirial, in the city of Otassa. Your other mother is Amasha Offee. She’s an engineer. She designs hyperdrive cores. You have a brother, too, three years younger. His name’s Tomassi.”

Barriss stops pacing abruptly. She looks up at him, and Anakin can see the marks of tears on her tattooed cheeks. “She’s a healer?” she whispers.

“Yes,” says Anakin. “A healer and an engineer. There’s more information here.” He offers her an encrypted datastick and tries for a grin. “I admit I didn’t understand much about Kalhran’s practice, but Amasha was one of the designers on the BN-17 hyperdrive core. It revolutionized hyperspace travel for capital ships. It’s –”

Barriss interrupts him with a laugh, and it even reaches her eyes. “I can’t believe you’re geeking out about my mother,” she says. And then her smile slips into something softer, half-frightened and half-wondering. “My mother…”

“Well, yeah,” Anakin says with an easy grin. “Your mom is wizard.”

Barriss snickers at him, but her eyes are warm. “Thanks, Anakin,” she says. “This helps.”

*  

The most frustrating thing about the information missing from the Archives, Anakin thinks, is that there’s no pattern. Or at least, there’s no pattern that he can see, or Jocasta either. And it doesn’t help that the Council keeps sending him away for missions, and then expecting him to pick up the trail weeks or even months later. It’s almost like they don’t see this as important.
But he knows better than to say that to Jocasta, because it will only set her off again. Jocasta in a righteous fury is a pretty amazing sight, but it won’t change the Council’s minds. They already know that.

“I don’t get it,” Anakin mutters, stirring his now tepid cup of tea idly. “Why would you go to the trouble of deleting all information about Mon Calamari ballet? What’s the point? Yes, it’s painfully boring, but –”

A huff of laughter escapes Jocasta before she can manage to paint a properly admonishing glare across her face. Anakin grins.

“Knowledge, no matter how boring you consider the subject, is always important, young man,” Madame Nu says severely. But her eyes are twinkling.

“Of course, Grandmother,” Anakin says, laughing as she swats lightly at his shoulder.

“Maybe we’re thinking about this all wrong,” Jocasta mutters, tapping her chin in thought. “There’s no pattern, you say. But maybe that’s the point.”

“A randomized deletion?” Anakin frowns. “That’s possible, I suppose. Might actually be easier. If you didn’t care about the results, you could just set a program and let it go…indefinitely.”

They look at each other.

“And we’d have no way of knowing how much is missing,” Jocasta says. A storm cloud is growing across her face. “We’ve only noticed the gaps we have because we know what should be there. But if something’s gone and we don’t know to look for it –”

Anakin gnaws his lip. “If we’re right, and I can isolate the algorithm, I might be able to trace it backwards,” he says. He’s not really sure it will work – or if they could even trust the results if it does. Maybe it would lead them to the original deleted information, the missing piece that, they assume, all the other deletions are meant to cover up. But maybe they’d simply be following the trail whoever is behind all this has laid for them.

Only a Master can edit the Jedi Archives. They both know that. The Council knows it too. They just haven’t wanted to talk about what that means.

He can tell that Jocasta is thinking all the same things. They’ve talked about this before, several times now. There’s no point in having this conversation again. The Council’s position hasn’t changed. And won’t, unless they can provide incontrovertible evidence.

“Do it, then,” says Jocasta with a sharp nod. “And when I find out who’s been deleting things from my Archives, I’ll want a word with them.”

* 

After waiting so long to be in the same place at the same time, Anakin can’t help but laugh when he and Barriss are assigned a mission together only a week later. She catches his eye as they board the transport to Ansion, and a silent understanding passes between them.

Normally, Obi-Wan would use their travel time to go over the mission briefing with Anakin one last time, and probably to lecture him on the protocols of diplomacy again, though lately he’s seemed almost amused during those lectures, rather than just resigned. They’ve had more missions along the transport routes lately, too, and it’s almost enough to make Anakin hope that perhaps Obi-Wan understands more than he lets on.
But Obi-Wan hasn’t said anything, and he can’t take the risk. So when Master Unduli suggests, rather pointedly, that perhaps her padawan could go over the mission parameters with Anakin, as Barriss is always admirably diligent in her preparation, Anakin accepts the offer and Obi-Wan’s teasing with feigned bad grace.

Obi-Wan and Master Unduli depart for the ship’s galley, still chuckling quietly, and Anakin waits until he’s certain they’re out of hearing range to fix Barriss with a mock glare. “Really?” he grumbles. “You have to use an excuse that makes me look bad?”

Barriss laughs in his face. “Don’t blame me for that,” she says, eyes twinkling. “You’re the one who decided to develop a reputation for flubbing diplomatic missions.”

Anakin should glare at her for effect, or perhaps laugh along with her, but he’s a little too startled by how perceptive that remark is, and he hesitates just too long.

Something in Barriss’s face softens. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I haven’t told anyone. And I’m not going to ask why you’ve chosen to be so bad at diplomacy. We all have our secrets.”

Anakin holds her gaze for a moment, and she meets his eyes easily. There are secrets there, secrets she won’t share, but she makes no effort to hide them, either. For just a moment, Anakin feels like he’s back home on Tatooine.

“Thanks,” he says, smiling.

Barriss shrugs one shoulder and passes him a datastick. At his raised eyebrow, she says, “It’s a message for you. From…from my mother.” She still stumbles over that word. “Something about engine cores. It didn’t make much sense to me, but…she wanted to thank you.”

Anakin takes the datastick, trying not to look too eager. But it’s a message from Amasha Offee! Of course he’s excited.

Barriss rolls her eyes at him.

“What are they like?” he asks, and Barriss’s teasing smile falls away, replaced by something soft and almost wistful.

“Nice,” she says, then shakes her head at her own choice of words. “I don’t know. It’s…it’s hard to describe. They wanted to know all about me, but they seemed thrilled with even the littlest scraps of information. And my…my brother. He said he used to make up stories about me, when he was younger. He’d pretend that we went on adventures together.” She laughs, short and hollow. “But I never even knew I had a brother.”

Anakin hesitates before squeezing her shoulder. Physical comfort isn’t common between Jedi. But Barriss’s only response is a grateful smile.

“Is it always like this, Anakin?” she asks. “This…and feeling torn in two, like you’re part of two different worlds, but you don’t quite belong in either?”

That isn’t really how he’d put it, Anakin thinks. He’s his mother’s child, and he’s a Jedi, and in his own mind there’s no conflict between the two. But in the eyes of the Republic and the Order, there is. And Barriss was a Jedi before she was her mothers’ daughter.

So he says, “Maybe it is. But maybe we can change that.”

Barriss squeezes his shoulder in turn and offers a tentative smile. “Maybe,” she says.
When Padmé – Senator Amidala – is almost killed in an assassination attempt on a landing platform, Aloo feels a burning, terrified rage that’s unlike any emotion she’s ever experienced before. It sends a deep shudder of apprehension through her and leaves her shaking. Is this what the masters have always warned them about, the danger of attachment? Is this the Dark Side?

There’s no way she can ask any of the masters about this. She’d have to confess how she’s broken the Code, how she’s developed a forbidden attachment. And maybe she should confess. But…

It takes her a surprisingly long time to find Anakin. He’s newly returned to the Temple, she knows that, but she can’t find him in any of his usual haunts, and she hasn’t even caught a glimpse of Master Kenobi anywhere. There are rumors that the two of them have a new assignment already, which could mean he’ll be gone for months and months again.

In desperation, Aloo takes to lurking in the corridor near Anakin’s quarters. When she finally hears him coming, accompanied by Master Kenobi, she ducks behind a pillar and waits until she’s heard two doors swish open and then closed again. Then she nearly runs to Anakin’s door and punches the com pad.

He takes one look at her and lets her in without a word. She watches him pack a small travel bag for a few moments in silence. There’s a hard, determined set to his face that she doesn’t see very often.

“Someone tried to kill Pa– Senator Amidala,” Aloo whispers.

“I know,” Anakin says. “Master Obi-Wan and I have been assigned as her bodyguards.”

“Oh,” says Aloo. She’s feeling more emotions than she even knows names for, but she can’t seem to manage any other words.

Something in Anakin’s face softens. “Are you all right?” he asks.

And that’s silly. She wasn’t attacked on a landing platform, after all. Of course she’s all right.

“I’m fine,” she snaps.

Anakin raises one eyebrow and just waits.

Aloo looks down first. “I – I was afraid,” she admits, shamed. “I was afraid for her.”

Anakin sets the datapad he was holding on the bed and squeezes her shoulder. “Of course you were,” he says. “I was afraid too. But she’s going to be fine. We’re going to keep her safe, and find the person trying to kill her. I promise.”

“Jedi aren’t supposed to be afraid,” Aloo whispers to the carpet.

Anakin steps back and then plods down on the edge of his bed, so now their eyes are level. “I don’t think that’s quite true,” he says. “We’re not supposed to let our fear control us, but that’s not exactly the same thing.”

Aloo thinks about that. “What do you do, Anakin? When you’re afraid?”

“Honestly?” He laughs. “I message my mom, usually. Or Kitster. Sometimes Padmé. And then – well. Sometimes you just have to accept it. But usually there’s something else under the fear. You were afraid for Padmé. Why is that?”
“Well I – because I have an attachment, I guess,” Aloo mutters. “That’s why Jedi aren’t supposed –”

Anakin laughs again, though this time there’s not much humor in it. “That’s not really what I mean,” he says. “You were afraid for Padmé because you care about her, right? Because she’s important to you. So you can focus on that. Not the fear, but the reason she’s important.”

“How does that help?”

“It changes your focus, just enough,” Anakin says. “Gives you something to fight for, instead of against.”

“Is that what your mom says?” Aloo asks, just a little teasing. She already knows the answer is probably yes.

“Nope,” Anakin says with a grin, popping the p. “Master Qui-Gon always used to say that your focus determines your reality. That’s all I’m saying.”

Aloo sighs. “Sure,” she says. “Of course it is.”

She should go. Anakin’s got to finish packing, and Master Kenobi could be here any minute, and –

“What?” Anakin asks, catching her growing frown.

“It’s stupid,” she mutters.

“I doubt that,” he says.

Aloo looks away. “It’s just – well. You’re going to be protecting Padmé, and that’s good, I’m glad you’ll be there, but –”

“But you wish you were going, too.”

“Yeah,” Aloo admits. “I know I shouldn’t –”

“It’s okay to be jealous,” Anakin says. He gives her a wry smile. “If you were going and I had to stay here, I’d be jealous too.”

That startles a laugh out of her. “That – that actually helps.”

“Good,” Anakin says. “I wish you could come, too. I can bring a message, though, or anything you want to send?”

“I don’t know,” Aloo says, feeling suddenly shy. “What do you think they’d want? My – my family?”

Anakin considers this for a moment, then says decisively, “A holo. They’d want to see you, I think. To see the person you are now.”

So they take a holo, and Anakin packs the datastick away in his travel bag, and then he slips out to join Master Kenobi and Aloo stays behind, waiting until she’s sure they’ve gone, thinking about the new encrypted com system in her pocket and imagining what it would be like to really meet her sister.

*
As glad as she is for the chance to see Anakin again, Padmé still thinks that Jedi protection is both intrusive and entirely unnecessary. And she’s particularly uncomfortable with the knowledge that the entire arrangement is Chancellor Palpatine’s idea.

She still has fond memories of Palpatine. He was her mentor once, and she does believe he accepted the Chancellorship with the best of intentions. But lately she’s found herself thinking that the post has changed him. He seems more concerned with maintaining his own position than with upholding the principles of democracy. And for all his encouraging talk to Anakin, he’s done absolutely nothing to support her push for abolition on the Outer Rim.

So she can’t help but wonder if, perhaps, her safety isn’t his only reason for insisting she accept Jedi protection. If there isn’t something else he hopes to get from this.

It certainly hasn’t escaped her notice that his plan means she’ll be absent from Coruscant for the foreseeable future. If the Military Creation Act is pushed through the Senate during that time –

But he’s left her no choice. The Jedi have charge of her security now, and after last night, they’re not going to allow her to stay on Coruscant.

Padmé is frustrated, and she knows Anakin can tell. She hopes he doesn’t think she blames him, but for some reason, she can’t manage to just have that conversation with him openly.

It doesn’t help that they’ve been awkward with each other from the beginning of this charade. He’d sent her a message just after he received his assignment, and they’d plotted out how exactly they should play their reunion. As far as Obi-Wan knows, they haven’t seen or spoken to one another in ten years, and it’s vitally important that he go on thinking that.

That part has been easier to play than Padmé expected, because the first half of that statement is true: she really hasn’t seen him in ten years. Of course her former handmaidens have joked about how he’s grown up – and up and up – but the image in Padmé’s mind had still been that dusty nine year old boy. Just like the Ilaré in her mind is still a few weeks shy of two years old.

It shouldn’t change anything, anyway. It doesn’t change anything. She’s just frustrated – with Palpatine, with the Jedi, with the Senate, with Ilaré who is right there, so close, but she can’t even see her. She can only see Anakin because someone is trying to kill her.

“Are you really going to need a diamond tiara while you’re in hiding?” Anakin asks suddenly, startling her out of her thoughts.

Padmé looks down and sees that she’s holding the headpiece Palpatine gave her on the third anniversary of the liberation of Naboo. She’s not even sure why she picked it up.

“Probably not,” she says with an exasperated sigh, tossing the thing carelessly on her bed. She’s not likely to need any of her senatorial regalia, and that’s at least half the problem.

“Can I help with anything?” he asks, and she looks over to see him shifting restlessly on his feet. Their eyes meet and he gives her a shy smile.

There is absolutely no reason for Padmé to feel flustered. So she doesn’t.

“I don’t know, Ani,” she says. “It’s not really packing that’s the problem.”

“Yeah, I know,” he says, then hesitates.

That’s an old mannerism, at least. The Ani she knew on Tatooine was always reluctant to offer an unsolicited opinion. With everything he’s told her, she’s not really surprised the Jedi haven’t
changed that about him, but she still hates that it’s directed now at her.

“What is it?” she prods.

He goes still in that way she knows means he’s searching the Force. A short moment later his face clears and he nods to himself as he says, “I know it’s…not really any help with the Senate vote, but…if we’re going back to Naboo, maybe you could visit your family?”

Padmé’s eyes widen. She notes the careful use of “you” and “your,” and the several possible meanings for his choice. Anakin doesn’t say anything else, but he nods again, this time at her.

“Yes,” Padmé breathes. “I’d like that.”

He doesn’t mention Ilaré, and she doesn’t mention Shmi. Not here, when Obi-Wan could return at any moment and the walls of 500 Republica could have more ears than she knows.

On Naboo, they’ll be able to really talk. That, at least, is something to look forward to.

Chapter End Notes

And we’ve made it to AOTC time period at last!

Concerning the deletions from the Archives: I freely admit that I gleefully write Jocasta very differently than her canon counterpart. She’s the only character for whom I just ignore canon, because honestly why would I write a tired librarian stereotype when I could instead write space librarian Granny Weatherwax?

That said, it also always seemed weird to me that none of the other Jedi appeared all that concerned about the information missing from the Archives. Yoda used it as a cute learning moment with his class, and then sent Obi-Wan on his merry way to Kamino, but it doesn’t seem like the Council ever actually asked themselves the obvious question, “Who deleted this information, and why?”
Family reunions all around!

Okay, and a few notes going into this chapter:

One of the more ironic results of Anakin and Padmé being much closer friends prior to AOTC in this 'verse is that Anakin is actually a lot less forward in terms of romantic advances. Canon Anakin didn't really have a relationship with Padmé to risk losing, but in this 'verse he does.

Concerning Beru: way back when only the OT existed, I always assumed that she was Anakin's sister, because she spoke so fondly of him to Luke. In the PT, I really like the idea of a relationship between her and Shmi, and I'm perpetually disturbed by everything about Cliegg Lars, so I figured, hey, this is my universe, I'll do what I want. So, Beru is Shmi's chosen daughter and Owen Lars is Beru's boyfriend. Owen probably has a father somewhere, but he's not important or in any way involved in the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s abundantly clear that Obi-Wan isn’t happy with the Council’s decision for them on this assignment.

Anakin tries not to take it personally. This is going to be his first solo mission, so it’s probably natural for his Master to have some anxiety about that. It’s not a reflection on his faith in Anakin’s abilities, or lack thereof. Shmi thinks that Obi-Wan just doesn’t know how else to express his caring for Anakin, and his mom is the wisest person Anakin knows, so she must be right about that. She must be.

Still, Anakin thinks, even if his Master is worried for him and can’t admit it, it’s pretty obvious that he also doesn’t like the idea of leaving Anakin alone with Padmé.

What’s less obvious is the reason for Obi-Wan’s concern. Just today, Anakin’s received two lectures already, one just outside the Council Chambers following their brief meeting, and another only a few moments later on the way back to Padmé’s apartment. Neither did much to clarify Obi-Wan’s mood. Anakin’s not sure if his Master is more concerned about encouraging what he calls Anakin’s “childhood attachment” to Padmé or about the inherent danger of spending any significant amount of time with a politician.

“I’ll be fine, Master,” he tells Obi-Wan for probably the fourth time this morning, just before they board the transport to the spaceport. Padmé herself is already aboard, along with her handmaiden and her head of security. Anakin catches his Master’s eye and dares a wink. “I have your training to rely on, after all.”

That succeeds in bringing a faint smile to Obi-Wan’s face. He even brings a hand up to stroke his beard in that overly sophisticated way of his, eyes twinkling as he says, “Well, that’s true.”

Anakin snorts. But he can’t resist adding, “You have nothing to worry about, Master. I have great
faith in your investigative abilities.”

Obi-Wan huffs, but he’s still smiling a little. Anakin counts it a win. It’s the closest he’s come to saying “I told you so” after the Council expanded their mandate to include investigation. And he knows this is the closest Obi-Wan will come to admitting he was right.

He’s still angry that the Council could ever have thought investigation wasn’t part of their mandate, but at least they’ve had their hand forced now. Even if it did take Padmé using herself as bait for an assassin.

Focus on the moment, he reminds himself, almost a parody of what he told Aloo just yesterday. There’s no point in letting the Council – or Obi-Wan for that matter – see he’s angry. There never is. It never changes their views or makes them reconsider; it just earns him a lot of concerned frowns. Emotion is energy, his mom always says, and he shouldn’t waste that energy on the Council when it can be put to better uses.

So he sits beside Obi-Wan on the transport and tries to focus on something else.

Obi-Wan himself appears to be meditating, alert to the moment but not paying Anakin any particular attention. Anakin should probably be doing something similar. But he’s never been any good at that kind of meditation. The Jedi ideal of emptiness feels too much like sitting and waiting for orders, and he gets enough of that from the Council already.

So instead he steals another glance at Padmé as the transport speeds along and tries not to fidget. “You’ll always be that little boy I knew on Tatooine,” she said yesterday, and he’s still not sure if she said it to salvage the absurd tumble of words that poured out of his mouth or simply to give him an excuse to stop talking. He doesn’t think she’s held it against him, at least. They had a chance at a more genuine conversation, without an audience, while she was packing this morning, and she very graciously didn’t bring it up, but he still feels like an absolute idiot every time he looks at her.

As much as he wishes Aloo could be here to meet her sister in person, he’s glad she didn’t witness that. He’d never live it down.

Padmé must feel his eyes on her, because she glances over at him with a curious smile, and Anakin looks quickly away. He can feel heat in his cheeks, which is just wonderful. He half raises a hand to scratch at the back of his neck before realizing what he’s doing and dropping it quickly to his lap. This is ridiculous. He’s been writing to her practically every day for ten years and now he can’t even look at her without falling all over himself.

It’s not as though he doesn’t know why. Even Aloo knows why, though at least with her he’d managed to play it cool. But that doesn’t mean he wants Padmé to know.

She’s his best friend. He knows she considers him a close friend, too. And that’s much more important than whatever other feelings he may have.

He’s jolted suddenly out of the spiral of his thoughts by a rather derisive string of Binary and looks up to see Artoo blinking his photoreceptor innocently at him.

*Are you in energy-saving mode, or are you just ignoring me?* the droid asks.

Anakin laughs. *Sorry, Artoo, he says. I’m doing too much processing, probably.*

Artoo’s photoreceptor shifts slightly toward Obi-Wan and he says, *He’s powered down, though, isn’t he?*
Anakin casts a sly look at Obi-Wan. He’s still doing a pretty good job of appearing deep in meditation, but Anakin knows better. He knows how much it both fascinates and annoys Obi-Wan whenever he speaks Binary.

*I think he’s running a diagnostic,* Anakin says, because honestly, that’s a pretty good description for meditation.

*That’s good,* Artoo says, sounding surprisingly serious. *I saw him jump out that window. I think he must have a loose wire.*

Anakin blinks, then throws his head back and laughs.

* Ani is apparently as excited about seeing Artoo again as he is about seeing her, and the two of them chatter almost non-stop on the way to the spaceport, while Obi-Wan pretends not to look on with fond exasperation. It’s pretty obvious that Obi-Wan doesn’t understand Binary, and that Anakin is having perhaps too much fun with that. Padmé resolves to call him on it later, just to see the surprise on his face. Though she can’t say she isn’t equally amused by Artoo’s diagnosis of Obi-Wan’s behavior.

And really, she’s glad Artoo’s there to distract Anakin. He seems oddly nervous whenever they’re together with Obi-Wan, and she wants to reach out, maybe pat his arm and tell him to just relax, but of course that would only look suspicious. She’s just not sure what he’s so worried about. Even with his obvious nerves, it doesn’t seem that Obi-Wan has any inkling about their ten years of forbidden communication. And besides, she thinks with a slight cringe, they’ve both been awkward enough about this reunion to make it believable.

She doesn’t have long to wonder about it, though, because sooner than she’d like they’ve arrived at the spaceport, and there’s an exchange of last minute instructions and farewells, and then they’re on their own. Just her, Anakin, and Artoo.

Now that Obi-Wan’s gone Anakin seems to perk up again. He practically scampers aboard the freighter, while Padmé follows at a more sedate pace, shaking her head ruefully. It doesn’t take long to stow their luggage, and then Anakin’s pulling a holoprojector out of his pocket and locking the door of their tiny cabin. Padmé looks at him in question, and he just grins.

“I brought holos,” he says.

Oh.

There she is. Her sister. Aloo Darie, not a two year old child but a twelve year old girl. It’s a full color holo. Aloo has warm brown eyes and curly light brown hair that looks remarkably like Pooja’s. Padmé and Sola both favor their mother, but even as a baby Ilaré looked likely to take after their father. She’s grown into that now.

Padmé sits down heavily on her cot, her eyes never leaving the holo.

“It’ll be a risk,” Anakin says softly, “but if you want, when we visit your parents, we can set up a vid link.”

That gets her attention, and she turns reluctantly from the holo to raise an eyebrow at him. “I thought you didn’t have access to the necessary equipment?”

Anakin only grins unrepentantly. “I…may have recently acquired a few things on our last mission. And I may have left them with Aloo. Maybe.”
“Surely that’s against the Jedi Code?” she teases.

“Oh, definitely,” he says. “I’ve got a list, you know. Of all the ways I’ve broken the Code.”

His eyes are dancing with mischief, and his smile is oddly soft, but Padmé still has no reason at all to feel flustered, so she still doesn’t.

“How long is your list?”

“At last count, I think I’ve either broken or…severely bent sixty-seven separate directives. But I figure I’ll probably add about a dozen more on this trip.” He gestures to the holoprojector. “That’s number sixty-eight.”

Padmé laughs. “You’re quite the rebel.”

“Don’t tell Master Obi-Wan,” Anakin says. “He’ll be so disappointed.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” she promises with another laugh.

But Anakin isn’t laughing. Something warm and intensely earnest sparks in his eyes, and Padmé can’t look away. “I know,” he says.

Padmé is eager to go home, but their first stop on landing is a visit with Queen Jamillia, who expresses her dismay at the threats against Padmé, and offers her the use of the Varykino lake retreat for the duration of her time in hiding, if she wants it. Padmé thanks her, but she hasn’t fully decided yet. Varykino would certainly be more secure, but it’s also more remote from communication with Coruscant. And there’s so much she wants to do here in Theed.

And it seems that, during their three days of travel on radio silence, another transport from Tatooine has arrived. Jamillia is watching Anakin closely as she tells them about it, and then she adds, “There probably won’t be anyone looking for the Senator from Naboo in Little Tatooine.”

Anakin’s entire face lights up like he’s never wanted anything so desperately in his life, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he turns to her.

Here’s something that hasn’t changed, at least, Padmé thinks. She never could resist that hopeful look of his.

Little Tatooine is a rapidly growing enclave in the heart of Theed. The buildings here are old, intricate and graceful constructions of stone, the streets still cobbled and dotted with countless fountains and gardens and historical markers of Naboo’s past.

The architecture is purely Naboo, but everything else is Tatooine. The air is rich with the warm, spicy smells of amee and laara and pikot. Woven tapestries in deep reds and browns, blacks and tans hang from balconies and windows. Vendors fill the streets, offering Tatooine staples and Naboo produce cooked Tatooine style, along with the specialties of a dozen other worlds.

Anakin stops and stares, and Padmé stops to watch him. There’s an unadulterated wonder in his face that makes something in her ache.

“This is – Padmé, this is amazing,” he breathes. “I’ve read your descriptions, but this – it feels like –” He doesn’t say home, but he doesn’t need to.

He’s gazing rapidly from side to side, even turning in place to take everything in, like a child on
his first trip to the market, and he’s beaming as bright as the twin suns. Padmé’s visited Little Tatooine herself many times before, but everything feels new and exhilarating seen through Anakin’s eyes.

Artoo seems every bit as excited, spinning in circles around Ani’s legs and trilling out a string of Binary too fast for Padmé to catch all of it. Anakin laughs in response, though Padmé can’t tell if he understood everything himself or if he’s just happy.

It’s good to see him happy.

She watches as his eyes flick back and forth between her and one of the food stalls, and she just manages to hold back a laugh when he blushes and stutters, “Can we –”


He looks bemused, but he follows her without question, through the market district with all its wonderful smells, through a park with a small pond, into what’s clearly a residential neighborhood. Now he looks downright puzzled, but he doesn’t say anything until they stop in front of a small stone house with a red wooden door.

“Padmé, what –” he begins, but at that moment the door opens and a woman steps out, followed by a young man.

Anakin’s face goes still. “Mom,” he breathes.

Shmi lets out a soft cry. “Ani!” she says, and then they’ve crossed the few short steps separating them, and Anakin’s forehead is pressed against his mother’s, their eyes closed, speaking secret words in a soft litany not meant for anyone else.

Padmé steps to one side, letting them have a private moment, and catches Kitster’s eye. He shoots her a wide grin and mouths, “Thank you.”

Shmi pulls back and eyes her child critically. “You’re all grown up, Ani,” she says, and if there’s something wistful in her voice, it doesn’t show in her smile. “Look at you. You’ve gotten so tall!”

Anakin groans. “Everyone keeps saying that,” he mutters, but he’s still smiling.

“Well, I for one feel cheated,” Kitster says, stepping forward for a hug of his own. “I distinctly remember us agreeing that I was going to be the tall one.”

Padmé and Shmi exchange a laughing glance. Kitster can’t be any more than a few centimeters shorter than Ani.

Shmi invites them all in for lunch. Artoo follows after Padmé, until he spots Threepio studying a datapad and speeds across the room to blurt something horribly rude at the protocol droid. Anakin darts rapidly after him, grinning and exclaiming, “Threepio! You look amazing!”

That at least distracts Threepio from Artoo’s ongoing invective, and he turns to preen at Anakin. “Oh, the Maker!” he says. “Goodness, Artoo, you didn’t tell me you were travelling with Ani. And Miss Padmé! I am delighted to see you again!”

Padmé watches as Anakin’s smile fades in surprise, and then returns a hundredfold. “Threepio?” he says, beaming, and then turns to Shmi. “Mom, you did it! You did it!”

“Did what, Ani?” Threepio asks.
Anakin laughs in delight, grabbing Threepio by the arms and spinning him around while the droid exclaims, “Goodness me!” and Artoo trills in fond derision.

“You didn’t call me Master,” Anakin says, still grinning like he’s received the best present imaginable. “Mom fixed your programming!” He steps back and gives Threepio a quick once over. “And you’ve got coverings now. Very stylish.”

“Oh, thank you!” Threepio says, sounding distinctly pleased. “They are rather nice, aren’t they?”

Artoolets out a derisive-sounding blatt, and Threepio turns on him in affront. “Well, I never! How very rude!”

Artoo’s answer sounds very much like a snicker.

“I most certainly do not!” Threepio huffs as Artoo begins wheeling away. “Get back here, you bucket of bolts!”

Shmi looks as resigned as Padmé feels, but Anakin giggles as the two droids disappear into a back room, apparently to continue their argument in peace.

Shmi serves her famed tarmish, and Ani consumes it like he’s never tasted food before. They all laugh at him, but he just grimaces and says, “If you’d ever experienced the Temple refectory, you’d understand.” Shmi gives him a wry smile and another helping.

She’s just returned to Naboo herself only yesterday, bringing with her another eighteen people from Mos Espa. There’s a fresh red scar across her left forearm, the mark of a blaster bolt that got too close. It’s hidden by her sleeve until she insists on washing the dishes.

“Mom,” Ani breathes, catching at her hand, and Shmi places her right hand over his and whispers, “Hush, akku.” Padmé catches Kitster’s eye and they slip quietly out of the kitchen.

Later, when the dishes are done, they really talk.

Padmé’s never been able to determine if heavy conversation over a meal is a taboo in Tatooine society, or simply something Shmi discourages, but when the tzai is served, when everyone becomes family in the sharing of the drink, then there are no taboos.

“There was a bounty hunter,” Shmi says, and Padmé thinks of explosions and venomous creatures in the night, and Cordé lying twisted up on the duracrete. “One of the Hutts’ people. Beru took care of it, and we didn’t lose anyone.”

Anakin’s jaw is tight as he says, “That’s good.”

Beru and her boyfriend Owen aren’t there right now. Owen had a scare with the bounty hunter and he’s finally managed to drag Beru off on a vacation to the lake country like he’s been threatening for months, Kitster says, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. “They’ll probably come back married,” he says with a grin.

“If they do, I hope we’ll still be on planet,” Anakin says, shooting an almost shy glance at Padmé. “I’d like to actually meet my sister and her husband.”

“How are you here, Ani?” Shmi asks. “Have the Jedi changed their minds about visiting?”

“Have the Hutts declared universal emancipation?” Anakin says with a snort, and then looks startled and a little embarrassed at the immediacy of his reaction. But he doesn’t apologize. “No. I’m on assignment, actually. I’m...not sure how long it will last.”
He’s pointedly not looking at Padmé, and she appreciates his attempt at discretion, but it isn’t needed here. Not with Shmi and Kitster. “He’s my bodyguard,” she says.


“We don’t know,” Padmé says, almost at the same time that Anakin says, “Obi-Wan is investigating.”

There’s a moment of silence, then Kitster says, very deliberately, “You missed my graduation, Ani.”

“I know,” Anakin says. “You’d better have holos.”

There are holos, and quite a lot of them. Shmi insists on showing them all, even the ones Kitster would plainly rather not have Anakin see. The Kitster in the holos is dressed in the formal regalia of a Queen’s Poet, the highest distinction conferred in the dramatic arts. And there’s a lovely dark-skinned woman with a thick cloud of dark hair standing beside him in most of the images and beaming widely.

“So,” says Anakin, his eyebrows waggling in an obvious imitation of Kitster himself. “Who’s this?”

Kitster gives him a scowl that’s somehow still a smile. “Her name’s Imer Moonspinner, and don’t you start.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Anakin snickers. Kitster is in for months of teasing and he clearly knows it.

“I see you haven’t graduated yet,” Kitster says, giving Anakin’s padawan braid a laughing tug. But then his face goes oddly serious as he says, “Still got the dep, huh?”

“Still got the dep,” Anakin says, and for once Padmé can’t read his expression at all.

Later, after they’ve left Shmi’s house and are heading for Padmé’s family home, she asks him what that word means.

He looks away and mutters to the cobblestones, “It means a chain.”

Dep, Padmé thinks. The root of depur. Master.

“Does it bother you?” she asks in a whisper of her own. “Calling the Jedi ‘master,’ I mean.”

Anakin hesitates for a moment. Then he says, “It’s not the same. Master means something different, for the Jedi.”

“That’s not really an answer,” Padmé says.

He looks up and offers her a smile she can’t decipher. “It’s a Jedi answer,” he says.

*  

Aloo shares sleeping quarters with three other younglings in her age group. Ahsoka’s not one of them, and for the first time, she’s glad – it’s easy enough to leave without attracting undue attention from her roommates, but Ahsoka would want to know where Aloo is going. And she can’t afford to let anyone know that.
She slips soundlessly through the halls of the Temple and makes her way to the Pool of Serenity. At this hour, when most Jedi are in the refectory, it’s unlikely anyone else would be there, but just to be sure, she’s booked the space for a one hour meditation.

She’s not planning to meditate, though. In the pockets of her utility belt she’s carrying a miniaturized communications array, a secure holoprojector, and a scrambler Anakin says he designed himself. She sets it all up just like he showed her, and when it’s ready she stands hesitantly staring down at the equipment, not sure if what she feels is fear or a wild, reckless lack of it.

She’s going to meet her family. All of them. She’s going to see them, and talk to them, and they’ll see her too. She’s talked to Padmé plenty of times now, but this feels somehow more real.

Her datapad buzzes and she looks down at the message. Ready when you are, Anakin says.

Aloo takes a deep breath and opens the connection.

At first, it’s only Anakin who appears in the holo, and she’s strangely glad of that. She knows him already, and that familiarity helps, more than she’d expected it to.

“Hey,” Anakin says. “How are things on Coruscant?”

Aloo’s face twists. “We had another lecture from Master Windu today,” she says. “It was awful.”

Anakin laughs at her, the jerk. “Tough luck, kid,” he says. “But maybe this’ll make you feel better. I’ve got some people here who really want to meet you.” His smile gentles and he says, “Are you ready?”

Aloo sucks in a long breath and centers herself in the Force. “Yes,” she says.

Anakin turns and says something to a person she can’t see, and then he’s stepped out of holorange and Padmé’s taken his place. Aloo stares. Her sister’s clothing is still beautiful, but it looks much less complicated and layered than the senatorial robes Aloo has seen on the holonet. And her hair is down and almost as curly as Aloo’s own.


“I know,” Aloo blurts, and then blushes. But Padmé looks surprised.

“You do?” she asks.

“Well, um,” Aloo mutters. “I’ve seen you on the holonet before.”

“Oh,” says Padmé with a little trilling laugh. “Right. Of course.”

She sounds as oddly nervous as Aloo feels, and somehow that helps.

Padmé introduces the rest of her – of their – family. First Sola, who’s the oldest, with her kind eyes and her teasing smile. She has a husband named Darred and two young daughters, Ryoo and Pooja, who are almost bouncing with the excitement of meeting their aunt. “Aunt Aloo, is it true you’re a Jedi like Ani?” the older girl, Ryoo, asks. “Do you have a lightsaber and a silly braid, too?”

Aloo laughs in spite of herself, because the truth is, she thinks she probably is a Jedi very much like “Ani.” A Jedi with a secret family.
“Yes, I have a lightsaber,” she says. “And the braid’s not silly.”

“IT’s pretty silly,” she hears Anakin mutter in the background, but she ignores him.

“Can we see your lightsaber, Aunt Aloo?” Pooja asks eagerly, so Aloo dutifully draws her lightsaber and demonstrates a few simple katas.

“Wow,” Ryoo says, her eyes huge and round, but her younger sister is pouting.

“I wanted to see what color it is!” Pooja huffs. “But everything just looks blue in the holo.”

Aloo laughs. “Well, that’s all right in this case, because my lightsaber is blue. Just like Ani’s.” She puts a special emphasis on the nickname, just to be sure he knows he’s never going to live that down.


Then there are her parents.

It’s still strange for Aloo to even think of herself as having parents. But they look familiar, at least. She looks at them and it’s like the images from her dreams, the faces that have never been clear before, are suddenly revealed.

“Hello, Aloo,” the woman says, her voice thick with something that makes Aloo’s own throat burn. “I’m your mother. You can call me Jobal, though, if that’s easier.”

“And you can call me Ruwee,” says the man who is her father.

Aloo remembers, suddenly, what Anakin said about unconditional love – it’s wanting what’s best for the other person, even when it hurts you. She looks at Jobal and Ruwee, with their warm, sad eyes and their careful expressions, and she thinks of how Padmé introduced them. Mom and Dad. And Mom and Dad is who they desperately want to be. She can see that in their faces, as easily as she can see they’re trying to hide it. Because they want her to be comfortable.

“Thank you,” Aloo whispers. “I – I don’t know what I want to call you, yet, but that helps.”

She’s only booked the Pool of Serenity for an hour, but she takes a risk and drags the holocall out a full five minutes past her scheduled time. When she does end the transmission, she packs all of the secret equipment away and steps back into the hall, feeling strangely disconnected and yet, at the same time, more fully herself than she’s ever been.

And that night, the faces in her dreams are perfectly clear.

Chapter End Notes

Amatakka translations:

_akkku_: literally translates as "heart," used as an endearment (so something like "sweetheart"), almost always between parents and children or people with similar relationships

 деп: a chain, the root word of _depur_, master (or more literally, "the one who binds in chains")
tarmish: dumplings made of ansar root flour and filled with whatever vegetables, spices, or (much more rarely) meats or cheeses are available
A little defense of the Jedi Council here before we get into this chapter: although Anakin is of course predisposed to be suspicious of any surveillance by authority, the Jedi practice of logging their members' communications on missions is arguably a pretty good idea for an organization that is at least part law enforcement agency.

Anakin has to make regular reports to the Council. He’s not quite sure if this is standard practice for a padawan on a first solo assignment, or if they’ve just decided this is standard practice for Padawan Skywalker on his first solo assignment, but at least the requirement gives him a good excuse for carrying a secure com system.

Of course, the com is designed to keep communications secure but also logged, so that the Council, who hold the codes, can go through a complete history of his activity after he returns. For instruction and record-keeping purposes, of course.

He should probably tell them how easy it is for him to alter that programming and not leave a trace. Or maybe, he thinks with a grin, he should just tell all the other padawans.

This morning it’s the full Council he’s reporting to, and even lightyears removed, he can feel the weight of their scrutiny. It’s the first time he’s come before the Council alone, without Obi-Wan, since they tested him and rejected him all those years ago.

Don’t center on your anxieties, his inner Obi-Wan prods. Anakin grinds his teeth, plasters a properly attentive expression across his face, and tries to avoid looking at any one Master for too long.

It wouldn’t be so bad if he could just report to Obi-Wan, but his Master is off investigating… somewhere, and all information about his part of their mission is classified, apparently even from his padawan. Anakin’s duty is simply to protect the senator. If Obi-Wan discovers something relevant to that aspect of the mission, the Council assures him, they will inform him at that time. Until then, he should focus his energy on maintaining the senator’s safety.

“But I –” he begins, unable to hold his tongue. But at least he manages to bite back the rest. But I could help with the investigation. I could pursue leads and track down information from here. Surely that could only assist in doing my duty?

He knows better than to say any of that, though. He’s learned this lesson. When the Council decides that something is classified, there’s little anyone can do to change their minds. Even a Master like Jocasta can’t. Anakin certainly can’t.

“More questions, have you, Padawan Skywalker?” Master Yoda asks.

“No, Master,” Anakin says, bowing his head to hide a grimace.

He’s expected to give a full accounting of the security measures he’s put in place to protect the senator, which is simple enough. All the more so because Padmé gave him blanket permission to
blame anything they don’t like on her, and it’s always amusing to see the Council try to deny the frustration that’s all too obvious in their faces. She’s an expert at evoking that reaction from them, too, even more than he is, which Anakin thinks is a little unfair, since he’s pretty sure she doesn’t even do it intentionally.

But the Council also wants an exacting overview of his itinerary and the senator’s plans for the duration of her time under Jedi protection. That requires...somewhat more creative answers. Luckily, he has years of practice, and the Council has never been particularly interested in anything related to Tatooine, anyway.

Anakin does make one major mistake in his reporting, though. He tells the Council that Queen Jamillia has offered Senator Amidala the use of a private lake retreat. And of course the Council jumps at that suggestion. It does sound secure, he can admit that, but it will also ensure that Padmé is even further removed from the political life of Coruscant, and possibly out of touch entirely. She won’t be happy about that at all, and even Anakin thinks that might not be a coincidence. The Council is against any possibility of war with the Separatists, of course, but Anakin knows that they’re also not sure it can be stopped, and if it does come to that, there aren’t enough Jedi to fight a war for the Republic. Perhaps it’s cynical, but he doesn’t think that Master Yoda and the Council would refuse an army if the Senate offered one to them.

He’s still trying to decide what, exactly, he should tell Padmé when she steps through the kitchen door and into the garden. He’s a little surprised – it’s early still, the sun just lighting the underbelly of the night’s clouds, and no one else in the house is awake. He wouldn’t have pegged Padmé for an early riser.

It’s obvious that she’s only recently awake, though. She’s still wearing her nightgown, a soft blue robe thrown over it, and her hair is down and almost as curly as Aloo’s. And she’s barefoot.

She looks...like Padmé. Like the girl he met on Tatooine ten years ago, simple and unconsciously elegant, perfectly at home and perfectly out of place all at once.

“Ani?” she calls softly, as though the hush of the morning makes any greater volume unthinkable.

“Over here,” he says from beneath the pink flowering tree in the center of the garden. It looks exactly the way Aloo described it from her dreams.

Padmé picks her way through the dewy grass and stands looking down at him, a faint smile quirking her lips. “What are you doing down there?”

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“Meditating,” he says. “Can’t you tell?”

She laughs, and Anakin grins up at her. He’s lying stretched out on his back in the grass, hands beneath his head, chewing on a twig of chinaa he took from Mom’s kitchen yesterday.

“I think I need to learn that kind of meditation,” Padmé says. “It looks very relaxing.”

“Well, it’s peaceful here,” Anakin says. “And there’s all this green. Coruscant’s so – I don’t know. The Force feels cloudy there somehow. Here it’s clear. And Mom and Kitster are here, and you, so –” He shrugs.

Padmé looks at him for a moment, the rising sun gleaming at her back, and then without any warning she plops down right beside him in the grass. She’s close enough that their shoulders just brush. The smell of blossoms fills the air, the soft scent of her hair mingling with the pink blooms now trembling in a faint breeze above them. One petal falls to rest on the tip of Anakin’s nose, and Padmé laughs as he sneezes and brushes it away.
Anakin swallows hard and forces himself to say, “You’re going to create a scandal, Senator, lying around on the grass in the early hours with a Jedi.”

Padmé actually giggles, and Anakin decides that he likes that. He likes that a lot.

Then she turns to look at him, a soft smile dancing in her eyes, and says, “Well?”

Is she actually asking about meditation? Anakin has no idea, and he doesn’t think there’s much chance he could meditate like this, anyway. Not with Padmé so close and so comfortably herself. He can’t even think how to answer her. He can only manage to blurt the first thing that comes to mind, but for once he manages not to make a complete fool of himself.

“Aloo told me about this tree, you know,” he says.

The last of the sleepiness leaves Padmé’s eyes and she fixes him with a look at once eager, sad, and tender. It’s an expression he knows well from his work on the freedom trail, moving people and doing his best to reunite families who were sold apart years ago. He’s never seen that look on a Core Worlder’s face before.

“She remembers it?” Padmé asks, voice hushed, and he hears the question she doesn’t ask. She remembers us?

“She’s dreamed about it,” Anakin says, turning his gaze up to the branches of the tree. That expression is private and she doesn’t need him gawking at her. “The stone house, and the beautiful garden, and the pink tree. She even described the smell – sweet and green and growing, she said. And she told me once she saw a pair of girls chasing each other around the garden.” He hesitates a little before adding, “I think she dreams about it a lot.”

Padmé is silent for a long moment. In the absence of human voices, birdsong fills the stillness. The early morning mist slowly burns away under the rising sun, and pink petals drift down around them like falling snow.

“Ilaré always loved this tree,” Padmé says at last, her words a near whisper. “From the minute she could walk, anytime Mom and Dad let her escape the house, she’d come out here. She was fascinated by the way the petals fall in spring, and she used to dash through them when the wind was blowing and laugh and laugh.”

As if to emphasize her point, a gust of wind shakes the tree and a sprig of pale pink blossoms lands on Anakin’s chest. Padmé laughs, just like the sister of her memory, as Anakin lifts the stem carefully, turning it between his fingers.

“Do they press well?” he asks.

She looks momentarily startled, and then her smile softens. “I’ve never tried,” she says. “I’m not really good with plants. But I hope they do.”

“Guess we’ll find out,” Anakin says, tucking the stem carefully between his tunic and tabard, so the flowers peek out.

Padmé laughs at him again. “Very pretty,” she says, and Anakin looks away and hopes that she’ll mistake his sudden bashfulness for a playful overreaction.

“I like plants,” he mutters. “I think Aloo does too. At least she always manages to find me in the Temple’s conservatory, and I don’t think it’s always because she’s looking for me. So I just thought –”
“It’s a good thought,” Padmé says gently. “Thank you.”

He meets her eyes again with a shy smile, and she smiles back. They lie there in the grass just smiling at each other as the silence stretches and the hush of the morning returns. But for once Anakin doesn’t feel the burning, terrified need to fill that silence. He could stay here all day.

And then Padmé shifts, grimacing slightly, and reaches down to draw his comlink from the grass beneath her.

So much for that.

“Ah,” she says. “Reporting to the Council?”

“Yeah,” Anakin lets out a breath and props himself up on his elbows. Might as well get it over with. “I have orders to move you to the lake retreat Queen Jamillia mentioned.”

“Oh,” says Padmé.

“I know I probably shouldn’t have said anything about it,” he stumbles on. “But I was afraid they’d find out about the offer, and have questions if I didn’t and –”

“It’s all right, Ani,” Padmé says. She sits up and rests a hand on his shoulder. “It probably is safer there. And if they think that moving up to the lake country will be enough to stop me communicating with Jar Jar and Dormé, they obviously don’t know me very well.”

Anakin breathes a tentative sigh of relief, but it turns more hopeful when Padmé looks down at him and grins. “Besides,” she says, “your orders only say you have to bring me there. They don’t say you can’t bring anyone else.”

That’s true. Anakin grins back at her and wonders how hard it will be to convince Mom and Kitster to get away for a week or two.

*

Aloo wakes that morning with the sound of her mother’s soft singing still humming in her ears. She heads to the refectory and, on a whim, decides to try the yanoma porridge. It’s supposed to be a Naboo specialty from the capital district. It tastes wrong, though, and she doesn’t know why.

“Hey,” says Ahsoka beside her. “Are you all right? You’ve been acting strange again.”

A dozen different excuses rise to her lips, but for some reason, this time, Aloo can’t make herself say any of them. She’s thinking about what she saw and heard in that holocall last night, the way her sister and Anakin teased each other, the way Anakin seemed so comfortable there. He’s friends with Padmé, and they don’t have to keep secrets from one another, and Aloo wants that. She wants a friend like that, and maybe it’s selfish and silly, but she also wants a friend who will be hers, who she won’t have to share with her sister.

And she wants that friend to be Ahsoka.

So she squares her shoulders and says, “I need to tell you something. Not here, though. Let’s go to the Pool of Serenity.”

Ahsoka looks dubious – Aloo doesn’t think she’s once been to the Pool in her life – but she agrees.

Aloo’s still carrying the scrambler. She turns it on as soon as the door to the Pool has closed
behind them and she says, “I need to tell you a secret. But you have to promise you won’t tell anyone.”

Ahsoka looks almost affronted. “Of course I won’t,” she says.

So Aloo tells her. All of it. She probably shouldn’t say anything about Anakin – his secrets aren’t hers to tell – but there’s too many of her own secrets that don’t make any sense without his. She can see that Ahsoka wants to interrupt several times, to ask questions or to object or maybe even to tell Aloo that she’s wrong, that what she’s doing is a transgression of the Code. But whatever Ahsoka is thinking, she manages to hold it back until Aloo has finished her story.

Then there’s a long silence. Aloo looks down at the pool, but it’s perfectly clear, just as it’s meant to be, and she can’t stand to meet her own eyes in the water. She looks back at Ahsoka.

“Well?” she says when she can’t wait any longer.

“Does it help?” Ahsoka asks at last. She sounds more uncertain than Aloo has ever heard her. “Knowing them, I mean. Your – your family.”

“Yes,” Aloo confesses. “I think it does.”

“That’s against the Code,” Ahsoka says, as though Aloo doesn’t know that already. “It’s forbidden. Jedi don’t have attachments.”


It’s heresy and she knows it. But it’s somehow freeing, to say it out loud. Maybe Ahsoka will keep her secret. Maybe she’ll report her to the Council. But either way she knows now, and Aloo doesn’t feel like she’s drowning any more.

She watches Ahsoka chew her lip and stare down into the pool. She doesn’t look up as she says, “Do you – do you think the Code is wrong, then? About attachments?”

“I don’t know,” Aloo admits. That alone is bad enough.

“I don’t know either,” Ahsoka whispers.

Aloo reaches out and takes her hand. Together they stand in silence, looking down at their reflections in the water.

*

“I don’t know what they’ve been teaching you in the Jedi, Ani, but this is the exact opposite of a secret getaway,” Kitster says.

Anakin throws his head back and laughs. It’s true. No doubt the Council was imagining a stealthy departure and secure isolation: just him and Padmé in a remote location, with maybe a few staff and no one else.

They definitely weren’t imagining the boisterous, chattering crowd of people waiting at the dock for the hoverboat that will take them to Varykino. It’s going to take at least two trips, Anakin thinks, and probably three. There are twelve people, including the droids, and that’s not even getting into the truly immense amount of luggage. The Naboo, it seems, don’t understand the concept of traveling light. Or at least the Naberries don’t.

“Who knows?” Anakin says, bumping his brother’s shoulder. “Maybe we’ll run into Beru and
Owen up here, too.”

“Mom, Mom, can we go swimming? Please?” Pooja practically whines, tugging at her mother’s skirt.

Sola heaves a longsuffering sigh. “Not yet, little voorpak,” she mutters. “We’ve got to get to the house and drop off all our luggage first.”

Ryoo and Pooja both groan as if this is the greatest possible betrayal, but their mother steadfastly ignores their pleas.

The journey to Varykino ends up taking four trips, one reserved solely for the majority of the luggage. Anakin helps Paddy Accu, the hoverboat’s pilot, haul the bags on and off the craft, and he only grins when the older man makes a show of huffing and puffing and mutters, “Can’t you just take care of this with your Force?”

The truth is he probably could, but the Order frowns on that kind of showmanship, and Anakin’s already broken a good half dozen Jedi rules on this mission already, so he can afford to let that one slide.

By the time they’ve finished unloading the bags and brought them all to the appropriate rooms, Ryoo and Pooja are already in their swimming gear and dashing toward the water, Artoo hot on their heels and whirring with excitement. Sola and Darred follow at a more resigned pace. And Jobal and Ruwee trail after them, Ruwee carrying a holorecorder. Threepio is the last in the strange caravan, and he’s muttering continually about Artoo’s unseemly encouragement of dangerous behavior.

“Do you know how to swim, Ani?” Padmé asks.

“Sure,” Anakin says. “It was part of survival training in the Temple.”

Padmé grimaces slightly, and he’s not sure why, until Kitster laughs. “We’re not going to be fighting for our lives, Ani,” he says. “This is supposed to be fun.”

Kitster, he knows, learned to swim in school in Theed, and Shmi learned from him. It didn’t sound like much fun, the way Kitster described it at the time, but Anakin remembers how agonizing the learning was for him, so maybe it’s always like that.

He shapes his face into his best imitation of Obi-Wan’s scolding frown and says, “Jedi don’t have fun. It’s against the Code.”

Shmi laughs, and Padmé hides a giggle behind her hand, so in spite of Kitster’s rolling eyes, Anakin counts it a win.

“So what you’re really saying is that you need to borrow some swimming gear,” Kitster says, in the tone of someone bravely shouldering a terrible hardship. “Fine. Come with me.”

Swimming for fun is pretty different, it turns out. Anakin discovers this when Kitster, rather than walking down to the beach, steps up on the balcony railing, leaps into the air, curls his body into a ball, and hits the water below with an enormous splash. Ryoo and Pooja shriek in delight, and Padmé yelps. Anakin looks over at Shmi with a grin.

“Go on then,” she says, laughing. Anakin doesn’t need to be told twice. He’s already imagining the look on Master Windu’s face if he were to try this in the Temple’s swimming pool.

He’s just surfacing, still grinning at the mental image and the rush of speed from his jump, when
Shmi hits the water with a splash that puts his and Kitster’s both to shame.

Chapter End Notes

I hope y'all weren't expecting a romantic getaway for two, because what you're getting is a family beach vacation. (And, okay, some romance too.)
in the summer air so moist and sweet

Chapter Notes

I apologize for being slow to answer all the lovely comments, but here at least is a new chapter.

And after so many people said they were happy to have a family focus, this one actually is more romany, lol. But still lots of family, too.

But first, the mystery of the week: why don't Obi-Wan or the Council communicate anything that Obi-Wan has learned in his investigation to Anakin, who is responsible for guarding the person whose (attempted) assassination Obi-Wan is investigating? I can only assume the Council has extremely strict rules about classified material, since Obi-Wan doesn't communicate with Anakin for most of AOTC, and even when he does so, it's only because his long-range com is down and he can't reach the Council without going through Anakin. The underlying implication is that, had his equipment been working properly, Anakin never would have known that Obi-Wan was on Geonosis at all.

And finally, Jar Jar Binks is a good politician and a better friend. Fight me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Anakin’s Council-issued com goes off just as he’s coming in from the lake. He snatches it up and answers, “Skywalker here,” before remembering that he should have included the “Padawan.”

Luckily for him, the voice on the other end only tuts at him. “You’ve been away for a week and you’ve forgotten protocol already?” Jocasta asks. Maybe someone who doesn’t know her well would take her tone for scolding, but Anakin’s not fooled.

“You know I’m terrible with etiquette, Grandmother,” he says with a grin.

“Hmph,” says Jocasta. “I know you’re good at everything you really try at.”

Anakin laughs. She’s got him there, and they both know it, but he’s not going to admit it.

“This is a secure link?” she asks.


There’s a long moment of silence, and then Jocasta says, “And it’s recording absolutely everything, is it?”

Now it’s Anakin’s turn to hesitate. There’s a true answer here, and a Jedi answer, and he’s not immediately sure which he should give.

But there’s something in her voice, some hint of mischief, that makes him think it might be worth a risk. And, of course, she’s commed him on this link in the first place, which already says something about her own regard for protocol. As the chief archivist it wouldn’t have been difficult for her to find this code, but that doesn’t change the fact that this isn’t exactly an authorized
communication.

So Anakin allows himself a slight smile as he says, “Well…mostly everything.”

Actually that’s still mostly a lie. The truth is that he’s set up the com to log his discussions with the Council, and nothing else. But he’s willing to bet that she knows that.

“Good,” Jocasta says brusquely. “In that case you should know that I’ve had a breakthrough, in spite of the Council stealing my research assistant in the middle of a very important investigation. Again.”

She’s obviously still peeved about that. Anakin grins to himself, but he knows better than to laugh aloud. “What have you found, then?” he asks.

“There was an entire system missing from the Archives,” Jocasta says, her voice cold. “Your Master Kenobi discovered the discrepancy. The system is caught up somehow with your current assignment, apparently.”

The smile freezes on Anakin’s face. “What system?” he asks.

“Kamino,” says Jocasta. “On the Outer Rim, out beyond the Rishi Maze.” He can practically hear the scowl in her voice as she adds, “Or so I’m told.”

Kamino. The name means nothing to him, at least not that he can remember, but the cold feeling in the pit of his stomach is only growing. Kamino is important. And he’s increasingly sure that something horrible is happening there.

“Master Obi-Wan is investigating?” he asks, though he can’t imagine the answer is no. Even the Council can’t ignore something like this.

“I can neither confirm nor deny that,” says Jocasta primly, which is all the confirmation he really needs.

“I don’t like this,” Anakin says, mostly to himself. “There’s something happening here, something…”

“Yes,” says Jocasta. “I feel it too.”

That surprises him, though maybe it shouldn’t. But he’d been expecting to hear that he shouldn’t focus on nebulous anxieties, or perhaps that he needn’t concern himself with the situation, as Master Obi-Wan and the Council are handling it. A simple agreement from a Master isn’t something he’s used to.

“What are we going to do, Grandmother?” he asks.

“We pay attention,” Jocasta nearly snaps, though he knows it’s not him she’s frustrated with. “We keep following the evidence, wherever it leads. We keep asking questions. And we keep one another informed.”

She doesn’t say “whether the Council likes it or not,” but then, she doesn’t need to.

* 

Padmé sets up a secure link with Jar Jar that evening. It’s mid-afternoon in the Senatorial district of Coruscant, and he’s still dressed in the fine robes she knows he hates. He looks immensely relieved to see her.
“Padmé!” he says, his bill splitting in a wide grin. “Mesa moy happy to be seeing yousa. Deysa Jedi no telling me anything.”

“I know, Jar Jar,” Padmé says with a wry smile. “They haven’t told me much more. I think they’d prefer it if I just disappeared for a few weeks – from politics, not just from Coruscant.”

Jar Jar nods thoughtfully. “Yousa probably right,” he says. “Deysa said yousa wouldn’t contact mesa at all.”

There’s a twinkle in his eye, and Padmé matches it. “I’m sure they’d like to think so,” she says. “But I’m on my own now, with no Jedi to stop me doing my job.”

Jar Jar’s smile is positively sly. “There’sa Ani,” he says.

“Oh, of course,” Padmé says with a grin of her own. “Ani’s very diligent about following his orders.” They both manage to hold back their laughter, but it’s a near thing.

There’s a bit more small talk, and then Padmé sighs and says, “Tell me the truth, Jar Jar. How bad is it?”

“There’sa lots of talk about da Separatists. And Senator Taa, he’sa calling for more patrolling da Outer Rim. He’sa saying unrest is bombad for trade.”

Padmé grinds her teeth. It’s not really surprising that Taa would use the Separatist crisis to try to tighten Republic control of the Outer Rim. Padmé might even support that idea, if she thought it would result in the actual enforcement of the Republic’s anti-slavery laws. But she’s not fourteen any more, and she’s lost whatever illusions she might once have had. If Ani or Shmi heard that proposal, they’d probably laugh out loud.

“Is it going to come to a vote?” she asks.


That’s no surprise, but it is a relief. “Do you want to talk with any of the freedom runners?” she asks. “Shmi and Kitster are here with me, along with Ani.”

Jar Jar grins again, an unspoken acknowledgement of Ani’s obvious dedication to following his orders to the letter, and promises to send her the bill he’s written so they can all look over it. They have several days yet before he’ll probably introduce it, so there’s time to be thorough.

After she’s said farewell to Jar Jar, Padmé sits for a time and stares at the communications array, wondering.

They spoke with Aloo just last night. Would it be too soon, to call again? Would she feel pressured? Would she even be able to get away, to talk in secret? Last night she only had an hour. Padmé isn’t really sure how time is scheduled in the Temple, or how closely monitored younglings are. Ani was usually able to speak with her fairly regularly, but then, he’s been engaged in various kinds of secret communication his entire life, and unlike Aloo, he’s never really bought into the Jedi ideal of detachment. He’s just gotten better at faking it.

She wonders how Aloo reconciles that difference in her own mind. Is she, too, getting better at faking it? Or does she still believe the Jedi doctrine of detachment is right, and that she’s willfully breaking it? Does she feel guilty for talking to her own family?

Padmé’s still debating those questions with herself when the door slides open and Anakin steps in.
“Dinner’s ready,” he says. “And Ryoo and Pooja have challenged each other to see which of them can find you first. I guess I win.”

Padmé looks up at him and tries for a smile, but it obviously doesn’t work, because his own grin slips and he says, “Are you all right?”

“What does Aloo think of us?” she asks. “I mean, what does she really think? Does she want to talk to us, or does she think it’s wrong somehow? Are we – are we just making everything worse for her, Ani?”

She’s set up her communications array in Varykino’s most secure facility, and the room isn’t large. The only chair is the one she’s sitting in. Anakin steps closer and then, to her surprise, curls his long legs beneath him and sits on the floor beside her. Padmé blinks down at him, and he leans back on his arms, looks up at her, and grins. She feels a flush of heat in her cheeks, which is ridiculous, so she ignores it.

“She definitely wants to talk to you,” Anakin says, and even though he’s still smiling his voice is perfectly earnest. “She wants to know you. She always seems excited after she coms or messages you, and usually she tells me all about it. She asks a lot about my mom, too, and about what it was like growing up with her, and being able to ask her anything. I think she wants that, though maybe she doesn’t know how to ask for it. It’s – ” He lets out a huff of breath. “It is hard for her, I think. Because she’s always been a Jedi, at least as far as she remembers.”

Suddenly he laughs, and Padmé looks at him in surprise. “I was just thinking,” Anakin says, a definite note of mischief in his voice. “When I first joined the Order, I remember Master Yoda saying to me once that, because I’d come to them too old, I would have to unlearn what I had learned.” He grins. “I obviously haven’t done a very good job of that. But I think maybe that’s what it’s like for Aloo. She’s unlearning a lot, and she knows that what she’s doing is something the Council won’t understand and definitely won’t approve of. But she wants to know you. She wants to know you badly enough that she’s willing to risk that.”

Padmé tries to imagine it. Tries to imagine being caught between her own sense of moral rightness and the teachings and statutes of her entire society. “She’s very brave,” she says.

Anakin’s smile is a warm secret. “Like her sister,” he says. There’s open admiration in his eyes, and Padmé can’t hold his gaze for long.

But he’s not entirely right about that. Though she and Aloo are getting to know one another, and Padmé loves her sister with a ferocity that surprises even her sometimes, she can still admit that they’re mostly strangers to each other. If Aloo has a role model in questioning authority, it isn’t Padmé.

“No,” she says, forcing herself to meet Anakin’s eyes and not to look away again. “Like her brother, I think.”

Surprise lights his face, and then turns to something pleased and shy. “Oh,” Anakin says, his voice gone soft. “Did she say – ?”

Padmé laughs. “She didn’t need to. It’s pretty obvious. She talks about you all the time. She really admires you, you know.”

Anakin is actually blushing now. It’s a good look for him. He bites his lip and Padmé glances quickly away again.

“Well, she admires you too,” he says. “I used to tell her all sorts of stories about you, before, and
I’m pretty sure she thought I was making you up because you sounded too amazing to be real.”

Now it’s Padmé’s turn to be embarrassed, just a little, but Anakin only laughs at her. “Then she actually talked to you,” he says, a little sly, “and she realized that I was completely right.”

“Flatterer,” Padmé says with a smirk.

“I would never,” Anakin says, throwing a hand over his heart in an absurdly dramatic fashion. “Senator, I am a Jedi. We never say anything but the unvarnished truth.”

Padmé laughs, partly because he’s ridiculous and partly because, well, she’s talked with enough Jedi over the course of her career and she knows exactly how true his statement is.

“Of course not,” she says. “It’s the same for us politicians.”

Anakin snickers loudly, and it takes him a moment to get it under control. “I’m going to tell Master Obi-Wan you said that,” he says when he’s stopped laughing enough to form words. “I want to see the look on his face.”

Padmé can imagine that look herself. Obi-Wan is a pretty decent diplomat, but he’s never really been able to disguise his disdain for the political game. Sometimes she thinks that’s what makes him so good at it.

“I shared that with you in the strictest confidence,” she says loftily. “I’ll only give you permission to tell Obi-Wan if I’m there to see it too.”

Anakin appears to be giving this serious consideration. “I think I can agree to that,” he says. Then, absurdly, he offers her a hand to seal the bargain.

Laughing, Padmé takes his hand and they shake. But rather than releasing her, Anakin stands in one swift movement and pulls her up too. Surprised, she stumbles into him and he drops her hand to steady her, blurtting, “Sorry, sorry, I –”

She looks up, and the words seem to die in his throat. They’re very close. She can see flecks of a darker color in his blue eyes, and she watches as his gaze flicks briefly down and then back to hers and he swallows. Padmé’s breath catches and she thinks, for one heady moment, that he’s going to kiss her.

But then his eyes widen and he practically jumps back, flushed and looking away as he clears his throat. “Right,” he says, apparently to the carpet. “Right. Dinner. We should, uh, we should go to dinner.” He coughs again. “They’ll be waiting for us.”

“Oh,” says Padmé, refusing to wonder why she feels disappointed. “Right. Dinner.”

They go to dinner, where Jobal asks, a bit hesitantly, for stories of her youngest daughter, and Anakin spends most of the meal telling increasingly wild tales of Aloo and Ahsoka and their childhood antics. Padmé listens eagerly, but her stomach is still fluttering for absolutely no reason, and she can’t look at him for too long. That’s all right, though, because Anakin barely glances once at her.

She’s always known that Ani had a crush on her when they were children. He never made any particular effort to hide it, and at the time she’d found it endearing and even comforting – something simple and innocent in the midst of a nightmare. But they aren’t children anymore, and they’re also not near strangers thrown together by circumstances and necessity. Over their years of correspondence and shared work on the freedom trail, he’s become one of her closest friends, and she knows he thinks the same of her. In some ways this – whatever this is – might actually be
easier if they were near strangers again. Instead she’s left feeling confused and flustered around
someone she’s used to being able to share everything with, and from what she can tell, Ani
doesn’t seem to be doing any better.

So, despite knowing that she’ll be teased about this probably for years to come, Padmé decides to
talk to Sola.

Sola’s always been the one she goes to with her personal struggles and dilemmas. There’s enough
of an age difference between them that Sola was something of a mentor to her when she was very
young, and even after she grew out of her hero worship, Padmé still finds her sister easier to talk
to than their parents.

She wonders, briefly, who Aloo talks to. In another world, Padmé might have filled that role
herself. She tries to tell herself she doesn’t mourn that. And then she pushes the question away
entirely, because the person Aloo talks to is probably Anakin himself, and the tangled mess of
emotions that goes with that realization is far more than Padmé wants to deal with right now.

Sola eyes her knowingly when Padmé mutters that she wants to talk about Anakin. “What did he
do?” she asks with a barely disguised snicker.

“Nothing!” Padmé blurs, glaring at her sister. But Sola only goes on looking at her, one eyebrow
raised, and finally Padmé sighs and adds, “Admittedly, that might be the problem.”

Sola stays blessedly quiet as Padmé recounts the incident that wasn’t, and she even waits a few
moments after Padmé finishes speaking, her face surprisingly serious as she considers her reply.
That more than anything soothes Padmé’s nerves. Sola likes to tease, but she knows when to back
off, too.

“Well,” Sola says at last, watching Padmé closely. “It seems to me that before you can decide
what to do about this, you need to know the answer to one question.”

“And what’s that?” Padmé asks.

“You said you thought he was going to kiss you,” Sola says. “Well, did you want him to?”

Padmé blinks. She knows the answer to that question, but she’s not sure she’s ready to admit it
yet, even to herself.

Sola gives her a sympathetic smile. “You don’t have to answer that right away. Give yourself
some time to think about it.”

“Okay,” says Padmé. She forces herself to ask the next question. “And…what if the answer is
yes?”

“Then you should talk to him,” Sola says. “Because if there’s one thing I think we can be sure of,
it’s that he’s going to follow your lead.”

*  

Aloo had told herself that she wouldn’t contact Anakin again for a couple of days. He’s on
assignment, a highly classified assignment protecting her sister no less, and she shouldn’t distract
him from that.

But he’s also with her parents and her older sister, too, and Aloo can’t stop thinking about that,
can’t stop thinking that she may not get a chance like this again, a chance to talk to all of them at
once without getting caught.
And there’s something else to consider, too. There’s Ahsoka.

Her friend still isn’t sure what to think about Aloo’s decision to contact her family. But Ahsoka’s kept her secret, and Aloo knows that won’t change. Aloo wants to honor that. She wants to share this new part of herself with her friend, too. And, perhaps selfishly, she wants to know if meeting her family will help Ahsoka understand. Because if someone else can understand this, someone besides Anakin, who’s always been different, someone who has always been a Jedi the way Aloo has always been a Jedi – if Ahsoka can understand this, then maybe everything will be okay.

So she books the Pool of Serenity again. Ahsoka meets her there after the evening meal. Aloo’s already sent a message to Anakin, and his reply comes back just as Ahsoka walks through the door.

Aloo shoots her a nervous smile and starts setting up the scrambler and the long-range array.

“Hey, kid,” Anakin says brightly as soon as the connection is established. His eyes widen almost imperceptibly when he spots Ahsoka. “And Snips. Good to see you too.”

“Hi, Skyguy,” Ahsoka says with an audible smirk.

Aloo sighs. Ahsoka’s been making an effort lately to mold herself into what she calls a “proper Jedi.” With Anakin, though, it’s completely backfired. He’d grimaced in increasingly over the top shows of pain every time she called him “Padawan Skywalker,” and when that didn’t work, he’d taken to calling Ahsoka “young one,” “Youngling Tano,” and, worst of all, “young learner,” until she finally gave up. Now they’ve apparently dropped titles entirely in favor of some truly terrible nicknames.

All things considered, Aloo definitely prefers “kid” to any theoretically creative nickname Anakin might think up instead.

“I wanted Ahsoka to meet my family,” Aloo says, her hands fidgeting with the hem of her tunic. “If…if they want.”

“I’m sure they’d love to meet her,” Anakin says with a grin. “Just give me a minute to corral everybody.”

His hologram disappears, and a moment later it’s replaced by Padmé’s. “Aloo!” she says, beaming. “I was really hoping we’d get to talk to you today.”

Aloo blinks in surprise. She’d been afraid of overreaching her welcome. “You…you were?”

Padmé’s smile softens. “Yes,” she says. “I always like hearing from you. And Ryoo and Pooja haven’t stopped talking about their aunt the Jedi all day.” She laughs. “I think Ani’s a little jealous. He used to be their favorite Jedi.”


“I’ve done nothing to deserve this,” she hears Anakin mutter from somewhere outside the holo’s range, and she and Ahsoka both laugh.

Padmé’s eyes widen and she cranes her neck slightly, like she’s trying to peer around Aloo. “Who’s this?” she asks, smiling.

Ahsoka looks decidedly nervous as she steps up beside Aloo, but she doesn’t back down. “Hi,” she says. “I’m Ahsoka. Ahsoka Tano. And you’re Senator Amidala, right?”
“Padmé, please,” Padmé says easily. “Right now, I’m Aloo’s older sister.” Then she scowls. “Besides, I’m apparently supposed to be staying entirely clear of politics for the foreseeable future.”

“Not that you’re bitter about that. Or planning to abide by it at all,” another voice says, and Sola steps into the hologram, closely followed by her daughters and then by Aloo’s parents.

Aloo introduces each of them to Ahsoka, who still looks awkward but still isn’t leaving or telling Aloo that she’s wrong to want this.

“So this is the young lady we’ve heard so much about,” Jobal gushes. Padmé and Sola snicker, while Ahsoka shoots Aloo a startled look, and Aloo feels like her face is on fire. Apparently this is what Sola meant yesterday, when she joked about parents loving to embarrass their children.

“You told them about me?” Ahsoka asks. Her voice is hushed, and Aloo can’t interpret the inflection there.

She’s still blushing furiously, and she can’t meet Ahsoka’s eyes as she mutters, “Well, they wanted to know about my friends.”

“Aloo says you’re the best dancer in your youngling group,” Padmé says, and she sounds perfectly innocent, but Aloo knows her well enough now to recognize the sly, teasing spark in her eyes. She can feel Ahsoka looking at her, but she keeps her glare fixed on Padmé.

“Well, that’s not true,” Ahsoka says. “Aloo’s better than me.”

Aloo looks at her in sharp surprise, but before she can think what to say, Sola says, “There’s one way you could resolve this, of course. Give us a demonstration.”

A slow grin spreads across Ahsoka’s face, the twin to Aloo’s. The room they’re in is almost entirely occupied by the Pool of Serenity, with only a narrow walkway surrounding it on all sides. It would be hard to think of a worse location to practice Tatooine dancing.

This is going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, Padmé went immediately from being annoyed with Sola teasing her about liking her best friend...to teasing Aloo about liking her best friend.

Siblings.
Sola was entirely right when she told Aloo there was no chance of Padmé actually staying clear of politics. Jar Jar’s draft legislation comes through early the next morning. He’s either forgotten the time difference again or, more likely, he simply knows she’ll want to tackle this immediately.

The sun hasn’t quite risen yet, though pinks and soft purples are beginning to seep into the sky. Padmé throws on a robe – it’s not too early to work, but it is too early to bother with getting dressed – and decamps to the kitchen.

She’s in luck. The Skywalkers are already awake, all three of them, bustling around the kitchen and each other in a masterfully choreographed dance. There’s a pot of tzai on the cooker, another of chinaka porridge, and the delicious smell of something baking in the oven. It looks like enough food for a small village. Which, Padmé thinks with fond amusement, isn’t too far off given the size of their party. Nandi and Teckla are nowhere to be seen, which must mean that Shmi has finally convinced them to take a morning off and enjoy someone else’s cooking for once.

“Good morning, Padmé,” Shmi says, looking up from the tray of shuura she’s slicing. “You’re up early.”

“Good morning,” Padmé says, offering Shmi a smile and doing her best to ignore Anakin, who’s busy at the cooker with his back to her. He’s wearing a thin shirt without the heavy layers and leather tabards of his Jedi uniform, and the longer hair that’s usually bound in a tail just above his neck is hanging loose. It’s more distracting than it should be.

“Bread’s ready!” Kitster says brightly, his words mostly directed at Anakin. When his brother doesn’t move, Kitster snorts and elbows him none too gently aside to reach the oven. Anakin starts and splutters, and Kitster laughs. “What happened to those vaunted Jedi senses, huh?”

“I was distracted,” Anakin mutters sharply, and that’s so unlike him that all three of them stop to look at him.

“Is something wrong?” Padmé asks tentatively. She doesn’t think this is about…well. He seems more concerned than embarrassed, and when he finally does turn to face them she can see there are shadows under his eyes. He’s an early riser, she knows, but today he looks like he hasn’t slept at all.

“I don’t know,” Anakin mutters, scrubbing a hand over his face and offering a grimace of a smile.

“Did you dream again?” Shmi asks softly.

Padmé’s brow furrows. Dream? What is Shmi talking about?

“Yeah,” Anakin says. A frustrated sigh escapes him. “I saw Obi-Wan again, and there was a
desert, but the rocks were all wrong, red and craggy, and there was this sound like…like a lot of kirik flies all buzzing at once. I think – I think Obi-Wan’s in danger, but I don’t know how, or where, or what any of this means.”

“Have you contacted him?” Shmi asks, frowning.

To Padmé’s surprise, Anakin laughs, though there’s no humor in it. “He says I need to stop focusing on my anxieties. The future is always in motion, and the dreams will pass in time, and in the meantime I need to focus on my assignment.” He looks sidelong at Padmé and shrugs helplessly. “And of course he wouldn’t tell me anything about his investigation. It’s still ongoing, and therefore classified.”

It probably is classified, at that, though Padmé wonders, a bit uncharitably, if Obi-Wan is trying to keep the information from Anakin, or from her.

“I just wish he’d listen to me,” Anakin mutters. “Something is coming. I can feel it.”

Shmi reaches out and squeezes her child’s arm. “You warned him,” she says. “He heard that. Perhaps he just doesn’t want you to worry.”

“I know,” Anakin says with another sigh. Some hint of mischief comes back into his eyes as he adds, “I do wish he’d tell me whatever he’s learned about this bounty hunter, though. I could probably help him with that.”

Kitster laughs. “Sure, Ani, but you shouldn’t be able to. Or are there a lot of Jedi padawans running around with extensive knowledge of the criminal underworld in the Outer Rim?”

“I’d just tell him that I overheard some things on Tatooine as a kid,” Anakin says with a grin. “You’d be amazed how often that works.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask,” Padmé says, laughing, though the truth is she’s incredibly curious and he probably knows it.

For the first time that morning Anakin looks directly at her, and something in his face softens. “You are up early,” he teases. “For the second time this week. And not perfectly pressed and Senate-presentable, either. What’s going on, Padmé?”

She reaches up to smooth her hair, but stops herself just in time. She can feel heat in her cheeks again and she scowls at him, but it doesn’t do any good. “Very funny,” she mutters. “Jar Jar sent his bill this morning, so I wasn’t about to go back to sleep.”

That gets all of their attention. They serve up breakfast in short order, leaving the remains in the kitchen just in case anyone else wakes up before noon, and then the four of them huddle around a table on the veranda, sipping tzai and pouring over the words as the sun rises across the lake.

Jar Jar’s bill is a thorough, well-constructed piece of legislation. He’s made use of much of the language from Padmé’s defeated Outer Rim emancipation proposal, but he’s taken care to create a bill that won’t be perceived as simply a reintroduction of hers. Packaged as a response to the Separatist crisis, this bill might even stand a chance of getting a hearing before the full Senate.

Padmé still doesn’t have much hope that it will ever pass. She tries to be optimistic about the Republic, usually, but there’s a difference between optimism and delusion. And yet they have to keep trying, and being visible about it.

“He’s calling for emancipation to unite the Outer Rim against the Separatists?” Kitster says, letting out a low whistle. “That’s clever. When it fails you’ll be able to say your opponents aren’t really
dedicated to combatting the Separatist movement or holding the Republic together.”

Anakin snorts, and even Shmi lets out a soft breath of laughter. Padmé holds her silence for a moment, startled by the ease of their laughter and her own discomfort with it.

“When did you get so cynical?” she asks at last. It’s only half meant as a joke, and she’s not sure which of them the question is directed at.

“Oh, probably sometime around my second eopie race,” Kitster says with a smirk. “So…when I was six, I think.”

“I don’t know,” Anakin says. “I’m pretty sure you’ve always been like this.”

“Maybe,” Kitster says unapologetically. “But you used to argue with me.”

Anakin shrugs. “That was before I lived on Coruscant. The Jedi like to say they’re apolitical, but most of what we do revolves around the politicians in one way or another. I think I’ve heard every possible variation on the Concerned Speech Denouncing Hatred and Oppression at this point. I could probably make one myself and everybody would applaud and then go right back to doing nothing.”

Padmé frowns. For the first time in a while, she’s very aware of the fact that for Anakin, Shmi, and Kitster, the Republic has never meant what it does for her. There’s a bitterness in them, in all three of them, that is entirely different from the kind of cynical politics she often encounters in the Senate. It’s a brutal and unblunted honesty, and Padmé finds that it unsettles her more than she’d like to think.

“You really don’t like politicians, do you?” she asks. It’s meant to tease, but her laugh sounds forced even to her.

Anakin, though, gives her an easy grin. “I like two or three,” he says. “Though there’s one I’m not sure of.”

“I’m going to regret this,” Padmé says, laughing more freely this time. “But I have to know. Which two?”

He must have realized that there’s something beneath her joking, because he doesn’t leave her hanging the way she’d expected him to. “You and Jar Jar, of course,” he says. His smile is warm and genuine.

And yes, that’s mostly what she’d expected. But… “What about the Chancellor?” she asks carefully.

Anakin frowns. “Well,” he says slowly. “He’s the one I’m not sure about.”

Padmé is a little surprised, though Shmi and Kitster look less so. She knows he’s been frustrated with Palpatine’s lack of visible, meaningful action on emancipation, but this seems to go a bit deeper.

“Sorry,” Anakin says, evidently mistaking her surprise. “I know he was a mentor to you, and I don’t mean to imply – ”

“It’s all right,” Padmé says. “He was my political mentor, that’s true, but…well. Lately I haven’t been too sure of him myself.”

“It’s just…it’s a little strange, isn’t it?” Anakin asks, still hesitant. “That he’s so interested in me, I
mean. There’s the battle of Naboo, of course, and I understand that he’s grateful for my role in that, but…well, it was a long time ago now, and it’s not like he’s meeting with any other Jedi padawans. And he always encourages me when we talk about emancipation, but he hasn’t actually done much about it, has he? So I just don’t know. I like talking to him, don’t get me wrong, and he’s always very kind and he seems interested, but –”

“But womp rats don’t befriend bantha cubs,” Kitster says darkly.

“Well, yes,” Anakin says. He seems surprised by Kitster’s words, but also relieved. “Exactly. You think so too?”

“It does seem a bit strange,” Shmi says. “Not impossible to explain, but…” She reaches out and squeezes Anakin’s hand. “You’ve always had good instincts, Ani. If something seems off, listen to that.”

“What did you mean about womp rats and bantha cubs?” Padmé asks, frowning.

“It’s an old saying,” Shmi says. “Adult womp rats will hunt young banthas. It means that people with power don’t befriend those without it, unless they want something.”

Padmé turns that idea over in her head. People with power… There’s something there, something she can only half guess at, something about Ani and… “But you’re not just a padawan,” she says slowly. “You’re the Chosen One.”

Anakin blinks. “Oh,” he says.

It’s clear he hasn’t actually considered that before. He’s always been uncomfortable with the title, and Padmé’s never heard him use it in reference to himself, though she knows the Jedi Council and Obi-Wan sometimes do. Palpatine is certainly savvy enough to have picked up on this, and she has no doubt that he’ll have avoided such language himself if Anakin does. The thought makes her shiver, and she doesn’t know why.

“So…you think he sees me as someone with power, too?” Anakin asks. He doesn’t sound very powerful. He sounds uncertain and distinctly uncomfortable.

“Or someone who’s useful as a symbol,” Kitster mutters.

If Anakin generally tries to see the best in people, Kitster is almost his exact opposite. It’s obvious that they’re brothers.

Privately, Padmé thinks that Kitster is probably right. Although Palpatine has proven quite popular as Chancellor, he did get off to a rocky start with the Jedi, who had been particularly close allies of Chancellor Valorum. Befriending the Jedi’s Chosen One, who also happens to be the youthful hero of Naboo, plays well for Palpatine’s image, both with the public and, perhaps, with the Jedi themselves. And that squares with what she knows of Palpatine herself. She’s still grateful for his guidance in the early days of her political career, but she can also acknowledge that mentoring her was good publicity for him, and she has no illusions about his selflessness.

“I don’t know,” Anakin huffs, obviously frustrated. “It probably doesn’t matter much either way. I do think he’s a good man, or he tries to be, but he’s very much a Core Worlder. And he’s not going to help against the Hutt’s, and that’s what matters.”

He’s right about that, and they all know it. When they return to Jar Jar’s bill, it’s with a subdued sense of purpose. The bill is well-crafted, and they can make it even better. But they all know it’s never going to pass.
Ahsoka still hasn’t said anything about Aloo’s family – not to the Council and not to Aloo, either – and Aloo is getting nervous. She’s not sure exactly what she wants from Ahsoka, but she wants something. Not this non-reaction.

It’s been all night and all morning and Aloo has just spectacularly failed to absorb any part of Master Yoda’s teaching on centering. A Jedi must have patience, she knows, but apparently she’s not feeling much like a Jedi today.

So she grabs Ahsoka by the arm before her friend can escape into the crowded safety of the refectory and instead drags her into a small, private meditation room.

“What are you doing?” Ahsoka yelps.

But Aloo just glares at her. She can feel herself shaking, though whether it’s terror or adrenaline she doesn’t know. “That’s what I want to know,” she blurs. “You haven’t said anything, and you won’t look at me, and I don’t know – I don’t know what’s going to happen, I –”

Ahsoka looks down, wrapping her arms around her middle. “What do you want me to say?” she mutters.

“Anything!” Aloo says desperately. “I just want to know what you think.”

“I don’t know, all right?” Ahsoka snaps. “I don’t know what I think, and I can’t talk to anybody about it because I promised to keep your secret.” She’s glaring now, finally meeting Aloo’s eyes again, her jaw set and her mouth hard.

Aloo feels like she’s crumbling in on herself. Ahsoka doesn’t understand, and if Ahsoka doesn’t understand then –

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I’m sorry I brought you into this.”

Ahsoka’s face softens, just a little. She sighs. “No, it’s – it’s okay,” she says, voice hushed with an uncertainty that shines too in her eyes. “I’m glad you did. Really. I’m – I’m glad you trust me. I just…I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what all of this means.”

Aloo swallows and says nothing.

“Watching you, with your family, it was like – well, it wasn’t anything like what the masters say about attachments,” Ahsoka says. “You seemed… You were more grounded, almost. I mean, you’ve been distracted for weeks, so maybe that is like what the masters warned us about, but when we were talking with them you seemed…happy. And Anakin seemed happy there, too. And you both felt, I don’t know…more real, somehow.”

“That’s how it feels for me,” Aloo says. “More real. It’s like…like some part of me always felt wrong before. Like I didn’t fit inside my own skin. But I didn’t know why until that first time I talked to Padmé.”

“But you’re still you,” Ahsoka says, though it sounds more like a question. “I mean, it doesn’t really change anything. Does it?”

It’s obvious she wants Aloo to agree, and maybe that would make things easier, but Aloo got herself into this mess by being honest, so she’s not going to stop now.

“Of course it does,” she says. “If it didn’t change anything, why would the masters forbid it?”
Ahsoka looks at her very strangely. “You sound like Anakin,” she says. Aloo can’t tell if that’s a compliment or not.

“And…you don’t think it’s dangerous?” Ahsoka asks. “Master Yoda says that attachment leads to fear and anger, and that leads to the Dark Side.”

“But it doesn’t have to,” Aloo says, a bit surprised by her own vehemence. “Anakin says that the core of every close relationship is compassion, and that’s supposed to be central to a Jedi’s life.”

Ahsoka snorts. “Has he run that opinion by the Council?”

“Well…probably not,” Aloo admits sheepishly. She’s very aware of the fact that she had nearly this same conversation with Anakin herself not too long ago, and that she was in Ahsoka’s position then. It’s startling to realize how much has changed, and she’s not entirely sure when it did.

“I’m still not sure what I think,” Ahsoka says just before they leave the meditation room. “But you’re my friend, Aloo. That won’t change.”

So maybe Ahsoka doesn’t understand. But she does accept, and that might be even better.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Padmé. When you’re getting distracted by his truly atrocious haircut, it’s time to admit you might have a problem.

As before Padmé and the Naboo government's involvement with the freedom trail makes a huge difference for Anakin's opinion of Palpatine, whose "thoughts and prayers" attitude doesn't look nearly as good in a universe where there are people actually trying to do something about emancipation. (Still, at this point Anakin’s view of Palpatine is of someone who's largely decent but really unaware of his privilege, and not someone who is, you know, a megalomaniacal proto-dictator.)

Kitster's reference to eopie races relates to my headcanon that, in addition to podraces, Tatooine slaveowners hold eopie races through the open desert, often using slave children as jockeys. Kitster was one of these prior to gaining his freedom.
Shmi gets a comcall from Beru that afternoon. The whole thing is very mysterious to Padmé: apparently Beru wants to know where Shmi is, because she needs to tell her something, but whatever it is can’t be shared over comlink, even in code. The reactions of the three Skywalkers only deepen the mystery: Shmi is positively beaming as she tells Padmé about the message, and Kitster and Anakin are smirking and elbowing one another in the ribs. “Called it!” Kitster says in a sing-song voice.

“Can we bring them here?” Anakin asks, turning that boyish, nakedly hopeful look on Padmé. “We could send someone to pick them up, so we stay secure.”

That probably wouldn’t meet the Jedi Council’s definition of security, but then, neither would the presence of Padmé’s family, let alone Shmi and Kitster. Besides, it would be nice to see Beru again, and Padmé can admit that she’s desperately curious about this whole situation. So she says, “I don’t see why not.”

Anakin’s face lights up like there’s a sun inside of him, and Padmé looks away, momentarily blinded.

Kitster and Paddy Accu go to meet Beru and Owen, and they return to Varykino by a remarkably and, in Padmé’s opinion, unnecessarily complicated route. Anakin is waiting eagerly by the dock. He’s heard a great deal about the woman his mother names her daughter, but he’s never actually met her before. Padmé watches him with a soft smile; he reminds her oddly of Aloo, that first time they talked on a vid link.

But Beru doesn’t seem to notice Anakin, Padmé, or anyone else. She steps off the hoverboat, Owen’s hand clasped in her own, and hurries straight to Shmi, her face alight with joy.

Anakin doesn’t seem affronted. He and Kitster are still grinning and elbowing one another, and Shmi is still beaming. There’s obviously some context here that’s lost on Padmé.

“Amu,” Beru says, “ek tipalu lukkakina ema nalua.”

“Oh!” Shmi says, laughing and crying at once as she envelopes both Beru and Owen in a crushing hug.

Padmé turns to Anakin as surreptitiously as possible and whispers, “What’s happening?”
Anakin leans down slightly to match her whisper. “Kitster was right,” he says. “They got married.”

Padmé blinks in surprise. She’d been sure Kitster was joking. “What, without telling anyone?”

Anakin cocks his head to one side and gives her a bemused grin. It’s strangely endearing, but she’s not going to think about that right now.

“Of course they didn’t tell anyone,” he says. “That would break the luck.”

Clearly she’s still missing something, some cultural marker probably, but she’ll have to wait to ask. Shmi has finally released her daughter and the man who is apparently her new son-in-law, and now it’s time for introductions.

“Ani, this is my daughter Beru Whitesun, and her husband Owen Lars,” Shmi says, taking each of their hands in one of hers. “Beru, Owen, this is my child Anakin Skywalker.”

“It’s good to finally meet you,” Anakin says, offering his hand first to Beru. “I’ve heard quite a lot about you. And Mom says you saved her on that last run.” His smile slips and his voice goes soft and earnest as he says, “Thank you.”

Beru’s smile is equally serious. “I’ve heard a lot about you, too,” she says. Then something in her eyes turns sly and she says, “And I have you to thank for my Republic citizenship.”

Anakin grins. “I remember. That was the one Master Obi-Wan almost caught me working on. I had to tell him it was a bit of research on the history of Republic identification documents. I’m still amazed he believed me.”

Beru laughs, and Anakin moves to shake Owen’s hand, too. Padmé thinks Owen looks just a little nervous, and she can practically see him thinking the word “Jedi,” but he grips Anakin’s hand firmly and offers a tentative smile.

“Have you arranged for your kuunaka yet?” Anakin asks them both, a bit shyly. “If you haven’t, I’d be happy to carve them for you. If you want.”

Owen nods, his smile more certain now, and Beru grins widely. “Oh, thank you!” she says. “That would be wonderful.”

Shmi asks if they can use Varykino’s kitchen and Padmé, who’s beginning to despair of ever understanding what’s going on, agrees with a shrug. Shmi leads them all inside, shows Beru and Owen the kitchen, and takes a packet of tzai spices from the pouch at her waist, offering them to Beru with some ceremony. Then she promptly shooes everyone but the new couple out of the kitchen, following behind to make sure they’ve all left.

Padmé looks at the three Skywalkers gathered in the dining hall and crosses her arms with a huff. “All right,” she says. “Who’s going to tell me what’s going on?”

They all laugh. “Beru is teaching Owen her tzai recipe,” Shmi says. “It binds them together as family, and it’s not a secret that can be witnessed by anyone else.”

“Or it will break the luck?” Padmé asks.

“Something like that,” Anakin says. “The secret is important.”

All the most important things on Tatooine are a secret, he tells her. Padmé knows this already, knows about the secret language and the secret stories and the secrets of the freedom trail. Now
she learns that marriage, too, is a sacred secret.

Slaves aren’t allowed to marry, of course. Anakin says this matter-of-factly. It’s just a reality of life. But Padmé can’t help but think that Jedi aren’t allowed to marry, either. It’s completely different, of course, just as the word “master” is completely different. Just as the reasons for forbidding contact with family are different. She wonders how often he has to tell himself that.

On Tatooine, slaves who wish to marry slip away in secret, telling no one of their plans. Marriage vows are spoken between partners and heard only by Ar-Amu and by the desert. They are never shared with anyone. Then the newlyweds teach one another their tzai recipes, and create a new blend uniquely their own, a secret that sustains. And, if it’s safe, they inform the Grandmother of the Quarters of their union.

“And then there’s the party!” Kitster says, grinning. “It’s not always safe to have one, but when it is…”

“And what about the – what did you call it, Ani?” Padmé asks. “The thing you offered to carve?”

“The kuunaka,” he says. “They’re a pair of japor snippets, to mark the promise. Something small that can be kept in a pouch, that the Masters won’t think has any value. If you get sold apart, you’ll carry the promise with you, even if you never see each other again.”

“Oh,” says Padmé. He talks about it so easily.

Owen and Beru emerge from the kitchen, carrying a tray with several mugs of tzai. They all drink and offer congratulations. It does taste different than the tzai Anakin and Shmi make, though Padmé can’t pinpoint exactly what the difference is.

The newlyweds want to hold their celebration in Little Tatooine, but they want Anakin and Padmé to be there, as well. Padmé watches the conflict in Anakin’s face as he debates between what he clearly wants and what he knows to be his assignment. It’s an interesting moment of realization: apparently he’s not quite as glib about his orders as he sometimes pretends to be.

But Padmé knows what she wants, and she knows what he wants, too, and so she feels no remorse as she takes the decision – and, hopefully, the blame from the Council – out of his hands. “Of course we’ll come,” she says.

Anakin looks at her sharply. “I’m not supposed to – ” he begins, but Padmé cheerfully interrupts him.

“I’m going to this wedding, Ani,” she says. “If you want to protect me, you’ll have to come along.”

He hesitates just a moment longer, and then he throws his head back and laughs.

* *

Weddings in Little Tatooine, as it turns out, are raucous affairs. There must be hundreds of people here, gathered in Shmi’s house, spilling out into her backyard and into the street on all sides. Someone has strung lights in all the trees, an impromptu band has set up in the yard, and there are people talking and laughing and dancing everywhere. There’s more food than Padmé thinks she’s ever seen in one place, not even at the numerous royal and senatorial events she’s attended.

She’s borrowed a set of clothes from Beru for the event, at Beru’s insistence – and Anakin’s. And now that she’s here, she can understand why. Dressed like everyone else, she blends into the crowd, and it’s much less likely that any potential assassin would recognize her. And if she’s
completely honest, it’s actually pretty nice not to be immediately noticeable. It’s been a long time since she went to a party just to have fun.

And then there’s Anakin, who hasn’t been to what he calls a real party since he left Tatooine ten years ago. “The rich people parties in the Senate don’t count,” he tells her, laughing. “Nobody there knows how to really dance.”

“And you do?” Padmé asks him archly. She’s heard stories about his attempts at a waltz, and she knows for a fact that Obi-Wan despairs of his padawan ever learning the social niceties of the Core.

But Anakin only grins. “Who do you think taught your sister?” he asks before spinning away into the crowd in a flash of blue and trailing laughter.

He’s borrowed his clothes from Kitster, and Padmé has spent most of the evening trying not to stare. It’s just because he looks so different, she tells herself. She’s used to always seeing him in Jedi robes, and even the disguise he wore on the transport from Coruscant to Naboo didn’t look terribly different. This is the first time she’s seen him wear anything that’s not in shades of brown. His long tunic is a deep, rich blue, worked with dark red embroidery in geometric patterns at the sleeves and hem. She recognizes some of the symbols – lukka, the sign for free, and ebra, laughter – but many of them are unfamiliar. And he’s wrapped his padawan braid up and around the short tail of hair at the back of his head, so it’s unnoticeable unless you know to look for it. That’s something he didn’t even do in disguise on the transport, and Padmé wonders what it means. Maybe he just wants to blend in. Or maybe it’s something else entirely.

Anakin doesn’t look much like a Jedi tonight, but he does look happy – probably happier than she’s ever seen him. That thought brings with it a tangle of emotions, none of which Padmé really wants to ponder too deeply.

A cheer goes up as Beru and Owen emerge from the house, both dressed in blue, their hands clasped together and beaming smiles lighting their faces. All the dancing and chatter stops, and a strange anticipatory silence falls. Padmé catches Anakin’s eye across the crowd of people, hoping for some clue, but he only winks at her as he pulls away from Kitster and the other dancers and makes his way to the newlyweds.

But when he holds his hands out to Beru and Owen, a snippet of japor resting on each open palm, Padmé understands.

He’s been working on the carvings all day, secluded in his room at Varykino, the faint sounds of his off-key humming occasionally emerging from behind the closed door. Shmi told her that, like everything else important in Tatooine culture, the kuunaka have to be made in secret. The songs are part of the blessing, and it’s very important that no one else see the carvings before they’re given to the newlyweds. They’re almost always carved by a sibling, Shmi told her, and Padmé understood why Anakin had seemed so excited when Beru accepted his offer.

Now he looks at Beru and her chosen husband with a grin that threatens to split his face. “You have spoken secret vows and Ar-Amu has heard them,” he says. “Receive now the sign of those vows, a secret that death cannot sever and no Master can tear asunder.”

Owen and Beru each take a japor snippet. They close their eyes and press the wood to their brows in silence, and then, just as silently, they exchange snippets.

Then Shmi steps forward, her face startlingly serious, bearing a shallow earthen bowl filled with water. She holds it out, and Beru and Owen bend to drink together from it.
Shmi draws back, raises the bowl to the heavens, and says, “May you be found together when the rain comes.” Then she casts the bowl down and it shatters at her feet.

“Chukata lav!” everyone shouts as Beru grabs Owen by his tunic and kisses him thoroughly. A riot of laughter and cheers surround them, and just like that, the party has started again.

Padmé loses Anakin in the crowd for a while, but she finds Sabé and Yané, who greet her with excited cries and pull her into a fast-moving Naboo circle dance which, somehow, doesn’t feel at all out of place at a Tatooine wedding. They spin faster and faster until they all fall down in a laughing heap, and then Sabé springs up again, hauling Padmé and Yané with her, and makes for one of the buffet tables with purpose.

“Sabé, really,” Yané mutters, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t give me that,” Sabé says. “I just saw Imer bring out another pot of Shmi’s tarmish, and I intend to get some before Ani eats it all.”

Yané rolls her eyes again, but Padmé picks up her pace. “No, that’s actually a valid concern,” she says, as Yané groans in despair.

Padmé can feel the smile nearly splitting her face. She hadn’t realized just how much she’s missed this.

As it turns out, Sabé’s fears were justified: they find Kitster and Anakin both camped out next to the tarmish pot, along with a striking woman Padmé recognizes from Kitster’s holos. Ani has a large bowl full of tarmish, and he’s inhaling it at an impressive rate.

Sabé elbows Anakin bodily aside and practically pounces on the pot of tarmish. Yané lets out another groan, but she’s right behind Sabé in line all the same. Padmé laughs at them both, but she can’t really blame them. Shmi’s tarmish is legendary.

After everyone has been guaranteed a bowl, Anakin nods at her and says, his mouth full of dumpling, “Padmé, this is Imer Moonspinner, freedom runner and most likely the love of my brother’s life.”

Kitster squawks indignantly, and Imer snickers at him. Anakin only raises a brow over his now nearly-empty bowl and says, “What? You never mentioned her even once in your letters, which can only mean one thing.” He turns to Imer and nods very seriously. “I hope you’re prepared to deal with his drama for the rest of your lives.”

“My drama?” Kitster mutters, glaring pointedly at Anakin. But Imer is smiling softly.

“I think I could manage that,” she says, giving Kitster a fond look.

His eyes widen, just for a moment, and then he coughs and does his best to hide a rather besotted grin. “Well,” he says, “Yes. In that case I guess I won’t be murdering Anakin tonight.”

Anakin scoffs loudly. “Please. As if you even could. What are you planning to do, read poetry at me?”

“No,” says Kitster easily. “We both know you’d enjoy that. Just like we both know I could destroy you on the dance floor any time, Jedi.”

Anakin slurps up his last dumpling and sets his bowl down with finality. “Let’s find out,” he says.

Padmé, Sabé, and Yané exchange a puzzled glance. Ani and Kitster both sound perfectly serious,
but their grins belie their words. Imer, too, is smirking, and as Kitster and Anakin step back from the table, she begins stomping her feet in a loud, rhythmic beat designed to echo.

Silence falls as those standing nearby turn to look, and then the stomping is taken up in earnest by a crowd of people who form a ring around Anakin and Kitster, who are now circling each other in an over-dramatic parody of two fighters. The effect is further ruined by their inability to contain their gleeful laughter.

The crowd parts briefly to allow Shmi, Beru, and Owen to slip to the fore. Shmi comes to stand beside Padmé, shaking her head fondly. “This should be interesting,” she says.

“Is this another wedding tradition?” Padmé asks her.

“Well, not necessarily,” Shmi says with a laugh. “This is nimdara.” At Padmé’s puzzled look, she adds, “Ani tells me that your sister Aloo and her friend Ahsoka demonstrated nimdara the other day, though they probably don’t know it’s called that.”

“Tatooine dancing,” that’s what Aloo had called it. Padmé had been impressed with the grace and artfulness of her sister’s dance, and the way she and Ahsoka seemed to move easily with and around one another.

Now, though, she can see that Aloo wasn’t just being modest when she said she was still learning the dance.

Anakin moves first, darting towards Kitster in a smooth lunge so breathtakingly fast that Padmé thinks he must be using the Force – until Kitster moves at the same speed, stepping just slightly to the side at the last second and then spinning to put Anakin on the defensive. They twist and leap, dip and kick and flip back, their movements almost too fast to follow, and all the time the stomping and clapping of the gathered crowd increases in tempo, driving the dancers to ever more frenzied speeds.

Padmé’s genuinely not certain if they’re actually aiming to connect their attacks and each is just that good at dodging, or if the whole thing is choreographed like a fight scene from a holofilm. It’s pretty amazing either way.

“Wow,” she says, and isn’t even embarrassed when the word slips out aloud.

Beside her, Shmi chuckles. “Ani’s been practicing,” she says. “That’s good.” Then she turns to Padmé and gives her a smile edged with steel. “Nimdara is a form of self-defense, though we call it a dance. The Masters don’t see any threat in dancing. It’s just one of those quaint, primitive things slaves do.”

And Ani’s been teaching that dance to the younglings, the children, in the Jedi Temple.

Caught up in her thoughts, Padmé misses the moment when it happens, but she comes back with a start when the sound of stomping feet falls into sudden silence. And then a great roar goes up, and Padmé sees that Anakin’s lying on his back on the ground, still looking startled but already beginning to laugh, and Kitster is standing over him with a positively wicked grin, offering a hand up.

“Did I forget to tell you that I officially reached dragon rank last week?” he asks without even attempting to sound innocent.

Anakin ignores his brother’s hand and flops fully on his back with a groan. Kitster snickers at him.

“You did forget to mention that, yes,” Anakin grumbles good-naturedly. “But I don’t mind losing
Kitster grins, waggling his hand in Anakin’s face until Anakin sits up with another groan, takes the hand, and allows himself to be dragged to his feet.

“And I beat a Jedi,” Kitster says, his smug smile not quite hiding the wonder in his eyes. “I am never letting that go.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Anakin says, waving him off. “We both know you’ve always been better than me. But thanks. It’s been a while since I had a real challenge. And since I practiced empty-handed.”

Kitster looks momentarily puzzled, and then his eyes widen in glee. “Nimdara with a lightsaber?”

Anakin grins. “Nimdara with a lightsaber.”

“I hope you’re planning to demonstrate,” Kitster says severely. “You’ve been holding out on us.”

“Oh sure, I’ve been holding out, Mr. Dragon Ranking,” Anakin laughs. “But if you want a demonstration, you’ll get one. Not here, though. Too many people here.”

“Tomorrow, then,” says Kitster, shaking his finger in Anakin’s face. “I’m holding you to that.”

Chapter End Notes

Amatakka translations:

- Amu: mother, mom
- ek tipalu lukkakina ema nalua: literally, "I have found the one who frees my soul." (Although certainly a romantic phrase, this is one of many Tatooine idioms that sounds a lot more poetic in Basic than it does to an Amatakka speaker.)
- kuunaka: literally, "promise staves." A set of japor snippets made to mark the promise of a marriage.
- Chukata lav!: basically the Tatooine equivalent of "Mazel tov!"
- nimdara: literally, "power dance," it’s similar to capoeira, a form of self defense, storytelling, and cultural teaching disguised as a dance.
dead languages on our tongues

Chapter Notes

Finally an update! Sorry for the wait on this one. And sorry for my continued delay in replying to comments on previous chapters. I have the best of intentions, but life gets in the way. Please know I enjoy and appreciate all your comments, though!

This chapter is set wholly in the Jedi Temple and populated entirely by OCs, because Anakin's off on Naboo and has no idea his babies are all grown up and rebelling without him.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Miik is the one who arranges the first meeting. It’s in the fern room in the conservatory, during their free meditation period, and they all know to tell any master who asks that they’re going to practice group meditation.

Aloo runs into Master Sinube on her way to the conservatory, and she’s only a little surprised by how easily the lie comes. The guilt that follows it, though, twists in her stomach for hours and even days after. But it’s not enough to stop her from going.

Almost sixty younglings come to the first meeting. Aloo is one of the last to arrive, and she stands for a moment just inside the entrance, the fresh wet smell of the ferns filling her nostrils as she blinks in surprise. She’d thought she was alone. She’s never imagined there could be so many of them.

Miik seems startled by the turnout, too, and more than a little nervous that everyone seems to be looking at him. He’s a good and diligent student, and everyone likes him, but he’s never really been much of a leader in the Temple.

“Um, hello,” Miik says, his antennae trembling with nerves.

There’s a smattering of greetings in reply, but they quickly peter into silence. They’re all eyeing one another nervously, and no one seems to know where to begin.

“So, uh,” Miik starts again. “We all know Anakin, right?”

Something about that question, or maybe the way he asks it, seems to break the tension, and Aloo finds herself laughing along with everyone else.

“Is that our code phrase, then?” asks a Muun girl whose name Aloo doesn’t know.

Miik stands there blinking in surprise. “Do we need a code phrase?” he asks, a bit weakly.

“We might,” says Ras. He’s raised his chin the way he always does just before the beginning of a duel, “I don’t know why the rest of you came, but I’m here because Anakin helped me find my family. We all know that’s against the Code. But I asked him to help me anyway, and he did.”

There’s a long stretch of silence. No one seems to want to meet anyone else’s eyes.

Aloo squares her shoulders and looks directly at Ras. “Me too,” she says.
“Yeah, me too,” the Muun girl says, and then someone else is saying, “me too,” and then it’s like a floodgate has opened and the truth, terrifying, exhilarating, liberating, comes pouring out.

They’re all here because they’ve broken the Code. Because they’ve taken the forbidden step, most of them before they’ve even been apprenticed, of learning about the people they came from.

“I think we do need a code phrase,” the Muun girl, who introduces herself as Palek, says. “Because there are a lot of us already, and there are going to be more, and…we need a way to know.”

“What about…Grandmaster Jocasta?” Miik suggests shyly, and everyone laughs, not at him but at the story behind the name.

“I like it,” says Aloo, grinning. “It’s perfect.”

“Grandmaster Jocasta” is almost infamous by now, and there are endless rumors about the name. But Aloo knows the full story, because she heard it from Anakin himself.

He calls the chief archivist of the Jedi Order “Grandmother” most of the time, a fact which still leaves Aloo a bit awed. Madame Nu can be rather severe, especially if she suspects you of treating her archives with anything less than perfect reverence, and Aloo’s not ashamed to admit she’s always found the old woman intimidating. Most younglings feel the same.

But Anakin seems strangely fond of Madame Nu, and, stranger still, she seems fond of him in turn. She actually gave him permission to call her “Grandmother,” though he tries not to address her that way when any other masters are present.

That’s how “Grandmaster Nu” was born. It only took a handful of times: Anakin beginning to say “Grandmother,” realizing there were other masters present, and changing titles mid-word. Aloo thinks that if she’d done something like that, she’d be mortified, but Anakin seems more gleefully amused than anything whenever he tells the story.

Aloo’s heard that once, when Anakin was twelve, there was actually a special session of the Council called to address the fact that Padawan Skywalker apparently believed Madame Jocasta Nu, who didn’t even have a seat on the Council, was Grandmaster of the Jedi Order.

Anakin himself refuses to confirm or deny that this ever happened. But he always does so with a wink, and Aloo is pretty sure about her theory.

“Grandmaster Jocasta,” Palek says, snickering. “And we can say we’re working on a research project. It would even be true.”

“A cultural research project,” says Miik, getting into the spirit of the thing.

“Okay, but…what are we researching?” asks a Chagrian boy named Tago. “I mean, now that we know something about our families, what are we going to do with that?”

There’s another nervous silence, broken at last by Palek, who squares her shoulders and says defiantly, “Well, I don’t know about anybody else, but I’m planning to contact mine.”

A soft but collective gasp goes through the room. If they weren’t all gathered here actively discussing breaking the Code, it would actually be funny.

Palek stands there, glaring around at each of them in turn as though daring anyone to tell her she’s wrong, and that gives Aloo the courage to speak.
“I have contacted my family,” she says. She whispers it really, but the room is so quiet that she may as well have shouted. Now everyone is staring at her.

“What…what was it like?” Miik breathes into the silence.

“Strange,” says Aloo. “But good, I think. I have a mother and a father and two sisters and two nieces. They’re nice. It was…awkward, at first, talking to them, but they’re nice.” Everyone is watching her in rapt attention so, emboldened, Aloo continues. “I’ve talked with one of my sisters the most, probably a couple dozen times now. The others I’ve only talked to twice so far. But I like talking with them. I feel like…like I’m learning a part of me I never knew.” She swallows, and because they’re all watching her the way she thinks she probably used to watch Anakin whenever he spoke about his family, she forces herself to add the most dangerous thing of all. “And I feel at peace when I talk to them. I feel at peace in the Force. I know I shouldn’t, that it’s wrong to have attachments, but…that’s how it feels.”

“Is it wrong, though?” asks Ras. There’s a stutter in his voice, and he looks absolutely terrified, but he’s asking.

“I’m not sure it is,” Palek says, forcefully enough that Aloo is pretty sure she’s trying to convince herself, too. “The masters are always saying we should trust the Force and our instincts, right? Well, if all of us are feeling the same way about this…maybe there’s a reason.” She looks around at each of them, eyes blazing with defiance. “Maybe this is the Force’s will.”

“Master Yoda wouldn’t agree with that at all,” Tago nearly gasps. His eyes are wide and unblinking.

*But who says he’s always right?* the memory of Anakin whispers in the back of Aloo’s mind. Those phantom words fill the dead silence of the room and leave her shaking. She can’t find the courage to speak them aloud, still isn’t at all sure she even should. But she can tell they’re all thinking the same thing.

“But we’re all here anyway,” says Miik slowly. His antennae are trembling but he meets Aloo’s eyes as he adds, in a voice too unsteady to be really teasing, “And Aloo doesn’t seem like she’s going to fall to the Dark Side at any minute. Right?”

He winces. Aloo thinks that probably came out sounding more like a question than he’d actually intended it to.

“No,” she says, and thinks that she doesn’t sound as flippant as she’d like, either. “I’m not.”

“And besides,” says Palek. “There’s Anakin.” When everyone looks at her, she only shrugs. “I mean…he’s always known his family, right? And I think we all know he still talks to his mother. And that’s all against the Code, but…”

But it’s made Anakin the Jedi he is, Aloo thinks. And that’s true for her, too, she realizes. Who would she be now, if she’d never tried Anakin’s meditation, never dreamed of the stone house and the beautiful garden, never learned about her sister or spoken with Padmé and Sola and their parents? The question leaves her startled and breathless. She can’t imagine the answer. And she finds she doesn’t want to.

*  

Palek is the first person to ask to borrow Aloo’s communications array. Aloo isn’t really surprised when the Muun girl pulls her aside after lightsaber practice one day, though she is impressed by Palek’s boldness. Master Yoda has only just left the room.
Palek has two fathers and three younger sisters, and she says she’s contacted them via datapad twice now. “It’s like you said,” she whispers to Aloo as they slip through the halls of the Temple. “It’s…strange. I don’t know if seeing them and really hearing their voices will make it less strange, or more, but…I want to find out.”

Aloo waits until she’s certain no one else is in her shared quarters, and then she slips the equipment into a pouch on her belt and makes her way to the meditation room where Palek is waiting. It’s one of the smaller rooms, empty except for a trickling fountain in one corner and a pair of meditation cushions on the floor. There’s no cameras. That’s important.

Palek is almost shaking with nerves as Aloo shows her how to set up a secure channel. She’s turning her datapad over and over in her hands, and she offers Aloo a tight smile when everything is ready.

“Thanks,” she whispers just as Aloo turns to leave. She’s already tapped in her parents’ com code, but her hand is hovering over the com, hesitating.

“Aloo, do you…are you sure we’re right about this?”

Aloo swallows. “I don’t know,” she admits. “But…what does your heart tell you?”

That’s an Anakin question, and it brings a more genuine smile to Palek’s face. “Yeah,” she whispers, and presses the com button.

Chapter End Notes

This is the last of the chapters I have written ahead, so expect longer periods between updates from here on out. Thanks as always for your patience and interest in this story!
Anakin wakes in a cold sheen of sweat and foreboding. It’s dark, the air sharp and breathless, marking that liminal space between late night and early morning. He knows that time only too well. It’s when the dreams always seem to come.

He throws the covers off and staggers out of the too-comfortable bed, red desert rocks and snapping claws and the ominous glow of a force field still chasing through his mind. The Obi-Wan in his dream didn’t look especially frightened, but Anakin knows just how little that means. His Master had managed to maintain an almost perfectly serene demeanor in that nest of gundarks, even as one had looked poised to make a light snack of his head.

It’s a point of pride with Obi-Wan, although of course he wouldn’t use that word. (*Jedi are not prideful, Anakin*, he’s said more than once, and Anakin has never had the heart to call him on it.) Obi-Wan would say that a Jedi must master his emotions and remain grounded in the Force in any situation. And then he would probably say that he always strives to abide by that dictum. That’s great for him, Anakin thinks, a little snidely, but it’s not at all helpful for interpreting these dreams.

He shakes his head with a soft groan and pads out into the hall, where his bathroom is located.

It’s still a little mind-boggling, the idea of a house with so many bathrooms that each guest can be assigned their own. But Padmé seems to think it’s perfectly normal, even expected. She’d actually apologized for the fact that his wasn’t *en suite*.

Now, though, Anakin’s grateful to have the place to himself. He’s sure it’s far too early for anyone else to be awake, and he doesn’t want to disturb the rest of the house.
The water from the tap is cold and carries with it the sharp fresh smell of the lake. He splashes it over his face, less to clear the sweat than to center himself. No matter how deep the dream, water can always bring him back.

He stretches out with the Force and finds Padmé, asleep still and peaceful, no sign of danger near her and nothing amiss in the whole house. Only his dreams are troubled.

It’s still dark when he steps out onto the balcony, but he can smell morning in the air. A light rain is falling, the kind that will blow away with the sun, and Anakin turns his face to the sky, closes his eyes, and breathes.

The dream is still waiting behind his eyelids.

Dreams pass in time, the Masters say, but dreams can also be messages from the Force, and no matter what Master Yoda thinks, Anakin has long ago learned the difference between vague worries and the lurking oppression of a foretelling.

He’s been having this dream for nearly a week now, and he’s certain of the feeling in his gut. This is a desert dream; he knows he can trust it. The desert is merciless and cruel and wild and free, and it is always true, even when it lies.

But the Jedi – the other Jedi – don’t understand the desert, and Anakin has never found a way to explain that they can understand.

So he knows better than to com Obi-Wan again. As far as his Master is concerned, they’ve already discussed this, and Anakin’s duty now is to release his anxieties and seek serenity. Barring any new direction from the Force, Obi-Wan considers the subject closed.

And Jedi meditation is no good, either. All that comes to him when he tries to meditate is the dream, screaming a warning through the Force but never providing more details or anything he could actually act on.

The rain fades away to a mist around him, and then disappears entirely as the sun rises, streaming through the cracks in his eyelids. But the warmth he feels comes from the presence behind him.

“Don’t go,” he says when he hears her start to turn away.

“I don’t want to disturb your meditations,” Shmi says, though there’s a hint of teasing laughter in her voice.

Anakin opens his eyes and turns to her with a wry grin. “You’re not disturbing me, Mom,” he says. “I think I’d rather talk to you than the Force, anyway.”

Shmi laughs aloud this time, but it fades quickly into concern. “Dreams again?” she asks softly, stepping up to stand beside him on the balcony.

“Yeah,” says Anakin, scraping a hand over his face with a sigh. “I’m obviously meant to do something, I just…I don’t know what. I don’t even know where Obi-Wan is. Well, I think he’s on Kamino, but there’s no information about it, and I just –”

“No information?” says Shmi with a frown. “I thought the Jedi Archives were the best in the galaxy?”

“They are,” Anakin says, smiling in spite of himself at the thought of how Jocasta would react to that. “But someone’s been deleting information. We don’t know who, or why, or even how
I’ve been working on it with Grandmother Jocasta, but they keep giving me missions and she keeps getting research requests from the Council so we haven’t had time –”

“What about another database, then?” Shmi asks. “Surely the Jedi Archives aren’t the only source of information about this planet?”

Anakin blinks. “Another database,” he repeats. Why hadn’t he thought of that? He could – a burst of incredulous laughter escapes him. “Mom, your child is an idiot.”

“You’re not,” says Shmi fondly. “Just perhaps too focused. You’ve been trying to solve a Jedi problem with a Jedi solution. That’s understandable.”

“But not the only option,” Anakin says, more to himself than to her. “Not even the simplest option, out here. Another database!”

Then he’s dashing off back to his quarters, Shmi’s startled exclamation of “Ani, what –” still ringing in his ears.

Another database! He really is an idiot.

The tiny folding data analyzer that Padmé sent him two years ago on Brundia is carefully tucked away in the same pouch on his utility belt where he always keeps it. He’s had it with him all this time. Jocasta would be appalled. All that knowledge right at his fingertips, and he hadn’t thought of it at all. He more than anyone should know that the Jedi don’t have all the answers.

But Mom is right. He’s been trying to solve a Jedi problem with a Jedi solution. And maybe that’s the real lesson here. The Force has been trying to tell him something, he’s certain of that much. But the Force didn’t start speaking to him only after he met Qui-Gon. It always has. Qui-Gon just gave him a new name for something he’s always known.

He snatches up Padmé’s datareader and hurries back to the balcony, tapping out his query as he goes.

Shmi is still waiting for him out there, looking fondly bemused, but now Kitster has joined her. None of the Naberries are awake yet.

“What’s that, Ani?” Kitster asks, leaning forward eagerly to examine the small device in Anakin’s hand.

Anakin grins at his mother. “Another database,” he says.

“Oh?” asks Shmi, peering at the analyzer with an expression comically similar to Kitster’s.

“It’s connected to the Naboo Royal Archives,” Anakin says, his grin widening at their interest. “Rabé and Yané promised me it’s perfectly legal and that’s probably even true, since Queen Jamillia approved it.”

Kitster lets out a low whistle. “That’s pretty wizard, Ani. But where did you even get it?”

Anakin squirms a little, grateful that Kitster’s attention is on the datareader. Shmi notices, but she at least won’t tease him. Not in front of his brother, anyway. “Uh, Padmé sent it,” he mutters. “Two years ago for my birthday, when Mom sent the japor snippet.” His left hand brushes over his collarbone, where the snippet rests around his neck beneath his light undershirt. He never takes it off.

“Padmé, huh?” says Kitster, and even though Anakin pointedly doesn’t meet his brother’s eyes,
he can practically hear the smirk in that question.

He thinks about making some teasing comment about Imer, but really that would only confirm the
direction of Kitster’s thoughts, so it’s best to ignore it entirely.

“Someone’s deleted all record of the planet Kamino from the Jedi Archives,” he tells Kitster
instead. That’s confidential information, of course, but Anakin doesn’t think twice about sharing
it. Information is safer with Shmi and Kitster than it is in the Archives themselves. “Obi-Wan’s
gone there to investigate – I think. They won’t tell me anything, but Jocasta said she could neither
confirm nor deny my suspicions, which is as good as a confirmation really.” He sighs. “We
weren’t certain if the deletions were totally random, or if they were meant to hide the original
deletion, but I have a feeling we’ve found the original now.”

They all stare down at the analyzer, where the basic stats on the planet Kamino are slowly
scrolling past.

It’s located deep in the Outer Rim, beyond the Rishi Maze just as Jocasta said. Outside the bounds
of the Hutts’ operations, and far from the Trade Federation’s sphere of influence, too, Anakin
notes.

Kamino is a water world, according to the Naboo Royal Database. It’s not a desert planet. The
database says there’s no dry land on the planet at all. So whatever dangers Obi-Wan may
encounter there, they won’t match the nebulous things in Anakin’s dreams.

That should be a relief. But the deep sense of unease that’s settled over him ever since Jocasta told
him about Kamino hasn’t dissipated in the least. If anything it’s increased, an ever-present, dull,
throbbing wound of premonition.

“Cloners,” says Shmi, her voice soft and too steady.

The Kaminoans are cloners. The database doesn’t contain many details, but what’s there is
enough to tell a story. Most of the listed settlements are also cloning facilities. Like the Trade
Federation, Kaminoans don’t seem to distinguish much between government and business. Lama
Su is named as both the chief executive of Kamino’s cloning operation and the planet’s prime
minister. The Kaminoans themselves are described as reclusive, little involved with galactic
politics, but very good at what they do.

And what they do is produce people to order.

They accept orders of all sizes, the database says. Everything from individual reproductive cloning
to whole armies.

At the end of the entry there’s a note about the Naboo government’s most recent survey of sentient
rights in the galaxy. Kamino doesn’t rank very highly.

Anakin stares at that note for a long time, surprised at how relieved he is to see it there.

“Bulk cloners,” says Kitster with a sharp, hollow laugh. “Troona, can you imagine if the Hutts –”

He doesn’t finish, but he doesn’t need to. They all know what the Hutts would do with access to
an endless supply of human resources.

“But why were they erased from the Archives?” Anakin mutters, still staring at that footnote. “A
whole planet. That’s –”

“A planet where they grow slaves,” says Kitster darkly. “I wonder why someone would want to
keep that a secret.”

He doesn’t sound like he wonders, though. There’s a bitter edge of laughter in his voice that Anakin tries desperately to ignore, because if he acknowledges it he might find himself sharing it.

“Isn’t it a bit early to be plotting sedition?” asks a sleepy, teasing voice behind them. Anakin spins around, and Padmé is there, a smile slowly slipping from her face as she catches the look on his.

Kitster, though, affects an overly bright smile of his own. “Certainly not!” he says, throwing a dramatic hand over his heart. “We are engaged in a daring scheme to overthrow Republic democracy and the galactic order and replace it with an autonomous collective centered in the Outer Rim.” He sniffs. “But you needn’t worry, Senator. We’ll spare you, of course. But only if you swear loyalty to the collective.”

Anakin snickers. Padmé, who looked momentarily alarmed when Kitster mentioned the overthrow of democracy, is now rolling her eyes at his theatrics. “Oh stop,” she grumbles. “It’s definitely too early for you to be making fun of me.”

“I would never make fun of a Republic senator!” Kitster says with a gasp, but then he ruins the act with a wink. “At least, not until after our collective is firmly established, and the old socio-economic paradigm has been thoroughly dismantled.”

Padmé huffs, but she’s smiling just slightly as she says, “I’m going to ignore your obvious attempt to bait me with a political debate, because I’d much rather know what’s so interesting about the planet Kamino.” Her eyes narrow and she peers more closely at the analyzer in Anakin’s hand. “Wait. Is that –”

“Yeah,” Anakin says quickly. He keeps his eyes on her and ignores Kitster’s quiet snigger. “It’s the analyzer you sent me. Mom reminded me of it. We’ve been so worried about the information missing from the Jedi Archives that we never thought to just check another archive.”

He tells her everything: the missing files in the Archives, what he’s learned from Jocasta, the bounty hunter’s dart, Obi-Wan’s suspected mission on Kamino, and the information found in the Naboo database.

Padmé’s frown grows steadily as she listens. “But that doesn’t make any sense,” she murmurs, staring down at the datareader in his hand, where the note about sentient rights is still prominently displayed. “The Kaminoan people may be more private than most, but their planet lies within Republic space, no matter how remote. It’s not as though someone could keep the whole planet a secret. So why delete it from the Jedi Archives?”

“So someone would notice.”

They all look up at Shmi, but her eyes are still glued to the analyzer’s display.

“It’s an old trick. I used it more than once myself on Gardulla, and a couple times on Watto.” There’s a faint smile on her face, edged like jagged rocks beneath sand. “If you truly want to hide something, you leave it where it is, unimportant and unremarkable. A cover-up only draws attention.”

“But sometimes you want to draw attention,” Anakin breathes. It makes sense, and he feels like an idiot all over again. All this time he and Jocasta have been rifling through the Archives, searching for the root of the missing information, trying to determine if the deletions were random or deliberate. And then Obi-Wan found…something. Something about that dart that led him to a missing planet. A mystery even the Jedi Council couldn’t ignore.
Which was exactly the point.

He doesn’t have proof. He only has Shmi’s theory. But the moment she said it, Anakin could feel the rightness of it in the Force. He doesn’t need more proof than that.

“Someone wanted the Jedi to go to Kamino,” he says slowly. And then his eyes catch Padmé’s. “And someone wanted Padmé to leave Coruscant.”

She startles, but he can already see her mulling it over. It’s something he’s been trying not to think about for several days now. But he can’t ignore it anymore.

“There haven’t been any assassination attempts since we left,” he says, trying to gentle his words and hopefully the blow. Cordé is still dead, after all. “And much as I’d like to take credit for that, the truth is, someone who was really determined could have found a way around our precautions. They knew your schedule for return to Coruscant, and they shouldn’t have. But nobody’s come after you. Nobody’s tried. Our security here is good, but…”

“But it’s not that good,” says Padmé. There’s sadness in her eyes, but she doesn’t flinch. “I know. I’ve been thinking the same thing. They didn’t want me dead, necessarily. They just wanted me gone from the capital.” Her mouth twists. “One way or the other.”

“And they got what they wanted,” Anakin says. Something is churning in the pit of his stomach, some new foreboding that doesn’t center entirely on Kamino. It’s elusive, and all the more disturbing for that. “The Council gave them what they wanted.”

“And the Chancellor,” Padmé whispers.

Anakin stills. He knows they’re not really being fair. Neither the Council nor the Chancellor could possibly have guessed what lay behind the attempts on Senator Amidala’s life. He and Padmé are still only guessing now, and they have no real way to confirm their suspicions.

“So we know it’s not the Hutts, then,” Kitster says. When Padmé looks at him in question, he offers an apologetic shrug. “Because they definitely want you dead.”

“Kit,” Anakin growls. “That’s not helping.”

“No, he’s got a point,” says Padmé. “The Hutts do want me dead, Ani, that’s not a secret. And they also don’t have any reason to want me gone from Coruscant. I’m just as troublesome to them here as I am there.”

“So who would want you gone?” Shmi asks. “It must be someone who stands to benefit from your immediate absence, if they’re not concerned about…” She hesitates before settling on, “About permanently removing you.”

Anakin winces in spite of himself, but Padmé’s eyes widen and her spine goes stiff. “The Military Creation Act,” she breathes. “That’s what I was coming back to vote on. That’s why I didn’t want to leave the capital. If the measure is approved it will all but assure the Republic will go to war with the Separatists.”

“So it’s someone who wants to see the act approved,” Anakin muses aloud, forcing himself to focus on the logic of her words and not the reality of the price on her head. “And they see you as the primary obstacle to that. That much makes sense. But what does that have to do with Kamino? Obi-Wan only found Kamino because he was looking for that bounty hunter, and somehow that led him to the missing planet in the Archives.” He scowls. “I don’t know how he got there, because no one will tell me anything. But they’re connected somehow, the bounty hunter and Kamino.”
Padmé huffs in frustration. “I don’t know,” she mutters. “But…I think I need to get in touch with Jar Jar again. And I need to know how long the Jedi intend to keep me here.”

She says that gently, but she holds his eyes without apology. Anakin’s not about to argue with her. No matter how desperately grateful he is to have this time with Mom and Kitster and Padmé, he also knows there’s something much larger at work here, something that gnaws at him like a massif at an old bone, slowly sucking the marrow and leaving only brittle white behind.

There is something rotten here, he thinks, and Kamino, watery Kamino far removed from any red desert, is at the heart of it. He can feel it.

“I don’t know,” he says, snapping the analyzer closed and scrapping a hand over his face. He feels suddenly and unspeakably tired, and the way Padmé is looking at him, kind and ferocious at once, isn’t doing anything to help. “I don’t know, Padmé. My assignment is to protect you.” In spite of himself, he can hear the bitterness creep into his voice. “Investigation isn’t in my mandate. That’s Obi-Wan. The Council expects me to keep you here, and safe, until the investigation is complete and the threat is past.” His mouth twists. “And until it is, they won’t tell me anything.”

Anakin is aware of Shmi studying him closely, and of Kitster’s growing frown. He does his best to ignore them. It’s not – It’s not something he can change. They’re free now, and they aren’t Jedi, and they don’t – well, they don’t understand.

He’s glad they don’t, he thinks in the darkest most secret part of his mind. But…

Padmé is still looking at him, but she doesn’t reply. Anakin gives her a helpless shrug and offers what he can. “I’ll try to contact Obi-Wan again, see if I can learn anything, let him know what we’ve learned here, and maybe…”

There’s something horribly close to pity in Padmé’s eyes, but she only nods. “All right,” she says.

*

Obi-Wan doesn’t answer his com.

The connection is strong, so Anakin knows it’s not a problem with the long range sensors on either end. Obi-Wan’s com is receiving his signal. He’s just not answering.

And that’s not like him. Obi-Wan would always answer him, even if he was annoyed with Anakin for contacting him unnecessarily yet again. (I’m not annoyed, Anakin, he can practically hear his Master say. I simply wish you would abide by the Council’s instructions.)

Obi-Wan’s datapad isn’t receiving messages right now, either. That could mean nothing. Perhaps he’s simply working an undercover angle and can’t take the risk of receiving communications. Maybe that’s why he’s not answering his com, too.

Maybe.

Anakin gnaws his lip, the dream images playing again behind his eyes. He should just let this go. It’s not part of his assignment. Obi-Wan can handle himself.

But Obi-Wan would have said that about the gundarks, too.

Anakin breathes deep and coms Obi-Wan’s starfighter before he can talk himself out of it. The connection is just as strong, but this time there’s an answering trill of Binary.
Arfour, Anakin says, more relieved than he wants to admit. It’s me. Is Obi-Wan there?

There’s a whir of answering surprise from Arfour and Anakin remembers belatedly that he’s not actually supposed to have the comcode for Obi-Wan’s starfighter.

Anakin? says Arfour.

Yeah, Anakin says, a little sheepish. He’s definitely going to get a lecture about this. Listen, Arfour, I really need to talk to Master Obi-Wan. It’s important. Is he there?

Master Obi-Wan is currently occupied, Arfour says, rather primly. He’s the most protocol-oriented astromech Anakin has ever met, and no matter how many times Obi-Wan insists that he almost always selects Arfour for his missions because it’s easier to work with a droid he’s used before, Anakin knows it’s because they’re a match for one another. If he weren’t so worried it would be funny.

But he’s there? Anakin presses. He’s safe and functioning unimpeded?

He was when I last saw him, Arfour says, sounding puzzled now. Is something wrong, Anakin? Has the Council issued new orders?

For half a second, Anakin considers saying yes, if only because that would almost certainly be enough to get Obi-Wan to speak to him. But it would be cruel to lie to Arfour, to use him that way. And it would practically guarantee that Anakin would face not just a lecture, but a disciplinary action from the Council. That won’t help anyone.

So he lets himself sigh and says, No, Arfour, there’s nothing from the Council. But I’ve come across some information that’s relevant to his investigation. I need to talk to him.

Arfour is silent for a while, no doubt considering the correct protocols for the situation. At last he says, I will give him your message.

And that’s as much as Anakin can hope for, really. Thanks, Arfour, he says, and terminates the connection.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I confess: reusing canon dialogue in completely different contexts is one of my favorite things about writing AUs.

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