Blood of Mandalore

by Kurenaino

Summary

Engaged in a bloody civil war, the Mandalorian government requests the aid of the Jedi to help protect their Duchess, the last hope for peace in their war-torn world.

Notes

WHAT UP, BITCHES!!!

Hey guys, welcome to another freaking thing I'm doing. I was actually going to write this after I finished From Darkness, I Rise, but it has been in the works for a long while, and the other day, I got the bloody inspiration for it. Now, updates on this one are going to be fairly slow, unless you guys are absolutely loving it. Slow for me, BTW, is once every week or so. I think. From Flames, I Soar is my primary work at the moment, which means this baby gets written when I feel stuck, or if I need a mental hug from having to feel sad for Obi-Wan. Which is happening a lot recently.

That being said, this one is going to be significantly lighter in tone from the other things I've done, though that doesn't mean shit won't happen, because it will. Oh, GOD IT WILL. I've got plans for this. Big plans. Evil plans...

This can technically be seen as a prequel to all my other stories, but since From Grace, I Fall is canon-compliant for the first four chapters or so, this baby here can fit super nicely into Star Wars canon on its own. This conflict is a major event in Obi-Wan's life, one that really helps shape him as a person, and we know very, VERY little about it. And I just
love filling in blanks.

One last note. I gave Obi-Wan something of an origin story in this here to make it mesh with what we know about his character, and with an aspect from Legends that I LOVE about his journey to becoming Qui-Gon’s Padawan, that thing being the fact that literally NOBODY wanted to train him, and the Jedi almost sent him to plow fields for the rest of his life. Friggin’ OBI-WAN KENOBI, GUYS. Pushing a plow! In a field! What the ACTUAL HELL!

Yeah, so I incorporated a bit of that, coupled with something I thought fit him very nicely. Imma shut up now. Please, my lovelies, enjoy. I'll see about getting another chapter out next week, or sooner if you guys like it. Let me know!
"Mandalore has requested the aid of the Jedi."

Mace Windu blinked once, twice at Jedi Master Sifo-Dyas, the stalwart human calm and composed, though Windu couldn't understand how he could be. It had to be a joke, right? Mandalore. Asking for help. From Jedi. The idea was absolutely insane. He looked about the room at the faces of the other Masters, all solemn, all calm, all very, very serious, and Mace couldn't understand why they didn't find the notion as outrageous as he did. But having just been newly appointed to the Council, and at a very young age at that, he didn't want to say anything to cast himself in a bad light, to make the seniors of the High Council regret choosing such a junior member to add to their ranks. And he did try to keep his silence, but...

"Excuse me?" Windu asked in disbelief, shaking his head and chuckling slightly and earning the glares of several of the Masters. "Mandalore wants the help of the Jedi?" he continued, managing to get a hold of his shock under the stares of the Masters, and he looked toward his peers, the also recently appointed Plo Koon and Saesee Tiin for solidarity. Tiin was having none of it, his usual hard stare on his face, but Plo gave him a reassuring gesture with his three fingered hand. "The Mandalore? The same Mandalore that has hunted Jedi for sport in the past?"

"The one and the same," Ki-Adi-Mundi said, his hands folded before him.

"Things certainly have changed..." Mace said under his breath, but it did not escape the notice of the large eared Lannik Master, Even Piell, beside him.

"Such is the nature of time," he gruffed. "It changes all things. Even the Mandalorians."

"They have been fighting a brutal civil war for some months now, and one of the factions has just reached out for help from the Republic," Sifo-Dyas, continued, and Windu groaned softly.

"Alright, so things don't change that much," Mace grumbled, and beside him, Plo Koon chuckled softly.

"We should be grateful they are divided. The last time the Mandalorians united, they nearly tore the galaxy apart."

"It seems," Sifo-Dyas said, his voice stern and hard as he glared at Windu and Koon, "that the planet's clans have divided over the matter of their leadership and the ideals they embraced. It's a...disagreement on the code they all follow and with it means to be Mandalorian."

"And as so many things with Mandalore, it has erupted in blood," Oppo Rancisis said in his soft wheeze. "The clan warlords have entered into a full-scale civil war, with rival and ally clans alike turning on each other, and their families are caught in the middle. Many of them are torn apart and find themselves fighting on different sides."

"None of this sounds like a good thing for the galaxy," Yarael Poof said. "And neither does it seem to be a thing the Senate would support, since Mandalore is not a part of the Galactic Republic. This is an internal matter."

"It would be, yes," Sifo Dyas said, nodding slightly and touching the controls on the arm of his chair, dimming the room and projecting the image of a tall, middle aged man with pale blond hair. "If not for three factions the clans have loosely formed, though there is infighting there as well. The group that currently sits in the seat of power on Mandalore in Sundari call themselves the..."
New Mandalorians. The ruling clan, House Kryze, belongs to this faction. They believe in a new, peaceful Mandalore and lead the efforts to join the galactic community."

"What, peaceful Mandalorians?" Saesee Tiin gruffed, shaking his head in disbelief, and a small, wry smile from Sifo-Dyas echoed the sentiment.

"Not peaceful, no. Clan Kryze currently sits on the throne of Sundari because their leader is a fearsome warlord, and he had been meeting every challenge to his position with brutality and violence in order to ensure peace on his planet. The difference is in their views of the galaxy at large. One faction, the True Mandalorians, are pushing for their warriors to serve as honorable mercenaries while the rest of the planet maintains their system of warring clans. The New Mandalorians seek a place in the Senate and are, generally speaking, peaceful and amicable to the Republic, and the Death Watch..." He grimaced. "Well, they're the traditionalists. They want a united Mandalore to wage war on the galaxy."

"Is that the New Mandalorian leader?" Michah Giitt asked, pointing at the hologram, and Sifo-Dyas tilted his head back and forth in a gesture of indecision.

"Yes...or he was. Last week, Duke Adonai Kryze denounced the warring clans as disgraces and traitors to Mandalore and their code and called them to submit to his rule as Mand'alor before he was forced to kill more of his kinsmen." The Master sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "In typical Mandalorian custom, the New Mandalorians are meeting their opposition with violence, though they do it in the name of peace, both for Mandalore and for the galaxy at large. Crazy, yes, but not so crazy as the others who glorify war."

"They have been trying to gain entry into the Republic for some years now," Ki-Adi-Mundi said, "but they have been denied at every turn because of their violent history. Clan Kryze sought to move Mandalore forward, though their method now isn't helping their cause."

"Insurgents from other clans in opposition to the New Mandalorians last week captured Duke Kryze, his wife, and his eldest son, and they have all been executed," Sifo-Dyas concluded. "It was his supporters that reached out for help to save the planet from this bloody war. The warring clans are now fighting not only for leadership in the three factions, but for the place as the dominant clan on Mandalore. The outcome will determine whether or not the Mandalore system preserves the violent warrior ways of the past, or embraces the more peaceful ways and moves forward. The peaceful have nowhere to turn but to us."

"The New Mandalorians have a leader?" Mace asked, and Sifo-Dyas nodded.

"A Duchess, from what we understand, and she is in grave danger. If Mandalore is ever to have a chance for peace, this is it. There isn't anyone in the sector more hunted than the sole survivor of House Kryze. So long as the Duchess lives, rule of Mandalore falls to her, which has led the opposing clans to call for her death. So long as she survives, the throne of Sundari will be contested."

"Authorized, we are, to intervene," Yoda said softly, every eye in the room focused on the tiny Master. "Slaughtered, the peaceful are. War, or death, the choice is. Stand for this, we cannot. A Jedi, we will send, to secure peace for Mandalore."

"But who?" Plo Koon asked. "This is an extended mission in a war zone against a people that take pride in their ability to kill Jedi. The situation is...tenuous at best."

"We risk making this look like the Republic is waging war against Mandalore," Ki-Adi-Mundi said. "I think we can all agree that is in the best interest of nobody. This mission is about the protection of the Duchess and the establishment of peace on the planet. We cannot arrive in force,
or it will be a bigger bloodbath than it already is."

"If that's even possible," Mace grumbled. "We need a skilled swordsman. Someone that can properly protect the Duchess."

"We need a Jedi who can withstand the field of war for a long period of time," Saesee Tiin growled. "We don't know how long this mission could take. It could be years before it reaches its conclusion."

"We need someone unconventional," Plo Koon added. "A Master who will do what must be done. The Mandalorians are Jedi hunters. We need someone who will defy their expectations."

The room erupted in soft spoken debate, each Master holding a different opinion of the manner of Jedi to send, and they were silenced only when Yoda tapped his stick on the ground, the sharp clacking drawing everyone's attention to the Master.

"Know who to send, I do," Yoda said softly. "In the morning, summon to us Master Qui-Gon Jinn."

"I find it monstrously unfair that your Padawan isn't giving you the hell you gave me," Master Dooku said, his deep voice light and good natured as he sat across from his former student, Qui-Gon, in the confines of his room. Jinn had just returned from a mission in the Outer Rim, a two week affair that had dragged on when a simple trade dispute led to the discovery of a group of pirates dealing in slaves taken from the local population. The mission should have been simple, an easy task the Council assigned Qui-Gon to take his mind off a very recent personal trauma. It had worked, but only when the slavers got involved. The rest was too boring, too mundane to catch the Master's attention.

"I think you'd be pleased to know, then, that rule abiding does not mean compliant," Qui-Gon grumbled. "Obi-Wan has a streak of defiance in him a parsec wide." Dooku chuckled deeply.

"Only you would find a such a devoted Padawan a difficulty. Poor Obi-Wan Kenobi. The most dedicated Padawan in the Jedi Order, the Code's most obedient follower, stuck with the renegade Jedi Master, Qui-Gon Jinn."

"I learned it all from you, Master," Qui-Gon lightly quipped, and both men softly chuckled, relaxing into their seats and easing into the pleasure of each other's company. As former Master and Padawan, the men were terribly close, the bond between them nearly unbreakable, and even after so many years, even after the Knight Qui-Gon became Jedi Master Jinn, the younger man still visited his aging Master for advice. They were of a like mind on many matters, most of which were considered highly controversial and earned them a place among the Jedi so unconventional they were considered defiant on the best of days. On the worst, some wondered how they were Jedi at all, since they seemed to only follow the Code never.

"Your mission went well, I take it?" Dooku asked, and Qui-Gon quickly nodded his head.

"As expected. Until the pirates, of course." He paused. "And the slaves, but we liberated them. One of them guided us for five days to the pirate's base." Qui-Gon shrugged. "Pirates defeated, slaves freed, trade negotiations upheld, and a new leader of the local trade guild instated. Not so bad for a mission in the Outer Rim."

"The Council was very displeased," Dooku said knowingly, and Qui-Gon groaned loudly. "Typically. It wasn't your mission to depose of the planet's corrupt officials."

"They were making the trade negotiations impossible. It had to be done! For the mission."
"Nor was it your job to interfere in ridding them of the pirates."

"They were enslaving the people!"

"Nor were you to relocate the planet's refugees to another system."

"Master Dooku, the Force wouldn't have put me on the planet at that time if I wasn't meant to do such." He shrugged, a small smile on his lips. "I was just doing the will of the Force."

"That excuse didn't work when you were a Padawan and it won't work now," Dooku sighed, a smile on his lips. "Does Obi-Wan use that excuse?" Qui-Gon scoffed.

"Hardly, the boy doesn't need to. He doesn't get into trouble. He barely speaks, if it can be avoided. No mischief, no excess, no women." Dooku scoffed indignantly.

"Oh, if I had him as a Padawan instead of you..." the older man bemoaned. "So many nights wasted dragging you by the ear back to the Temple smelling like wine, women and sex..."

"I will reiterate, Master, that I had the very best of teachers."

"You did not learn such from me, my student." Dooku rolled his eyes. "It's the will of the Force, Master..." he said mockingly. "Does any Padawan truly believe that excuse will work?"

"Hope springs eternal, Master."

"So it does." He smiled softly at his former student. "How fortunate for you that you do not need to deal with that humiliation. The burning through your connection. The feel of his arousal...his climax..."

"Even worse is finding out that your Master could feel it all along." Dooku simply grinned, his smile fading when Qui-Gon's face suddenly darkened. "So much the better that Obi-Wan is a better Jedi than I ever was. We know where such a thing can lead." Dooku frowned as he looked at his student. Qui-Gon never adhered to the Code well, felt deeply and often, followed the will of the Force without exception, and lived in the present better than any Jedi alive. But with his deep empathy for all those living came the danger of attachment, and Qui-Gon Jinn found himself falling in love with a fellow Jedi and peer, a thing he accepted as the will of the Force.

And then, a few short months ago, the woman had died, and Qui-Gon Jinn nearly fell to the Dark Side as he attempted to avenge her death. He managed to pull away just in time, but his close brush with darkness had left him changed, his opinion on romantic connections and intimacy changing from indifferent to a fervent opponent, his own personal experience fueling his newfound stance.

Dooku leaned forward in his seat, committed to changing the topic. Nothing good could come of revisiting that particular wound, not now. Qui-Gon had put the matter to rest, in any case, and further discussions only served to rub salt in a wound. "Have you heard of the situation on Mandalore?"

"Briefly, yes," Qui-Gon said softly, his morose mood lightening immediately. "I have been too busy to pay it much mind. I have been sitting in meditation with Obi-Wan most of the day. He was forced to kill a man on our mission. He is still shaken."

"His first?" Qui-Gon nodded solemnly. "A difficult thing."

"Yes, but Obi-Wan is strong. He will recover," He paused. "...why? What's happening with Mandalore?"
"War," Dooku said casually. "It would seem they have reached out to us for aid and we have been asked to take action." Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow.

"And the Senate approved this?" Dooku scoffed, the slightest hint of disgust in his voice.

"The Senate still debates, and they will continue to debate the matter. You know they will never reach consensus."

"Typical," Qui-Gon said as he rolled his eyes. "I suppose the Council will do nothing as well."

"You know the Council..." Dooku droned sardonically. "If there is an action to be taken, they will talk about it until the matter has resolved itself."

"Almost makes one wish for the Sith to return, doesn't it?" Dooku chuckled softly.

"That it does, my apprentice. If for nothing else, to spur the Jedi back into action." Qui-Gon's light smile quickly faded, and he sat up straight in his seat for a moment before rising. Dooku stood as well, his hand grasping the younger Master's shoulder.

"It's Obi-Wan," he muttered quickly. "He should be sleeping, it's far too late for my little early-riser to be awake."

"Restless?" Dooku asked, and Qui-Gon quickly shook his head.

"Disturbed. I need to go." He smiled quickly at the older man. "I'm glad we had a chance to talk," he said softly. "Come by and see my Padawan some time. I think you will be impressed."

"I'm certain I will be." Dooku squeezed Qui-Gon's shoulder. "...are you alright? About Tahl, she-"

"I'm fine, Master," Qui-Gon said swiftly, a small, sad smile on his lips. "Truly, I am. I miss her terribly, but..." He sighed, looked away for a moment before his gaze returned to Dooku's face. "I will be fine. Thank you." With a quick bow and a swift goodbye, Qui-Gon was off, feeling his student through the Force and taking long strides toward the boy's room.

Three years, Qui-Gon had been Master to Obi-Wan Kenobi, a blue eyed, sandy blond boy of sixteen years of age, a thin, lanky youth that had yet to outgrow the gaunt awkwardness of his teenage years, his body's transition to manhood well underway, but far from complete. His soft, accented voice had deepened into a light, rich tenor when he chose to speak, which was not often, and he had grown like a weed in the past year, which had prevented his body from filling out with the thick muscles he would come to possess as a man. Still, he was strong, his body lean and well defined, the result of his tireless training, though the young Kenobi still had no need to shave at all, much to his dismay.

Obi-Wan's path through the Jedi Order to his current position had been a rocky one, to say the least. Like all children in the Jedi Temple, Obi-Wan had been discovered at a very young age to be Force sensitive, and he had been taken from his home on Stewjon to live on Coruscant with the others of his kind. As he grew, the powers that had been apparent in him suddenly diminished, and while Obi-Wan was by no means weak in the Force or his potential, he found himself struggling with even the most basic of tasks, having to work twice as hard to become half as good as his peers. It made the young boy almost hopelessly shy with embarrassment, his dedication to his studies and his persistence to see them through to the end leading the already introverted child to be downright reclusive.

His dedication to the Jedi Order was absolute, his skills growing with the fierceness of his studies,
but years of struggle to keep up with his two unquestionably talented friends, Quinlan Vos and Luminara Unduli left Kenobi’s confidence shattered, which was most certainly part of the problem. By the age of ten, young Obi-Wan took to machines, developing a fascination with all forms of mechanics and flying in the increasingly likely event that becoming a Jedi would not be possible for him. If he couldn’t be a Jedi Knight, so help him, he’s be a starship pilot. He passed his Initiate trials easily enough, but when it came time to become a Padawan, Obi-Wan found himself faced with Masters that judged him as not worth their time, his potential too small, his lightsaber style too wild and reckless to be tempered, his talent in the Force not great enough, and he was overlooked for those with greater potential.

By the age of twelve, it seemed as though the opportunity to become a Jedi Knight had passed him by, and he remained the last of the Initiates in his group to be without a Master. If not a Knight, Obi-Wan would be transferred to another division of the Temple, relegated to the Archives, or tasked to be a pilot, or any number of remedial things that a Force untalented prospective Jedi could do, since returning to families they never knew was not an option that was often taken. Just before he turned thirteen, Master Yoda himself decided to take another look at the boy, the tremendous potential of his early childhood disappearing entirely as he grew older a mystery that the Master wanted to see solved.

For hours, Obi-Wan Kenobi stood before the Masters of the High Council, the boy trying to remain impassive through the threat of tears and doing his best to answer the questions given to him. He looked through tired, burning eyes at the blank backs of cards as he was told to describe the image that appeared on the face of cards that Master Sifo-Dyas held up. Thousands of images appeared on the cards, making correctly guessing a near impossibility, a task that could only be accomplished through the Force by trusting the first thing that came to mind. Three times, the test was done, and out of nearly one hundred cards, Obi-Wan had gotten none of them correct, leaving the boy shaking with repressed emotion and a desire to leave so strong that the next time he spoke, instead of answering the question posed to him, he begged to be allowed to leave.

It was a painful thing to see, the pain and desperation in the boy apparent, and the Masters nearly let him go without any of the answers they sought, until Ki-Adi-Mundi stopped them and requested that the boy do the test again. After allowing the nearly sobbing boy to compose himself, they began the test again, but this time, the Cerean Master wrote down all of Kenobi’s answers. As before, the boy got none of them correct, and again, Ki-Adi-Mundi asked him to repeat the test, taking down all his answers once again, the other Masters looking at Yoda with increasing discomfort as the twelve year old boy grew closer and closer to open tears, and yet never hit that point.

Once again, Ki-Adi-Mundi demanded the boy take the test, but this time, he held up the paper with Kenobi’s previous answers before Sifo-Dyas, the Master administering the test. Confused, Sifo-Dyas slowly began holding up cards and prompting the boy for answers, each of his answers incorrect as before, but as they test went on, his eyes began widening in understanding as a smug, satisfied smirk crossed the highly intelligent Cerean’s face. None of Kenobi’s answers matched the images on the cards.

But his answers from the first test matched the cards perfectly.

All the other Masters suddenly understood, and all of them began taking rapid notes, demanding again and again that the increasingly uncomfortable boy, unused to this level of attention, complete the test. They shuffled the cards between tests, during tests, they added cards in, repeated cards, cheated if they could, but the results were always the same. Obi-Wan's answers were two steps ahead of the test, and they perfectly predicted the cards that would be drawn. A closer examination of the boy found the well of potential that had surrounded him as a youngling hadn’t diminished, it had been hidden, the solitary, focused boy involuntarily guarding his mind
with Force shielding, something that no youngling should have been able to do. His test results and the unconscious shielding pointed toward a very strong inclination toward the mental powers of the Force, something that would have to be developed and nurtured as soon as possible. There was greatness in Obi-Wan Kenobi, and the Jedi had almost let him go.

The word spread quickly, and by the next day, every available Master in the Order was scrambling to become Master to Obi-Wan Kenobi, but it was Qui-Gon who managed to secure the boy for himself. He had visited Yoda late one evening, disturbing the Master from his meditations and quietly petitioned to be allowed to train the boy. When Yoda sighed tiredly, Qui-Gon explained that the child was so out of step with the present, he was existing always two moments ahead, a great benefit to a tactician, but a fatal flaw if one could not open their eyes to see what lay directly before them. He needed a Master that would teach him how to open his eyes to the present, not simply the future. There was greatness in Obi-Wan, but that potential would never be achieved if he avoided danger in the future, only to walk right into death in the present.

The next day, Obi-Wan had a Master, and they had been inseparable since.

Except for now, Qui-Gon thought as he entered Obi-Wan's room and found the teenager completely absent, the room in such a neat, orderly state that it seemed as though young Kenobi hadn't returned to his room at all after their mission. Of course, Obi-Wan had always been meticulous to the point of obsessive compulsive, so it was possible that he had simply left everything put away in its proper place before he left. Closing his eyes, Qui-Gon felt for his student through the Force and found the boy...anxious. Restless, disturbed and struggling for calm and peace of mind, and in such a state, there was only one place that Obi-Wan turned to go to.

With a sigh, Qui-Gon left the room and headed for the training hall.

Years of perceived inferiority had left Qui-Gon's student with a great deal of emotional anxiety, a thing that had only gone to foster his tremendous perseverance, which seemed to be the way in which the Force manifested in the boy. Where others may display sharp reflexes or tremendous luck, Obi-Wan possessed an indomitable spirit that simply could not be broken, though his near expulsion from the Jedi brought him close. He was crushingly hard on himself, a facet of being a perfectionist, which led him to constantly study and hone his craft. It was no wonder Obi-Wan had never showed an interest in the opposite sex, or the same sex, for that matter, he simply lacked the time.

Already, he was shaping up to be one of the most promising Jedi of the Order. He was modest and reserved, respectful and kind, an introvert that rather be alone with his thoughts, a boy of few words, though when he did speak, chose his words with careful consideration, a teenager that would rather avoid fighting, but was a natural talent with a lightsaber. He was, in many ways, exactly what a Jedi should be, though he still had much to learn before he reached the heights that Qui-Gon knew he would.

Obi-Wan was terribly intelligent and learned things at a distressingly quick speed, and while he may have had a modest opinion of his talent with the Force, in this aspect, he was arrogant and often very impatient. And while he may have followed the Code to the letter, going so far as to quietly whisper the mantra to himself as a means of centering his being, the boy was both stubborn and defiant, a thing that Qui-Gon had difficulty correcting, since he was both of these things as well. Coupled all of this with anxiety that bordered on a disorder, and you had Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Padawan, wellspring of the Force and teenage mess.

Still, it was better than what Qui-Gon had forced Dooku to endure. At least Obi-Wan wasn't coping with his self-doubt by drinking his troubles away and rutting with every creature that vaguely resembled the female form like Tholme's Padawan. Obi-Wan was just...quiet, a product of an introverted nature and a crushing lack of confidence in his abilities. He only ever really
spoke when he was alone with his Master, and then, the boy displayed a sharp, dry sense of humor and a sarcastic wit, all of touched with the teen's inerrant cynicism, though his cautious, strategical mind kept this part of him carefully hidden behind his guarded walls.

Qui-Gon found his student in the training hall, as he suspected he would, the Padawan's eyes closed in concentration and lightsaber in hand, the blue blade thrumming through the air as he slowly walked through the steps of one of the Ataru katas, his blade work smooth and even, his steps precise, the weapon twirling slowly and gracefully in his hand, his lips slowly moving as he whispered the Jedi Code. With a smile, Qui-Gon leaned against the wall and watched, chuckling to himself when the edge of Kenobi's foot dragged against the sand, leaving a harsh cut in the otherwise smooth path of his foot.

"Stupid, Obi-Wan..." the teenager hissed to himself, cursing under his breath as he extended his hand and cleared the tracks from the sand, the ring once again even as he assumed the ready position. "Why can't you do anything right, this should be easy for you! Start over. Again."

"Again?" Qui-Gon asked, his quiet tones seeming loud in the empty hall, and the sudden noise caused Obi-Wan to jump and stumble, dropping his lightsaber and hissing in pain when he reached out to catch it and his hand grasped the blade. "How many times have you done this? How long have you been here?" the Master asked as he slowly made his way to stand before the boy, the teen's eyes cast down at the sand and focused on the careless tracks through the sand that Qui-Gon's stride had made.

"A few hours, Master," Obi-Wan muttered, his finger twirling around the Padawan braid that just barely brushed his shoulder. It was a nervous habit, and it made Qui-Gon desperately want to see what the boy would do when he achieved knighthood and no longer had the braid to serve as a clutch, though by then, he hoped that Kenobi would be cured of his anxiety. At some point, he'd shed the awkwardness of his teenage years. It was difficult for everyone. The Force knows he made Dooku suffer through his turbulent adolescence.

"And you have done nothing but this particular Kata?" Obi-Wan's silence stood as his confirmation. "...well, how many times have you done it?"

"None, Master."

"...none." The boy offered no clarification. "I watched you do it once."

"No, Master," Obi-Wan whispered, his hand tightening around his braid the only indication of his distress. "You watched me fail once."

"Ah," Qui-Gon said, drawing up to his considerable height and smiling softly as he looked at his student. "How many times have you failed to complete it?"

Obi-Wan shut his eyes tight and took a deep, shuddering breath. "...one hundred seventeen times, Master." Qui-Gon arched an eyebrow. How very like Obi-Wan to push far past the point of diminishing returns.

"Oh, my Padawan..." Qui-Gon sighed as he ran a hand down his face and clapped the boy gently on the shoulder. "Each failure is a lesson, as you well know, but I cannot help but think that perhaps you are not learning from these failures. To fail so many times seems to me like the failure isn't in the work itself, but within you," he said, pointing to the boy's chest. "You are the only thing preventing your success. Be mindful of the present, my student." He reached out and called Obi-Wan's fallen lightsaber to his hand and pressed it into the boy's grasp. "There is only you, your blade, and this moment. Show me what you can do."
Finally, Obi-Wan looked up at his Master, his eyes clear and alight with new resolve, and he nodded tersely, lit the blade, and assumed the ready stance as Qui–Gon stepped away, his hand sweeping out to clear the tracks from the sand as he left the ring. Slowly, he began the form once again, his movements smooth and graceful, the pitch of the blade’s thrumming rising and falling in a perfect, melodic harmony with his movements. It was... _perfection_, each step light, each movement refined, not an elbow out of place, not an arm at a less than ideal angle, the lightsaber’s trail through the air deadly efficient. In this, Obi-Wan was beautiful, centered, _focused_, and it was in moments such as these that Qui-Gon saw the Jedi Master he would grow to be, steadfast, loyal, dedicated, his persistent study allowing him to rise to heights that his peers would not reach. It was not talent, but hard work that forged a great Jedi, and though young Kenobi didn't know it, he had both.

An ever so slight waver of the teen's wrist, a small ripple through the otherwise calm of the Force, and Obi-Wan's focus was shattered, his thoughts leaving the pristine clarity of the moment and drifting, and the tip of his lightsaber just barely touched the sand, leaving a small, thin glowing line of hissing, smoking grains in its wake. With a barely audible growl of frustration, Obi-Wan shut his lightsaber off, clipped it to his belt, and tightly grasped his braid.

"Did you ever consider, Obi-Wan, that perhaps the entire form isn't perfect because you _don't finish it_?"

"How am I supposed to finish it if it is rife with mistakes?" Kenobi said softly, but the accented voice was tight with frustration.

" _Rife_?" Qui-Gon repeated. "Padawan, your form is _perfection_. Even with the mistake, it is the best I have seen." Obi-Wan scoffed and grabbed his arm, his finger twirling the braid around the digit.

"You do it better, Master. I've never seen you make an error in the motions. In _any_ of them."

"Of course I do the form well, I have been doing it since before you were born. _Now_," he said, striding into the ring and taking the Padawan by the arm, "you are only awake at this hour when you are engaging in one of your bouts of self-flagellation, and you are going to tell me what brought this on." Under his light grasp, the boy's strong, lean arm tensed, their connection flaring with doubt and shame and desperation that he quickly got control over, though his face remained impassive, expressionless. He was an emotional boy, but Obi-Wan hid it _very_ well. Just not from his Master.

It took a long while before Obi-Wan answered, his hand pulling absently at his braid as he bit his lip and carefully chose his words, the conflict of deciding what to tell his Master flashing in his eyes.

"...Quinlan beat me." Obi-Wan offered no other explanation, and no other words, and slowly, the Master began to chuckle, his laughter increasing when Obi-Wan looked up at him and pouted.

"Not only is Quinlan Vos a year older than you, Obi-Wan, but he's been Padawan to Master Tholme for _years_. That talent of his had him selected early, you know that."

"That sounds like an excuse," Obi-Wan grumbled. "The Jedi that triumphs is the Jedi most in tune with the Force. Master Yoda said that, though..." He paused, his mouth dropping into a slight frown. "Not in that order."

Qui-Gon shrugged. "Very well, let's accept Master Yoda's words as the truth of the matter. Your thoughts are disturbed, my student, and _that_ is why you lost. Your trouble has nothing to do with Quinlan Vos."
"Yes it does," Obi-Wan insisted, his frown deepening into a long-suffering look so like the one that new Knights got when forced to teach a room full of screaming younglings, hardly the glamorous assignment that young Jedi Knights wanted. "He becomes insufferable when he wins. I told him that it isn't about winning or losing, but..." He rolled his eyes and sighed heavily. "But he says only losers say that."

"A wonder he bothers spending time with you," Qui-Gon said, a mischievous tone in his voice and a wry smile on his lips. "One would think that Quinlan Vos, the Force's gift to the Jedi, wouldn't choose to spend his time with lowly Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"The cocky, arrogant braggart..." He rolled his eyes again, his hand dropping from his braid as he slowly relaxed, the tension present through their connection easing drastically as he was given a chance to complain about his friend, which was a favorite pastime of young Obi-Wan. Kenobi loved Quinlan Vos, and the feeling was mutual, but their personalities conflicted on every count which left the two friends in a constant struggle, Kenobi trying to correct the Kiffar's terrible, irreverent habits, and Quinlan trying to lead the stuffy Padawan to lighten up by running headlong into trouble and sin, the favorite activities of rough and rowdy Vos.

"It must be so nice to be so uniquely talented in the Force," Obi-Wan continued, unable to keep the faint smile from his lips. "So help me, if I never had to work a day in my life to have his skill...w-well, I'd probably still work..." Obi-Wan muttered, a faint flush coming to his face as Qui-Gon chuckled softly. Despite Kenobi's more relaxed state, a faint buzz still pulsed through their connection, disturbing the Force and keeping it from setting into soothing calm.

"You are a talent, Obi-Wan."

"You have to say that, you're my Master."

"Oh, come now, my student, do you think I'd lie to you?" Qui-Gon gently, jokingly admonished. "It's against the Code for a Jedi to be dishonest."

"Since when have you ever followed the Code, Master?"

"Whenever it does not contradict the will of the Force," the Master said, flashing his student a bright grin and Kenobi sighed heavily and shook his head.

"You should have been Quinlan's Master. It's almost as if you were made for each other."

"I fear I would have made a poor Master for Quinlan," Qui-Gon lightly scoffed. "He needs a Master that can temper him, just as you need a Master that will challenge you. Growth does not come from peace and serenity, my student. That is the goal. The path to it is rife with challenges that must be overcome, and only in our handling them do we find the wisdom to grow and move forward." He smiled softly when he felt Obi-Wan's eyes, wide and focused and attentive upon him. "Remember, my Padawan. For a plant to grow, it must first struggle to push through the soil."

"...I understand, Master," Obi-Wan whispered, his accented clip grave, his face serious as he looked down the hall they were slowly walking. "Master," he thoughtfully gasped, "I-"

"All of this is about the man you killed, is it not?" Qui-Gon softly, kindly interjected, and Obi-Wan bit his lip and stared at the floor, quickly nodding his head. "It was unavoidable, Obi-Wan."

"Was it?"

"It came down to his life, or the lives of the innocent he threatened. You made the right decision."
"It doesn't feel like the right decision..." Obi-Wan muttered, once again reaching for his braid before he stopped himself and let his hand fall to his side, his shoulders slumped as if a great weight sat upon them. "There must have been another way that wouldn't have ended in his death. If I had been stronger or faster or smarter, maybe-"

"Was it your doing that he made the decision to endanger innocent people to avoid his capture?" Obi-Wan started to answer, but quickly silenced himself when he found he had no reply. "Would it have been better to let him go so that he may endanger others elsewhere?"

"...no, Master."

"There will be times, my young student, when you must choose between a bad decision and a worse one. Perhaps some of the time you will discover a better option, one that cannot be seen, but those situations are rare. When called to act, you must act swiftly and decisively."

"I-I just don't think I can get used to killing someone..." Obi-Wan softly muttered, and Qui-Gon nodded his head in approval.

"Good. That isn't something you should ever get used to. As a Jedi, sometimes, you will hold people's lives in your hands, and you aren't always going to have time to sit and think through your options."

"...how will I know what to do?" Obi-Wan asked softly after a moment of silence, and the Master looked down at him and smiled.

"You will trust in the will of the Force, Obi-Wan. The Force moves through you. You will turn yourself over to it, and you will move in accordance with your instincts, you will exist in the moment, just as you did when you killed that man the other day." Kenobi's mouth twitched slightly, the boy's eyes focused straight ahead, but he nodded in understanding. He didn't like it, but he understood. "...you saved a lot of innocent people, my Padawan. You should be pleased, even as you mourn the life you were forced to take."

"...I will, Master." Kenobi looked up at Qui-Gon and smiled, small but genuine. "Thank you. I'm feeling much better." The Master patted the Padawan on the back.

"If you come back to my room, we can meditate on this together."

"I'd like that," Obi-Wan said softly, his previous, light smile growing slightly wider, and Master and Padawan walked together toward Qui-Gon's room, the halls of the Temple almost empty in the dead of night.

Qui-Gon stared bleary-eyed at the elevator doors, his Padawan fidgeting nervously beside him. It was very early, especially considering how late of a night he had, though Obi-Wan seemed fine, and sign of exhaustion he may have been experiencing not apparent on his face or through their bond in the Force. Nothing was apparent in Obi-Wan through the Force. The young Padawan, through nerves or anxiety or whatever, had reenforced his mental walls, allowing nothing to touch him, not even his Master. Perhaps Qui-Gon was just getting too old to pull all-nighters without suffering the consequences. He found himself having a new respect for Master Dooku. He had kept him up all night nearly three times a week during the entirety of his teenage years.

"There is no emotion, there is peace..." Obi-Wan whispered under his breath, barely audible, and Qui-Gon would have thought he was simply hearing things had Kenobi's mouth not been moving and had the boy not clung to the Code like a crutch. He casually bumped into his Padawan, jolting the boy out of his meditations.
"You have nothing to worry about, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said lightly, covering his mouth as he yawned. "It's just the Council."

"It never goes well..." the boy muttered, and the Master softly chuckled.

"Oh please, when was the last time it went poorly?"

"Oh, I don't know..." Obi-Wan lightly intoned, his hand grasping his braid as he looked upwards. "How about last time. When you got into the fight with Master Rancisis about how using a lightsaber to intimidate a person into talking isn't aggression."

"And it isn't," Qui-Gon said sagely. "I did bring a potentially violent situation to the table to talk, did I not?"

Obi-Wan drew up as tall as he was able. "If a Jedi ignites his lightsaber, he must be ready to take a life."

"Oh, I was ready, Obi-Wan, I was going to kill that criminal if peace could not be met." Kenobi gawked at his Master as the elevator opened and he strode out, his Padawan following a moment after when the doors nearly closed on him.

"Master," Obi-Wan said softly, stopping Qui-Gon by grabbing the sleeve of his robe. "I just don't want to watch you make a fool of yourself in front of the Council again..."

"That seems an inevitability at this point..." Qui-Gon sighed. "If you want to wait out here, you can, but I will speak my mind, my student." Obi-Wan sighed heavily.

"I'll keep my silence, then."

"Well, I've come to expect that from you. Come on, let's find out whey they summoned us at such an ungodly hour."

"...it's eight thirty, Master."

"Yes, and I was up all night," Qui-Gon said, yawning. "I'm getting old. This whole matter is terribly inconsiderate." Without another word to his increasingly anxious student. Qui-Gon pushed open the large, heavy doors with the Force and strode into the circular room, standing in the center and quickly blowing his head to the Masters, Obi-Wan beside him bowing deep and respectful, his eyes fixed on the floor before him and refusing to meet the twelve judging gazes.

"Master Jinn," Yoda softly rasped, his hands clutching the head of his stick and smiling warmly at the pair. "Padawan Kenobi. Welcome."

"You said the matter was urgent, Master," Qui-Gon said, cutting to the chase in his desire to leave as quickly as possible, if not to help relieve the quickly mounting anxiety of his student, then to go to the dining hall for breakfast. He was hungry. "If this is about my last mission -"

"Well done, that mission was," Yoda said quickly, earning looks of disbelief from not just from Jinn and his Padawan, but from the other Council members as well. "Not the mission assigned to you, you accomplished, Master Qui-Gon. But well done, it was." Yoda shook his head. "A shame, it is, how it ended. Unnecessary, the death may have bene, if followed our Orders, you did."

Qui-Gon drew up tall and held his head high, and beside him, Obi-Wan tried to sink into the ground, the much smaller man seeming diminutive in comparison as his shoulders slumped. "The mission given to me was misleading in its simplicity," Qui-Gon boldly asserted. "The reality of the
situation made it much more than a trade dispute. You sent me to solve the problem, and I did. I'm not in the business of treating symptoms when I can find a way to administer a cure. A problem isn't solved if it keeps coming back." At this, a tired, knowing smile crossed Yoda's lips, and all the other Masters relaxed, their usual indignation with the maverick Qui-Gon suspiciously absent. Both Jinn and Kenobi noticed immediately.

"Padawan Kenobi," Yoda said softly, and Obi-Wan tensed, his hands balling into fists in his cloak and his eyes cautiously drifting up to meet the warm, deep brown eyes of the Grandmaster. The Padawan could only hold the gaze for a moment before he looked back down at the ground. "What think you of your Master's claims?" Yoda softly asked. "Right, is he, to interfere beyond the will of the Council? Or right is the Council to expect obedience?"

Obi-Wan shut his eyes tightly. He could feel the eyes of all the Masters of the room on him, burning right through him, seeing *everything*, judging him for all he had done and all he hadn't, for things that had yet to come to pass that they somehow still knew about. One day, he would walk these halls and feel comfortable around the Masters. One day, he hoped to sit among their ranks, wise and fair and leading the Jedi in peace and understanding, living in harmony with the Force and all around him. But that day was not today. Today, he stood before them far different than he had been the last time he was here. This time, he stood before them as a killer, and the weight of the life he had taken still weighed heavily on him, even though he knew it could not be helped. He was certain he was going to be sick, and he could feel panic slowly encroaching upon him, just as it had the day he stood before the Masters and was tested, a final, grueling affair to determine if he was even worth keeping. He had been, but he still could not understand why. His task had been to identify the cards being *held*, not the ones that *would be* held. Anyone could do that.

"I think..." the boy said softly, finally raising his eyes to meet Yoda's warm gaze, and he felt instantly soothed and reassured by the warmth of his presence. Nothing else mattered. It was just him and Yoda and his Master, just the three of them. "To answer your question, Master, I think..." He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart. "I think...there is no answer." The room filled with the soft sound of gentle laughter from the Masters, and Obi-Wan's eyes shot back to the floor, his face flushing a deep red in embarrassment.

"Oh?" Yoda asked, tilting his head to the side and examining the hopelessly shy Padawan, a breath of fresh air when compared to his arrogant, reckless peers. "No answer, is there?" Obi-Wan swiftly shook his head, and Yoda leaned back and gently smiled. "A better answer than this, there is not." Kenobi cautiously looked up at the Grandmaster when the laughter mercifully stopped, and he met Yoda's kind gaze with a small, grateful smile. "The right choice, I have made," Yoda said firmly. "A mission, we have, for you and your Padawan, Qui-Gon."

"A mission?" Qui-Gon repeated. "Already?" He frowned. "Are you *trying* to get rid of me?"

"Just so," Sifo-Dyas said, his voice laced with laughter as he looked at Qui-Gon, and the renegade Master grinned brightly. This particular Council member was considered a bit of a renegade as well, and they had always gotten along. "Mandalore is engaged in a brutal, inter-clan war, a civil war unlike anything they have seen before in their history. The ruling New Mandalorians push for more peaceful ways for their people so that they may avoid conflict and ruin such as this, but..." He cleared his throat and shrugged. "They *are* Mandalorians."

Qui-Gon gasped in understanding and drew up tall, his eyes drifting around the room at the Masters who sat in attendance. "You're sending us to Mandalore." He frowned when nobody spoke. "Why. Surely the Senate did not approve of this, Mandalore isn't even a member world of the Republic."
"Do you think we are so bound by the will of the Republic that we cannot make our own decisions?" Mace Windu asked, and Qui-Gon looked at him with a sardonic look on his face.

"Well..."

"Don't answer that, Master Jinn," Sifo-Dyas quickly cut in. "We all know your beliefs. At the heart of us, we are peacekeepers, and Mandalore had reached out to us to help them end a bloody conflict. How could we say no?"

"...am I supposed to answer that question?" Qui-Gon carefully asked, and Sifo-Dyas rolled his eyes.

"No." He settled in his seat, breathing deeply as he decided how best to present the mission. "Mandalore's ruling family, House Kryze, has been executed, save for one, and the New Mandalorians have named her Duchess. She is their last chance for peace, and as such, she is the biggest target in the system. She's only been Mandalore's ruler for a week, and she has already suffered fourteen attempts on her life by bounty hunters, four bombings, six attempted abductions and one attempted coup. They can't protect her much longer, and if she is executed, House Kryze becomes extinct, and with it, hope for peace. The New Mandalorians have no other viable leaders. Satine Kryze is it."

"Bring her here," Qui-Gon said swiftly. "Remove her from Mandalore, she-"

"She will not leave," Plo Koon said softly. "The Senate has already offered the Duchess sanctuary, but she has declined us." He paused, his masked eyes wrinkling around their shielding. "She has also denied the need of the Jedi, but her people have insisted upon it and left her no choice in the matter. However, they cannot make her leave. Were she to go, the seat of Sundari would be available to anyone who could take it."

"So long as she stays among her people, she has not abandoned them," Sifo-Dyas said firmly. "Don't forget, she is Mandalorian. They're all crazy."

"Protect the Duchess, you must," Yoda softly rasped. "Until end, the war does, remain with her, you will. Peace in Mandalore, there will be, if successful, you are."

Qui-Gon was silent for a moment, his hands pressed together and his fingers on his lips as he looked at the stern Sifo-Dyas, the kind, hopeful Yoda, and the worried, expectant other Masters. He could feel Obi-Wan beside him, the boy's shoulders tense, his mental wall high and tight as they always were when he was uneasy, his face an expressionless mask that simply couldn't hide the reluctance and the fear in those clear blue eyes. They were being sent to war. It may have been to protect Mandalore's hope for peace, but many people were going to die to bring such a thing about, and the Jedi would be forced to be the executioners of dozens. Hundreds. Thousands.

Qui-Gon bowed to the Masters. "The matter seems urgent, and we cannot waste time. Obi-Wan and I will leave for Mandalore this evening. We will not fail in this task, Masters." Qui-Gon tried to ignore the sudden, frantic buzzing in his mind, the fearful anxiety of his young student, reaching though the Force to him for comfort and reassurance, and though Qui-Gon silently reciprocated Obi-Wan's reach and gently touched his presence, there was little he could give in the ways of comfort. Mandalore, it seemed, would be the battlefield on which Obi-Wan Kenobi would become a man.

"May the Force be with you, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi," Yoda said somberly, and with a final bow to the Masters, the two left the Council Chamber to prepare for their mission.
"You are so lucky!" Quinlan Vos loudly proclaimed as he slammed a tray of food stacked high with fruits and lean meats between Obi-Wan and Luminara Unduli, and the Kiffar gracelessly muscled his way between the two closely sitting Padawans. Obi-Wan shot the slightly older boy a look of outraged disbelief as he was knocked out of the way, his own plate shoved to the side to accommodate Vos, the neat, arranged order of his food disturbed by the carelessness of his blundering friend. Luminara crossed her thin arms over her chest, giving Vos one of her withering glares that she had perfected in the course of her friendship with him, and Quinlan responded by leaning in close to the girl, a lazy, cocky smile on his self-assured face.

"Well, hey there, baby..." Quinlan drawled in his smoothest, most seductive voice, the tones in his voice low and inviting, a thing that worked on most everyone with the exception of the Mirialan he was currently invading the space of. With an outraged scoff, Luminara pushed the Kiffar backwards, sending him leaning back against Kenobi as he tried to bring order back to his plate, Quinlan's sudden weight only serving to disrupt the plate once again. With a quick glare at the boy, Luminara snatched her mostly empty plate from the table and moved to Obi-Wan's other side, gracefully sitting herself down beside him and laying a gentle hand on his as she began helping him with his task of bringing order to food chaos.

"Well, sorry!" Quinlan said, an apology that sounded almost like an accusation, even as he put his hands in the air. "I didn't mean to disrupt you lovebirds. Honestly, how can I know to keep away from your woman if you don't tell me, Kenobi?"

"She's not my woman..." Obi-Wan muttered through clenched teeth, an assertion that fell on deaf ears as Quinlan roughly patted the boy on the back, causing him to lurch forward and knock into the plate once again. With a sigh, Luminara dragged it before her, away from Quinlan's reach, and she smiled softly at the grateful, faintly blushing Obi-Wan.

"You get all the best missions!" the Kiffar said, returning to his original subject of conversation now that the obligatory attempt to seduce stalwart Luminara was out of the way. "I mean, Mandalore?! Kriffing hell, Obi-Wan, you're going to war! This is going to be just like the Mandalorian Wars! You're going to return a hero like Jedi Knight Revan after vanquishing the enemy!" Quinlan sighed wistfully as his friend looked at him in disdain.

"Quin," Obi-Wan said smoothly, "Revan fell to the Dark Side."

"Well, yeah, but he was great before that." Obi-Wan smacked his forehead and groaned. There was no reasoning with a madman, and there was no talking sense to Quinlan Vos.

"War isn't some glamorous thing, Vos," Luminara firmly said. "Obi-Wan's going to have to kill people while he's there. This is a grave thing. A tragedy. A responsibility." She crossed her arms and closed her eyes sagely, looking far wiser than her seventeen years. "This is the duty of a Jedi Knight. To bring peace to those who are suffering, no matter-"

"Blah, blah, blah," Quinlan said, his voice heavy as if he were being weighed down with the boredom of repetition. "You sound like my Master. Honor this and duty that. Kriff, you make this whole thing seem so somber."

"It is, Vos," Luminara snapped, shooting him another glare which he quickly dismissed, a lazy grin on his face as he draped an arm over Obi-Wan's shoulders and drew him in closer to him.

"Imagine!" the Kiffar said breathlessly, waving his hand before him as if painting a picture for the squirming Obi-Wan. "I see Mandalore, a war ravaged world brought to peace by the grace of the Jedi, and you, their conquering hero, surrounded by women, all so eager to show their gratitude to their savior by begging for you deep inside them," Quinlan said, excited and lusty and emphasized with a few quick thrusts of his hips, and the boy beside him flushed a fierce shade of red, his
hands clasped tightly in his lap as he focused on a fork on the opposite side of the table.

There is no passion, there is serenity, there is no passion, there is serenity, there is no passion, there is serenity...

"Oh, please," Luminara said with a roll of her eyes. "I don't think there's a single creature in this galaxy that is more base and animalistic than you, Vos. Not everyone is obsessed with sexual intercourse!"

"No, but the Mandalorians are," he countered, a knowing smile on his lips as he leaned in toward the Mirialan, the gold band tattoo that crossed his face crinkling in his endless amusement. "They're all fire and passion and hot blood. All of them warriors that live each day like they'll be dead tomorrow. They fight like beasts and rut like animals!"

"Please don't tell us how you know this..." the Mirialan sighed, and she was answered by a slow, sly grin.

"I was with two!" Quinlan said triumphantly, holding up two fingers in Luminara's face. "Insane, the both of them, and hopelessly slutty. I have never been ridden so hard in my life!" He patted the severely flushed, nearly hyperventilating Obi-Wan on the chest. "Buckle up, Obi, you're in for a ride."

"That is definitely against the Code..." Obi-Wan muttered, swallowing hard as he slowly regained his composure, and the Kiffar groaned loudly as he rolled his eyes.

"Kriff, Kenobi, you need to get laid. I have never met a man so uptight as you. Honestly, what do you think's going to happen? It's not like you're going to go Sith or something because you spill inside a few girls."

"Shhh!" Obi-Wan swiftly hushed, clamping his hand over the Kiffar's mouth. "Just...don't say that." Obi-Wan's eyes widened in shock, then with disgust, and with a cry, he pulled his hand away and frantically wiped his hand on a napkin, looking at outrage at Quinlan as his tongue slowly ran along his lips. The Kiffar had licked him.

"Talking about the Sith won't summon them, Kenobi, they are gone, and have been for a thousand years. It's not like they're hiding in the shadows and waiting for unsuspecting Padawans to get their rocks off so they can corrupt them." He rolled his eyes. "It's just sex. We all do it." His eyes roved over Kenobi's handsome face, and he shrugged. "Except for you. Even Master Mundi does it! He's got a family, and nobody's calling him a Sith Lord."

"Master Mundi," Luminara explained between grit teeth, "has permission from the Council to help propagate his species because of their low birthrate. He maintains no attachments to his wives or his children, as is expected of a Jedi Master."

"...wait, wives?!!" Quinlan gasped, his eyes wide as his fork fell unceremoniously out of his hands. "Let me get this straight. He has wives, and all the no strings attached sex he could ever want?" With a coy smile on her face, Luminara nodded, and the Kiffar sat back, dumbfounded. "Kriff, I was born the wrong species. Hey, do you think if I went to the Jedi Council and told them that I'm a Cerean in my heart, they'd let me in on that deal?"

"I find that highly unlikely, but by all means, Quinlan, do try it," Obi-Wan drawled in a dry voice. "It's been too long since you've been relegated to library duty."

"Well," Quinlan scoffed, carelessly nudging Kenobi, "the Council clearly has no problem with sex so long as you don't get attached."
"Y-yeah, maybe..." Obi-Wan hesitantly agreed, only to have his hand admonishingly smacked by Luminara.

"Look, the point is," Quinlan growled, "that you're so lucky! You know what my last mission was? To Bardotta to serve as the Jedi representative at some ceremony to swear in the new leader of the Dagoyan Order. I thought there would be food and wine and women, but no. Four hours of sitting and listening to some creepy reptile bird thing warble, and that was just the introduction! I thought I was going to crawl out of my skin! Be grateful you're going to war instead of that. You might be getting shot at, but if you wanted, you'd have some girl sucking you off every night." He paused and looked at his two deadpan friends, the both of them having given up on finishing their food a long time ago. "Uh...you are going to be fighting, right?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Our mission is to protect Mandalore's Duchess. She's an assassination target."

"...she hot?" the Kiffar asked hopefully, and Kenobi shrugged.

"I didn't read the mission briefing yet."

"When are you leaving?" Quinlan asked.

"Tonight."

"Tonight!" Quinlan cried, throwing his hands up in the air in his outrage and knocking his own plate over, spilling food clear across the table. "Obi, I'm going to be so bored without you! Luminara just doesn't fill me the way you do, my beautiful lover!" The Mirialan's retribution was swift, and the two began a vicious back and forth while Obi-Wan laid his head on the table, face deeply flushed as he softly laughed. He was going to be gone a long while, from the sound of it, and he missed his friends already. With any luck, his Master would find a way to end the war quickly so he could return home. There was nothing for him on Mandalore.

---

Meditation.

Master Qui-Gon suggested that I attempt to look on the bright side of this awful mission, though I fail to see how there could be something good to be gained from a viciously violent conflict. I spent the afternoon in the library researching Mandalore so I may be better prepared when I meet them, and I have downloaded a language program to my datapad so that I may study their language on the trip there. So far, it appears that the majority of their language consists of curses, followed by threats, and then descriptions of war and battle, in exactly that order. I am unsurprised.

Right, positive thoughts, Obi-Wan! Master Qui-Gon says I may get a chance to pilot the ship to Mandalore. I stopped by to see it on my way to the Archives. It's a Consular-Class Cruiser, and it is absolutely stunning, though I suspect he just said that to make me feel better about this mess. A ship of that size almost certainly has a pilot already, and were she my ship, I'd never let anyone near the helm.

I have yet to understand why the Council would even contemplate a mission like this. It seems...unwise. This is an internal conflict among the Mandalorians. We will be unwelcome strangers there. Invaders to some, I am certain. Not even the Duchess we are being sent to protect wants us there, so I don't understand why we are getting involved. Mandalore isn't even part of the Republic, and I know the Jedi are supposed to be peacekeepers, but...can we call ourselves keepers of the peace if we impose peace upon them? They do not want our aid, so what does that
make us? At what point does a Jedi interfere against the will of the people? Should we even interfere at all? We are sworn to uphold and guard civilization, but if they are determined toward self-destruction, are we obligated to interfere, or do we allow them to stay to their chosen course?

It seems as though these questions have no answers, and if they do, they are lost to me. I shall have to meditate on them on the way to Mandalore.

I suppose, in the end, it's the will of the Force, but I don't claim to know what that will is. The Masters must, and they must sense that we are meant to go, but I cannot fathom why. I suppose I will see when we get there. Perhaps I'll know what I'm meant to do when I look at the situation with my own eyes. I'm staring now at the mission briefing, though I have yet to read it. I confess I'm a bit reluctant to view it. It feels like once I do, the mission becomes real, and there is no chance of me waking up from this. I don't want to kill again. The last time, my first time...I can still feel it now. How it felt to be so close to someone as the life fled from them. How sick it made me to feel the way the Force trembled. How very cold I felt to know that I did it. It's not a thing I ever thought I'd experience, and I had hoped I never would again, but it seems the Force has other plans for me.

I suppose I just don't take well to lightsaber diplomacy, as the other Padawans call it. It would be so much easier if they could just be persuaded to sit down and talk it out. They're going to end up at a table in the end anyway, so all the lives lost in the interim is just...wasteful. Pointless. But, I suppose that is what the Jedi are for. To facilitate the talks that will bring about peace. I just hope the Mandalorians can find a way to be agreeable. Their culture seems to indicate otherwise, but at some point, the fighting must end. With any luck, the Duchess will be able to bring about the peace they think she can. I certainly hope we can aid her in that. If she doesn't throw us out first. Or execute us.

Quinlan should have gone on this mission in my place. He was far more excited than I was, though I suspect his motivations were less than pure. A Duchess wouldn't be safe in his care for...well, for many reasons. It would be something of a scandal if Mandalore's ruler was found to have a Jedi lover. After all, they have a long, proud history of murdering Jedi, so I doubt that taking one to bed is looked on favorably. Hopefully simply helping her will not damage her position. It may be wise to keep a low profile, if possible.

I don't want to go.

Perhaps it will be over soon.
OH MY GOD WHAT HAPPENED!!! This chapter is so long! I hope you guys appreciate it. I can't feel my fingers! Let me know how you're liking this. I can go in a lot of directions from here, so let me know what you guys want to see, if you like where it's headed, etc. Enjoy, lovelies!

Obi-Wan sat in the pilot's seat of the Consular-class cruiser Radiant V, a faint smile on his lips as his eyes roved over the console before him, all blinking lights and buttons and switches and displays, the cockpit filled with the smooth, even hum of the hyperdrive and low, pulsating thrum of the engines. His hands rested delicately, so, so gently on the acceleration lever and the control yoke, though he had no need to actively pilot the ship in the blue and white tunnel of the hyperspace corridor, but he liked the feel of them beneath his hands. The ship's captain, a small, strongly built woman with short, dark hair and the severe face of many that served in the Judicial forces, was kind enough to allow the young Jedi to sit in her seat and pilot them out of Coruscant’s atmosphere and into hyperspace for a quick jump to Brentaal before setting course for Mandalore via the Hydian Way. He had yet to give up the seat, but the captain didn't seem to mind.

There was something peaceful and soothing about sitting in the captain's chair of a starship, something that went beyond the freedom of traveling among the stars. Perhaps it was the soothing hum of the engines, a thing that seemed to resonate deep within him. Perhaps it was simply the freedom of opportunity, to sit in a vessel that could spirit him away to...well, anywhere. There was wonder and life and beauty among the stars, be it on planets, tamed and ordered, or wild and teeming with possibilities, or in space itself, a thousand different species on a thousand, thousand ships like his own, in search of adventure or enterprise, but all united in the vastness of space through the Force.

Or perhaps it was simply that Obi-Wan had yet to believe he would be a Jedi. Being a Padawan wasn't a guarantee of knighthood, and there were many ways that an apprentice could fail. He had always liked the idea of flying, had always been good with mechanics, and had spent a great deal of time learning about them as a youngling when his prospects were more bleak. Perhaps his comfort piloting a starship had more to do with that than with the freedom that flight afforded. But still...there was so much to see, so much to do in the vast, beautiful galaxy that he had sworn to protect. So many different worlds, so many different people, and Obi-Wan wanted to see it all, experience all of it. There was adventure to be had in the freedom of flight, the pulse of life and the Force so prominent, so alive, so beautiful that-

Adventures. Excitement. A Jedi craves not these things.

Obi-Wan grit his teeth, his delicate grip tightening so his knuckles whitened, his eyes shut tightly as the small, stern, raspy voice of Master Yoda echoed in his mind. He was a quiet person, one that preferred to be alone, one that sought peace and quiet more often than not, but every now and then, the Padawan would find his heart aching for the stars, his natural curiosity and desire for knowledge driving him to explore, to discover, to learn, and one simply couldn't do that locked away in a Temple in quiet contemplation. He simply didn't understand how it was he could protect the galaxy and all the different beings within, with their different biology, their different home worlds, their varying cultures and beliefs if he didn't know them. Understand them. Experience
them.

He felt it again, the pull for adventure, the thrill and excitement that came from new discoveries, and he swallowed hard and tried to force it away, but his mind would not be calmed. It couldn't, not here at the helm of a ship on the way to a new place, not when, whether he wanted it or not, adventure lay in wait just beyond the tunnel of hyperspace.

"There is no emotion, there is peace, there is no ignorance, there is knowledge, there is no passion, there is serenity, there is no chaos, there is harmony, there is no death, there is the Force..." He closed his eyes and took a deep, shivering breath. "Come on, Obi-Wan, get it together...you're just nervous, that's all..."

Perhaps that was something that he could gain from his time on Mandalore. Perhaps he would better understand the warrior race. Perhaps there was something more to them than their history portrayed. Perhaps there was a reason, a purpose to all their senseless violence, one that could be explained with an understanding of their culture, by time living among them, and in understanding, perhaps peace could be achieved. Perhaps...

Obi-Wan felt his chest brace against his flight restraints as the blue and white of hyperspace gave way to the black of space, the stars snapping back into their bright pinpoints against the black canvas, and Obi-Wan could feel his heart beat faster as he looked out the forward viewport at the planet that hung before them. Even from space, Mandalore's desolation was apparent, and if he didn't know better, Kenobi would have thought he was looking at a dead world. The pale, lifeless color of ash, Mandalore's surface was pockmarked with deep craters, the results of ancient orbital bombardments of past wars. The surface was barren in appearance, no signs of life apparent at all, and lacking the bright vibrance of the sand of even the most harsh and hostile desert worlds. Those worlds were alive, despite the hot, unforgiving days and cold, frigid nights, a desert teeming with life even in the harshest conditions. But Mandalore...Mandalore was dead.

"Not what you were expecting, my student?" Qui-Gon asked softly as he entered the cockpit, the door hissing softly as it opened to admit the Master. Obi-Wan didn't even turn around. He just sat with his eyes transfixed as he slowly moved the Radiant V closer to the ashen planet.

"I didn't know what to expect..." Obi-Wan muttered softly. "But it wasn't this. Are we too late? Nothing can live there, surely..."

"It's true that Mandalore's past wars have desolated the planet. Once, long ago, it's said that Mandalore was quite beautiful, until their fighting irradiated its surface. But the Mandalorians are stubborn. They refused to give up their home world, and they have found a way to survive."

"...life truly is amazing," Kenobi muttered, sighing heavily as he hung his head. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected anything different from a people who's language consists mostly of curses and a thousand ways to threaten someone."

Qui-Gon smiled wryly at the boy. "Difficult with the language, Obi-Wan?"

"The grammar is simple," he quickly explained. "A great deal like Galactic Basic, actually, but the words..." He finally took his eyes away from the planet as it slowly began to fill the viewport. "Three hours of study, and I can't begin a conversation without starting a fight. No wonder they're at war, they can't even speak to each other without being threatening or insulting, it leaves no room at all for diplomacy."

"Well, they are Mandalorian..." Qui-Gon said, a hand on his student's shoulder and smiling softly down at him. "Perhaps this Duchess of theirs can bring about a new way. Her dossier says she has studied diplomacy on Coruscant for a short while."
"No doubt in Basic..." the Padawan mumbled. "I wonder how that translates into Mando'a." The Master said nothing, but Obi-Wan felt his hand tighten on his shoulder and the soft, insistent, inquisitive push upon his consciousness, and he sighed, silent for a moment as he collected his thoughts. "We shouldn't even be here, Master..." Obi-Wan said softly. "The Senate hasn't even reached consensus on the matter. This is an internal affair, and Mandalore's leader doesn't even want us there."

"But we are here, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, his voice taking on the hard edge it always did when he was instructing his student. "What should or should not be is out of our hands because we are. Right here, in this moment, we are protectors, keepers of the peace, and it's up to us to save this woman's life. Your vision is far reaching, my Padawan. Surely see can see the importance of our actions here in the pursuit of peace."

"W-well, yes, but-

"In the moment, my Padawan. Be mindful of the present. We are saving a life. There is great value in that, regardless of the politics." Qui-Gon smiled softly when Obi-Wan flushed a deep shade of red, clearly embarrassed, and averted his eyes. "Keep your emotions guarded, Obi-Wan, lest they interfere with your ability to carry out our mission." Slowly, the boy nodded, the concern and worry present on his face melting away into his mask of removed indifference, peace settling upon him as he softly uttered the Code under his breath.

"I understand, Master. I will be mindful of my emotions. They will not interfere." Qui-Gon patted the boy on the shoulder and moved away from the pilot's chair, standing in the aisle that ran down the center of the cockpit as the Radiant V cut its way into Mandalore's atmosphere, the ship shaking with its entry. Obi-Wan was a boy that felt very deeply, his keen connection and love of life leading him to be boundlessly curious and excessively kind, an admirable trait in a Jedi that would one day lead to a fierce protective spirit, a stalwart Jedi defender that put the lives of all others far above his own. But like most things, it was a double-edged sword, one that Qui-Gon knew the dangers of all too well.

Like his student, Qui-Gon also had a deep respect for life, and his inclination to live moment by moment left him vulnerable to keenly feeling the emotions that grew within him, even if they didn't last past the present. Until they did. Until someone became hooked within him from prolonged contact, his great empathy and affection reaching out to surround those he had come to care about. Come to love and treasure, not above all others, but deep and enduring, the blanket of his protection covering not just those beside him in the moment, but those that walked beside him in his thoughts. Like Tahl...

Tahl...

Tahl was what happened when a Jedi did not take care to mind their emotions, to put aside the desire to love and defend, because when it went wrong, when they had failed in their duty to protect, as all Jedi would at some point, the emotions that arose from the guilt, the anguish, the anger of failure and loss led to revenge, the fastest path to the Dark Side. Qui-Gon had come dangerously close to walking the darkness when Tahl had been murdered, his fellow Jedi Master the victim of torture and poison so severe, she succumbed and died with Qui-Gon right beside her. He had been unable to save her, unable to stop what he had seen coming, unable to heal her weakened body fast enough. He had loved her, he had failed, and she had died, and he didn't have the strength to let her go.

She had died...

Qui-Gon shut his eyes and focused and pushed thoughts of his dead love aside. It was his constant
struggle. It wasn't that the Jedi were discouraged from feeling. A great deal of what made them
Jedi was the depth of their compassion, but it was on a grander scale, a love for *life*, not an
individual. When it became smaller, more personal, it became selfish, and that so often led to
possession, the desire to protect an individual over a group, the need to prioritize one life over
another when the Jedi believed all life was sacred. Jealousy, fear, anger, hate, all these things and
more paved the path of the Jedi that allowed love to consume them.

Fortunately, this was not a struggle that Obi-Wan shared with his Master. Quiet, dedicated Obi-
Wan was, in many ways, a better Jedi than he was, a fact that Qui-Gon readily admitted. Obi-Wan
had friends, but he did not get attached, his every emotion, even when alone with his Master, was
carefully guarded and measured, swiftly analyzed by his sharp mind and dealt with appropriately.
Obi-Wan felt, yes, deeply so, but his emotions did not effect him. The quiet boy would not allow
it. And *that* made him ideal for this mission, one which would put him in close contact with a
single person for quite a long time, and while Qui-Gon in his youth would struggle with the
emotions that rose from prolonged contact, guarded Obi-Wan always held the mission first and
foremost at the sacrifice of himself. His charge would be safe.

"Master." Qui-Gon snapped out of his meditations and looked at his Padawan, the boy's hands
clenched tightly around the ship's controls as he sliced them through the sky high above the barren
waste below on the way to their designated coordinates. "There are incoming ships on scanners,
Master," Obi-Wan said nervously. "What if-"

"I'm opening a channel to them now, sir," the com officer said, and the captain laid her hand on
the back of the pilot's chair, Obi-Wan looking up at her with wide, expectant eyes that seemed to
ask for directions.

"My seat, Master Jedi," she said softly. "The Republic has no official authority here, and though
we fly under diplomatic colors, these are a people at war. I need the helm in case things get
messy." For just a moment, Qui-Gon felt a flash of defiance in his student, a rare glimpse of
confidence almost to the point of arrogance. He had the *Force*, Obi-Wan thought. He flew with its
guiding hand upon his shoulder, and years of experience was no match against the eternity that
was the Force. Though he was younger, he was a *better* pilot.

And then it was gone, released into the Force and let go like so many other emotions, just as he
had been trained to do, just as he instinctively knew to do. Qui-Gon could feel the boy flush with
embarrassment and guilt, ashamed of himself for even entertaining such thoughts, especially when
the mission was at stake. With a light pink stain on his cheeks, the teenager rose from his seat and
smiled at the captain, bowing to her as she took her place.

"Thank you for allowing me to fly your ship," he said softly, his eyes averted. "It was..." He
paused, considering what it was he felt, sifting through his emotions before settling on one that
suited him. "It was a great honor." Qui-Gon smirked. Deferential. Respectful. Removed. So like
his student. The captain only smiled slightly in response, her hands on the controls as she observed
the ships on the scanner as they slowly became visible through the viewport.

"Incoming ships," the captain said on the com when the com officer indicated that they were
patched through," this is Republic Consular cruiser *Radiant V*, carrying diplomats to be delivered
to Sundari. Please identify." There was silence on the other end, only the occasional burst of static
to indicate that they were even connected at all. A moment later, the ships turned and flew away,
only to execute a flip in the distance, and the ship's alarms began blaring in warning when the
unidentified ships locked their weapon systems on to them and approached with an attack vector.

"Master, they're *attacking* us!" Obi-Wan said tensely, his hands tightly gripping the back of one of
the passenger seats as the starfighters began opening fire, the ship rocking as red bolts of plasma
struck the ship, its shields protecting them from damage, but it wasn't something they could
withstand too much of. This was a diplomatic vessel, not a fighter.

"I'll admit, this isn't the welcome party I was expecting..." Qui-Gon muttered, bracing himself as the ship rocked again, and the starfighters screeched past the Radiant V, only to loop around and quickly head back toward them.

"Really? This is exactly the sort of welcome party I was expecting," Obi-Wan said dryly, his voice tense with worry. "We don't have any business here, why shouldn't they be shooting at us?"

"Very good, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon softly drawled, a wry smirk on his face despite the danger they were in. "You are understanding even those that are trying to kill you. That understanding will take you far in the ranks of the Jedi."

"Master, this isn't the time or place for a lesson!" he gasped as the ship pitched sideways, the two Jedi clinging to the seats as the pilot began taking evasive maneuvers.

"Unidentified ships, cease hostilities!" the com officer said into the open channel, taking over as the spokesperson as the pilot focused on swinging the ship out of harm's way, though the cruiser continued to shake and rock with impact, the central consoles flashing with warning as shield integrity fell to fifty percent, thirty percent, twenty percent. "This is a diplomatic vessel, we are unarmed. Repeat, we are unarmed!"

"Nayc ga'amur aru'e cuyir a pel lenedat," the com finally crackled in response. "Par Kyr'tsad!" The static cut as the com went silent, and the ships swooped in for another run, the pilot spinning the much larger ship out of the way, though the cruiser was too large, too unwieldy to avoid the shots fired. They were a large target, and the starfighters could hit them even if their aim was bad.

"Did you get any of that, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked swiftly, and Kenobi quickly shook his head, his hands rapidly and repeatedly running the length of his braid through his hands.

"No, but I know it isn't good!"

"Divert all non-essential power to the shields!" the pilot said, swiftly running her hands over the console, and with the low groan of electronics powering down, the lights in the cabin flickered off, the sun reflecting off the ashen surface of the irradiated planet their only source of light. Shield integrity climbed back up to fifty percent, and Obi-Wan thought that maybe, maybe, if they were very lucky, if the Force was with them, it would be enough to bring them to their destination. It wasn't far. From here, he could see a dark speck against the pale dust of the earth, a spherical bio-dome of what he knew had to be their destination. Sundari. It was nothing like he expected, but then, Obi-Wan expected Mandalore to be a planet, not a lifeless rock.

Shields fell to thirty percent just as the dark, tinted bio-dome came into clear view, the two ships still flying around them and furiously bombarding the helpless ship with plasma and torpedoes, the ship rocking violently as they were repeatedly hit. As they drew closer to Sundari, Obi-Wan felt his stomach sink with dread as starfighters filled the skies around the dome, swarming like insects defending a hive, and a squadron of eight fighters broke off from the group, flying at full speed toward the cruiser in attack formation. Obi-Wan closed his eyes as green plasma from the new ships streaked through the sky between them, and try as he might, he couldn't push aside his fear, couldn't find within him the calm he knew his Master felt, and was left uncomforted by Qui-Gon's large, strong hand upon his shoulder.

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

Explosions and shockwaves rocked the ship, the lights on the console flickering from the blast, the shields dropping to below twenty percent and the harsh metallic sound of something striking the
ship filled the cockpit, black flames and smoke filling the viewport for just a moment before 
alarms began blaring. The ships had locked on to them. The com suddenly burst with static, and 
the com officer quickly tuned to the open frequency, and for a moment, the voice on the other end 
was garbled and lost in a high whine and static before the channel cleared up.

"Tatugir, dinuir gar gai, me'sen," the voice said, strong and commanding. "Repeat, identify, 
cruiser," the voice said again in heavily accented Basic, and the com officer quickly fumbled with 
the controls.

"Radiant V, Republic diplomatic cruiser. Cease fire, we are unarmed!"

There was silence for a moment before the com crackled again and the voice said, "Hostilities 
ceased, Radiant V. The insurgents firing upon you have been destroyed. Are the Jedi aboard?"

The com officer muted the com as the pilot slowed the wounded ship, conserving what power she 
could in the event that they had to make a run for it. "Confirm those kills, captain," the com officer 
shouted behind him, and the captain tapped a few commands into the scanner, the device 
flickering as the system attempted to recover from the last attack.

"Kills confirmed," the captain said, and the occupants of the cockpit breathed a collective sigh of 
relief as the com officer un-muted the com.

"The Jedi are aboard, starship." Again, a moment of silence.

"We have been waiting for you, Radiant V. We'll escort you to Sundari."

Obi-Wan dropped into the passenger seat and ran his hands over his face, focusing on his 
breathing and tuning out the excited chattering of the crew, and slowly, the people fell away, 
leaving him alone with nothing but the humming of the ship and the comforting feel of the Force. 
He could feel the jerking of the limping ship slowly even out as the straining engines relaxed, 
gliding in toward Sundari and surrounded by an escort team. He could feel the pounding of his 
heart slow to a slow, strong beat as he meditated, his reflexive chant of the Code soothing his 
frazzled nerves, and he wondered if he might have avoided all this anxiety if he had instead 
reached for the Force instead of focusing on his own concern. He still had so much to learn.

And yet, despite his slowing heart, his even breathing, the peace that settled over him, there was a 
soft, quiet nagging at the back of his mind, and Obi-Wan couldn't help but feel like this ordeal was 
only the least of what was to come.

The Radiant V entered the protected bio-dome of Sundari, Mandalore's mighty capital city, and 
was met with a war zone, the entire city torn by explosions, once mighty buildings reduced to little 
more than rubble, and every structure, every street seemed to be covered in dark carbon scoring 
from blasters. The streets were filled with soldiers, all of them armed to the teeth, and Obi-Wan 
felt instantly on edge as he looked out the viewport at the Mandalorian warriors that patrolled the 
city, both on the ground and in the air. These were the soldiers that had once brought the galaxy to 
its knees, a legion of people in the distinctive armor of their violent past, a thing that only foretold 
an equally violent future. With any luck, they would change that.

Sundari Palace stood tall in the distance, magnificent among the rubble of the city, a glimpse of 
what the city had been before months of violent, bloody war had taken its toll. Obi-Wan 
wondered how quickly the capital had been reduced into a collection of war bunkers and 
strongholds from what it had used to be, and the graceful elegance of the palace sitting over the 
central plaza seemed to suggest that the city had once been remarkable. His eyes roved over the 
grand entrance of the palace as they drew near, a high balcony overlooking the plaza below which
now served as a military command center that sat at the base of the steps leading into the palace. The ship was directed to set down on the small landing pad they had cobbled together in the square. The palace's own hangar, they were told, had been bombed earlier that week, and was still inaccessible, a fact stated so casually that Obi-Wan couldn't help but wonder how many horrors a person had to witness before even the most awful violence became commonplace.

When they disembarked from the *Radiant V*, Obi-Wan stood close to his Master as a military commander debriefed him, his hands folded into the sleeves of his rough-spun brown cloak, his hood pulled over his head, and his interest elsewhere. The command center was bustling with activity as soldiers in blue and white Mandalorian armor came and went, rushing into camp from the streets, returned from patrols, or taking off at the edge of the platform on the jetpacks affixed to their backs. It wasn't a comfortable feel, all this tension, the harsh commands of a people that couldn't afford to be soft or kind, the acrid smell of smoke and fire in the air, the distant sound of blasters discharging and screams and sirens that echoed through streets empty of the civilians and commerce that made a city.

Though the city was teeming with life, this was a dead world, a city of corpses and killers, a lifeless, hollow thing made all the more difficult to bear by the feeling of hopelessness within the people, and the anger that sparkled within them. As his eyes wandered, as he reached out with the Force to get a sense of the people that shared in the cause the Council had sent him to fight for, Obi-Wan’s gaze was pulled back to the palace, tall and magnificent at the top of the long, wide stairs to its entrance, and up further still to the balcony, where he envisioned the Mandalorian leader would address his people from in a more peaceful time. Below the balcony was carved a mural, an ancient, stylized thing depicting the Mandalorian warriors of old, swords in hand and raised as they executed their enemy, their defeated opponents laying beheaded at the feet of their leader, the Mand'alor, the dead clutching blades of light that...

Obi-Wan squinted and looked closer, and sighed in exasperation. Yes. They were Jedi in the mural. Upon their palace, the seat of their government, the Mandalorians etched massive, elaborate art depicting the proud slaughter of *Jedi*.

*Perfect.*

He couldn't help but wonder why they were helping these people. Or why these people had even asked the Jedi for help to begin with.

"Obi-Wan." The Padawan swiftly looked up as his name was called and saw the stern look on his Master's face and could feel his cheeks burning. As always, Qui-Gon sensed his less guarded thoughts as they passed through his mind, and Obi-Wan looked at the ground to avoid his gaze. He felt no disappointment or displeasure through their connection, but to him, that knowing look felt like judgement.

"Forgive me, Master..." he said reflexively, and Qui-Gon laughed softly and laid a hand on his back, gently leading him away from the plaza to begin their long climb up the stairs to Sundari Palace, a compliment of heavily armed Mandalorian guards flanking them, both to lead them to stand before their Duchess, and to guard them against violent attacks that could happen at any moment.

"There's nothing to forgive, Padawan," the Master said, his voice low to keep the conversation between themselves. "You are still growing and learning. This is all a learning experience. If you were already perfect, you'd have no need of me."

"I doubt that will ever happen, Master," Obi-Wan responded quietly, a slight smile on his face as he allowed himself to be eased by his Master's presence. Qui-Gon flashed the boy his own small smile in return as he felt the boy simultaneously open himself up to the Jedi's presence and hide
away his own emotions deep within him, the calm of peace settling over him as the boy released his concerns into the Force.

"Just remember, Obi-Wan. Mandalore's history is bloody and violent, they take pride in the fact that their warriors are among the few in the galaxy that can reliably and systematically kill Jedi. And still they reached to us for help. They're trying to change. That's reason enough for us to be here."

Obi-Wan took a deep breath and looked up at the Jedi and smiled, warm and genuine, his blue eyes alight with compassion and understanding, and it faded the moment they stepped past the threshold of Sundari Palace, replaced instead with the expressionless mask he hid behind so well, a way to keep the boy distant and unattached, just as the Code demanded of him.

The beauty of the halls of Sundari Palace stood in stark contrast to the city outside, though even here, the elegance of the white marble rooms were tarnished with the dark marks of carbon scoring and shattered glass from what used to be windows, now covered up with thick durasteel plating bolted into the stone. The only light provided was from the large, lit braziers that lined the hallway, the flames casting flickering, ominous shadows across the room, dancing almost as if they were alive, a constant reminder that even in the palace fortress, their enemies laid in wait. As Obi-Wan looked around, silently following his Master and their guard, he could imagine what this place would be like in better times, when peace once again came to Mandalore, and it was breathtaking.

White halls lined with the royal blue rugs and tapestries of Mandalore's reigning house, the sun filtering in from long, elegant, open windows that allowed the gentle breeze to carry with it the sounds of a bustling, thriving city and the sweet smell of Mandalorian flora. Obi-Wan closed his eyes and felt peace and warmth rush through him, and when he opened his eyes, he could see it, not just in his mind's eye, but right before him, vibrant and real and alight with life and peace and prosperity, a thing unlike anything Mandalore had ever known before. It was...beautiful. Stunning, and he could feel his heart beat faster with the excitement of it. This was what he would help bring to pass, a war torn, ravaged world uplifted and restored, allowed to finally thrive after years of blood and war and death.

And then it was gone, the beauty before him fading like mist in the wind, and he found himself looking again at the dark, silent halls, the air smelling of smoke and flames and death, the Force a grave and heavy weight upon him. He sighed, his gaze dropping to the ground as he breathed deeply, the Code on his lips to being ease to his troubled mind. A vision, nothing more, of things that once were, or things that would be, he was uncertain, but it would be up to the Force if such a thing were to come to pass. He sincerely hoped it would. Nothing good could be gained from a continuation of all this destruction.

Large, ornate doors before them were pushed open by a guard after a quick command by their escort, and the Jedi found themselves in a long room untouched by the destruction that marred the surface of everything else in this city. Save for what should have been long walls of open windows, now bolted shut, the room carried with it the weight of the office it represented, a tribute to the glory of the reigning Mandalorian, in the past, a warlord, strong and mighty, uncontested in his worthiness to rule the warrior race, and now...

At the end of the hall stood Mandalore's throne, the seat of power throughout the entire sector, and built to represent such. Built of the dark, slate gray of the iron unique to Mandalore's earth and backed with glowing stones of reds and yellows, the throne was meant to be beautiful, intimidating, worthy of the leader that sat upon it, strong like any Mandalorian should be. The Jedi slowly made their way toward it, calm and respectful, the Padawan keeping his eyes lowered the entire time. Obi-Wan wasn't certain what the custom was for meeting the Mandalorian leader, and
the last thing he wanted to do was offend the Duchess before their mission even truly began, especially when getting here had been so perilous. It was dangerous enough here as it was, and it was little secret that it wasn't the Duchess that had asked for the Jedi, but her closest supporters and advisers. She had argued against it, though in the end, she submitted to the will of her people. It wasn't a great start.

When the had stopped, both Jedi bowed, deep and respectful, Obi-Wan's eyes fixed on the foot of the stairs leading up to the throne, and curiosity got the better of him. Raising his eyes as he stood to his full height, he looked up at the throne at the Duchess he was tasked with guarding, and for a moment, he thought he was looking in the wrong place, that the Duchess had sent another in her stead to deal with the Jedi she wanted no part in. It wasn't until the guards' respectful, almost reverent briefing of the incident in the skies above Sundari that Obi-Wan realized that the woman seated in the throne was, if fact, the Duchess Satine Kryze, the sole survivor of Mandalore's ruling house.

She was young, far younger than anyone possessing the title of Duchess had a right to be, far too young for the weight of a sector at war. She sat in the throne that seemed far, far too big for her small, thin frame, and her delicate, long fingered hands tightly gripped the wide arms of the throne so tightly that Obi-Wan thought that the impossibly strong metal might cave under the pressure. He had expected an older woman a warrior like all the rest with the bearing of a diplomat that sought peace for her violent people so that they may move forward in accordance with the New Mandalorians she led, someone with experience and training, someone with poise and grace that came with age. But Satine couldn't have been older than him, sixteen and all long legs and thin arms and gaunt, teenage awkwardness, her sharp, angular face framed with pale blond hair, her eyes the same bright, clear blue that the kyber crystal that powered his lightsaber possessed. Her body was already well into the development of adulthood, but she had a long ways to go until she was a woman.

But the thing that stood out most about the Duchess Satine was what lay just beneath her surface, a fierce passion that blazed within her, a thing she was clearly struggling and failing to contain. There was anger in her, deep and consuming, frustration and pride, and a stubbornness that allowed it to burn blindingly bright, even though there was little left within her to burn. But just beyond the brightness of the sun that was Satine Kryze was the field of her soul, already blackened with embers and ash from an inferno that already swept through her. There was grief. Hopelessness. Desperation. She was...lost. Obi-Wan had to look away. It was all darkness and light, all flames and shadow, all emotion and passion barely hid behind a thin veneer of what was meant to be nobility and strength, but came across as arrogance and coldness. All things that were forbidden to the Jedi. All things he had been trained his whole life not to feel. It was...confusing and overwhelming, and Obi-Wan felt himself retreat deeper into himself to protect himself from the infectious blaze.

There is no emotion...

"They tell me your trip to Sundari was a difficult one, Master Jedi," Satine said in a voice that was small, uncertain, and wavering with emotion that Obi-Wan could not place. "For that, I am sorry."

"It is of little consequence, Duchess," Qui-Gon said softly, a gentle smile on his face. "What matters is that we are here safely. I am Qui-Gon Jinn, and this is my Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi," he said, indicating toward his student. Kenobi bowed his head, but said nothing. "The Jedi Council sent us on behalf of the Galactic Republic to protect you and assist your planet in its push for peace." A bitter smile crossed the Duchess' lips, and the Jedi could feel her thin veneer of civility beginning to rapidly crack.

"Yes, my advisers have exalted the prowess of the Jedi. Keepers of the peace and peerless
warriors.” She looked accusingly at the pair, and though Obi-Wan never rose his eyes to meet hers, he could feel the sharpness of her stare. "Tell me, which one is it?"

"Can it not be both?" Qui-Gon asked patiently. "It is difficult to maintain one without the other."

"I disagree," Satine almost spat, her anger quickly rising, and Qui-Gon said nothing, simply looked at her and waited. "I know what you Jedi do," she said, quieter than before as she struggled to contain her anger, shooting a vicious glare at her advisors at the side of the throne, and they had the good sense to look chastised, though unrepentant. "You are not peacekeepers if you find peace at the end of a weapon.” She scoffed. "There’s even an expression for it. Lightsaber diplomacy." She crossed her arms over her chest. "We are at war, Master Jedi, and you were not sent here as diplomats, not when the Republic and your Order have no sway or jurisdiction here on Mandalore. Our negotiations have failed, which means you are here as warriors."

"Duchess, we are here-"

"Don't insult me, I know why you're here," she said harshly. "I don't need even more people to fight and die for me, Jedi, I have enough of that from my own people." She glared at her advisers once again. "And for reasons I have yet to understand, my trusted advisers thought it wise to bring in outside help from Jedi to help me maintain my rule."

"Duchess..." one of the men at the side of her throne said softly, taking a few steps closer to the furious girl on the throne. "You know what you mean to our people, we need-" The girl slammed her hands on the arms of the throne and jumped to her feet, her hands balled into fists and shaking with rage she no longer tried to repress.

"My people already believe I am weak!" she shouted, and the man retreated his head bowed in deference. "My father commanded the respect of the clans because he was a warlord, but not even his strength was enough to hold Mandalore together! I tried to make peace, and they think me a coward! An insult!"

"Duchess..."

"Explain to me how bringing in outside help to keep my throne isn't weakness! Tell me how this doesn't look like I have gone crawling to the Galactic Republic for the strength that I lack! Tell me how having Jedi here isn't further proof to my people that I have abandoned Mandalore!" The advisers said nothing. They could say nothing, and their impotence was taken by the Duchess as an admission of their failure in judgement, and in the silence, Satine slowly began to calm, her anger replaced by weariness, and she dropped back into the throne, her youth suddenly staggeringly apparent.

"Duchess Satine," Qui-Gon said softly, stepping forward and climbing the first two steps to draw himself closer to the defeated young ruler of a fractured people. "I hear and understand your concerns, but I am here because of the concerns of your people and their desire for peace. They do not think it is possible without you. I am here to facilitate that, as a peacekeeper, and I will do everything in my power to help you bring peace to Mandalore."

"Duchess..." one of the advisers said, emboldened by the Jedi and stepping forward. "Your brother-"

"My brother is dead, Prime Minister!" the girl hissed, her voice cracking with emotion far deeper than her apparent anger. "I thank you for the reminder." Her intense glare focused on the man, he meekly shrank back. "You wanted the Jedi here, and you got your wish. I am talking with the Jedi, not you, and you will remain silent." The man bowed his head and said nothing. "My father
didn't start this war, but neither did he shy away from it," Satine said after a long, uncomfortable silence. "It was a war that he should have ended, and failing that, the task was to fall to my brother." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, and Obi-Wan looked up at the girl, and though the light was low, he thought he could see silent tears upon her cheeks. "But my brother died with my father and mother, and..."

She stopped suddenly, her breath hitching like something within her was suddenly shot with terrible pain, but she quickly hid it. "I am the last of House Kryze," she said, her voice weaker than it had been, filled with sorrow and nervousness and insecurity. "I did not ask for this war. I didn't want this war, but it falls now on me to end it. I just...I-I don't know how..." She stood quickly, her body tense as she swiftly took the stairs at the side of the throne. "Excuse me..." And with that, she disappeared into a door off to the side of the throne room, her personal guard following swiftly behind her.

"Well..." Qui-Gon said softly after the girl was gone, his deep voice echoing softly off the high, stone ceilings. "That went better than expected." Obi-Wan looked up at him with a slightly appalled expression.

"That was better than expected?" The Master shrugged.

"She is Mandalorian, my student. It's somewhat of a wonder we weren't executed on the spot. She is a warrior, that is to be sure..." He gently nudged the boy when his eyes cast back to the ground, to the same spot he had been staring at nearly the entire time they had been in audience with the Duchess. "You alright? You certainly have been quiet."

"I've nothing to say, Master." Qui-Gon said nothing in response, the silence hanging between them heavy and expectant, and Obi-Wan looked up at the Jedi when he realized that Qui-Gon would say nothing until the Padawan found something to say, until he relinquished the thoughts he kept so carefully hidden. "I accept the necessity of this mission, Master," he said slowly. "The Duchess' plight is...moving."

"Moving..." Qui-Gon softly chuckled, and the Padawan looked away again, his mask not slipping for a moment, even as his face flushed softly and he fiddled with his braid. "My compassionate Padawan."

"The Council sent us here for a reason," the boy said softly. "I just find it...uncharacteristic that I not yield to their wisdom. The problem is with me, not them, not this mission."

"You are reluctant to kill again." Qui-Gon said knowingly, and Kenobi slowly nodded. "I will do what I can to shield you from such, my student, but the day will come when you must put your feelings aside for the mission." Obi-Wan sucked in a sharp breath, and Qui-Gon could feel the boy through the Force, his emotions turbulent and disturbed, but as he always managed, he put the emotions away, nodding swiftly and looking up at his Master.

"The mission always comes first, Master. I will...do what's expected of me. I'll preserve life to the best of my ability, but..." He took a deep breath. "The Duchess, peace comes first. Even if I find her...difficult to look at." He frowned, his eyes cast at the ground. "I am...unaccustomed to such strong passions. It is overwhelming."

"Can you handle this mission?" A brief flash of defiance ripped through the Padawan, the powerful surge of a boy that dedicated everything he had to the task at hand, and Qui-Gon smiled to witness the fire within him, hidden as though it may be.

"I can do anything, Master."
"I'm glad you think so." He began walking toward the door the Duchess left through, his Padawan following confused behind him. "Come. Let's check on our charge."

Satine sat with her back against the solid stone half wall that encircled the balcony overlooking the central plaza turned military camp, her knees drawn to her chest and her arms wrapped around her legs as she silently cried. Her personal guard strongly discouraged her from even setting foot on the balcony, had even gone so far as to bolt the doors shut, but that hadn't stopped her from finding a way each day since she arrived to slip away from her guard and come here to sit. It was the only time she was ever alone, the only time she didn't need to be strong, the only time when the weight of her responsibilities didn't crush her and she was allowed to grieve.

She remembered a time when Sundari was beautiful, when there wasn't always smoke and blaster fire in the air, when the palace's many doors and windows were left wide open to allow the light and the wind to pass through. She had stood upon this balcony often beside her father and her mother as she looked out on the city that was the dominion of her family, and the sight had always filled her with pride for both her family and the planet. Mandalore was moving forward, as her father had told her often, the thriving Sundari proof that the new, peaceful ways worked. Her father was a respected war hero, a man that had come out on top of all the other clan leaders and used his position to forge them a new path, one that many clans fought against, the tensions against change, against the perceived betrayal of their warrior heritage causing a rift between them.

It wasn't betrayal, it was evolution. Satine saw little to be gained by the violence of their past, and there were other ways they may embrace and exalt their culture. They were a beautiful people, passionate and intense and dedicated, capable of so much that they had so foolishly destroyed with their constant warring. It had to stop, and Satine was determined to stop it. Her father had raised her differently when it was clear that she was no warrior like her older brother or her younger sister. She hadn't the stomach for violence, though she was no less a warrior, though her battlefield had been in politics and debate, her weapons words, so unlike the rest of her family.

Like a good leader, her father had taught her how to use her weapons, had sent her for diplomatic training on Coruscant, had rounded her education in the throne room of Theed, had sent her as an envoy to different clans to learn them, study them, grow familiar with their particular customs and habits so that she may one day better serve them While it was no secret that her father was training her warrior brother to take his place on the throne, he had always told Satine that she was a new type of leader, a warrior for peace and prosperity, one that would help forge the new way.

And it was all for nothing. Now, she sat on the balcony, unable to look out over the city, even if she wanted to for fear of assassination, though she didn't want to, since the sight of her city pained her. It was here, on this very balcony, where her mother, her father, her brother were executed by the Death Watch insurgents that managed to capture them, and though the balcony had since been cleaned, she could still see their blood upon the ground, could feel nausea and revulsion rise up inside her, and yet, she could not bring herself to leave. Nothing had prepared her for this. Nothing she had learned had taught her how to even begin to talk to a people that wanted her dead, no matter the cost. She couldn't flee. She wouldn't flee, not when her people were suffering, not when the entire system was torn to pieces by war, not when families were divided, drawn to different sides of the conflict, not when her own sister-

She whimpered and leaned her forehead against her knees. She couldn't think about Bo-Katan, not now. Not when the younger girl wanted her dead, actually dead. Her own sister, throwing in with those Death Watch savages. Violence only begat more violence, especially with the Mandalorian pride and culture for revenge. But it had to stop somewhere. Mandalorians were proud and stubborn, and they would all be killed, all of them, if someone didn't have the good
sense to bring everyone to the table and talk, and Satine vowed to be that person. She had to be. She was their Duchess, and she had to fight for her people in the way she knew was best.

"Duchess?"

The girl squeaked in alarm, her body tensing as she jumped to her feet, her heart pounding in her chest as she looked at the Jedi Master before her, his assistant quickly moving behind her a fair distance away, his sharp eyes taking in the city, the buildings, the rubble, vigilant for any attack that may occur. "W-what are you doing here?" she muttered, wiping her arm across her eyes to hide that she had been crying, though she knew she didn't do it well. Her pale skin would stay reddened for hours after she was done.

"You seemed distressed, Duchess," Qui-Gon said softly. "We thought-"

"I am not distressed!" she said firmly, her eyes furiously gazing at the Jedi's calm, kind face, and her anger quickly left her. She felt...warm, the Jedi kind and understanding, like he could be trusted with anything, and she immediately felt foolish for the strength of her reflexive action.

"My mistake," he said, bowing slightly, but that gentle, knowing smile never left his lips, his deep blue eyes filled with understanding, and while no words on the subject were spoken between the two, Satine felt that he just...knew. "I thought it a wise decision to meet so that we may discuss your protection detail," he said. "We should like to act according to your wishes. If you will still have us, of course."

"...have you been briefed on the situation?" Satine asked softly, the lack of objection to their presence a clear indication that the Duchess had accepted their aid, not to say anything of the rush of gratitude that Qui-Gon felt from within her. She was proud, yes, terribly so, but she could be made to see reason, and Qui-Gon could work what that.

"I have an understanding of the current conflict, yes," the Jedi said swiftly. "We were also provided a dossier about you, though it was little more than a situation report. I'm afraid that our records on the affairs of Mandalore are...lacking," he said, smiling warmly at her.

"One day, my people will be a part of the galactic community," she said in a whisper, almost as if she didn't believe it herself.

"I know they will," the Jedi said quickly, reassuringly. "Perhaps our work together with you will help pave the way for an alliance between Mandalore and the Republic." The girl said nothing, and Qui-Gon quickly cleared his throat. "So no, Duchess, our briefing shall have to come from you. Our knowledge was so limited I'm ready to discount it outright." He laughed softly. "We didn't even know your age. Obi-Wan was quite surprised, weren't you, Obi-Wan?" Satine looked over at the boy, almost forgetting that he had been there, the younger man looking to the older Jedi for a moment before he turned back to his watch over the city, his face devoid of all emotion, all reaction.

"As you say, Master," the boy said softly, as though he didn't want to answer and didn't want to be heard. He was...aloof. Distant, so unlike the other Jedi, and the Duchess couldn't help but wonder why he was here if he didn't want to be.

"...I'm being hunted," Satine said quietly. "By everyone. The Death Watch, the other clans, bounty hunters and assassins. Every day, it is something new, every day..." She looked pointedly at Qui-Gon, her eyes wide and pleading. "My people all across the sector are dying. Every single day, this conflict claims the lives of thousands of my people, both warriors and civilians. The Death Watch slaughter the peaceful, the other clans work to exterminate each other, and all of them look to kill me." She held her head up, tall and proud, her lip quivering slightly and her thin
frame trembling in fear that she kept locked inside her. "I am the Duchess of Mandalore. I may be a contested leader, but I am the leader none the less, and so long as I live, these insurgents will not have Mandalore."

"You must have allies," Qui-Gon said thoughtfully as he stroked his beard, and Satine quickly began to answer before she stopped herself, suddenly uncertain.

"I-I...yes. Yes, I have allies, though one wouldn't think so to look at my city or the frequent attempts on my life."

"Do you know who you can trust?" Satine shook her head. "And leaving for Coruscant is out of the question?" This time, the girl glared at him, offended by the notion.

"I will not leave my people while they are fighting and dying, Master Jedi," she almost snapped. "I cannot, I will not abandon them. We may be at war, they may stand against me, but they are still my people. All of them."

"A noble sentiment," Qui-Gon said, drawing up to his full height. A determined, focused look on his face. "I believe I have a course of action. Are you object to leaving Mandalore?" The girl's face flushed red with impatience.

"I told you, I-"

"Not the sector, the planet," Qui-Gon quickly clarified, and the Duchess stumbled on her own tongue.

"I-I...n-no, I suppose not...Mandalore is not the only planet I rule over." She paused to look at him. "But you promise we won't leave the sector?"

"I swear to you, Duchess." She looked at him for a moment before she gently nodded, and with a smile, the Jedi laid his hand on her shoulder. "I will protect you. You have my word, we will bring peace to your little piece of the galaxy. I need to have a word to the head of your guard. I believe it unwise to stay in Sundari while all your enemies know exactly where to find you. It will make your defense difficult. Obi-Wan." The other Jedi drew up taller, and Satine was once again reminded of his presence. "Take the Duchess to the Radiant V and let her have a look around. I'm reluctant to use a Mandalorian ship, given the current situation. We at least have a chance of not being shot on sight in the Radiant V."

The Jedi said nothing in response to Qui-Gon, only bowed in acknowledgment, and with that, Qui-Gon walked back into the palace, leaving the two teens alone on the balcony.

Satine looked the Jedi over carefully, the first time she had really seen him, what with how quiet he seemed to be, how easily he blended in with the scenery, almost as though he wanted to disappear. Something about him was...infuriating, an immediate reaction to his aloof, disinterested mannerisms. The other Jedi was nothing like this. She frowned in the silence, unhappy with her gut reaction towards one of the men that would be protecting her, but she couldn't help it. Perhaps it was his age, far, far too young to be protecting anybody, let alone fighting and killing on her behalf. Perhaps it was his attitude, his manner completely devoid of the passion she thrived on, lacking any emotion at all on his handsome face when the situation they were in was one that invoked emotion from everyone. Nobody, nobody felt nothing in the face of war and death and horror. Perhaps this was simply the Jedi Way, and it was the other that was the odd one out. If that was so, it was no wonder her ancestors clashed so violently with the Jedi. They were diametric opposites.

When the silence had gone on long enough, Satine decided to be the one to bridge the gap, as she
always was, the first step to diplomacy and understanding as simple as being the first one to reach out a hand. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, the Jedi swept past her and walked into the palace, indicating with his hand, not his words for her to follow, and it rankled her. She was not some commoner, some pet to be summoned, but she followed anyway.

"What should I call you?" she asked him tersely, wincing as she said it and wishing it hadn't sounded so much like a demand. But he was silent in any case, the robes that fell off his shoulders shifting as the muscles underneath tensed, almost as though he was startled that she had bothered to speak to him at all. It was...intriguing. Infuriating, yes, but also intriguing.

"Obi-Wan," he said softly, almost too softly for her to hear him, and when she looked at him, moving closer to hear better, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, his face as impassive as ever. He didn't seem bothered or anything really. He just...was. "That's my name."

"Then you may call me Satine." He looked at her again out of the corner of his eye.

"...I find that inappropriate, Duchess." Satine frowned as her irritation grew. It was the most she had heard him speak since he had arrived, and only now did she notice the soft Core World accent upon his words, which she couldn't have noticed earlier since he had barely spoken. She was beginning to wonder if he was even capable of stringing more than five words together. She thought for a moment that perhaps he was silent because he just wasn't very smart, but one look in those cold, distant blue eyes saw them brimming with intelligence.

"Well, you can call me what you wish, Jedi," she snapped, unable to hold her tongue, and she usually would have felt guilty for her lack of tact, but the boy's face registered no emotion anyway. It was like talking to a droid. Or a wall.

"I don't understand why you are here," she asked, her head held tall and her bearing as regal as she could make it as they strode down the throne room toward the doors that would lead them out in the smokey air. "I only need one Jedi protector, and the other seems more than willing to do the job he was assigned. You, on the other hand..." She trailed off, leaving the sentence uncompleted. She didn't need to say it for the meaning to be clear. Still, the Jedi remained aloof, and if she didn't know better, she would have thought he didn't hear her. Slowly, he reached up and tugged at the braid that hung behind his right ear, and she wondered why he would cut his blond hair short, only to allow one piece to grow.

"Jedi work in pairs, Duchess," he said, his tone even and unaffected, and said nothing else. She knew he wouldn't. He had reached his five word limit.

"But why you?" she demanded as they stepped out into the open air and slowly began making their way down the stairs toward the Radiant V, the cruiser surrounded by soldiers and technicians as they repaired the damage caused by their rocky flight into Sundari. "You don't want to be here. How does the Jedi Council select which Jedi to send on missions? Is it a lottery? Do you volunteer? Or do they choose who is simply best for the job, regardless of their opinions on the mission." A hard, humorless smile came to her face. "I don't suppose it's that one. You're too young to be the best at anything." It was a cruel thing to say, she knew, but she wanted to get a rise out of him. Something, anything at all. If this was to be one of her protectors, her companions, she needed to trust him implicitly, and she just couldn't trust someone with no passion, no fire, no humanity. But still, he remained blank, unfeeling, and for reasons she couldn't understand, she felt her heart sink.

"Listen, Obi-Wan..." she started, feeling immediately guilty for trying so harshly to get a reaction from him. She should have known better, she did know better. One didn't win allies with cruelty, and one would never expose their heart without kindness. She certainly wouldn't. "That was beneath me, I-"
"I am his student, Duchess," the boy softly interrupted, and she looked at him as they walked, her eyes focused straight ahead. Of course he was a student. She should have been a student still.

"I...understand," she said, slow and measured, smiling softly at him in hopes of breaking the ice, though as expected, it yielded no results. "I'm sorry I have been rude, I-" His hand swiftly shot out and grabbed her wrist, so tight it was almost crushing, and he swiftly pulled her back, her arm jarring uncomfortably as she turned to face him and lecture him on not only interrupting her very sincere apology, but on the proper way to handle a real lady, but stopped immediately when she saw it. His face was as blank and expressionless as before, but his eyes were intense, the rich, vibrant blue seeming almost to glow, his gaze penetrating as if he could see through everything, right into her heart and soul, and she could feel her pulse quicken, her pale skin flush under the focused stare. But he wasn't looking at her. He was looking past her.

He was looking at the Radiant V.

Heedless of her, Obi-Wan quickly pulled her arm and threw her to the ground, his body pressed close against her as he covered her, and not a second later, Satine was blinded by a flash of light, followed closely by a deafening roar that ripped through the air, and she felt the Jedi tense and twitch above her as a powerful, blazing wind brought debris and rocks and shrapnel with it. When it was over, when her ears stopped ringing, when her blinded sight returned, Satine found herself hauled up to her feet, and she saw chaos, soldiers rushing to help their comrades bleeding and dying upon the ground, screams carrying through the burning air, limbs and sections of bodies unattached to the whole scattered around the plaza. Where the Radiant V once stood, there was now only flames and a twisted, burning wreckage. The ship had exploded, and had she kept walking, had Obi-Wan not stopped her, she would have been caught in the blast radius.

She watched in a state of shock as the Jedi swiftly snatched a metallic cylinder off his belt and with a snapping hiss, it was activated, a long, blue blade of glowing plasm extending from the grip, the young Jedi holding it in a trembling two handed grip by his shoulder. A lightsaber. She could focus on almost nothing else, the horrors around her too much for her to look at. She had never seen a Jedi weapon before. She had never seen a Jedi before, but she was beginning to understand why the Republic cherished them so dearly. Somehow, Obi-Wan had sensed the attack. But...how?

The soldiers stopped running and helping their wounded when from the lower levels of the city, Mandalorian warriors in the black and blue of Death Watch rose into the sky on jetpacks, their blasters pointed at the soldiers as they opened fire, instantly killing many of the people closest to them. Those that survived the first volley quickly dove behind burning cover and brought their own weapons to bear, firing into the swarm that seemed to endlessly rise from below. This wasn't one of the smaller attacks they had been executing all week. This one was bigger, better planned. An actual invasion of the capital.

Obi-Wan stood before the Duchess, his gaze swiftly sweeping around to make sure he wasn't being flanked, and he quickly began to deflect stray blaster bolts away from her. From the palace, the guard rushed out, their weapons blazing as they took to the air to combat the insurgents, and the battle quickly became chaos as bodies began to fall from the sky as they were killed. As Satine's soldiers rushed past her, forming a defensive, protective line between her and the Death Watch, she heard a second thrum, and out of the corner of her eye saw a flash of green as Qui-Gon rushed past, his own lightsaber in his hands. Without speaking a word to each other, the two Jedi fell in beside the Duchess, their blades moving together in perfect harmony as their lightsabers created a shield through which nobody could pass. It was a perfect defense, and amidst the chaos of war and death, despite her racing heart and her fear, she felt safe.

"Duchess, we need a ship!" Qui-Gon shouted over the sounds of blaster fire, screams, and the
rising and falling thrum of the lightsabers. He looked up quickly, his hand extended before him as two Death Watch soldiers flew down at the group, and reaching through the Force, he blasted them away with a wave of energy, sending the two soldiers careening through the air, their jetpacks smoking and sparking and finally exploding when they crashed to the ground.

Satine didn't say a word, she simply nodded quickly, turned and ran, her Jedi protectors falling in beside her and matching her pace exactly, and as they ran toward the palace, the Sundari guard retreated to cover them, keeping the Death Watch at bay and paying for it with their lives as their Duchess escaped.

They tore through the dark of the palace, her leather boots making hardly a sound upon the stone floor, and she was grateful that the past week saw her dressing as if she would have to run at any moment. Blaster fire and screams followed them as the Duchess led them into the ruins of the palaces' hangar, the enormous room exposed to the open air, the result of a savage explosion only a few days before. Still starships lay wrecked and burnt and twisted across the space, but some of the ships were clearly functional. As soon as they began to cross the room, Obi-Wan left her side, running past her and straight across the massive space faster than she had ever seen anyone run, faster than she was sure anyone could run.

She tried to run faster as well, but her legs and lungs were burning, and despite her best efforts, despite her years of being in the peak of physical fitness, the result of being the eldest daughter of a Mandalorian warlord, she was panicked and afraid, her heart beating faster than it ever had, and it was a long way they had run at her full sprint from the central plaza. It was too much, and the attempt to push herself only saw her legs failing her, her breathing becoming faster as she began to hyperventilate, and beside her, the Jedi powered off his lightsaber, and the tall, imposing man scooped her up into his arms, held her close to his broad chest, and took off running at his considerable full speed.

She tightly gripped his robes, coughing uncontrollably as her lungs burned, the effort of the sprint making her throat taste blood, and she watched with tired eyes as they rushed for a sleek, triangular cruiser, the ship's boarding ramp down and the engines already blazing and ready for lift off. The moment Qui-Gon's foot hit the boarding ramp, it began to close, and he rushed within the ship, the Duchess gripped tightly to him as he made a beeline for the cockpit. By the time he got there and sat Satine down in the passenger seat behind the copilot's chair, the ship was already in the air, Obi-Wan at the helm, his fingers quickly flipping switches and pulling levers, his eyes not on his work, but focused out the forward viewport. He tilted the nose up and pulled back hard on the accelerator, the ship lurching forward as the engines engaged their maximum capacity, the sky quickly darkening as they shot toward the atmosphere, the sky filling with oncoming starfighters.

"We're not going to make it," Satine said, shaking her head and trembling as the adrenaline faded from her system. "This ship needs a crew of six, we-"

"That won't be a problem," Qui-Gon quickly interrupted, looking behind him and smiling at the girl reassuringly. "Don't worry, Duchess. You're in good hands. He may tell you otherwise, but Obi-Wan's one of the finest pilots I have ever seen."

"I don't think he'd tell me anything..." she muttered, watching with rapt attention as Obi-Wan's hands quickly pulled a lever beside his knee, and he pulled up the ship's weapon's module, flying with one hand and aiming the ship's cannons with the other, his mouth moving as he said...something, though whatever it was, Satine couldn't hear it.

"...well, you may be right about that," Qui-Gon said, looking his apprentice over and smiling softly at the intensity of the boy's focus. With a deep, calming breath, Obi-Wan targeted the ships in his immediate path and opened fire, spinning the ship out of the way of the resulting explosion as the enemy fighter was hit. He continued his upward climb through the atmosphere, flying by
feel, not with the ship's navigation, shooting down any ship that got in his way and skillfully evading most of the fire from the ships that trailed him. The moment he cleared Mandalore's atmosphere, Satine got a glimpse of an enormous warship hanging in space before them, a Jehavey’ir type assault ship painted in the colors of the Death Watch, and without wasting a moment, the young pilot flipped the cruiser one hundred and eighty degrees, facing away from the enemy ship and making the jump to hyperspace before he even righted the vessel.

Entry eight.

I find myself at something of a loss. It feels like I have abandoned my people, and I have, I suppose. Many people died to give me a chance to get to safety, and even more will die now that Death Watch has invaded Sundari. I should have stayed behind. I am no battle commander, nor am I a great warrior, but I am their leader, their Mand'alor. What sort of leader runs from a fight? Father certainly wouldn't have. Father didn't. And now he is dead. I would have been as well if I stayed. My people would be dead, regardless of if I was there or not. I should thank the Jedi for their noble efforts in saving me, but I don't feel there's much to be grateful for at the moment. Its difficult to feel glad I live while so many of my people are slaughtered. This was a loss, and nothing more, and it disgusts me that my life if somehow valued above all of theirs.

I would gladly give my life if it meant that the fighting would stop, but I know it will not. With me gone, they would all just have something new to fight for. It wouldn't just be this senseless killing over the matter of our values, it would be to determine who would rule Mandalore, which, I suppose, they're already fighting over. It would just intensify once I'm dead. There's a possibility that Clan Vizsla would use Bo-Katan to assert their claim to the throne, and knowing her, she would give it to them. She has our father's blood, after all, and she is a Kryze, though she has since relinquished that name. Even if that matter were settled, the fighting would continue. Vizsla will bring war to the galaxy, and Mandalore would be crushed, just as it was before. It seems my people like to forget that we lost the war against the Jedi before, and seeing what my new protectors can do, it's no wonder.

The Jedi are nice enough, though they are nothing what I expected. Master Qui-Gon is kind and understanding, and I feel like I've known him all my life. It's...somewhat unsettling to be in the presence of a man that makes you want to tell your secrets. I can't do that, for the obvious reasons, though the Jedi aren't my people. I don't have to be strong for them they way I need to be strong for Mandalore, though I am reluctant to let my guard down. Do it once, and the next time is easier. Soon enough, I may not be able to remain strong when I must. I can't let that happen, even if I need to. Its for Mandalore, for my people, and my duty comes first. Father taught me that much. Though...it would be nice to have a friend.

And Obi-Wan...

I don't know what to think about him. I don't dislike him, though I am certain that my actions have made it seem as though I do. I just don't know what to do with him. He infuriates me, though I cannot place why. Its something that goes beyond his complete lack of emotions, his inability to speak more than five words at a time, his aloofness, his silence. It's almost as if its intentional, like he thinks he's superior because of his amazing gifts. He feels like he sits far above the rest of us, and he knows it. Its arrogance, I suppose. Or something else. I don't know what, but I want to know. I really, really do. He did save my life today, more than once, even though it seems like he couldn't possibly care any less about anyone around him. No person is an island, but it appears that he thinks so.

He's be insufferably handsome if he just smiled.

It occurs to me I know very little about the Jedi Order. Perhaps that accounts for his inhuman
behavior. I will have to ask Qui-Gon to tell me about the Order. We’re floating in space between systems right now while the Jedi formulate a plan. Somewhere between Draboon and Jakelia, I believe. I’d ask Obi-Wan, but...I don’t think an understanding of the Jedi Order can be reached within the span of five words. Perhaps we just got off on the wrong foot. I have been told I can come off rather strong, that I rub people the wrong way. It must be true, or so many of my people wouldn’t be trying to kill me.

I shall have to work on that.
These things just keep getting longer, don't they? Alright, expect at least a few days before the next update here, unless I get hit with inspiration. I have a few chapters to write on my other fic, since my readers seem to be getting antsy. Hopefully this monster will tide you over. Let me know what you think, my lovelies! Seriously, I want to know if you have ideas, what you like, what you don't. Your thoughts help me craft this story.

Obi-Wan Kenobi and Satine Kryze were, in many ways, kindred spirits, Qui-Gon had come to realize. Both were emotional and cared deeply for those around them. Both were shamelessly intelligent and terribly stubborn. Both tried to remain composed and collected, no matter the situation, though Obi-Wan's Jedi upbringing had made him quite a bit better at that than the young Duchess, whose culture encouraged deep and unrelenting passion in all things. But above all else, they were creatures of duty, placing their responsibilities above everything else at the cost of their own well being. It was an admirable trait, especially for a hopeful Jedi Knight and the leader of Mandalore, but it left little room inside them for anything else but the roles they were born to fill.

It had taken them about five minutes to determine that they hated each other.

Qui-Gon sighed heavily as his student stormed into the cockpit and threw himself into the pilot's seat, his hands tightly gripping the yoke and his usual emotionless mask cracked beyond repair, showing the frustration and the irritation that lay just under the surface. It had been three days since they made their daring escape from Sundari, and they had yet to decide on a planet on which to land. It needed to happen soon, though, because they were running out of rations, and hunger was beginning to set them all on edge. Which was disastrously bad, because tensions were already high between the Duchess and his Padawan.

Things were fine, at first. Obi-Wan sat in his usual silence, while Satine retreated from the two Jedi to be alone herself, the weight of the day and her short, turbulent week in Sundari toiling upon her. When she emerged once again and attempted to engage the other teen, asking him a flurry of quick questions that the shy boy had no desire to answer in the aftermath of the three lives he had ended in their escape, Obi-Wan quickly shut her down in a rare moment of irritation, snapping as he asked if she ever stopped talking, and the reactionary Duchess handled it not at all. Silence settled between them, though where before it was a calm, contemplative one, now it was fraught with tension and anger.

The two simply brought the worst out in each other.

Attempts to broker peace between them had failed spectacularly. Satine took Obi-Wan's silence as arrogance, his detachment as callousness. She saw no passion within him, no drive, no desire, a thing she didn't understand, and a thing that infuriated her Mandalorian nature. She didn't understand how someone could serve as a protector when they simply didn't care. What's more, he was young, and her mission was a dangerous one, one she wasn't willing to entrust to anyone other than someone with wisdom and experience, both things she saw lacking in the young Jedi.

Obi-Wan, on the other hand, saw her brightly burning passion as an affront to the Code he served,
a blazing wave of emotions, deep and unrestrained pouring off the girl, and not a single one of them good. There was anger and grief, so deep, so dark that just looking at her made his careful defenses strain and split, filling him with a desperate anxiety to get away from a girl he saw as poisonous. He saw her nobility as superiority, her frantic desperation as aggression no different from the Mandalorians of the past, and her inquisitive nature, her overwhelming need for companionship tested his patience when he needed it most, his great need to be alone to center himself snapping against her need for emotional closeness. He hated her for invoking the worst in him almost as much as he hated himself for being so weak to allow it.

It was a problem. The two simply rubbed each other the wrong way, saw their differences as problems, and the few times they did speak, it was in vicious barbs meant to offend, Satine in the effort of getting an emotional response out of the boy, and Obi-Wan in an attempt to get the girl to leave him alone. It was unlike his student to let his emotions get away from him, but they were cramped on a ship together and they were getting hungry, and young Obi-Wan was still just a student and a teenager, stubborn and proud, little though he showed it. He was human, after all, and he wasn't perfect, something he was struggling to come to grips with.

"...are you strapped in, Master?" Obi-Wan asked quietly from the pilot's seat, and the Master looked at him curiously.

"Why? Are you expecting trouble?"

"We are drawing close to the Zanbar system," he said softly. "Given our last welcome to a Mandalorian system, I think it's fair to expect trouble." Qui-Gon quickly secured the restraints.

"Wisely said, my student."

"Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon winced, and quickly looked at his student, his previous ease melting into an uncharacteristic sneer, his hands tightening on the ship's controls. The Duchess didn't sound happy at all. "You do not get to just bail out on a conversation!" she snapped, entering the cockpit and the Force itself seemed to quake at her fearsome presence. Obi-Wan yanked the yoke to the side hard, sending the unsecured Mandalorian girl toppling ungracefully into the seat behind the copilot's position with a startled yelp. Qui-Gon quickly looked back at Obi-Wan, a small, smug smirk on his face for just a moment until he realized his Master was watching.

"Sorry, Master," he said, his voice almost his usual even dispassion were it not laced with satisfaction. He had meant to do this. "My hand slipped."

"You did that on purpose!" Satine snapped, leaping to her feet in her anger only to have the young Jedi send the ship careening to the side once again, the Duchess' tight grip on the back of Qui-Gon's seat the only thing keeping her from striking the wall. "Stop it!"

"Please," Obi-Wan said, his voice back to its smooth, even tone. He looked back at the Duchess when she didn't respond to find her both confused and highly irritated. "Stop it please," the Jedi said again. "Honesty, have some manners. I never thought I'd be teaching a Duchess courtesy."

"Courtesy?!" She snapped, starting to rise from her seat again, but thinking twice of it when Obi-Wan's hand tightened again on the yoke. "You are trying to lecture me on manners after trying to knock me over with your terrible flying?!"

"I'll have you know, my flying is exemplary when I don't have to listen to your emotional diatribe."

"Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon said sternly, snapping his student out of his attitude for only a moment before Satine cut back in.
"I preferred you when you were silent, Jedi!"

"As did I," Obi-Wan said mournfully. "Perhaps we should return to our silent arrangement. I look back on those long hours of tense, awkward silence quite fondly, actually." "You insolent."

"Both of you, silence!" Qui-Gon snapped, his deep voice raised and commanding, and both teens looked at him, startled at his harsh tone for just a moment before they both looked away sheepishly, embarrassed that their bickering had made it to the Jedi Master's attention. "Both of you will apologize immediately."

"I will do no such thing!" Satine said swiftly, glaring at the boy that she had come to anger her so deeply over the course of the past few days. "He started it, in any case, and I will not accept an apology from him any more than I would accept an apology from a droid! They don't mean it and neither does he because he is soulless!"

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow and looked at his Master, casually gesturing his hand in the Duchess' direction as if to show Qui-Gon exactly what it is he had to deal with. Qui-Gon put his face in his hands and groaned. This was going to be a long mission. "I don't ask you two to like each other," he said softly. "I don't even ask you to get along. But if we cannot functionally work together, than I can't protect you the way I need to, and we will all die."

"I will do my duty, Master," Obi-Wan said swiftly, cutting off whatever it was that Satine was about to say. "You know I will. But our Code demands time for meditation and reflection, and-"

"And sometimes, my Padawan, the Code gets in the way of our ability to successfully complete a mission, as it is doing now." Obi-Wan looked down at the control console, his face flushing as he tried to keep the insecurities off his face. "I will not have this mission jeopardized because you do not wish to be vulnerable. To connect to others, Obi-Wan, to truly understand them, you must open yourself as well."

Satine sniffled in satisfaction as Qui-Gon inadvertently vindicated her. "We should send him back to Coruscant, Master Jedi, I don't need-"

"But I do!" Qui-Gon interrupted, his voice stern and filled with irritation he wouldn't be feeling had he not been so hungry. "I cannot protect you alone, Duchess, I need him. I know you have reservations because he is young, but there doesn't exist a more promising student in the entire Order." He took a deep breath and ran a hand through his long hair. "I was sent by the Order to protect Mandalore's only chance for peace, not to babysit children." Both of the teens began to mutter quiet apologies to the Jedi, but Qui-Gon held up his hand and they were silenced. "Padawan, you are going to sit there, pilot the ship, and attend to your studies."

"...of course, Master..."

"And you, Duchess..." he said, taking a deep breath as he looked at her, then closed his eyes and shook his head. "You know, I don't care what you do. Sit there, return to your quarters, talk, be silent, I don't care what. You don't need to talk to Obi-Wan. You don't even need to be civil, but so help me, if your tone doesn't reflect your noble birth, there will be hell to pay. Am I understood?"

"Y-yes, I'm sorry. I have...forgotten myself these past few days. It won't happen again."

"One step at a time, I will correct this lapse of common decency..." the Jedi muttered as he leaned back and closed his eyes, his breath slowing as he prepared to meditate.
They were silent for a long while, Qui-Gon sinking into his meditations, Obi-Wan alternating between setting the ship on course and studying text on his datapad, and Satine watching the two in quiet, repentant silence. Even on her best of days, she didn't think she could get along with stoic, aloof, arrogant Obi-Wan, but she could at least be respectful, as her mother taught her. Her father and brother would have wondered why she hadn't killed this Jedi yet. Bo-Katan would have killed him already.

Without warning, grief suddenly rushed through her, deep and intense as she thought about her mother, her father, her brother, all executed brutally by the Death Watch, and her sister, a part of the group that saw to her family's deaths and now sought to murder her as well. She tried to push the thought aside, but couldn't, her mind fixated on her little sister, just fourteen years old and already a murderer, already a woman, most like, if she practiced the customs of their savage past that she so exalted, and she knew that little Bo-Katan did. Mandalorians were hard, passionate people, and they readily embraced their passions, because tomorrow, they might be dead. It was something Satine loved about her people, and their passion was a beautiful thing to behold, all fire and light and love so intense it threatened to burn the heart out of anyone caught in its grasp. It wasn't anything that Satine would have. Her duty came first, and her duty was something that it seemed she would have to do alone. Which was fine. She was a warrior too.

When she looked up, she saw the young Jedi looking at her, his face cold and emotionless as always, but his eyes were...curious., almost as if they could see right into her. She bristled. It was extremely unsettling, just like much about this Jedi. "What are you looking at?" she asked, her tone even, respectful, but the words harsh and biting, and for just a moment, the Jedi had a look of surprise on his face, like he didn't know what to do with words that conflicted with her tone.

"N-nothing," he stuttered. "I just thought..." He shook his head. "Never mind..." He returned to his datapad, quietly muttering as he often did to himself, but this time, Satine could hear him, and she could have sworn what she heard was Mando'a. She leaned in closer, peeking over his shoulder at his datapad and grinned. It was Mando'a. He was studying the language. "What are you doing?" she asked, far louder than necessary being so close to his ear, and the boy tensed, a sharp gasp of surprise in his throat as he jumped and fumbled the datapad, his quick reflexes recovering just in time to catch it before it fell. He held it close to his chest, his eyes narrowed and skeptical, and the vaguest hint of annoyance on his face. He did have emotions, and he had expressed two in the span of a few minutes. It must have been a record for him. Perhaps they should celebrate this momentous occasion.

"Studying..." he nearly whispered, his voice calm and even as the expression dropped from his face. "As my Master commanded."

"Studying what?" she asked innocently, and those eyes narrowed further, a faint smile playing on Satine's lips as the boy's frustration mounted.

"The language of your people," he managed to say, his voice tense as his patience was tried. "It is...challenging."

"Can you say that in Mando'a?" He held his breath, and Satine could see the teen's chest tighten, though with what, she couldn't be sure. It could have been anything from nerves to anger. From frustration to plain stubbornness.

"Bic cuyir umaan," the Jedi said softly, slowly, as if he was weighing each of the foreign words on his tongue before he spoke them. The edge of his mouth twitched in satisfaction, not quite a small smile, but the emotion behind it was clear. But Satine did smile, a grin that never quite reached her eyes, and Kenobi frowned in response. Three days with the Duchess had taught him that her pleasure never ended well for him. He really didn't like this girl.
"Oh, you poor dear," she said, her tone sweet, but it reeked of patronization. "Your pronunciation is all wrong. Cuyir, not cuýir, umaan, not umaan. Forgive me, but you sound like a hopeless case." Obi-Wan bowed his head, and for a moment, Satine felt bad for having teased him, considering that he was trying to learn her language, which wouldn't be easy with his soft, aristocratic accent, but the feeling fled when she saw the hint of a devious smirk upon his handsome face.

"Forgive me, Duchess," he said, his smooth voice calm and even and slightly repentant. "Mando'a is difficult for me. It's harsh and grating, and nearly half of your vocabulary is as brutal as your people." His eyes met hers, and they almost seemed to glow with intelligence and wit, and for just a moment, Satine felt her heart begin to race. In anger, she decided. It could be from nothing else. "I'm just not made for such, I suppose," he continued. "Your very language sounds like the drums of war, no wonder your people fight."

"Don't be bitter just because you're hopeless, Jedi," she said, her voice tight but still controlled, but she glanced at the Master just to be certain she was not breaking his rules. She wasn't, if his closed eyes and deep, even breathing were any indication. She looked back at Obi-Wan and saw a flash of stubbornness in his eyes, bold and defiant, and he looked back on the datapad in his hands and his face the very image of emotionlessness once again. Though she did get the last word, if felt like defeat. She glared at the back of the Jedi's head and felt instantly infuriated by nearly everything about him. His gall at showing her defiance when she was royalty and he was nothing but a student with a Master, not even his own man, not even a man at all! His aloof mannerisms, his habit of running that tiny, stupid braid through his fingers, his clipped, superior accent, the folds of his robes, his meticulous neatness, everything.

Obi-Wan reached up and pulled at his braid, and Satine couldn't take it anymore. "Are all Jedi so stubborn as you?" she asked, her tone biting as her frustration got the better of her, and Kenobi just looked back at her with that bored, indifferent expression.

"I don't know. Are all Mandalorians so aggressive as you?" he asked, her voice tight but still controlled, but she glanced at the Master just to be certain she was not breaking his rules. She wasn't, if his closed eyes and deep, even breathing were any indication. She looked back at Obi-Wan and saw a flash of stubbornness in his eyes, bold and defiant, and he quickly looked away, his gaze back on the datapad in his hands and his face the very image of emotionlessness once again. Though she did get the last word, if felt like defeat. She glared at the back of the Jedi's head and felt instantly infuriated by nearly everything about him. His gall at showing her defiance when she was royalty and he was nothing but a student with a Master, not even his own man, not even a man at all! His aloof mannerisms, his habit of running that tiny, stupid braid through his fingers, his clipped, superior accent, the folds of his robes, his meticulous neatness, everything.

"I have time," she said swiftly. "I want to learn. If your student is studying about my people, I can learn about yours. Will you tell me?"

"We don't have time," Obi-Wan said, his tone harsh, and her frustration mounting, Satine whipped her head around to tell him exactly what she thought of him when she saw something out of the corner of her eye through the viewport, and her attention was immediately diverted. Out in space before them hung the planet Zanbar, white cloud cover swirling over the rich, deep blues of the dark side of the planet. That wasn't what caught her attention, though. She was focused on the capital ship that loomed in space over the planet, marked with the red, jagged image of a shriek-hawk, the symbol of Clan Vizsla and the Death Watch.

"How do they keep finding us?!" Satine asked, the panic in her voice rising as her heart pounded in her chest.

"I think we found them this time..." Obi-Wan said, his voice dispassionate as focus settled over him and his hands worked the navicom, quickly punching in coordinates for the ship to calculate their jump out of there.
"Obi-Wan..." Qui-Gon said, his voice slightly tense with worry as he watched a swarm of starfighters pour from the capital ship, coming at them fast like a black cloud, alarms quickly beeping to warn that the massive ship before them had a weapon's lock on them. "We need to get out of here."

"I'm working on it," he snapped, his hands tightening around the yoke and the accelerator and activating the cruiser's weapon systems, the targeting array folding down in front of the copilot's chair, and Qui-Gon quickly took the controls.

"Those starfighters are faster than this ship!" Satine said quickly, her hands digging into the backs of the pilot and copilot chairs as she looked out of the viewport, her eyes wide and frightened. "We can't outrun them, and there are too many of them for us to fight!" She squeaked in surprise when Obi-Wan took the ship into a rapid, horizontal spin, rolling out of the way as a line of green ion energy tore through space from the capital ship, narrowly missing the cruiser, but taking out several of the buzzing starfighters in its wake.

"Sit down, secure your restraints and shut up!" Obi-Wan snarled, looking back at her from over his shoulder for a moment, his eyes alight with focus. "I know what I'm doing!"

"Do you?" Satine asked frantically as she quickly sat and locked herself in as directed. "Because you're flying right toward them!" The Jedi said nothing, the focus between them absolute as Qui-Gon shot the swiftly oncoming ships with the forward cannons, and Obi-Wan expertly piloted them through an array of plasma bolts and streaking torpedoes and green beams of energy from the capital ship, keeping as many starfighters between himself and the enormous vessel to have the ion cannon inflict maximum damage upon their own fighters as he artfully spun out of the way. When they drew closer to the capital ship, Obi-Wan thrust the yoke forward, causing the cruiser to dive underneath the Mandalorian warships and toward the planet in an effort to himself a chance to flip the ship around and use the planet's orbital pull to fling him out of range of the quickly closing starfighters.

In the grip of the planet's gravitational field, the cruiser began to shake and rock, both from the strain of the planet's pull and from the plasma bolts that occasionally struck them, depleting their slowly diminishing shields. Just a little further, and he'd have the chance to breech the planet's pull, gaining a boost of much needed speed as the ship was slung off into open space.

"Why haven't we jumped yet!" Satine asked, breaking her tense silence as she felt the ship begin to rock violently. "How much longer is it going to be?!"

"Two minutes twenty eight seconds..." Obi-Wan repeated emotionlessly as he spun the ship to the side, avoiding the next streaking beam of green energy just in time.

"That's a long time in a war zone, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said as he fired twice and destroyed the ship swooping down in front of them from above.

"I can do it, Master," he said confidently just as the ship rocked hard, the cabin lights flickering as warning alarms began to blare. The shields were down, and the cruiser's hyperdrive had been damaged. Obi-Wan swallowed hard, looked quickly at his instrumentations, and centered himself in the Force. "It's alright, this is still manageable!"

"It is not manageable!" Satine shouted, her system flooded with adrenaline and a cold, sinking feeling in her stomach. "This is beyond you, Jedi, set us down on the planet before you get us all killed!"

"They see us, Duchess!" Obi-Wan shouted back, keeping his eyes focused before him. "We set down, we'll be open targets, and we'll be dead for sure! At least we have a chance in the ship!"
"We do not!"

"We do!" he snapped, brimming with anger and confidence and defiance as he looked back at the shaking girl quickly. "I can do this!" He could. Just a little further, and they'd slingshot around the planet, and the boost of speed they got from that would be enough to put a safe distance between them and the starfighters. This was where he excelled. At the helm of a ship, he had no match. Just a little further...

Just as the cruiser was about to clear Zanbar's orbit, the ship lurched forward and rocked violently, the alarms blaring as the power went out, the sudden jolt knocking them all out of their senses, and when Obi-Wan managed to get his wits about him, he looked out the viewport to see Zanbar, then open space marked by stars, then the capital ship and the starfighters. Then Zanbar, bigger than before as they rapidly spun bow over stern, out of control as they rocketed toward the planet as they crashed.

He was going to be sick...

Closing his eyes for a moment to center himself and clear away his sudden nausea, Obi-Wan quickly moved to attempt to repair the dead ship, pulling out wires and rerouting the ship's thrusters to the emergency power and hoping that their emergency power systems hadn't been taken out with the rest. Just as flames filled the viewport with the burning of a steep and dangerous entry into the atmosphere, the emergency power blinked on, and Kenobi activated the thrusters, compensating against their spin and managing to even them out just enough to not burn up on their entry. He pulled back hard on the yoke with both hands, his arms shaking from the effort of fighting against the ship, and he looked over to his passengers, both dazed, but slowly coming to.

The Jedi regained his senses first, and he quickly undid his restraints and moved to the seat behind his, bracing his back against the copilot's chair as he gripped Satine's chair, adding an additional layer of protection between her and the impact he knew was coming. The ship was slowing, but not enough, and despite his best efforts, the smoking cruiser struck trees as they approached the ground, ripping through them like they were nothing, the rapid impacts slowing them down just enough that when the ship finally struck ground, it didn't explode or burn, the impact jostling them in the cabin and the ship slowed further by the damp, soggy ground of Zanbar's swamp terrain.

Swamp water splashed up and showered the viewport, dousing the flames on the engines as it left long, deep furloughs in the soft soil. They had crashed, but they were all alive.

As soon as the ship stopped, the Jedi moved into action, Qui-Gon throwing off Satine's restraints and picking the girl up in his arms while Obi-Wan activated his lightsaber and drove it through the hull, cutting their way out of the wreckage of the ship. As soon as Obi-Wan jumped out, he sunk knee high into mud and swamp water, his eyes trained on the black of the night sky as he looked for the enemy ships. He couldn't see them through the thicket of trees that grew out of the swamps, but he could hear the screech of starfighters as they entered the atmosphere. The second Qui-Gon hit the ground with Satine tightly held in his arms, the Jedi were running as fast as they were able through the swamps as they looked for a place where they could regroup.

Qui-Gon kept a careful eye on his Padawan as they ran, the boy's eyes focused, his face calm and peaceful, the very image of a Jedi, but just beneath the surface, Obi-Wan's powerful mental walls lay in ruins, his presence shaky and uncertain like it hadn't been since the day he was made to repeatedly fail the Council's tests. Whatever confidence he had lay in his ability to fly, and that confidence had just been shattered, the result of compensating overconfidence and reaching just too high. With the boy's anxieties and his powerful drive toward perfection, this blow was a wound to an already slight pride that would not soon be healed.

Damn it...
They set down in a large tree hollowed out by decay that provided good cover from most angles and shielded them completely from sight from above. They could be seen from hole from which they entered, but they would be able to see anyone approaching first. It wasn't ideal, but it was going to have to do.

"I'm sorry, Master," Obi-Wan said softly, his voice shaking with emotion as Qui-Gon set the Duchess down. "I-I did the best I could, I-

"I know, Obi-Wan..." he said kindly, a reassuring hand on the boy's shaking shoulder and watching with concern as a wide range of emotions played across the usually stoic boy's face. Repentance, fear and worry for what had happened, where they were, the danger they were in, and doubt, loathing and disgust for himself, for his failure, for what he had so foolishly led them into. "It was unavoidable. We wouldn't be alive now if you hadn't managed to safely crash us."

"This is your fault!" Satine hissed from her spot, rising from the ground and shaking in her fury, and Qui-Gon watched as the expression on his Padawan's face turned from apologetic to cold, pure rage. "I told you we should have set down! You should have flown away while we had the chance!"

"I told you," Obi-Wan growled through grit teeth, trying his best to control his emotions, but he was rapidly failing. "We couldn't set down! I did what I had to do, I thought-

"You thought wrong!" she snapped. "Maybe you were just arrogant! Maybe, Obi-Wan Kenobi, you aren't nearly so good a pilot as you seem to think!" The words stabbed into Obi-Wan like a knife, a critical strike in a wound that was already wide open and bleeding, and he turned furious blue eyes on the Duchess, his usually expressionless face filled with anger and hatred and scorn so intense that Satine staggered back, her breath caught in her throat and too afraid to breathe, and she suddenly found herself missing the Jedi's quiet, emotionless demeanor, now suddenly seeming less arrogant and more quiet and contemplative in the light of the wrath he now turned on her.

"Alright, Duchess," he spat with contempt, slowly drawing closer to her and sneering when she drew herself up in a show of defiance despite her fear. "You wanted me to talk, hmm? You want me to open up and express emotion, well, here it is! Shall I tell you exactly what I think of you?"

"Yes," she said in a voice far more confident than she felt, but now, she was in her element. She had been dealing with the passionate mood swings of the Mandalorians since the day she was born, and she could certainly handle this emotionally stunted Jedi. "But you have to do it in five words," she snapped, hoping to impose Kenobi's own seemingly self-imposed limit on him, but those eyes just narrowed and he leaned in close to her. She didn't back away, not even when their faces were inches from each other.

"You will never change Mandalore," he slowly drawled, his voice expressionless as was his usual, but before, it had been flat, devoid of warmth, but also lacking the cold, removed quality of one who was truly heartless. Now, his tone was bitingly cold, and Satine found herself trembling for it.

"Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon swiftly admonished, and with a callous smirk, the Padawan slowly drew out of the stunned Satine's space. "Apologize immediately!" The teenager turned on his heel to face the Duchess, mockingly bowed toward her, and stormed toward the opening of the tree.

"I'm going to scout ahead," Kenobi said swiftly, his hand on the lightsaber at his belt. "They'll be searching for us, and we need a better place to hide."

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon started. "It's best I-"
"Her Highness wants you to protect her, not me," he said bitingly. "This makes the most sense." Qui-Gon sighed heavily and bowed his head. This was for the best, not just in terms of guarding the girl, but for his student's own well being. He needed to be alone so he could recenter himself. Obi-Wan could always be trusted to do that, at least. When things were bad, he always returned to the Code for comfort and guidance, and now was no different.

"Try to be back within the hour."

"I'll see what I can do." With that, Obi-Wan took off and soon disappeared into the heavy mists of the swamp. With a heavy sigh, Qui-Gon leaned his back against the soft, spongy wood of the tree and ran his hand over his face as he reached out through his connection with his student and found the boy already returning to a calm, controlled state. Obi-Wan would be fine. He would always be fine.

"Master Jedi?" Satine asked softly after a long, fraught silence. "Do the Jedi-

"I will not discuss the Jedi with you, Duchess," Qui-Gon said tiredly, refusing to meet the girl's hurt expression. He felt a headache coming on. "Not now. Not when I am angry at them. Not when the Code and the way of the Council has failed my student." He could feel the Duchess slowly creeping closer, but he ignored her as he delved into his own thoughts and frustrations. "We are told to open ourselves to others, but to never let our emotions rule us. Obi-Wan was woefully unprepared for this mission. Nothing in the Jedi Code could have prepared him to deal with an emotionally volatile teenage girl."

"...is this all my fault?" Satine whispered, her eyes downcast and her slight frame trembling. "...no," the Jedi said after a moment. "No, this would have happened at some point regardless. The Code...does not prepare the younger Jedi for life in the galaxy. He grew up isolated, surrounded by children taught, the same as him, to distance themselves from emotion." He sighed. "But the galaxy is passionate, and maybe a Jedi Master can feel the powerful emotions around them and remain aloof, but a teenager?" He scoffed. "No matter the species, no matter the upbringing, and adolescent is an adolescent. There's already enough going on with hormones, but to then be exposed to a girl like you? And be expected to connect and remain unaffected?" Qui-Gon whistled. "Impossible."

"I've been awful and unkind..." she said, her voice trembling with emotions she tried desperately to hold back. "I-I didn't know, I-

"As I said, this isn't your doing. If you weren't an emotional wreck, something would be terribly wrong with you. You and Obi-Wan...met at a bad time," He smiled gently at her, a hand on her shoulder and gently urging her to sit. She silently obeyed, her knees drawn to her chest as she waited for the Jedi Master to sit before her. "You need emotional comfort, and were met with his aloofness, which made you angry, which made him more withdrawn, and so on." He shrugged. "It's a cycle, and now you hate each other."

"He is...quite infuriating, yes," she said, her lips pursed as she thought about it, and the Jedi softly chuckled. "If you could just tell him to-"

"I can't do anything about Obi-Wan because he isn't here," Qui-Gon gently explained. "Nor would I if he was. Obi-Wan is Obi-Wan, and it is not in my power to change him. That change must come from within, as must yours." He looked her right in the eye when she began to protest, and she swiftly fell silent. "You are here," the Jedi said. "And so, I can help you. Tell me what troubles you, Duchess, and I can help you ease your burden."

She recoiled slightly, immediately rejecting the very notion. A leader relied on nobody. A
Mandalorian didn't ask for help from outsiders, let alone Jedi. But...she was so alone, and had been so badly craving companionship. She would never like Obi-Wan, could never feel comfortable with such a cold creature, even if it wasn't his fault, even if that was the way he was raised. She was beginning to understand, and she disliked it all the same. Qui-Gon wasn't like that. He was warmth and compassion, deep and endless. For his sake, she would mind his student, would remain civil, would hold her tongue better than she had, but she didn't have to like him.

Slowly, carefully, she began to whisper to the Jedi Master about her mother, her father, her brother, about her people, both for her and against her, and slowly, Qui-Gon Jinn began to help her heal the wounds.

There is no emotion, there is peace...

Obi-Wan's sprint through the swamp slowed to a jog as he put distance between himself and the subject of his disturbance, and the cold, wet air of the swamp, the air filled with the calls of the local fauna, the feel of the planet teeming with life cleared his mind, the Code on his lips settling himself back into peace and serenity, and he felt awful. He had been needlessly cruel to Satine, had lost himself in a rush of anger brought on by a mix of his own frustrations with himself and the Duchess' own infectious anger. He had tried so hard to understand her, to connect as he was supposed to, the empathy of the Jedi bringing compassion and understanding, but every time he had opened himself to Satine, he was overwhelmed. What was worse was that no matter how guarded he was, she seemed to effect him, all of them united by the flow of the Force, and when he found his own careful guard shattered, he stood no chance to resist the overwhelming power of her emotions.

It wasn't her fault, of course. She was young and alone, desperate and grief-stricken and lashing out at all who came near. But such passion was...toxic, as Obi-Wan well knew, and was a dangerous thing to people who could feel the Force, as well as to those that could not. Satine had been made angry and cruel by the darkness thrust upon her. This was why the Jedi had the rules they did. This was why they did not allow themselves family and love. As if the lessons that Master Qui-Gon imparted to him were not enough, a terrifying, visual reminder of what happens when one becomes too attached, Satine stood as a cautionary tale, a bleak reminder of what happens when one becomes too passionate. It was all depression and grief and anger, a desperation so intense that it contaminated everything around her, made her lash out at those who did nothing to deserve it, changed even them into cruel creatures that moved to hurt her in turn, and so, she was trapped.

This was how the Dark Side held on to those that fell. This was why it was impossible to go back. Darkness could not be banished with darkness, and in her struggle, Satine had made him hate her, just as he knew she hated him.

There was little he could do for her but keep his distance and hope for the best. Nothing he had done had made a positive impact anyway. She was a difficult case, one better suited to his Master, not to him. But Obi-Wan did vow to do better. He could hold his tongue and keep his peace, but more than that, he could...

He didn't know. He felt...small. A Jedi was valued by the strength of their connection to the Force, but Obi-Wan had never felt the strength of the connection like his friends did, like the others did. His was but a drop in an infinite ocean, so slight that he had nearly been passed over by twelve of the most powerful Jedi in the galaxy. No, his value was elsewhere, and he etched out his influence where he could make it. He was smart, this he knew, and steadfast and dedicated, and until today, he had considered himself something of a great pilot, good enough to consider it as an option were he to fail his Trials. But now...
Satine had been right, cruel as though she was about it. He was not the pilot he believed himself to be. And she...could not save Mandalore. He had meant that, though not as cruelly as he had made it seem. She was too much like her kinsmen, though where they drew weapons, Satine used words, something far more powerful, and even with a Jedi’s defenses, they still cut, and they still hurt. She was a soldier, just like the others, and someone so cruel as she had shown herself to be, regardless of the reasons, could not lead Mandalore to peace. But she would. He could feel it deep inside him. She was young and unpolished, but given time to learn and grow, Satine Kryze could bring her peace to Mandalore. That's what he should have told her, not left it as he had.

He felt stupid, a mess of conflicting emotions and ideals. Qui-Gon had said that adolescence was difficult, but Obi-Wan had thought it had been limited to embarrassing thoughts that seemed to creep into his mind and severely uncomfortable mornings of painful, shameful, pointless arousal. He didn't think it would include acting like an absolute child in front of the first beautifully passionate girl he laid his eyes on. It was like his thoughts weren't his own. It was like Quinlan sat laughing in the deepest parts of his mind.

The Force tugged at him, strong and insistent and pulling him out of his mind and into the present, and the Jedi dropped to the wet and muddy ground, slowing his breathing and his heartbeat in his focus. There was nothing he could do about Satine, so thinking on her was pointless. All that mattered was the mission, and the mission was to keep her alive. It was simple, clear, without complications, and that was something he could handle. A smile crossed his face as he felt the Force pulse within him, guiding him slowly along as he silently crawled close to the ground. He felt...clear. Focused, his emotions fading before the task at hand. He could do this. Satine's feelings, her frustrations with him, his own frustrations with her, none of it mattered, and he released it into the Force, focus and purpose filling him like a breath of fresh air.

Anything within him that felt weak, inadequate, lost, hopeless...all of that could be dealt with together with his Master when they next had the time. For now, all that mattered was the mission and the calling of the Force.

As Obi-Wan crawled, he slowly became aware of the wrongness around him, the Force not just rippling with life, but disturbed by ill-intent, by violence, by killers, murderers, and not just one. Hundreds. He felt them first, then he heard them, pressing himself low to the ground when ships went screeching overhead. He slowed, being mindful and cautious, focusing on his return to his Master and his charge, and keeping to the underbrush, he peaked out over the edge of a gradual slope down into a murky valley, and that's when he saw them. Mandalorians. Thousands, all in the black and blue of Death Watch, all rushing about like a swarm ready to defend their hive. They were deploying ships by the dozen, entire squadrons of soldiers with jetpacks taking off into the air, large companies of soldiers on foot spreading out in search parties, their helmet lights on to see better in the dark and accompanied by large, savage looking carnivorous quadrupeds that sniffed at the ground and screeched. Tracking animals.

Obi-Wan didn't understand much Mandalorian, and from the distance, they were difficult to hear, let alone understand, but he gleaned enough from the words he did understand to know what was happening. They had found the ship they had shot down, confirmed it to be the ship the Duchess left Sundari with, and without any bodies present, they were hunting for Satine and her Jedi guard. When a group began heading in his direction, their steps cautious and uneasy, Obi-Wan sprinted from the scene as fast as the Force would allow, praying they did not know he was there, but he knew very well that was extremely unlikely.

That they had landed in a swamp was fortunate. Many things about the terrain would make them difficult to hunt.
He didn't make straight for their hiding spot, instead opting to go out of his way to tromp through swamp waters, and on one occasion, dive into a pool of clear, crystal water flowing down from a waterfall that cut into the rocky surface of a cliff face to make it harder to track him. He took note of this pool of water, running deep into the ground, far beneath the surface, and he could sense something...something else there. He didn't know what, but it felt like safety to him. Logging the location of the pool in his mind, he continued his serpentine train through the swamp back to Qui-Gon and Satine.

He arrived to the Jedi Master gently holding the girl as she cried, and upon his breathless arrival, Satine jumped to her feet, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand and sniffing, her head tall and her eyes proud, and already, Obi-Wan could feel the tension between them. He pushed it to the side. He could live with tension. The Force knew that he had his fair share of tension training being friends with Quinlan Vos.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, his voice low and concerned and he quickly rose when he saw fear in his young student's eyes. "What is it, what's wrong?"

"Death Watch," Obi-Wan gasped, and he shivered, as if saying it out loud made him realize the gravity of the situation. No ship, no means of escape, stranded in a swamp with the most hunted person in the entire sector, and her enemies owned the planet. "There's an encampment a ways off, there are thousands of them, and that was just what I could see."

"...how far away?" Qui-Gon asked, lowering his voice and suddenly very keenly aware of every sound, the smell of the air, the shifting of the Force.

"I don't know, maybe...ten klicks or so to the south." Obi-Wan frowned and shook his head, the fear within him slowly rising into anxiety driven panic. "Look, it doesn't matter where, they're coming, Master. They know we're here, and they're mobilizing their forces to hunt us. They found our ship, they have tracking animals, ships, soldiers with jetpacks and-"

"Did they see you?" Qui-Gon asked quickly, and his Padawan just stood and stared at him, gasping as he tried to speak, but no words came out. "Obi-Wan, focus! Did they see you?!"

"I-I don't know!" the Padawan finally managed to choke. "I did what I could to cover my tracks in case they did, I-" He stopped when he heard a low flying ship overhead, followed by the roar of jetpacks and the rush of air from flames, smoke rising in the distance as flamethrowers were turned on underbrush in an attempt to flush them out of hiding. The smoke wasn't far off, and within seconds, they could hear the harsh shouts of the soldiers and the quick, sharp howls of their tracking beasts.

"You brought them right to us!" Satine gasped, though her tone wasn't accusatory, simply frightened.

"I did no such thing!" Obi-Wan quickly objected. "They were coming for you anyway, they know you're here!"

"If you didn't lead them to us, then the time it took to cover your tracks ruined any advanced notice we could have had," Qui-Gon said, soft and quick as he took his lightsaber in his hand. One look at the fearful, desperate, apologetic face of his Padawan softened him for a moment, and he laid his hand on the boy's shoulder, the teenager flinching from the sudden contact. "If what you say was true, they were coming anyway. At least you got a look at exactly what is coming for us." He pointed to his temple. "Next time, Obi-Wan...we share a connection. Use it. I felt your disturbance in the Force, but...that has been your natural state these past few days, hasn't it."

"...forgive me, Master," Obi-Wan whispered, his gaze drifting to stare at the ground. He couldn't
look at his Master any more than he could look at the Duchess, though the reasons were vastly different. *This* was guilt, and it felt *much* worse.

"What are we going to do?" Satine asked quickly, her hands wringing together to keep the Jedi from seeing how much she was trembling.

"We're going to run," Qui-Go said quickly, leaning his head out of their hiding spot and looking around, and he leaned back in quickly and hissed when he saw lights in the distance. They were very close. "Obi-Wan, we're going to have to fight our way out. How big were their search teams?"

"I don't know..." he muttered, closing his eyes as he thought. "Squads of twenty, I believe, for the ground troops. Squads of ten for the jetpacks. I think the starfighters were leaving in pairs."

"That's a lot of people..." Qui-Gon took a deep breath. "Maybe we can fight off one squadron together, but the Mandalorians are feared throughout the galaxy for a reason. Once we make our presence known, they will *all* be coming for us. We need to hide. Did you see anything out there we could use?" The boy didn't respond. "*...Obi-Wan!*"

"Yes!" the Padawan gasped, startled by the Master's hard tone. "Yes, I saw something. *Well...I felt* something. Out in the forest. I didn't *see* it, but it felt like safety."

"That's it?!" Satine scoffed. "We're going to run out into dark woods swarming with soldiers that want you because of a *feeling*?!"

"That is *exactly* what we are going to do, Duchess," Qui-Gon said firmly, his tone strong and commanding and leaving no room for debate, and the girl fell silent, her fear intensifying. This was far, far more dangerous than being in Sundari during attacks. "Obi-Wan, can you take us there?"

"I can." Qui-Gon gave his student a quick nod as the boy reluctantly took his lightsaber in hand. "Duchess, stay close." Without hesitation, the girl slipped between her Jedi guards, her bottom lip caught between her teeth, but now that there was a plan, she was resolved and committed to it. "Lead the way, Obi-Wan."

They ducked out of their hiding place, creeping slowly through the swamp water that came nearly to their waist to minimize the sound of splashing, and as soon as they hit the soft ground of the shore, they took off running, keeping low and staying in the shadows and underbrush as much as they could. They didn't get far before a sharp, swift howl pierced the still, silent air, heavy and oppressive without the sounds of the wildlife around them, the creatures of the swamp muted as they hid from the intruders in their home. The silence was further broken by the modulated shouts of the Mandalorians through their helmets and loud splashing as the search group ran through the swampy water. All hope that the Death Watch was somehow on the wrong trail was dashed when blaster fire raced past them, uncomfortably close to their heads.

They ran faster, the sudden rush of adrenaline urging them even faster, and while they managed to increase the distance between them and their pursuers, they couldn't avoid the group of warriors on jetpacks rushing at them from ahead and slowly moving out to flank them. The Jedi stopped before a large, thick tree and pressed Satine against it, ignited their lightsabers as one, and stood protectively before her. It was the closest thing to a defendable position they were going to get.

"Your count puts us at thirty Mandalorians," Qui-Gon said softly to his student as he raised his blade and quickly deflected the burst of blaster fire aimed at them, sending the bolts back at the one who shot them and striking not only him, but the two flying in formation beside him, their bodies dropping out of the air and falling heavy into the waters of the swamp.
"For now..." Obi-Wan muttered softly, deflecting the bolts of plasma as well, his focus intense and his gaze resolved as his deflections missed the soldiers, but he didn't miss when he raised his hand and threw two swiftly approaching ground soldiers back with the Force, their flailing bodies flung into the group behind them and causing several of them to be knocked over. "They will call for reinforcements if they haven't already, Master. We can't kill an entire army!"

"You're right, we can't..." The two Jedi moved as one, their blades swinging so quickly to deflect the blaster fire it seemed as though the light wove a protective barrier around their charge. Qui-Gon's blade seemed to move by the hand of the Force, instinct and reflex alone driving his movements as his focus turned toward the Death Watch, the soldiers keeping their distance from their dangerous enemy as their comrades slowly began to fall. His eyes shot to one as he prepared a rocket launcher, and with a quick wave of his hand, Qui-Gon sent the weapon spinning in the air just as the trigger was pulled, causing the missile to land at the feet of a small group and detonating in the soft earth, the resulting explosion killing those caught in the blast radius.

"Briirud rud, eso te aru'e!" one of the soldiers, the obvious commander, shouted, and Satine quickly pulled at Qui-Gon's robes.

"They're circling around behind us!" He didn't look at her, but he quickly nodded to indicate that he heard her, and he reached out with the Force, turbulent and disturbed and choppy with violence and murderous intent, and he felt it, sharp and deep and from behind them, just as the girl had indicated. Without taking his gaze from the bulk of the soldiers before them, Qui-Gon spun his blade in his hand, caught it in a backhanded grip, and thrust it behind him, the emerald plasma of the weapon piercing through the chest of the soldier that approached from behind. He dropped to the ground, dead instantly, and with a powerful push of the Force from both Master and Padawan to their flank, the Death Watch rethought the strategy of trying to circle behind them.

With the Mandalorian dead right beside her, Satine swallowed hard, reached over and laid a hand on his helmet, silent for just a moment before she reached down to the holster on his leg and drew his blaster, trained it on the soldiers before her, and began to shoot back. Obi-Wan glanced down at her from the corner of his eye when he felt the change in her, the shift from fear to grim determination, and he watched her shoot.

She was a terrible shot.

Her shots struck shoulders and arms and legs, never chest, never head, and it took Obi-Wan a moment to realize that her terrible shooting was actually very good shooting. She was missing on purpose, disabling, hurting, but not killing, and despite the direness of the situation, she couldn't help but feel the pull of admiration within him, the young ruler forced to fight her own people, but refusing to kill them. They were all Mandalorian, all her people, all her responsibility, even if they rejected her rule.

When the pulse weapons were brought out, Qui-Gon quickly neutralized the force of the blast of energy with his own push of the Force against it, the blue circle of energy dissipating into the air time and time again as the Master used the Force the way the soldiers used the pulse rifles.

"I'm going to create an opening," Qui-Gon softly told his Padawan. When you see it, take the Duchess and run, I'll cover your retreat."

"I won't leave you, Master," Obi-Wan said softly, his blade spinning before him as he batted back yet more blaster shots, his hand quickly sweeping before him to deflect the rocket that was shot just enough to send it flying past them.

"You will," Qui-Gon said firmly. "You must. We will die if we stay here, and their reinforcements will be coming. They will be worse shots on the move and they will be forced to
spread out. We can handle them then." After a moment's hesitation, Obi-Wan nodded, his face
drawn in his focused determination, and he reached back and grabbed hold of the Duchess' hand,
squeezing it reassuringly when he felt her tense. "Are you ready?"

"Ready, Master."

"Run. I will be right behind you." His hand balled into a fist as he grabbed the pulse rifle with the
Force, wrenching the weapon sideways just as it was shot and sending the rapid energy disc flying
into the soldiers off to their side, their bodies tensing and shaking as they collapsed to the ground,
and as commanded, Obi-Wan ran, the Duchess' hand tight in his own, his lightsaber deftly
blocking the shots fired at them as they rushed past their line. The Mandalorians were relentless,
their diminished force shouting and angry as their target escaped, quickly giving chase only to be
met by the dangerous green blade of the Jedi Master, the man cutting through arms and legs,
stabbing through lungs and hearts as the warriors scattered through the swamp in pursuit of the
two teenagers.

Obi-Wan stayed right at Satine's side, keeping perfect pace with her even as his attention was
behind them on the Mandalorians that managed to rush past Qui-Gon's deadly blade. He could
feel his Master through the Force, focused on the task, not the Code that Obi-Wan always held so
close to him when things were bad. It made the job easier, made killing easier without the Way of
the Jedi to interfere, without looking toward the future and imagining the people that would suffer
for the death he dealt, existing only in the moment where success boiled down to a matter of kill or
be killed. And Qui-Gon would be successful.

He swung his lightsaber behind them, effortlessly batting away the bolts that made their way to
them, his entire being open to the Force as he heard Satine's labored breathing, the high, whine of
blasters being primed, the shouts of the Death Watch, the roar of the jetpacks' engines drawing
swiftly closer, the pounding of his own heart. They would be on them soon, and Qui-Gon
wouldn't be here in time. He swallowed hard and banished the pain in his chest when he realized
what he would be forced to do. Killing people in enemy starfighters was one thing, but this...this
was far more personal, more painful. But he had to.

He swiftly turned, his hand tightly clutching Satine's as he pulled her down into the swampy
water, the girl falling with a cry of surprise as the Jedi planted himself before her and rapidly spun
his lightsaber, deflecting the punishing barrage of blaster bolts that rained down on him from
above, not a single redirected shot striking the man that fired it. He stayed in the air, circling
around to try and hit the girl that the Jedi protected, but Obi-Wan would not allow it, keeping
himself between the warrior and the Duchess, no matter the angle. With a frustrated cry and a
swiftly spat curse that Obi-Wan did recognize from his studies, the Mandalorian attempted to fly
over the Jedi's head, to get a clear shot from above, but Kenobi reached out with the Force and
grabbed hold of the jetpack and pulled hard, the powerful motion pulling the Death Watch trooper
back and causing the jetpack to spark and smoke.

The warrior dislodged himself from the pack, dropping to the swamp just as the jetpack's fuel cell
ignited and exploded, and once on the knee high water, he wasted no time in raising his blaster and
firing rapidly at the Jedi as he swiftly advanced, the lightsaber blocking every strike that came
toward him. Obi-Wan had no time to think, no time to do anything but move on instinct as the
Mandalorian rushed him, and with his blade spinning in his hand, he ducked down to avoid a shot
that narrowly missed his head, and when the soldier was nearly on top of him, he rose again,
driving the blade upwards and piercing the soldier through the lungs, the tip of his weapon
extending out behind him. He could hear the modulated voice gasp and gargle as air and life left
him, could feel the Force shiver in his death throes, and Obi-Wan felt cold deep in his bones, and
it haunted him.
He could see the green glow of Qui-Gon's lightsaber as he rushed toward them through the mist, cutting down the Death Watch soldiers that had managed to get by him before, but everything seemed to be moving so slowly to Obi-Wan, like everything was underwater, like he couldn’t breathe, like every time he tried, his lungs filled with freezing liquid, and it burned. It was worse than the first time he had killed someone barely a week ago, something he had wished to never feel again, and it sickened him. He felt his life fade like the extinguishing of a flame, like the chill of darkness where the sun used to shine warmly, like water slipping through his fingers, and he felt lost, cold, desperate to make the feeling vanish, and he retreated deep into himself to protect himself from the thick haze of death that he had brought upon him.

He saw the soldier out of the corner of his eye, the blue and black armor approaching just off to his side, his blaster pistols raised and aimed at the Duchess. Everything was moving so slowly, even Obi-Wan, and he raised his lightsaber, moving it before her to deflect the two bursts that fired from the blasters. With everything moving so painfully slow, Obi-Wan could see everything, the red bolts of plasma as they left the twin barrels, the streak of light from his weapon as it moved through the air too slow to block them. His blade wouldn't be fast enough. He twisted, trying to angle the blade in a better position, but it was too little, too late, and with no other options left, the mission clear and focused in his mind, Obi-Wan stepped between Satine and the killing shots.

Time returned to its normal flow, and Obi-Wan was slammed by the two blaster bolts, the searing plasma burning into his right shoulder and his left side, and he gasped sharply as he staggered backwards, the immense pain rushing through him silencing the sounds of Satine's screams. He could feel nothing else, his vision tunneling into intense focus as he looked upon the soldier before him, and the pain turned to steel in his veins, hard and stalwart and impenetrable, his feet digging into the mud under the water as he firmly held his ground. Obi-Wan felt his mental walls fly up, stronger than ever before, his physical resistance pushed far beyond what he believed himself to be capable of, and in that moment, he felt that nothing could kill him, not while he was defending that ungrateful, infuriating, frightened, beautiful Duchess.

He didn't miss the next three shots. His lightsaber moved so swiftly he could barely see the blade, the first two shots redirected to strike the water, but the third was expertly deflected, the red plasma shooting back at the soldier and burning a hole right through his helmet, and the man dropped dead, his body landing with a splash in the water. Obi-Wan watched as another soldier came rushing toward them, but before he could get close, green plasma shot out of his chest and Qui-Gon ran him through, his weapon deactivating as he rushed to his Padawan and grabbed him as he staggered back, his hand clutched to the burning hole in his side.

"We aren't far now, Master..." Obi-Wan said, his voice perfectly even, perfectly removed from his body, even as he felt the warm touch of Qui-Gon's healing hand upon the smoking wound."

"Are you strong enough?" Qui-Gon asked softly, his voice tight with worry, and Kenobi nodded. "Reenforcements are coming," Qui-Gon said swiftly, pushing the two teens forward through the water and jogging behind them as they picked up speed. "I heard them approaching when I came for you. They won't be long now." He nudged Satine, the girl shaking as silent tears ran down her face and looking with grave concern at the boy that had saved her again. "Faster, Satine."

"B-but-"

"Obi-Wan is fine. Run. Do not compromise the mission by stalling."

She didn't need to be told twice, though she had to stifle a sob as she began running faster and her Jedi companion groaned in pain, his eyes shut tightly for a moment before they opened, hard and impassive as they always were. He was focused, and all she could do was trust that he could make it.
They made it to the deep pool at the base of the waterfall before the Death Watch reenforcements arrived, though they could hear them through the silence of the swamp. A quick examination of the area told Qui-Gon everything he needed to know, understanding what Obi-Wan had sensed in this place, and he removed a small breathing apparatus from the pouch on his belt and handed it to the Duchess. At first, she did nothing, just stood staring into the forest in the direction of the distant shouts drawing closer to their position. When Obi-Wan jumped into the pool, his hand extended to her as he treaded, the corner of his mouth twitching in pain, she put the device into her mouth, took his hand, and slid in after him.

They dove beneath the surface, the Jedi pulling the Duchess as he went deeper, though she couldn't see where it is they were going. Neither could Obi-Wan, so far as she could tell, because his eyes were closed. She wondered how long a Jedi could hold their breath. Surely longer than a normal person, or he would have been using the breather she knew he must have had, given that his Master carried one. After a moment, she saw it, difficult to see under the churning water and bubble stream under the waterfall, but there was a small opening in the rock at the edge of the pool deep beneath the flowing water, just big enough for a person to squeeze through. She followed Obi-Wan through, grasping hold of his leg as they swam up through the pitch black of the tunnel.

Obi-Wan stopped, suddenly disappearing, and Satine kicked her legs and breached the surface, cold, damp air on her face making goose bumps rise upon her skin, and the Jedi helped pull her out of the water, his lightsaber in hand and ignited and bathing the cavern in blue light. Her eyes widened in amazement as she looked around the cave, big enough to hold the three of them, big enough to hold ten of them and still have room to spare. Towards the back, the light of the glowing plasma lit what looked like a tunnel going back, going deeper into the ground. It was...amazing. And to think that Obi-Wan knew it was here without even laying eyes on it...

With a gasp, she reeled around, remembering what had happened to her protector, and she saw the Jedi sitting propped against a rock, the Master leaning over him with his large hands covering the burned holes in his student's robes, Obi-Wan breathing fast, his eyes closed, his face showing pain, and Satine rushed to his side.

"You'll be fine, Obi-Wan," he said softly, a small, relieved smile on his lips. "You were lucky that nothing vital was hit."

"...I know."

"I need to go," Qui-Gon said swiftly as soon as Satine stood beside him, rising to his feet and his hand on the hilt of his lightsaber.

"What?" she gasped, looking up at the Master. "You can't, we're safe here, we-"

"We are not safe," he said firmly. "We aren't going to be safe until this war is over. In a moment, the entirety of the Death Watch compound is going to be combing over this area in search of us, and they will find us. I'm going to lead them away, get them looking elsewhere. If we're lucky, they'll focus on following me rather than doubling back." He took a deep breath and looked at his student. "Protect her while I'm away, Obi-Wan. You're in charge while I'm away."

"Master..."

Qui-Gon smiled gently at his student, knelt down and gently touched his face. "I will be back, Obi-Wan. Rest, get a fire started, if you can, dry off. I'll return before you know it."

"Qui-Gon, please," Satine said, but stopped herself from speaking further when he held up a hand, smiled at her, and lowered himself into the hole, disappearing beneath the surface.
It was silent between them, and it was awkward. Satine didn't know what to say, didn't know if she should even say anything, since the boy had requested her silence in the past and always seemed to be grateful to have a reason not to talk. The last they spoke, they had parted very poorly, though she could not find it in her to blame him for what had happened. Not much, in any case. It was, of course, still his fault, but...she was responsible as well. Qui-Gon had been right. They had gotten off on the wrong foot, they must have. The boy she imagined him to be would never have taken a shot for her the way Obi-Wan had. Perhaps he disliked her. Hell, she still couldn't find it in her to like the passionless boy, brushing him off as both bland and uninteresting in the best of cases. No person who lacked passion was ever worth it, in her experience.

But he was brave, and he was noble, and that was enough. She may not have liked him, but she could respect him. She did respect him. And she had been awful. The reasons were inexcusable. She was a Duchess, nobility, a diplomat, and with any luck, a broker of peace for her people. To do that, she would have to learn to work with people she didn't like, people far worse than the quiet, self-sacrificing Jedi she found herself sharing a cave with. She would do better, not just for Obi-Wan, but for herself as well.

And yet, she couldn't find it in her to speak. Each time she tried, her voice caught in her throat, a shiver running through her as she watched him struggle to shrug off the heavy, rough spun brown cloak he wore, groaning from pain and the effort of moving, and he tossed the damp thing before him and touched his lightsaber to it, the blade hissing and sputtering as it made contact with the fabric and singed through it, leaving the fibers alight with embers that quickly went out. He tried again twice more with no success, but on the forth attempt, the embers leapt up to become small flames glowing in the darkness, slowly burning along the fabric as the heat dried it, the tightly wound fibers of the cloak slow to burn. It would take some time before they would have a fire, but they would have one. She hoped...

"I'm sorry," Obi-Wan said softly, his voice tinged with pain, and Satine silently scolded herself for allowing the Jedi to be the one to break the silence. "I know...you'd rather have Qui-Gon with you than-"

"No!" she said swiftly, her voice louder than intended and made only louder by the cave. "No..." she said again, whispering this time. "It...can't be helped, in any case..." She looked at him, his face cold and impassive as before, but now, she could see the pain through the mask, and it hurt her. "We...started badly," she said, and the Jedi chuckled softly before he fell into a fit of pained coughing.

"That can be said, yes."

"I'd like to start again, but..." Satine sighed heavily and looked at him. "I don't like you, Obi-Wan. I find you passionless and aloof and I was taught that indifference is the worst crime of all. Your silence, your recklessness, it...infuriates me." She looked away from him. "But you are also...brave. And selfless. And even though you were afraid, you did something, while I did nothing at all. It's...admirable." She took a shuddering breath and was grateful for the colored blue light that his the deep blush on her cheeks. "I'm...proud to have you as my protector." When she looked back at the Jedi, he was looking away from her, silent and stoic as always, and remained so, and with a frustrated huff, Satine sat against a stalagmite that grew toward ceiling.

"I don't like you either," Obi-Wan said after a long while, and Satine looked over to where he sat, his hand tugging on the braid behind his ear. "Your passion makes you aggressive, uncompromising, closed to others when one in your position must be open. There is no peace within you. You are all harsh reactions and stubbornness." He paused for a moment, and Satine stared at him expectantly. It was...oddly refreshing to speak frankly like this. "...but your passion is what will make you great," Kenobi whispered. "It burns so bright, it is difficult to look at.
You...burn with life, Satine. You don't just walk this world, you are a part of it. I find that...magnificent."

"That's the most I've ever heard you speak," she said, a small smile on her face.

"It's the most you're likely to ever hear me speak. I'm no good at it."

"No?" she asked, scooting closer to him. "I thought you were quite eloquent." she held out a hand to him. "Truce? I still hate you, of course, but-

"Truce," Kenobi said quickly, grabbing her hand lightly, almost shyly, she thought, and letting it go a moment later. "I can handle being hated, Duchess, if you can just leave me in peace."

"Done, you gutless, boring cretin," she said, and the Jedi laughed, soft and genuine before he switched his lightsaber off, his cloak burning with small, dancing flames, and he closed his eyes to rest. Satine watched him for a long while, and for the first time, found his silence...soothing. Peaceful, even, something she hadn't felt in a long while. It was good to discuss their feelings, in part because it was confirmation that Obi-Wan had them. This was something she could handle. Her Jedi protector was brave and stalwart, had saved her life several times, now that she looked at it. For that, she could give him his silence. He deserved no less.

She wasn't certain how long it was before Qui-Gon returned, but when he did, the fire was burning strongly on the Jedi's cloak, and pangs of hunger had her curled on the ground. But he did return, his hair and clothing soaked through, but appearing uninjured.

"They're gone," he said softly, peeling off his own heavy brown cloak and dropping it to the ground. "At least for now. I have them investigating a search perimeter on the other side of their outpost. You were right, Obi-Wan. It's huge."

"We need a way to get off this planet," he said softly, and the Master nodded.

"We'll find a way. I need you to recover first."

"We need to eat..." Satine said softly, and the Jedi looked at her sympathetically. "I can-"

"You will stay here with Obi-Wan while I investigate the rest of the caves and see if I can find something edible."

"Master," Kenobi said quietly, his teeth grit as he sat up, and the Master quickly laid a healing hand on his side and forced the boy to lay down again.

"I need you to stay here and study," Qui-Gon said gently. "You said you're going to learn Mando'a, and you will." Kenobi frowned.

"Master, my datapad shattered in the crash, and the water has left it hopelessly ruined."

"Hmm..." The Master crossed his arms over his chest. "Good thing you have a native speaker of the language here," he said, looking at Satine, and the girl drew up.

"Now, wait a moment! I am no teacher, and he's already shown himself to be hopeless! He thinks it's a base, barbaric language anyway!"

"Well, it sounds to me like you have your work cut out for you. And you, Duchess," he said, a clever smile on his face as he pointed to the girl. "You are going to learn about the Jedi." She smiled brightly, opened her mouth to begin asking a question, and was silenced when Qui-Gon held up a hand. "From Obi-Wan, not me."
"...what?!" the Duchess gasped, and the smile on the Jedi's face only grew wider.

"I know you dislike each other, and that's fine, but I need you to be able to work together on this mission, or we're not going to make it. Today was a close enough call for me, and this may not have happened were you two not fighting the way you were." Both teenagers looked chastised. "And so, you will learn from each other. It will help you understand each other, and that will help you work together."

"I won't do it!" Satine said swiftly. "We just came to an arrangement, we will leave each other alone!"

"Which is not acceptable in this situation," Qui-Gon explained. "We must depend on each other. Solitude is not an option," he said, shooting a pointed look to his student, and Obi-Wan looked away. "When you are ready, you will ask the other to teach you on these subjects. Not before. I will not impose this upon you, but if these are things you wish to learn about, you will need each other." With that, Qui-Gon struck on his lightsaber and ventured off into the caves.

Satine crossed her arms defiantly. She just made an arrangement with the silent Padawan, and this was exactly what he didn't want, exactly what she didn't want. She wouldn't do it. To hell with the Jedi Order, she didn't need to learn about them, especially not when she would learn all she needed simply by watching her guardians in action. She was too proud to ask, and Obi-Wan was too reclusive to. This was a fool arrangement, and she would have nothing to do with it. Neither of them would.

"Satine." She almost jumped in surprise, even though Obi-Wan's voice was soft and smooth. She hadn't expected him to speak at all. His eyes were averted, as always, as if he were afraid of making eye contact. "Would you...teach me Mando'a?" he asked gently, and Satine couldn't help but stare at him stupidly. This was not what she expected from a boy that craved silence the way he did. "Not words, just...the sound. You say my pronunciation is wrong, and...w-well, I've never really heard the language spoken by..." He trailed off. Leaving the sentence unfinished. "...usually you'd interrupt me by now," Obi-Wan muttered. "If you don't want to-"

"I do," she said, slowly coming to sit beside him by the fire. "I'll just...talk?" she asked. "Is that what you want?" Obi-Wan nodded, and with a smile, the girl began talking, and Obi-Wan leaned back and just listened, his eyes never leaving her face and watching as she lit up as she spoke. Upon her lips, Mando'a flowed like a steady, even stream, and it was beautiful.

Reflection.

You would be pleased to know, Master Dooku, that Obi-Wan is finally giving me the trouble that you had hoped for. Probably not as severe as the problems you wished upon me, given the hell I gave you in my adolescence. Force, I don't know how I survived without you killing me. Or how you didn't at the very least castrate me. I suspect that would have ended the trouble in very short order. Obi-Wan's current issues are nothing like mine, and yet, they somehow are still being caused by a female. Why is it that women seem to be the root of every problem? Are men just that blindingly stupid?

The Duchess isn't what I expected. She's much younger than anticipated, and her youth shows. I also didn't expect her to be so consumed with grief, but again, that comes from her youth and her passionate heart. She will be a great asset to Mandalore after we have won the war and secured her throne, and by the time that happens, she will be ready. This war will age her, as it ages all who fight. So much the better, though it is unfortunate that adulthood must be thrust upon her like this. Mandalore will never be ruled by a child, and this war will not end until she grows up.
And of course, they hate each other passionately. Well, as passionately as Obi-Wan ever gets about anything. It’s heartbreaking to see him struggle like this, and I’m sure you would agree about the cause of it. If the Jedi exposed the younglings to the vast wealth of emotions, allowed them and expected them to feel them instead of instructing them to distance themselves from them, we would not be having this problem. The galaxy is brimming with life and passion, and by keeping ourselves separate from it, we risk isolating ourselves, preventing us from truly understanding those we are intended to serve. If Obi-Wan weren’t so shielded by the Code, he would be able to look at Satine and help her, instead of being unable to look at her for fear of the depth of the passion within her.

But I don’t need to tell you that. I know you and I feel similarly on the subject.

It is, in some ways, fortunate that they dislike each other so intensely. You know what trouble may arise when you put two teenagers together. But if his dislike of her wasn’t enough, his dedication to the Code keeps him away from her. I can only imagine what kind of a disaster it would be if a more passionate Padawan were assigned this mission. Someone like Obi-Wan's friend Quinlan would be something of a worst case scenario, but even a Jedi with only half of his appetite for women would see themselves quickly in bed with their charge.

I have the opposite problem with Obi-Wan. They seem to have settled into something of a peace for now, and I have taken steps to help foster respect between them, but I do not suspect that they will ever like each other. In many ways, they are too similar, and because of it, they bring out the worst in each other. So much the better, if peace can be maintained. I can’t have my student doing anything so foolish as what I did with Tahl. It is always a risk that teenagers let their hormones drive them, and someone so passionate as Satine and as devoted as Obi-Wan run the risk of something...deeper. Something far too close to the love I had for Tahl. And we both know where love leads. It's merciful that I will not need to guide Obi-Wan away from that.

Perhaps when we return, I will have Obi-Wan sit down and talk with you. His trials seem to be a bit more in line with you than they are with me. I don’t believe you gave your Master the same trouble I gave you. Or...did you? I can’t imagine Master Yoda having to pull you off a woman as you had to do with me. My student is more reserved, though he has very strong opinions, just as you do. Perhaps you can give him some wisdom in that. I try, you know I do, but Obi-Wan does not share my view of the Force or the Code, and we know how strongly he is inclined toward future events.

Speaking of which, I believe we were all wrong about the way in which Obi-Wan's talents are manifesting. I believe the Force is showing his skill not through his foresight, as we suspected, but through his fortitude. He’s always been stubborn and dedicated, a tireless perfectionist, and I think that is the manner in which the Force is manifesting. He was shot today. Twice. And he staggered, but he didn't fall, and he kept fighting, and then running after that. He brushed them off like they were nothing, like injury only strengthened his resolve and his will. I felt it within him, and he was, in that moment, unbreakable.

I shall have to begin redirecting his studies to suit these talents. Perhaps he will take to more of the mental aspects of the Force, the Mind Trick, advanced shielding, that sort of thing. He can excel at that, and I'm sure he will find it less frustrating than listening to me lecture him about being mindful of the Living Force. And perhaps an increased defense will help him be more comfortable about handling his emotions.

I know you believe as I do on this matter. In order for a Jedi to help those around us, we must be understanding and compassionate, and we cannot possibly understand emotions if we do not experience them. Perhaps one day soon, my student will learn this. Not all emotions lead to the Dark Side, like he fears they do. One day, he will understand. Perhaps the Duchess can help him.
We are hungry and filthy and living like rats in a cave, Master Dooku.

But at least the teenagers aren't exploring their sexuality together.

Wait...

No, everything is fine.

I need to get some rest. I'm starting to feel things that aren't there.
THRAWN COMES OUT TODAY!!!

Give me a day or two to read it before I get back to From Flames, I Rise. He's sort of important in the story, and I wanna make sure I get him right. Also, typing is awkward and ouch because broken wrist is broken. Also, spring break means twelve hour workdays for me, so...yeah, don't expect a chapter until Thursday or Friday. That's all! I really like this chapter and I have a great idea for the next one! Enjoy, lovelies! Let me know what you think and what you want to see!

"Will you continue instructing me in Mando'a?"

Satine stared at hateful, hateful Obi-Wan, her lips slightly parted, and the question she was going to ask him dying in her throat. She narrowed her eyes as she looked at him, the warmth of the morning light through the thick foliage of the trees speckling his face with sunlight, and it made her even angrier, though she didn't know why. A few days of living in very close quarters in the cave had given Satine a chance to study her stoic young protector while he recovered from his injuries.

Forced to work with and teach each other instead of being allowed to leave each other alone, Satine had come to understand that the boy, contrary to her previous belief, wasn't emotionless at all. Though his face remained cold and expressionless, a closer look revealed it to be little more than a mask through which the faintest flicker of his closely guarded emotions could be viewed. She was still learning to interpret exactly what the slight twitch of the eye, the nearly imperceptible curl of his lips and the slightest furrow of his brow meant, but soon enough, she would be able to read him as well as she could read anyone else. It was a gift of hers, and this arrogant Jedi would not be able to escape her keen eye.

Now, the slight twitch at the corner of his lips suggested panic, the relaxed brow, relief, and the gleam in his eye was positively triumphant, and Satine had never hated the boy more than she did in that moment. Every time, every single time she went to ask him about the Jedi, the quiet boy, so usually resolved to silence, spoke first, prompting his own language lessons, and Qui-Gon had made it clear that were they to ask for instruction, they were not to be denied. And thus far, the only one asking was Obi-Wan because he wouldn't let her ask. She was certain it was done on purpose. The arrogant, haughty Jedi doing everything in his power to keep the secrets of the Jedi contained within the Jedi, keeping her ignorant and therefore the lesser member of the partnership. Knowledge was power, after all, and Obi-Wan was going out of his way to deny her.

It's not like he always asked for her to teach him, and truth be told, she enjoyed teaching him. Obi-Wan was proving to be a thoughtful and intelligent pupil, even if his silence was frustrating. He claimed to learn just by listening, and it was nice to just be allowed to talk without interruption. Her entire life, she had been undermined because of her views regarding the future of Mandalore, culminating in the current war for dominance she found herself in now, but having the ear of the silent Jedi allowed her to vent her frustrations. He only occasionally interrupted her to ask about the meaning of a word, or to quietly ask for details about what she had been speaking about, though sometimes, his questions made it clear he didn't quite understand what she was talking
about. That was fine by her. She was making it difficult on purpose.

She had no way to gauge if she even was teaching him anything, since the boy rarely spoke to her, and when he did, it was usually in Basic. But when he spoke Mando'a, his accent colored his every word, making his pronunciation of the words off just enough to be noticeable. It was far better than it had been when she first heard him speak, and it was, in a way...pleasant. It was something about his inflection, something about his soft, Coruscanti accent that smoothed the harsh edges of Mando'a and made it sound gentle, soothing, almost like music, and she was glad that Obi-Wan rarely spoke. It made her chest feel...tight with what she assumed must be anger, though she wasn't certain why. It was true that the Jedi simply brought out the worst in her.

But that wasn't the problem. The problem was, every single time she got up the nerve to ask him about the Jedi Order he belonged to, so she could reciprocate learning about him the way he was learning about her, the damnable teen jumped to speak up and make himself heard, and she found herself roped into teaching again while he skillfully avoided his responsibilities. It was as if Obi-Wan could somehow sense her intentions. Perhaps this was a skill the Jedi possessed, something she'd have known if Obi-Wan ever taught her anything.

"Why are you doing this?" Satine snapped, her anger only growing when the faintest of smiles touched the Jedi's lips. At least someone was enjoying themselves.

"This?" he asked innocently, holding up a hard shelled fruit he was cracking into with a knife he had made out of stone. The inside was soft and edible, and it had been what they survived on for the past two days. The lightsaber made the soft flesh of the fruit blackened and completely inedible, so more conventional means were needed to provide food for themselves. It was a tedious process, and they were still hungry, but they weren't starving. Not yet, in any case.

"This!" she said, poking her finger against Obi-Wan's chest. "You keep asking me to teach you Mando'a when-

"I'm just following my Master's orders," Obi-Wan said, raising his hands in a placating gesture that had the opposite effect on the fiery Mandalorian.

"Is that all you can do?!!" she snapped, her fierce eyes examining the boy as he sat cross-legged on a stone at the side of a hidden entrance to their cave network. The waterfall wasn't the only way in and out of the safe haven they had found, but while more ways inside made it more convenient for them, it also made them easier to find. They would have to move soon. The planet was crawling with Death Watch looking for them, and while their current position kept them concealed from view from the air, they were far from safe. Still, they could see most any threat coming, but they needed to leave. They couldn't stay here forever.

"Should I be doing anything else?" Obi-Wan asked, returning to preparing the fruit. "I need to know Mando'a for the mission, and the mission is all that matters."

"Which makes me your mission!" she said, leaning in toward the suddenly uncomfortable boy, the faintest hint of color rising to his cheeks, and she loved it. An uncomfortable Obi-Wan was quickly becoming her favorite flavor of all the dull, muted expressions the boy exhibited. "I am your mission..." she drawled, leaning in closer to him, and he planted his hands on the rock behind him to keep himself from falling off when he leaned back. "Would you like to hear it in Mando'a? Ni cu'ya garaka." She smirked when the Jedi began attempting to squirm away from her. If he was going to get his way all the time, she was going to make sure he suffered for it. "What I want, Obi-Wan, is-"

"I have a plan!" Satine winced when Qui-Gon came out of the thick trees of the nearby swamp, and Obi-Wan breathed a sigh of relief, smiling gratefully as he slid off the rock to meet his Master.
Satine frowned. Obi-Wan still walked with a bit of a limp. His injuries hadn't fully healed, and while Qui-Gon did... *something* with him every day, they didn't have access to medical supplies. She took a mental note of that. Just another one of the many things they needed.

"Are we finally leaving?" Satine asked, smiling softly at the Jedi Master as he approached. "I need to get back to my people, the longer we are out here, the more ground Death Watch will gain."

"We are working toward leaving soon, yes," Qui-Gon said, looking between the Duchess and his student. "What were you two up to?"

"The Duchess has been continuing my studies in Mando'a," Obi-Wan said softly, looking at her with an expression that immediately made her bristle, though she couldn't say why. She couldn't even place what the expression was. But the Master seemed happy, his face lighting up with a pleasant, easy smile.

"That's perfect! My plan requires you having a basic understanding of the language." Obi-Wan inclined his head, his hand reaching up to fiddle with his braid.

"I shall endeavor not to disappoint you, Master."

"How is he progressing, Duchess?" Qui-Gon asked her, that pleasant smile on his face, and Satine felt her anger draining from her. With the Master Jedi near, it was easy to forget her personality conflict with Obi-Wan. The Jedi were here to help, and Obi-Wan had been seriously injured on her behalf. She knew he just saw it as something done in the line of duty, but if it had been *anyone* else...

He was deserving of respect, at the very least.

"I'd tell you how he's doing if I knew how he was doing," she sighed, suddenly frustrated again with Kenobi's silence. "It seems he is silent in many languages, not just Basic." Qui-Gon frowned and looked at the younger Jedi at his side, the teen's eyes downcast, his expression blank. "It seems like he has a feel for the language, though, but his accent makes him..." She grit her teeth, searched for the right word, and couldn't find it. "When he *does* speak, it's simplistic. If you need him to speak Mando'a for your plan to work, we'd be better off thinking of another plan. It's barely been a week, he can't learn a language that quickly!"

"Well?" Qui-Gon asked his student, and the boy took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving the ground.

"Mando'a cuyir o'r birov ara guuror Ika'dyc. Ni Kelir hibirar meg gar linibar ni at." Satine's jaw dropped, and she stared wide eyed at the boy. The sentence structure wasn't perfect, the chosen words simplistic, the accent on the wrong syllable in some places, but it was... *passable.* Understandable, even, and though he sounded exactly like the foreigner he was, Obi-Wan was easy to understand. When had he learned *that*?! Surely it wasn't just from listening to her prattle on. She...may have underestimated him.

"Ah," Qui-Gon said, his easy smile returning. *He* didn't seem surprised. "Was that acceptable. Duchess?" She could do nothing but absentely nod. "It seems, then, that our plan is still on. Come, we need to discuss it," he said as he walked inside the cave, his student close by his side, and Satine followed in stunned silence, her eyes fixed on Obi-Wan's back. That little brat was holding out on her...

"Alright," Qui-Gon said as he picked up a rock and began drawing on the stone wall, adding to the etchings already there. In the days since their crash, Qui-Gon had been steadily taking note of everything he had seen on his scouting trips, and he had managed to make a comprehensive map
of not just their surrounding area, but of the main Death Watch compound and several smaller outposts they had set up around the dense swamp in which they hid. It had been a monumental effort, one that saw the Jedi Master gone for most of the day, only to leave again under the cover of night. It had left Satine alone in the careful, although somewhat crippled care of Obi-Wan, a thing she would have resented if the young Jedi hadn't been shot for her.

She found herself getting angry as she looked at the passionless boy. Things could have been so different if he didn't have the passion of a particularly handsome rock.

"We need a ship to get off planet, and so far as I can tell, every ship in the area is owned by the Death Watch, and they're all kept here," Qui-Gon said, pointing to a large rectangle within the drawing of the Death Watch compound, "in their main hub." He stroked his chin for a moment. "Satine, do you have any idea who your allies are right now? When we leave here, we need a place to go." The Duchess shook her head.

"This war has torn families apart. I can't say for certain if an entire clan stands for me. I...have family on Kalevala, and I can't even be sure that they can be considered allies." She sighed heavily and looked at the ground, biting the inside of her lip as she calmed herself and pushed back tears. "If anyone even stands for me at all," she whispered. "Fleeing from Mandalore would be seen as an act of cowardice. No true Mandalorian would stand behind a child who ran..."

"...Duchess." Satine looked over to Obi-Wan, the boy standing silently beside his Master, the blue of his eyes vibrant even in the shadows of the cave. "I don't believe your people would abandon you. Loyalty is important to Mandalorians. That is why this war is being fought." Satine held her breath as she looked at the other teen, and something about his calm, his dispassion, his...everything that she had come to hate about him spoke to her, eased her fears, and filled her with a sense of ease she hadn't felt in a long time. Of course Mandalore would abandon her, especially now that she had been gone for so long and possibly presumed dead. But still, everything within her wanted to believe him.

"It may not be so simple as that, my Padawan," Qui-Gon said as he wrote upon the wall. "But you may be on to something. Given something to fight for, the Mandalorians become fierce." He took a breath and looked over all the notes and drawings he had upon the wall. "This adds an additional objective to our plans."

"You have figured out how to leave?" Satine asked, and the Jedi slowly nodded.

"I have, yes. It's a plan that will take some time to execute, but I believe it can be done if we remain vigilant. Obi-Wan."

"Master."

"Have you recovered enough to fight again?" The teen lowered his eyes, the tension in his shoulders plain for even Satine to see. "...Obi-Wan. Killing is not something you will ever get used to. It isn't something you should get used to. Each time will hurt you, but there are times that we must, and this is one of those times." Satine watched Obi-Wan closely, though the boy's face showed no hint of emotion. Was that what was bothering him? Him?! Cold, passionless Jedi, warriors without peer, grand guardians of peace in the galaxy, and the lives he had taken had bothered him? She frowned. Perhaps she was not the judge of character she believed herself to be if she couldn't see this struggle in him. It was the same struggle that rested in her own heart.

"I'm ready, Master," Obi-Wan said softly. His Master nodded, a soft smile on his lips as he laid a hand on the boy's shoulder, and Satine was certain that she saw young Kenobi wince and grit his teeth in pain.
"Our ultimate goal is to escape this planet," Qui-Gon said firmly. "To do so, we need a ship, and since the only ships are in Death Watch's possession, we're going to steal one."

"Um, what?" Satine asked, completely astounded. "Qui-Gon, that's madness! You said they keep all their ships at their compound!" The Jedi nodded. 

"That's correct."

"So how do you propose to do this!" Satine laughed nervously when the resolve on the Jedi's face wavered not at all. "Do you have any idea how many soldiers are stationed there?!"

"Upwards of ten thousand, at the moment," Qui-Gon said. "But we're going to change that today." He circled a spot on the wall. "This is our current location, and this," he said, drawing a curving line from their cave in a wide arch to the other side of the Death Watch complex, "is the location of our new hideout. From this day on, we will be moving between hiding places daily."

"But why!" Satine asked, her heart racing as fear began to settle uncomfortably within her again. "We've been safe here for days!"

"Yes, and it has resulted in the Death Watch fortifying their strength here," Qui-Gon said quickly. "You are right, Duchess. Ten thousand troops is far too much for us to deal with. So we're going to kick the nest and watch them swarm. If they are after a threat, they will leave their base with minimal defenses. You are the highest priority, after all." He took a deep breath and looked at his map. "With the fortress mobilized to search for you, we can send one of us inside to infiltrate the base and steal a ship while the others serve as a distraction. It's not much, but it's the best we've got."

"Master," Obi-Wan said softly. "This puts the Duchess at risk. I cannot defend her against so many."

"You won't be, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said slowly, carefully looking at his student to gauge his response. "I will be defending Satine. You will be infiltrating the base, stealing the ship, and flying us away."

"...what?!

...For the first time since she met him, Obi-Wan did nothing to hide, the expressionless mask torn away and replaced with insecurity and fear. "Master, no, I can't, you know I can't!"

"You can, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, soft and calm. "You will. You must."

"I-I'm not a pilot! Qui-Gon, it's my mistakes that landed us here in the first place. I-I can't fly, I can't!" He swallowed hard and turned wide, pleading eyes on his Master. "You do it. You infiltrate the compound and steal the ship, I'll...I'll find a way to keep the Duchess safe!"

"On your worst day, I'm not half the pilot you are, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, his measured calm never wavering, and Satine slowly began to understand why the Jedi distanced themselves from emotions when normal people would fall prey to them. Cooler heads would prevail, and his calm would assert itself and allow them to see this dangerous situation clearly. She tucked that away within her. It was a lesson that would benefit her in the future. If her people were to have peace, they needed a leader that could calm them, not rile them. Perhaps there was something she could learn from the Jedi.

"Master, as a pilot, I am nothing! I was..." He grit his teeth and closed his eyes. "I was arrogant and overconfident, foolishly so, and it almost got us all killed." His hand balled into a fist at his side. "This is my fault...my fault..."

"Do you trust in the Force, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked, his voice softer than before, sadder, and
without looking at him, Obi-Wan nodded. "Then that is enough. If you doubt your obvious talents, put your faith in the Force that it will guide us successfully from this place. It will be a week or two before this plan is ready to execute, so prepare yourself."

"...yes, Master." And just like that, the mask was back on, the boy's face expressionless once again, and Satine couldn't help but wonder if the emotion was actually gone, or just well hidden. She'd have to ask...if she could ever get the jump on the boy. Irritating, frustrating Obi-Wan was proving to be more trouble than he was worth.

"Everything we do from this moment forward will be for our ultimate goal of leaving this planet," Qui-Gon said, his demeanor returning to its previous command. "That means on taking steps to ensure a successful infiltration." He circled one of the smaller squares surrounding the swamp to indicate one of the Death Watch outposts. "That means attacking these outposts. Not only will it draw their soldiers away from their base, but if we're lucky, word will get out that Duchess Satine is alive and fighting the Death Watch."

"Won't that just draw my enemies here?" Satine asked weakly, and the Jedi simply grinned in response.

"Yes it will, but it will rally your allies as well. Death Watch may find themselves being spread thin dealing with you and your supporters around the system. Never underestimate people when they're backed into a corner." He tapped his rock against the wall and looked over all the information. "If we're lucky, at the outposts, we can get a sense of the state of the conflict. Perhaps that will help you inform your decision of where it is best to flee."

"I'll...begin thinking right away," Satine said, her hands clutched tightly in her lap to hide the fact they were shaking.

"Obi-Wan, this first outpost will be the easiest one we will have to deal with since we have the element of surprise, so you will use this opportunity to steal yourself a set of Mandalorian armor. It will be necessary for a successful infiltration."

"Master, should we not all be armored, in that case?" the teen asked softly, and the Master sighed, tapping the rock against the wall.

"I considered that, yes, but it's a priority for you, since you will be infiltrating the compound. You're the most likely of us to find a set that fits, in any case. I'm far taller than the average, and Satine doesn't exactly have the warrior build of their soldiers." Satine looked up at the Jedi Master, her lips pursed indignantly when she saw Obi-Wan beside him, his eyes fixed on her and...examining her, like he was seeing her for the first time. She felt a deep flush spread across her cheeks and he stomach flutter with...anger, it had to be. What right did he have to look at her that way?!

"What are you looking at?!" she snapped, harsher than she intended, and Obi-Wan's eyes widened as if realizing what he had been doing, and he tore his gaze from her, his cheeks stained the same deep red as Satine's.

"Obi-Wan, focus," the Master sharply admonished, and the younger Jedi shut his eyes tightly. "If you happen to find a set that fits us as well, so much the better, but you must have it. After, you will take Satine to the new hideout I have marked while I lead the Death Watch away. The hiding place is quite a ways away, which should work to your advantage. The Death Watch will be following my trajectory, not yours. Understand?"

"...understood, Master."
"Memorize the map and prepare yourselves," the Jedi said as he gave the wall one last glance. "We leave for the first outpost in an hour."

"I count twenty of them, Master," Obi-Wan said, his voice just loud enough to carry down to the ground from the tree in which he stood looking out over the Death Watch outpost. It wasn't much, little more than three watchtowers, a supply storage shed, and a command center, no doubt erected in response to the Jedi and the Duchess having crashed in the swamp. Qui-Gon had said that the outposts circled the swamp, closing them inside a perimeter which they wouldn't be able to escape without notice. And it would have been difficult to. The forested areas had been cleared in a large strip between the outposts, giving them a clear line of sight on anything coming out of the swamp. Qui-Gon had been right. Causing a commotion was the only way to create a disturbance great enough to get past the line.

It was all well and good that they had to get off the planet, but at that moment, Obi-Wan's eyes were fixed on the supply storage shed as four Death Watch soldiers unloaded crates of rations off a repulsor craft. He was so hungry. Food had been scarce, and that morning, with the mission hanging over their heads, he had given his meager portion to Satine. The Duchess didn't have the benefit of the Force, so she needed food for strength, though at that moment, he was regretting having done so. Or, he would have regretted it if the memory of the small, shy smile on her face hadn't been burned on his mind. It was...pleasing, though he knew it wasn't a sight he would often see, and certainly not directed toward him.

Not that he cared for such things. His dedication to the Jedi Order was absolute. He had no need for such things. And with his flying no longer an option for the future...well, what else did he have but the Jedi? But Satine...

The past few days, he could feel her looking at him, which was...natural, he supposed. They were alone together a great deal, after all, and he could feel the lonely girl anxious for companionship. But there was...something in her gaze, something he could feel even when he wasn't looking at her, a slight change within her every time her eyes fell upon him. He could feel her heart race, the blood rushing through her, causing her pale skin to slightly flush and he breath to quicken. He ventured a look at her once to see if he could discern the cause of such, and found her...burning. So many emotions, and none of which he could recognize but the anger and bitter disdain that he knew he deserved, and that was mirrored in himself as well.

Still, he found peace in listening to her talk in her native tongue, found it soothed his own frustrations, not just to focus on a task, but to just listen to emotion play across every word she uttered. He wasn't used to this level of expression, this range of emotion, from the deepest sadness to the greatest joys, a tone far more pure than he had heard in more emotional Jedi, like Quinlan, who was more boisterous and overwhelming than the sweet chime of Satine. It was...his honor to protect such purity of soul, even if it was one that blazed like a star he deeply resented for the burns it inflicted.

"Master!" Obi-Wan called down from his position, his eyes fixed on two Mandalorians as they mounted speeder bikes and began heading in their direction. "They're sending out patrols, just as you said."

"How many?" the Master called up to him, and Obi-Wan jumped off the tree and landed beside Qui-Gon, wincing as the shock of the landing sent pain lancing from the two wounds in his body. Not yet healed...

"Two on speeders," Obi-Wan said quickly, pointing in the direction they were coming from. Qui-Gon nodded and pressed his body against a tree, watching as Obi-Wan did the same against the nearest one to his position.
"Remember, when you feel them right behind you, push out toward me with the Force," the Master said softly, his eyes looking sidelong up the path through the woods when he heard the buzz of the speeders. Satine clung too him, peeking out from behind him to look at the Padawan, her eyes worried but filled with a fierce determination. The panic of before was gone. She looked...almost like the ruler she'd one day be.

They didn't need to wait long for the buzzing to grow into the loud, shrill screech of the speeders, and Obi-Wan closed his eyes, reached out through the Force for his Master, syncing himself with Qui-Gon's calm, his even breathing, his slow, rhythmic heartbeat, and when he felt the Master move, he moved to mirror him, pushing out with the Force toward the other Jedi with as much strength as he could muster. Just as they pushed, the speeder bikes zoomed past, their speed kicking up dirt and wind, and the three fugitives watched as the Force slammed into the bikes, causing them to waver in the air and swerve directly toward each other, the long noses colliding and sending both bikes crashing to the ground. As one, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon raced from their cover toward the riders that had been thrown from their bikes, their hands on their lightsabers and setting them to blazing when the dazed soldiers rose, swaying on their feet as they drew their blasters. With a wave of his hand, Qui-Gon threw both of the scouting party against the thick trunk of a tree, Obi-Wan's blade swinging in the air to deflect two errant shots fired just as they were thrown. They collapsed to the ground and didn't move, though their chests rose and fell with their breathing.

"We must move quickly, Obi-Wan," the Master said, his sharp eyes looking in the direction of the outpost as his student quickly examined the unconscious bodies. Obi-Wan frowned, standing just as soon as Satine knelt beside the warriors.

"It's no good, one's too big and the other is female." He sighed heavily. "Eighteen at the compound...we aren't going to get lucky enough to be able and just knock them all out, are we?"

"Most likely not, no." Qui-Gon sighed and looked back at his student and the Duchess. "We can't waste time here. We need to hurry."

"I can help," Satine said, standing and taking the female's helmet and the long blaster off her male counterpart's back, her long, thin fingers making small adjustments on the weapon. Her eyes narrowed and she frowned when she saw the Jedi looking at her with surprise on their faces. "I was raised Mandalorian. I can shoot!" She held the weapon out to them. "This is an X-500 Wraith Sharpshooter, and my father raised me on shooting the X-52 Wraith and the X-55 Riot. I can shoot."

"She can shoot, Master," Obi-Wan quietly confirmed. "When we crashed, she got her hands on a blaster and didn't miss a shot. Not a single one killed, but all of them hit." Qui-Gon looked the hopeful Duchess over and slowly nodded.

"You will stay out of sight, am I understood?" The girl responded by putting the helmet on her head. "You may end up killing them, you understand this, right?"

"I won't," Satine said, her voice modulated through the helmet. "I've set the weapon to output concussive force. They'll be out of your way, in any case, but I won't kill them, and I'd appreciate it if you found a way to avoid it as well."

"As ever, Duchess." Satine held her hand on the helmet, listening to the com broadcast through the small speakers by her ears.

"...it doesn't sound like they know their scouts went down. We may still have the element of surprise, but it won't be for long."
"Sounds like a good time to run," Qui-Gon said. "Come on, let's go."

They ran swiftly through the swampy, wooded terrain, with Satine giving them regular updates on the movements of the Death Watch. The reports weren't complete, but she got the idea that something was happening over at the main complex. She didn't know what, but from the sound of it, the troops were mobilizing. It wasn't good. When he access to the com channel was cut, she knew that they had discovered that something had happened to their search party, and with a quiet curse under her breath, she told her Jedi guardians to prepare for trouble.

It was an excellent suggestion, and they prepared for trouble by climbing up into the high branches of the wetland trees, silent and still as they counted the outpost soldiers that ran by. Eight, leaving only ten at the outpost, a much more reasonable number. There would, of course, be reinforcements, and in moments, the swamps would be flooded with the Death Watch, but Obi-Wan was confident in their ability to succeed, not in the least because of the intensity of the focus between the three of them. They had a task, and it would be accomplished. When the swamp was silent, the sound of the troops having passed them by, they dropped out of the trees and continued to run, quickly closing the kilometer of distance still left between them and the outpost.

They hid in the underbrush at the edge of the woods, peering through leaves and branches at the outpost where four Death Watch soldiers stood, blasters in hand and on high alert. The three watchtowers each had one soldier standing atop of it, which left the other three hidden to them, though both Jedi could sense them within the command center. They had to move fast. Reinforcements would be coming much sooner than they would have liked.

"I'll take the four guards on the ground," Qui-Gon said, pointing toward his targets. "Obi-Wan, you go for the command center, make sure they don't get out the call alerting their friends to our location. We need as much time as we can get, and I like them better scouting the woods than poking around here." The Padawan nodded, his eyes narrowed as he quickly ran through a plan in his mind. "Satine, you say you're a good shot?"

"Better than you'll ever be, Jedi." Qui-Gon softly chuckled, and felt the student beside him shift as he repressed a small smile.

"Take the three on the watchtowers. Do you have clear shots at all three?" Satine moved some branches out of her way, frowning as she looked at the scene before her.

"No, but I do from over there," she said, pointing to a tree at the edge of the clearing not too far from their current position. She looked through the scope of the rifle in her hands through the narrow visor of her helmet. "It looks like they're equipt with snipers as well. If you can draw them to the other side of that storage shed, you should be out of the range of two of them. I can take out the other one first."

"Is Obi-Wan covered?" The Duchess shook her head.

"No, but if he gets in the command center quickly, it shouldn't be a problem." Qui-Gon and Satine both looked at Obi-Wan, the young Jedi quietly surveying the scene before him.

"...it won't be a problem, Master. I can get in."

"Very well." Qui-Gon tossed his lightsaber from hand to hand as he readied himself. "Satine, don't begin shooting until I have their undivided attention. Obi-Wan, you and I move at the same time. I'll keep them off of you, but be prepared to deal with them if need be." Both teens nodded. "Alright. May the Force be with us. Go!"
Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan tore out of their hiding position as one, the two Jedi using the Force to augment their speed as they rushed across the wide open clearing, the Mandalorian guards catching sight of them immediately and opening fire. Lightsabers thrumming to life as they rushed them, the two Jedi batted bolt after bolt out of the way as their straight trajectory suddenly zigzagged as they bounded and dodged, keeping their movements unpredictable and making it impossible for the snipers to get a shot. The moment they crossed the line between the two of the watchtowers, they peeled away from each other, Qui-Gon rushing the three soldiers that stood between him and the supply shed, and Obi-Wan making a straight path to the command center, deflecting a bolt fired at him from the fourth guard, the plasma striking the Mandalorian that shot it right in the stomach.

Obi-Wan winced when he heard the man groan in pain, and before he rushed the door of his target, he slid his lightsaber into the fatally wounded man's neck, ending his life quickly instead of letting him linger in pain as he slowly died. It was a mercy, he told himself, but it made him shiver all the same. His eyed shot quickly over to where he knew Qui-Gon was when he heard a short, high pitched screech, the sound of Satine's sniper rifle firing, and he watched as one guard fell from his post on the guard tower. A moment later and a second shot rang out, and a second guard fell. He only had a moment to look, but Obi-Wan managed to see two of the guards that had been chasing Qui-Gon fly from behind the storage shed and strike the base of the guard tower. The plan was...actually succeeding. The Force, at least in this moment, was with them.

Steeling himself and opening himself to the Force, his heart beating with confidence, Obi-Wan jumped up and kicked the door, all his weight and power behind the strike, and the door caved open, the Jedi falling to the ground in a rolling dive, his hands outstretched before him as he rose to a knee, sending the three Death Watch soldiers slamming against the walls of the small room before they had a chance to react to the violent intrusion. When the men on the ground groaned and began to struggle to their feet, Obi-Wan used the Force to tear their helmets from their heads and quickly slammed the heavy hilt of his lightsaber on the backs of their heads, sending them unmoving to the ground.

He stood in the room and listened, still and quiet as he heard his Master's lightsaber thrum in the air, it's pitch rising and falling as he swung it, followed by the final screeching shot from the sniper. Clipping his lightsaber to his belt, he quickly dragged the three Mandalorians to the center of the room, lining them up and carefully examining them, and his eyes settled on the one on the right. Taking a deep breath and shaking his head, Obi-Wan knelt down and began to fiddle with the straps of his armor as he undressed him. Which was how Satine found him a few minutes later, kneeling over a half naked Mandalorian warrior and fiddling with the buckle on his pants.

It was awkward.

Satine arched an eyebrow, a wry, wicked smile on her face, and Obi-Wan blushed furiously and averted his eyes from both the Duchess and the man laid out before him.

"Shall I leave you two alone?" the girl said, sniggering when the Jedi flushed even deeper. "Though I must say, this is hardly the time for it. It does explain quite a bit about you, though."

"T-this is for the mission!" Obi-Wan cried indignantly, his face burning with embarrassment and frustration with the aggravating girl. "You heard Master Qui-Gon, he said I needed armor, and this man happens to be very similar to my size and build!" Satine's eyes roved over the unconscious soldier as Obi-Wan pulled the last of the armor from him, the young Jedi's eyes focused on folding the pants neatly together to fit with the rest of his pile of armor.

"He is a good deal better to look at than you, Jedi," the Duchess said mockingly, and Obi-Wan rolled his eyes.
"You would like my friend Quinlan, I think," he muttered, and Satine gasped.

"You have friends?!!" Obi-Wan's hand balled into a fist as he glared at the girl, his face an even darker shade of red, which the Duchess didn't even think was possible.

"I do have friends, yes," Obi-Wan said through grit teeth, standing with the stack of armor in his hands and placing it on one of the chairs in the room as he began to fiddle with the control console. "Quinlan is a hedonistic degenerate. I believe you would have gotten along with him much better, though you'd have quite a time keeping him from ravishing you." He glanced at the girl over his shoulder, the smile on her face gone and replaced with something a fair bit less comfortable and relaxed, her pale skin stained pink. "Unless, of course, you'd like that sort of thing."

"So the Jedi are human, hmm?" she asked, less assured than before. "I guess that makes you an outcast among the Jedi as well." The Jedi's eyes narrowed in a rare show of anger for just a moment before they became...what? Satine tilted her head as she looked at him, the boy quickly turning back to his work at the console, but the look in his eyes before he averted his gaze seemed almost...wounded. Like she had struck on something far closer to the truth than she knew.

"Quinlan is the exception," Obi-Wan muttered. "I suspect his pleasure-seeking behavior is tolerated only because he is...uniquely gifted. He possesses an extremely rare talent, the Jedi fought over the chance to teach him since the moment they realized he had the skill." His shoulders tensed, a thing he tried to cover by hunching over the console. "His talents would have been of great use on this mission."

"Perhaps he should have been assigned here, then," Satine said, but her voice lacked the conviction and harshness of before.

"...maybe so. He would have liked you very much, he thrives on passion." He laughed softly as he tuned into the encrypted com channel. "And since you Mandalorians place no value in chastity, I think you would have gotten along with him very well indeed, though..." he laughed softly, glaring at the girl over his shoulder when he felt her tense. "He is a Jedi. You'd never be more to him than a convenient bedmate."

"Is that what you think would happen?!!" the girl shouted.

"You don't know Quinlan. It is what would happen."

"You think so little of me?!" This time, the Padawan turned to face her, his face and eyes cold, not just emotionless.

"Well, you are Mandalorian," he said with disdain, and he held up his hand to the girl in a silent command to be silent, and for once, Satine obeyed, at a rare loss for words in her fury, the air filled with the crackling static of the com and the Mandalorian voices that carried over it. He could feel Satine's blood rush with anger, and he could feel new reasons for her hatred of him grow within her. That was fine by him.

Both teens stood in angry silence as they listened to the shouts and confusion, the frantic commands and the heated shouting for more support. Their attack on the outpost had disrupted something big, something important that was happening over at the base, though what it was, they had no idea. What they did know was that the confusion was to their benefit, as the troops were having difficulty mobilizing an organized response. It was good, but they needed to go.

Together, they ran from the command center and out into the yard toward the storage shed, the doors thrown open, and they saw Qui-Gon disappear inside. As they drew closer, the Jedi exited,
his arms filled with packets that he dropped on his heavy cloak that had been shed and lay on the ground. A small mountain of medical supplies and food rations lay on the cloak, and Obi-Wan felt his mouth begin to water as he remembered how hungry he was.

"Can you get to the next hiding place?" Qui-Gon asked. "Do you remember the way?"

"Yes, Master."

"It's very far away, and there aren't any speeders here," the Master said, disappearing inside the shed and coming out with another armful of supplies that he dropped on his cloak. "You'll be running most of the day, but if you're swift and lucky, you'll make it there before sundown." His head shot up as he listened, feeling the Force for the dull, nagging feeling that Obi-Wan felt as well, and he quickly returned his attentions to the teenagers. "Does that armor fit?"

"It should, Master." Qui-Gon nodded.

"Good. Put it on the cloak." Obi-Wan did as he was told, and Qui-Gon quickly wrapped the supplies in his cloak in a bundle, tying it all together with the sleeves and the hood, and he thrust the pack into Obi-Wan's arms. "Go. Don't stop running. Reenforcements are on the way, and they will be here very soon. I'm going to lead them far, far away from you."

"Master, if you came with us, we-"

"If they don't have something to chase, they will find something to chase, Obi-Wan. It's best we provide them with something." He laid a hand on his worried Padawan's shoulder. "Take care of the Duchess. I should return by morning, and if I don't, stay put and wait. If I'm not back in three days..." He paused to smile reassuringly at the student when he felt the teen's heart begin to race with anxiety. "I will be, but if not, then the mission will be up to you. Go forth like we planned, get her to safety, and contact the Council." Qui-Gon held up a hand to silence him before Obi-Wan could voice his opposition. "You will do as your told, my Padawan."

"...yes, Master."

"Go, I'll cover you."

Without looking back, Obi-Wan slung the pack over his shoulder, took Satine by the hand, and ran away from the swamp, the Death Watch, and his Master.

As Qui-Gon had said, it had taken hours to reach their destination, but it only took Satine half hour to run out of energy completely, the punishing pace draining the additional speed and strength that her rushing adrenaline provided. With no other options, Obi-Wan was forced to stop, quickly retie his pack to create makeshift straps, and he gave it to Satine to wear as he hoisted the girl on his own back and carried her the rest of the way. She was...mesmerized. She couldn't fathom where the boy got such strength, such stamina, such determined endurance, but somehow, each time she felt his body sag with exhaustion, he quickly caught himself and rushed forward, stronger and faster than before.

The terrain changed drastically as they ran, the traces of swamp fading into thick forests, then thinning into plains and rocky plateaus, and back into forest once again. Thanks to the fierce determination of the Jedi that carried her, they arrived long before the sun set, possibly as much as an hour before the Master had projected they would arrive. Satine didn't see where they would be hiding until Obi-Wan pointed it out, a small cave cut into the base of one of the forest's protruding plateaus, hidden well by thick vines and a small river that cut across the woods. Back in the swamp, the air had felt heavy and stagnant and strangely silent, the local avians and fauna driven
to silence by the constant activity of the Death Watch, and no matter the time of day, they could always hear the shouting of soldiers, the screeching of search ships and speeder bikes, and the roar of jetpacks as their enemy hunted them.

But here, there was...nothing. No screams, no disturbance in the air from the harsh sound of ships as they roared overhead. There was just the sound of birds and insects and the call of animals and the trickling of water over rocks. Satine knew they were not safe, not even here, but this place was far out of the standard search area, and she allowed herself to relax, letting her weariness settle over her as she dropped the pack inside the cave and promptly fell asleep.

It was still light when she awoke perhaps an hour later, and her entire body ached, her back sore from sleeping on top of the rifle strapped to her back. She stretched, groaning as she did so, and grabbed one of the food rations from the open pack as she left the cave to look for her protector. He was easy to find. She squinted against the setting sun to see him crouching beside the small river, his hands in the water, doing...something, she couldn't see. With a sigh, Satine quietly pattered over to him, watching as he stood and pulled his robe out of the water, tightly wound the cloth and wrung it out, and draped it on a rock beside him. When he turned around, he stood facing the Duchess, the girl gaping at him, and Satine watched as a deep flush spread across the boy's face, too flustered to even move.

Despite living so closely for the past few days, Satine and Obi-Wan never got close, his apparent Jedi modesty demanding that he remain decent whenever she was around, but now, the Jedi stood stripped to the waist, and Satine couldn't take her eyes from him. The boy was thin, a condition that was no doubt made worse by a week of barely eating, his ribs easy to see beneath skin that was far too pale. He was gaunt and lanky, his body still caught between his youth and manhood, though in a few years, she could see that frame filled out beautifully with strength, an easy thing to imagine as she looked at the trim, lean, defined muscle of his torso.

But that wasn't why she stared. No, Satine's eyes were fixed on the burned, blackened holes on his shoulder and side, the indentations shining with the thick, viscous smear of bacta that the boy had applied, a large circle of dark purple bruising his skin around each wound. It was sobering, a stark contrast to his natural pale, the discoloration drifting down his arm, across his ribs, and dipping below the waist of his pants. The shot was one thing, but it seemed as though the force of the blast caused more damage than the burning plasma did. She felt guilt rush through her. This may not have been her fault, but he suffered these wounds for her, even though he hated her, even though she hated him, even though she was unduly cruel...

Violence could never be the answer to anything if it could result in damaging a body as beautiful as this.

Obi-Wan looked at her like he was caught doing something he wasn't supposed to, his mouth moving as he tried to speak, but the words caught in his throat, and Satine finally, finally saw her opportunity. It wasn't what she came to him for, but she couldn't pass it up, not now.

"Tell me about the Jedi Order."

Obi-Wan's eyes widened even further, staring at her with confusion and shock before it melted into defeat, and then acceptance as he slowly nodded. "I...suppose we're well past due for this, aren't we?" Satine crossed her arms over her chest, but couldn't keep the smile from her lips.

"That we are."

"I-I'm washing my clothing, I thought you were asleep," he quickly stuttered, pointing back to the rock where his robes and tunic lay drying. "I'm sorry, I-"
"Obi-Wan, it's alright!" Satine quickly interrupted before the boy could find an excuse to get out of the conversation. "I don't mind, and..." She pointed to his wounds. "They're healing, right? We need to let the bacta do its work." Obi-Wan looked at her for a moment, searching her face for ulterior motive, but found nothing, and slowly nodded, watching the Duchess as she pulled off her boots and sat beside the river, her feet dipping into the gently rushing water. He quietly sat beside her and did likewise.

"...it's hard to define the Order," Obi-Wan said after a moment of silence. "How do you describe something you have known your whole life? I know no other way but the way of the Jedi."

"Alright..." Satine said, planting her hands behind her and leaning back, her lips pursed as she thought. "Do you have family?"

"None but the Jedi."

"But surely you must have parents. Are they Jedi too?" This time, Obi-Wan looked contemplative, his mouth slightly parted as he seemed to mouth something to himself, his blue eyes distant as he dove within himself, and there was silence. For a long while, Satine sat watching him, trying to be patient, but found she could bear the silence no longer. "If it was a bad question, or a painful one, I'm sorry, I-"

"No, no," Obi-Wan said quickly. "It...it was a good question. I find I am having difficulty answering it. Those outside the Order do not understand the Jedi because of our customs, and I feel it will be especially difficult for you because..." He trailed off, a blush coming to his face when he saw offense in her eyes. "...the Mandalorian dedication to the embrace of your passions will make this, make me seem...odd. More odd than you already believe me to be."

Was that it? All those long silences, all those short answers, all those averted eyes, the stubborn refusal to even look at her, was this it? She had thought Obi-Wan simply arrogant, a teenage boy with a rare gift that made him uniquely powerful, a boy that thought himself above her...could all of it just be because of this? Arrogance wasn't his affliction, it was shyness. She was beginning to see him in a new light, and a slow, challenging smile spread across her face.

"Try me." The response seemed to surprise him, and he drew back slightly, his eyes searching her face, his expression guarded, but she didn't look away from him. Obi-Wan averted his gaze first, his eyes fixing on the light playing on his feet through the water.

"...the Jedi are forbidden from forming attachments," he said slowly after a moment of silence, measuring each word and giving it its appropriate weight. "As a part of our Code, we train to allow our bonds to be broken, so we hold nothing too close, too dear, so we prioritize nothing above the mission we are given." Obi-Wan glanced at the young Duchess out of the corner of his eye and found her confused and horrified, but not disgusted or disdainful as he expected.

"No attachments?" she gasped. "None? What about Qui-Gon? You two seem so close!"

"And we are," Obi-Wan said softly, a slight smile on his lips that seemed to make him glow with warmth and a depth of emotion far greater than Satine thought him capable of. "There is a...bond between us, deeper than something someone without the Force may feel. Our bond is a mental connection, a link through which the Force flows freely between us. He is always with me, I can always feel his presence."

"Can you feel him now?" she asked cautiously, afraid of what the answer may be, since the Master was putting himself in danger, but his student nodded.

"I can. Ease your fears, Duchess, he is fine." She breathed a sigh of relief, one that Obi-Wan
found himself mirroring. "When I become a Jedi Knight, when my apprenticeship has ended...that bond will be severed, and we will be forced to move on." The warm smile dropped from her face, and Obi-Wan had to look away from her. "It's...part of our final test. He will always be there for me, of course, should I ever need him, but...attachment is forbidden, and there is none stronger within the Jedi than that between a Master and his Padawan. The bond must be broken."

"Y-you said you had friends," she said, almost as if she was searching for a way to prove that life without any attachment was impossible, but Obi-Wan simply shook his head.

"I do, yes. I like them, but...the bonds may not grow too deep. I have found myself to be...particularly susceptible to forging bonds. I have gone to great lengths to protect myself from such." He sighed. "It is...no easy thing for me, but I have managed." Satine was silent for a while as she looked at him. This was a conversation they should have had long ago.

"That is why you do the whole..." She did her best to stare blankly ahead, her face expressionless, her eyes devoid of emotion before a small smile came to her face. "Stoic thing. Right?" Obi-Wan slowly nodded.

"We are not forbidden from feeling," he said softly. "But those feeling have a time, a place, and must be let go when it is time. A Master can handle this. A Padawan cannot." He smiled at her, a faint, pained thing that tugged at her heartstrings. "A Jedi shall not know anger, nor hatred, nor love." He laid a hand over his heart. "Emotions, connections, all of it must be let go, released, or not felt at all, and I...already feel too deeply. It's easier to remain...distant." He smiled at her again. "You understand?"

Satine nodded slowly. "I think so...you have no deep friendships, then? Nothing like that, no person you would do anything to protect?" The Jedi shook his head. "I suppose that means you can have no lovers." The boy flushed a fierce shade of red and quickly shook his head, his expression appalled and horrified.

"N-no, no, of course not! It is...deeply discouraged, though my friend has many. It's not overlooked because he's..." Obi-Wan cleared his throat and turned his gaze away. "This is an inappropriate subject to discuss with a lady. Let's just say...it's purely physical with him. I've never heard of him being with the same girl twice, so...w-well, he says it's not really breaking the rules if he isn't attached."

Satine laughed softly. "Well, is he right?" The Jedi shrugged, chuckling as well, a light and easy thing that made Satine feel at ease. "Still, it must be lonely. You must be lonely." Obi-Wan was silent for a moment as he contemplated the statement.

"...I'm not," he finally said. "After all, no being is ever truly alone. The Force connects us all."

"Yes, but most people can't even feel the Force," Satine countered. "You may be connected to everything, but there's a big difference between living in this world and being a part of it."

"...you may be right," Obi-Wan said, a sad smile on his face. "But that is not my path. I will be a Jedi Knight, or...I am nothing." The smile on his face grew wider, but it was hollow, a shell of an emotion, not an actual one. "What else can I be but that?"

"You could be anything," she started, but stopped quickly when she saw that smile waver.

"I am nothing without the Jedi," he whispered, and the Duchess had to lean in to hear him over the sound of the water at their feet. "You don't know what I suffered to get where I am. I have come too far to turn back now." Those blue eyes grew distant, hazy, like he had suddenly left his body, and Satine frowned. She had pushed him too far for one day. But she learned a great deal
about him and the place he came from. Her hunch was right. Obi-Wan was shy, a quiet, introverted boy that hid behind a mask of indifference to protect a soft, deeply emotional heart. His experience with people outside of the equally cold and emotionless Jedi must have been limited, so it was little wonder he was struggling to deal with her now.

"I think," Satine said softly, smiling at the Jedi as he watched the sun dip below the horizon, "that it is getting late, and we're going to need a fire before it becomes too dark." Obi-Wan's eyes lit up, returning to himself as suddenly as he had left.

"A wise decision, Duchess."

"But I should like to hear more about the Jedi!" she said quickly as Kenobi stood, and she took his hand when he offered it to her to help her to her feet.

"If you will continue teaching me Mando'a, I would be happy to."

"Or..." she said, a clever smirk crossing her face. "You could tell me about the Jedi in Mando'a."

The Jedi's blue eyes lit up, and a small, genuine smile crossed his lips, one that made Satine's heart skip a beat, and she began to tremble, not exactly knowing why. The sun had set, it was getting cold. That was it. It had to be.

"I was thinking the exact thing, Duchess." Obi-Wan watched Satine as she frowned, not unpleasantly, but in thought, her eyes casually looking at him before she realized what she was doing, flushed deeply, and turned to walk swiftly toward the cave, gathering branches as she went. They were a good deal out of the way of the regular patrols, they had food, water, medical supplies, and if need be, they could hide out for a while, take their time to prepare for their plan and execute it when they were ready. Suddenly, the prospect of being alone with Satine didn't seem like such a horrible thing to Obi-Wan.

Meditation.

All things considered, today was something of a success. Qui-Gon has yet to return, but he will. The night has only just begun, and he said not to expect him until morning, but still...I worry. I know he is safe, I can feel he is safe, but it wouldn't be the first time I was wrong. It wouldn't be the first time my emotions clouded my judgement. But I believe he is well. I have to believe he is well. I don't know what I would do if it were otherwise.

I took a look at the Mandalorian armor I managed to secure today after Satine fell asleep. It's much lighter than I thought it would be. I doubt I am wearing it right, I will have to ask Satine for help with it in the morning. If I'm to infiltrate their base of operations, I can't look like someone who's never worn armor in their life. I am someone who's never worn armor in their life, so I suppose I'll need a great deal of practice to pull it off. I'll need to look like one of them, I'll need to speak like one of them, which we have already determined is impossible. I learn the words and the grammar quickly, but the perfect intonation eludes me. But I can learn it. I must learn it. The infiltration will fail if I can't pull this off, and...

Force, what am I doing here?

That's the trouble with this plan. It doesn't matter how well I end up speaking Mando'a because I can't fly. I may have been good in the simulations at the Jedi Temple and in the skies around Coruscant, but out here, I am nothing. There's a vast chasm of difference between life in the Temple and life in the galaxy, and I hadn't realized how wide it was until I came here. Misplaced pride and arrogance makes for a poor pilot, and I hadn't realized how filled with pride I was until it was taken from me. With any luck, Qui-Gon will see the error in his plan before he decides to
go through with this mistake. He wants this mission to succeed, doesn't he? I want this mission to succeed. Perhaps I will petition Satine in the morning so she can talk some sense into him. We are at her command, after all, and she wouldn't feel safe in my care, not after last time. If there's one thing I can count on Satine for, it's her lack of faith in me.

I don't blame her, of course. I did earn it, and this consistence in the otherwise inconsistent, emotional mess that is...well, her is something I can count on. Although...

Things have changed between us, and I do not suspect it was because of what happened at the outpost. No, she changed because of our conversation about the Jedi, which gave her a little understanding into...well, me, I suspect. Which of course will vindicate Qui-Gon, who claimed that the problem in our relationship was me. It must have been, since tensions seem to have eased a great deal. Our conversation over dinner tonight could almost be called...pleasant, if not a bit bumbling, since she insisted in conversing in Mando'a, which I truly am grateful for, but I could barely get through a sentence without her stopping to correct me. She must have sensed my frustrations, because before she went to sleep, she said that I was perhaps just slightly less hopeless than she previously thought. Of course, she was tired, and we had both eaten our first real meal in over a week, so of course she was more relaxed.

Quinlan, of course, would tell me it's changed because she saw me in a state of undress, but Quinlan is a single-minded, hedonistic, lascivious child. Satine isn't like that. She may be a confused, emotional mess, but her heart beats for her people. She is focused and dedicated to her cause, she had no time for such things, nor will she be swayed by them. It's plain to see just by looking at her. And our conversation laid bare the rules of the Jedi that I must obey, so she knows in this, I am the same as her. We are committed to our duty, and that is all. I will have no lover, no wife, no children, as are the demands of the Jedi. She will, one day, when her duty allows for it, when her duty demands it of her. After all, she is a Duchess. Royalty. A Queen, even, and that lineage must be continued. They could never be a future with me, even if it's what I wanted. Which it isn't.

I wouldn't even know where to begin if a woman were put in front of me. I...don't even know what I would do if I were confronted by even the possibility of such a thing. I've found women...aesthetically pleasing before, that isn't new. I will even confess that Satine is quite easy to look at. Qui-Gon says it's the pull of hormones, and as Jedi, we are to rise above such base desires, which I feel I have been successful in. Mostly...

Puberty hasn't escaped me entirely, of course, and I've had my fair share of terribly embarrassing nights, but that was last year. This year, so far, I am much more in control, though I suspect a great deal of that has to do with watching Quinlan descend into hormone-induced madness in his insatiable need to copulate with literally every female he sees. It's so undignified. It's not a trap I will be falling into. I have my urges under control, the dreams have stopped, and through meditation, I can free myself of the need for physical release. Real men don't let themselves be controlled by their basic instincts, they rise above it. Jedi rise above it, and so will I.

I need to. Without flying, it's all I have left.
As promised, Qui-Gon returned before dawn the next day, and since then, they hadn't stopped running. Each morning, the trio would awaken before the sun and run from their hiding place to attack the Death Watch outposts, keeping the warriors on a frantic search for them, each passing day causing more of their number to take up the search for the renegade Duchess and her Jedi defenders. At the Duchess' request and much to Obi-Wan's relief, they rarely needed to kill the soldiers, opting instead to run and hide or render them unconscious. When killing did have to be done, it was often Qui-Gon that rushed in to swiftly dispatch their pursuers.

The outpost attacks served three very specific purposes, which was why, despite increasing danger, they continued to attack the guarded stations. First and foremost, the outposts were guaranteed to be fully supplied with food and medical supplies, which the trio was in desperate need of, as Zanbar proved to be hostile and unforgiving in the best of circumstances, and with their increased activity came the need to make certain they were getting the fuel they needed to continue running. Even still, they were becoming leaner in their flight, quickly shedding any excess weight they may have carried, their skin seeming to thin as the stringy cords of their musculature could be clearly seen. It was especially noted in the already wiry Obi-Wan, the increase of activity stimulating the growth of thin, lean muscle that lacked the nutrients to fill out his lanky frame.

The second reason was far more political. In addition to serving their ultimate goal of driving the Death Watch from their nest, attacking the outposts served as a very effective means of showing Satine's enemies that she was fighting, and after they had left the second outpost with the symbol of Clan Kryze burned into the side of the command center, they had made a point to do so at every outpost they attacked. It was a symbol of defiance, one that weakened the Death Watch in a non-violent way simply by existing. Satine was to them, a traitorous little girl, one that needed to be executed immediately, and despite being stranded on the planet from which the Death Watch operated, they had been unable to catch her. In short, it was making them look like bumbling idiots.

The third and possibly most important reason the outposts remained the targets was from the command centers they managed to take, even for a short while, they had access to the Death Watch's communications hub, and through it, they received word of what was happening in the sector as war raged across it. The Death Watch had taken Sundari, and their leader sat on the throne within the palace, but they were struggling to hold it. Every clan that opposed Clan Vizsla rose against them, and when word of Satine's survival left Zanbar, and it did quickly, her supporters rallied, forcing Death Watch to give much of the ground they gained in order to keep the palace. The city was in open rebellion with no one clan assuming control, and the Death Watch was calling upon their supporters to converge on Mandalore in order to secure the planet.

It wasn't working. Through their brief, daily information feed, Satine learned that Death Watch, while a force to be reckoned with, was heavily fractured, which explained their difficulties in hunting her so close to their own base, despite the importance of her death to their cause. They were spread far too thin, their commanders all agreeing that Satine needed to die, but none of them willing to give up their meager forces for a chance to kill her when it meant losing their territory for certain. With their leader pinned down in Sundari and with every other clan standing against them and against each other, it became impossible to mount a focused assault. Besides, one little girl, no matter how good her guards, couldn't run forever, and the dangers of Zanbar's swamps would see her dead before long.

But it didn't. Two weeks rushed by like a blur of running and fighting and hiding, and still, Satine
and her Jedi guardians lived, and they were getting very good at their hit and run attacks. A new hiding place was selected every evening by Qui-Gon, and when it was time to run, Obi-Wan would escort Satine to the designated location, and provided he deemed it safe, they would hunker down and wait for the Master to return from leading the soldiers away. But soon, it would all be over. According to Qui-Gon, nearly the entire Death Watch hub was swarming the forests and swamps and plateaus in search of them, and judging by how often they heard soldiers nearby, or had to leave their location for another one of relative safety, Obi-Wan agreed with the assessment. There were more warriors in the forest than in the encampments, and so, it was finally time for them to execute their final plan. It was time to leave Zanbar.

They barely had time to talk, and rarely had the energy to, but still, Satine and Obi-Wan always seemed to find a chance to steal away and quietly whisper to each other as the boy told the Duchess about the Jedi in Mando’a. It wasn’t much, sometimes little more than a few whispered sentences as they lay close together in the night, but it was enough. The learning was slow, but Satine felt she was growing to learn more and more about the Jedi, not just from Obi-Wan, but by her observations of the Master and his student. Knowing a bit about them and their philosophies helped her better understand their actions and motivations, and she found herself increasingly intrigued.

However, as the days went on and they drew closer and closer to the day when they would leave, Obi-Wan seemed to grow increasingly withdrawn, his affect flat, his expressions blank, the boy retreating deep within himself for hours at a time when they sat huddled together in hiding. This wasn’t like before. Satine recognized that before, his aloofness was the product of his upbringing and his natural introversion, but what he experienced now was different. Gone was the peaceful silences, the calm ease at which he sat in contemplation and reflection. Now, he was tense, his voice always tight, and if she looked very closely, she could see beyond his emotionless exterior, at what lay within him.

It was stress, yes, but much deeper than that. Anxiety, maybe, a lack of confidence born from fear and a shattered ego, or perhaps one that was never whole to begin with. There was fear as well, a great deal of it, plain for her to see when he sat down to meditate and his breathing shuddered, uneven and fast as though he were desperately trying to keep from hyperventilation. No, this wasn’t anxiety. This was panic. Though over what, she had no idea, though she tried very hard to puzzle that out as she leaned against a tree very near their new hideout and watched him as he walked through the graceful, elegant motions of one of his lightsaber forms, the Jedi weapon exchanged for a stick in favor of keeping a low profile. The hum and glow of the weapon had a habit of attracting attention they did not want.

It was the first place in nearly five days where she felt they were actually safe, the first place they hadn’t stayed tense and jumpy and ready to run, the distant sounds of Mando’a shouts and commands in the air as the commandos looked for them. Here, there were only the shouts of wildlife, the rustling of the wind through the trees, the chirping of insects, the soft trickle of distant water, and the hissed curses of the Jedi as he berated himself for his poor form, his sloppy technique, his lack of focus, his everything, and not a single thing of it correct. Satine didn’t see it. She didn’t think she had seen anything so beautiful in her entire life. It was like dancing, like art, like the calm of night and the fire of passion in each graceful movement, like everything and more that the Jedi were restricted from, and she longed to see it done with a lightsaber clutched in his hand.

Perhaps soon. If things went well during Qui-Gon’s reconnaissance, tomorrow was the day. Tomorrow, they attacked the Death Watch’s main hub and left this awful planet. Maybe Obi-Wan would steal a ship that had enough room for him to practice and show her the form as it was meant to be done. But for now, there was just the two of them, alone and quiet while they waited for Qui-Gon to return with news, the first day in what seemed like forever when they could breathe,
the first time in a while they could say more than a few words to each other without fear of being seen. And typically, Obi-Wan chose to spend the time alone. It was infuriating, as he so often was, and despite the differences they had managed to overcome, despite the fact that the young Jedi was so, so slowly beginning to open himself to her, Obi-Wan Kenobi still made Satine burn with her frustrations.

"You know," she said, not loudly, but loud enough to startle the boy into nearly dropping his stick, "there's a word for people like you in my language." Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth turning down into a pensive, irritated frown that made Satine smile bright as the sun. He was perturbed. She liked that look.

"There are many words for people like me in your language, as you so often remind me, and I believe you've called me all of them. Which is it today?" He held up his hand, dropping his stick on the ground as he counted off on his fingers. "There's aruetii, if you're going for a general approach. Nothing like being called an outsider. Di'kut, rude, but I think you use that affectionately, and shabuir if you're feeling particularly insulting. I've grown quite partial to or'dinii." He rolled his eyes. "I think it's becoming a pet name. You must really like me to call me idiot so often."

"Well, my father always taught me to be honest." She smiled softly at him when he reached up and snatched his braid in his hands and pulled at it, a habit she had quickly learned was a nervous one born from his natural anxiety. "I mean...not an insult." Obi-Wan's eyes looked sidelong at her. "Solus," she said softly, and the Jedi turned to her, an inquisitive look on his face, an expression that he would have hidden from her just a few weeks ago.

"Solus?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "One. The number."

"W-well..." She frowned and bit her lip as she thought how best to explain. "It...is not often used to describe a person. Not in Mandalore. It means...shy. Alone. Vulnerable." Obi-Wan frowned. "One word sure has a lot of meaning to you Mandalorians. And given your culture, none of those are good." He paused. "...you're insulting me again, aren't you?" Satine looked up into the sky as she thought.

"It's true that these things are looked down upon in our culture. The lone soldier doesn't get far, and the shy man is seen as weak willed."

"Oh, fantastic." Satine scoffed and arrogantly put her nose in the air. "But my people are also the ones that exalt the kandosii, the indomitable and the ruthless, so much so that the word is used interchangeably for noble, and classy, and awesome." Her eyes narrowed fiercely. "But there is nothing noble about being ruthless. My people are idiots, Obi-Wan, that's why we're fighting this stupid war!" He said nothing, and his silence...calmed her. Satine smiled softly at the teen, his head tilted as he observed her. "I don't think it's so bad to be shy, to be solus. I...think it's sweet." She frowned for a second, considering the word, and nodded when she found she liked it. "Yes. It's sweet."

"Gar ijaat ni, Satine, you honor me." For just a moment, Obi-Wan's anxiety seemed to leave him, replaced instead with modesty and a small smile on his face that shone brighter than any sun Satine had ever seen, and she could feel her heart skip a beat. She didn't like it at all, and quickly brushed the feeling away.

"I still hate you, of course," she said swiftly, and the Jedi chuckled softly.

"Yes, of course." The anxiety returned, his eyes seeming to dull as he lowered his gaze to the
"I am, yes." She crossed her arms over her chest and shivered as a cool wind blew through the trees. "I am trying not to get my hopes up in case Qui-Gon returns and says the time is not right. The fighting has only intensified, I cannot stay here any longer. My people need me." She smiled at him again, hoping to put the boy more at ease, but it wasn't working. Whatever it was that bothered him was beyond her reach, and the secretive boy still did not trust her with the fragile heart she knew he protected. That was fine. She didn't trust him with her own secrets either.

"There is little we can do now but wait," Obi-Wan said softly, his voice distant in his distraction, and Satine slowly reached over to him and tugged lightly on his braid, snapping him quickly out of his revere.

"Why do you have this?" she asked, running the tight, neat braid through her fingers for a moment before Obi-Wan snatched it out of her hands, tucking it behind his ear as he frowned. "Is this a Jedi thing? Or are you just really strange?"

"You would believe me strange regardless of my answer."

"Well, yes, but you are very strange, Obi-Wan." The boy's eyes flicked to the ground, and for just a moment, Satine saw the boy look hurt. Again, a rare thing for the boy to show. He was beginning to be more free with his emotions around her as he became more comfortable, or something was really bothering him and he was struggling to contain it. It was, perhaps, not the best day to tease him.

"Bicuyir a Jetise kebi," Obi-Wan said softly, running the braid through his fingers absently as he stared at the ground. Satine smiled gently at him, though she was certain he wasn't looking at her. Often, however, he seemed to be in tune with what she was feeling, so perhaps he could feel her satisfaction. Two weeks, and they had very little time to practice, but Obi-Wan had made large strides in the language. He was insufferably intelligent, and though he could never quite purge himself of his clipped, aristocratic accent, his infections had greatly improved. Mando'a flowed freely and beautifully off his tongue, but seeing how hard he had been on himself during his earlier practice with the stick, she doubted that he felt the same as she.

"Your Mando'a is greatly improved," she said softly in her native tongue, and she smiled when she saw the Jedi try to go unnoticed as he looked at her, his gaze focused, almost mesmerized, she thought, but she brushed the notion away. Obi-Wan wasn't engaged in anything enough to be mesmerized, and certainly not by Mando'ã, which he found to be harsh and brutish.

"It's kind of you to say so..."

"I only say it because it's true." Again, the boy began to fidget uncomfortably, and with a frown, Satine grabbed his hand, a thing he immediately began to object to, but she was having none of it, and she tightened her grip and began to lead him back to their hiding place. "Come on. I'm going to teach you how to wear that armor properly, and you're going to tell me more about the Jedi, just like you promised."

"Satine, I can't-"

"I'm the reason that you're even here, Obi-Wan, I think that means you have to do what I tell you." At that, the Jedi suddenly stopped in a show of stubbornness, and Satine was wrenched backwards, the boy keeping her from falling, but she stumbled awkwardly. Frowning, she looked up into his face and saw defiance, pure and unrestrained, and she thought that perhaps she had pushed him too far. Whatever hidden, unknown stress he was under was making him...emotional. In his own, muted way, perhaps, but it shone through regardless, all the more shocking for how
little he actually showed. She dropped his hand. In addition to everything else, reserved Obi-Wan had no time for peace or silence, and the invasion of his personal space may have been too much.

And then it was gone, stubborn resolve fading into tired resignation, and Satine found herself missing the brief show of temper.

"As you say, Duchess..." he almost whispered, his eyes downcast as he dragged his feet into their hideout, and Satine followed at a distance behind him. What happened? Yes, true, they were all tired from two weeks of nonstop running and fighting and fear, and despite the rations they managed to get their hands on, they were still hungry. Perhaps that was simply it. The tension had been slowly mounting since they had crashed on the planet, but especially in the past two weeks, and while Satine vented her frustrations on the Jedi in snapping fits of harsh words and insults, Obi-Wan had been a perfect gentleman, bearing it all with quiet patience, though Satine could see him growing angry as she did. He never said a word, though, which only made her more angry.

Perhaps prying wasn't the best idea at the moment.

"Obi-Wan," Satine said softly as she entered the carefully hidden hiding space, a small cave lit by the headlights of one of the Mandalorian helmets they had collected. "I'm sorry. Nothing has been easy, I know, but-"

"You bring out the worst in me..." the Jedi growled. Growled! Satine could hardly believe it. A low, tense, angry thing that reverberated from his chest, almost as if the tightly wound emotions within him were straining for freedom. It was the most emotional that he had ever sounded. "I'm sorry..." he said after a moment, continuing on in his smooth, beautiful Mando'a. "Maybe it's just the war, maybe it's just being here and being surrounded by killing and fear and violence all the time. T-there's been no time for peace, or silence, or..." He stopped, frowning. "How do you say meditation in Mando'a?" he asked in Basic, and Satine smiled sadly at him.

"Ogir cuyir nayc miit par bic. There is no word for it," she said, and the Jedi's lips turned up in a disdainful snarl.

"Of course not..." he continued in Mando'a. "But you..." He took a few short, fast breaths, a thing that seemed unintentional to Satine, before he calmed himself and regained control. "I feel your emotions. All of them, all the time, whether I want to or not, and they...effect me. All your anger, all your hate, all your fear and resentment and grief, all of it, I feel." He laughed, a high, tense nervous thing that lacked even the slightest trace of humor. This was verbal tension relief, but Satine could see it only served to heighten his anxiety and push him closer to panic.

"Do all Jedi sense emotions like this?" Obi-Wan nodded.

"Yes, but usually only when we look for it. I can usually tune it out, but you..." He laughed again. "You are so passionate, so intense, so overwhelming, I can't...I can't..." He gripped his head tightly for a moment before he began to twirl his braid tightly around his fingers. "You are a mess, Satine. And it isn't your fault. I understand it all too well, but instead of making me brave, o-or strong or focused or wise, it's making me-"

"Irritable and annoyed," the Duchess finished, and the Jedi clamped his mouth shut and nodded.

"All derived from your hatred of me," he snapped, wincing as he did so and taking a few deep breaths in a futile reach for calm. It only made him more stressed. "I'm sorry..."

"Don't be, I understand," she swiftly snapped in return. "You and I are fundamentally
incompatible. A Mandalorian sees a lack of passion as weakness. As soulless, which is the worst thing you can be."

"The Jedi see fierce passion as dangerous and corrupting, the fastest way to poor decisions and pain, as your war is evidence of."

"Ooh, you are awful!" the Duchess snapped. "Everything inside me, everything I have ever believed in rebels against creatures like you! Let us not forget, it was your arrogance that got us stranded here in the first place!" Again, that deeply wounded look, and Satine felt the anger drain out of her as she was filled with understanding. Her protector was afraid. They fought like this nearly every time they spoke, between the silences and moments of instruction, but this was different. All their other spats ended with irritation at the other, but neither was truly hurt or offended. It was verbal sparring, a thing that Satine happened to enjoy, and was devilishly good at. But Obi-Wan...

"Take your robes off," Satine quietly instructed the boy, his eyes shooting back at her, the rich blue doing nothing to hide the hurt and panic he was feeling. She held the armor up. "I need to teach you how to wear it properly. We'll be leaving soon, and you need to be ready." Obi-Wan didn't answer, instead nodding slightly and turned his back to her as he shed his robe and tunic, neatly folding each as he carefully set them down. Satine pretended not to look at him, but she couldn't help but glance over her shoulder at the bare-chested boy.

It wasn't a sight she hadn't seen before. She was well accustomed to watching the warriors of her clan training in the yard, a thing they most often did stripped to the waist, and despite his discretion and modesty, she had seen a fair bit of Obi-Wan shirtless, a sight that she always appreciated. He wasn't nearly so bulky or thick chested like her Mandalorian warriors, but he lacked their bluster and bravado, a thing she grateful for. Something about her brash, cocky kinsmen was inherently distasteful to the young Duchess, a thing that had kept her from becoming involved with any of them in an intimate sense, though it didn't keep her from looking and seriously admiring the view. She was a woman, after all, and Mandalorian blood ran hot with passion and lust for life and...other things.

Still, she wasn't like her sister. Bo-Katan had always been brazen and brash like the boys she trained with, and she made Satine in comparison look as though she had ice running in her veins. Satine admired from afar, but she had modesty her little sister didn't, and such things made her nearly as shy as Obi-Wan. It wasn't something she was comfortable with, a thing that her father had praised, as he often praised his eldest girl. Her innate reserve would serve her well, he always said, and she should wait for a man to prove worthy of her, which she had taken to heart, her lack of initiative leading to a lack of experience that led her here, her heart fluttering at the sight of an undressing boy, not down in a yard far below her, but a mere ten feet away.

Pathetic, she mentally chided herself. You are a woman, Satine, the Duchess of Mandalore. You do not shy from anything! His body is no different from any other man.

But it was. So, so different from her kinsmen, so much paler, so much leaner, a thing that would be seen as weakness, but she knew he was filled with power, and the more subtle strength of her protector... appealed to her. He was an unfortunate personality and a poor match for her, but he was a handsome thing to look at. A safe thing to look at. Obi-Wan was forbidden from passions of all kind, forbidden from love and lust and desire, which made him ideal. Dealing with fending off advances from a typical teenage boy was a stress she did not need, and there was no chance at that happening with Obi-Wan. His dedication to the Jedi was as absolute as her dedication to Mandalore. She didn't like him. As he had said, she brought out the worst in him, and he did likewise with her. But she respected him, learned from him, and could feel the beginnings of a highly antagonistic friendship beginning to grow between them.
She turned away from him, a fierce flush on her face, when Obi-Wan began shedding his pants. It wasn't that she was *embarrassed*, it was just that...well, Obi-Wan would have turned away if *she* were changing.

She only turned around when the Jedi tapped her shoulder a moment later, the boy clad in the tight black long sleeved shirt and pants worn under the lightweight armor to keep the skin from chaffing. A small, modest smile was on his lips as he looked at the Duchess and indicated to the clothing he wore.

"See? I figured out this part, at least." Satine laughed softly, shaking her head as she took the grieves in her hand, knelt, and began fastening them to his shins, her long, deft fingers working quickly and automatically, the armor a thing she had been working with since she had been old enough to run.

"You figured out the rest as well, for the most part," she said, grabbing two other pieces and holding them to his thighs as she attached them to his hips. "You just needed some adjustments, which is admittedly a bit trickier."

"Y-yes, it didn't feel quite right..." he stuttered, his head held high and looking away from the girl as she knelt before him and worked. His heart was racing. Quinlan often, *often* went into vivid, disgusting detail about his escapades, something he and Luminara tried with all their might to avoid, but the Kiffar was not to be daunted in his efforts to shout his conquests into the ears of his best friends. This felt *distressingly* like some of the things he described. Obi-Wan shut his eyes tight and whispered the Code to himself in a noble effort to quell his beating heart.

It was, of course, just like this when Qui-Gon arrived, and the Master stopped dead in his tracks when he saw his student, red faced and wide eyed, staring at him in horror as the Duchess of Mandalore sat on her knees before him her hands doing *something* at the waist of his pants.

Satine truly did bring out the worst in *everything*.

"Qui-Gon!" Satine said swiftly, her voice filled with relief and happiness when she saw him, a smile on her face bright enough to light the room, and with a final tug on a strap, she rose to her feet. "We're fitting his armor, *finally*.

"Oh, I *bet* you were..." the Master said, his voice low and warning, his Padawan seeming to shrink down in size, but Satine didn't seem to notice as she picked up the chest piece.

"Well?" she asked excitedly, her fingers tightly clutching the armor, her face tight and expectant as she watched the Jedi Master. "Are we ready?" Qui-Gon walked past Satine, grabbed Obi-Wan's braid as he passed and tugged *hard*, a swift admonishment he had picked up from Dooku from his own wild youth. Obi-Wan quickly and obediently knelt, his lip bit and his entire body trembling, and Qui-Gon felt *awful*. It wasn't a harsh admonishment, but his sensitive Padawan took criticism very hard. The rush of blood that the Master had felt coursing through his Padawan when he entered quickly stilled to an even pulse, and he felt no desire within the boy. Still, it was an important reminder. Satine was, in every way, completely and totally off-limits. Obi-Wan understood this, at least. Qui-Gon had felt the boy's thoughts drift elsewhere, no doubt the influence of his friendship with the incorrigible Quinlan and his own severely repressed sexuality, but it wasn't directed at Satine. And Satine, it seemed, was simply working. There was nothing there.

*Still...*

"We are ready," Qui-Gon said softly, smiling when Satine gave a small, sharp cry of joy and quickly bent to fitting Obi-Wan, the boy suddenly *very* uncomfortable. "Everything is set, and I
don't think we will have a better chance. They take the ships out daily, but they are only bringing recon ships and fighters out to look for us. The hangar is filled with cruisers and corvettes, which come and go regularly throughout the day, so stealing away with one should be a simple matter. Is Obi-Wan's Mando'a good enough?" Satine smiled brightly as her fingers quickly made the necessary adjustments to the shoulders and the gauntlets, pulling Obi-Wan to his feet.

"He's perfect!" she chirped, quickly looking over the Padawan and making any final adjustments she saw as necessary, and stepped back to admire her work. "He carries his accent, but I think it will be fine. Mandalorians are very diverse, they are a lot of different accents, even within clans."

"Then it would seem we are ready," Qui-Gon said, sighing with relief. "As always, we leave before the sun rises, but this time, we head for the main hub. We'll have to be quick and especially clever, but if you remain at my side, Satine, we-"

"Master!" It was harsh, the tone high and frantic, a thing that Qui-Gon almost never heard from Obi-Wan, even at his most anxious. He frowned, looking at the boy and reaching through the Force to touch at his mind and found it burning. His student was far past anxious and well into the realm of completely panic-stricken. The boy said nothing more, merely stared at the ground, his hands clenched tightly at his side and his entire body tense and trembling. Even Satine looked worried for him, her delicate hand instinctively reaching out toward the boy before she stopped, hesitated, and withdrew.

"Speak, Obi-Wan," the Master said softly, and with a few short, uncontrolled breaths, the Padawan turned his gaze to his Master.

"This plan is deeply flawed, Master," Obi-Wan said, his voice low and measured, but tight with anxiety far worse than what he usually exhibited. "I-I can't fly us out of here, and before you say anything," the Padawan said quickly when the Master's face took on that stern, admonishing look, "I have thought of a series of alternative plans that barely deviate from the plan we currently have." Qui-Gon sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"What is it, Obi-Wan..." Obi-Wan sighed hopefully, and quickly moved to stand before his Master, and Satine watched him very carefully. When she had met him, Obi-Wan had been confident to the point of arrogance in the pilot's seat. Could such a thing be shattered so quickly? Was one failure enough for the boy to truly begin to believe that he was nothing? Satine was used to the undaunted Mandalorians, a group that suffered greatly from overconfidence, even in their failures. If his one source of pride could be so easily destroyed, than she had done him a great cruelty.

"Alright, we do the plan exactly as you said," Obi-Wan said excitedly. "Only I guard the Duchess, and you steal the ship."

"Obi-Wan Kenobi, I'm not a pilot!" Qui-Gon cried, throwing his hands in the air in his frustration. "I have never been a pilot. But you, my dear Padawan, are a pilot, despite what you may think!"

"Alright, bad plan," the Padawan said, seemingly undaunted. "That's alright, I didn't like that one either. Of course you should be the one to defend Satine." He smiled, a tight, nervous thing. "Next plan. You go to the base-"

"Obi-Wan..."

"And instead of stealing a ship, since you aren't a pilot, you mind trick the pilot of the ship you want, and have him come get us!" Obi-Wan looked at his Master expectantly, a faint smile twitching at the edge of his lips, but never forming as silence hung heavy between them. Finally,
Qui-Gon sighed and shook his head.

"You have so much to learn, my Padawan...Mandalorians are fierce and passionate. They have conviction and strength. I don't think there's a Mandalorian alive that could be considered weak willed. The trick won't work." The Master and the Duchess watched as Obi-Wan's world shattered around him, no longer even attempting to conceal the panic he was feeling, and just by looking at him, Satine could plainly see the heart inside him, young and innocent and deeply and easily wounded. By killing by death, by cruelty, by his own anxiety and his desire for perfection, all of it led now to this, a frantic mess of emotions as he tried to hide himself away from confronting that which he feared.

"Master..." Obi-Wan swallowed hard and pointed at the Duchess. "She doesn't feel safe with me flying." There was silence, tense and expectant, and Qui-Gon looked between his student, so fearful and unsure, and the Duchess, confused and guilty, and he didn't know what to make of it. "She is our mission," Obi-Wan said swiftly when he could no longer stand the silence. "It's up to her to decide."

"...no, it isn't," Qui-Gon said after a moment, ignoring the young Duchess when she looked at him indignantly, and he could feel the challenge to his claim rise up within her. "It is our job to keep her alive, and we will do that by playing to our strengths." He sighed. "But...if the Duchess refuses to get on the ship if you are piloting, than I see no other choice." The Master turned to Satine. "Is what he says true? It will be difficult, but...we can find another way, if necessary."

Silence settled between them as Satine looked between Qui-Gon, worn and tired and resigned to her desire, and to Obi-Wan, tense, panic-stricken, and desperately clinging to hope that he could avoid a repeat of his failure from before. She didn't know what to do. She didn't know how to handle a boy with a shattered spirit, or how to be the one in command, the one making a decision that would determine the path they would take. But she knew she needed to. One day, she would rule over millions of shattered souls, and she would need to guide them down a new path as well.

"In two weeks, I have seen what you Jedi can do," Satine said softly. "You are...bold and fierce, you have powers I can't even begin to understand. And I have seen Obi-Wan. I know what he is capable of." She looked at him, and her eyes locked with his gentle blue, and she couldn't look away. "I have not the words to express my deep respect of your abilities, Obi-Wan. We may not like each other, but we work well together. You have learned a language in weeks. You've been shot twice and still found the strength to keep running. You do what your duty demands of you, no matter what." She smiled softly. "I have seen your limits, and you have none. I have faith that you will fly us to safety."

Satine couldn't recognize the emotions that flitted across the Padawan's face, but when Qui-Gon shifted, the Jedi Master leaning forward as if ready to rush to his student's side, she figured it couldn't have been good. It wasn't what Obi-Wan had wanted, but Satine knew it was what he needed. She just hoped she wasn't making a mistake. A lack of confidence meant death on the field of battle, but his commitment to his mission superseded everything else inside him. She only hoped it would be enough. After a moment, Kenobi found his control once again, and held on to it tightly, his face impassive but only just barely managing to keep it so. He bowed deeply to her.

"Your faith in me is misplaced, Duchess," Obi-Wan said softly, his voice cracking with all the emotion that his face didn't show. "I am unworthy of it." Without another word, Obi-Wan turned and left their hideout, and the Master sighed heavily and ran a hand down his face.

"Get some rest, Satine," Qui-Gon said softly when he saw her eyes drift toward outside where her young protector had fled. "Tomorrow won't be easy for any of us. There's no sense in making it harder by being sleep deprived."
"Y-yes, of course..." Satine silently moved to do as she was told, gathering her things and retreating to one of the walls that she would sleep against. She shivered slightly, the air growing colder as night set in, and after a moment of consideration, she grabbed Obi-Wan's soft, thick, cream-colored robe from its neatly folded stack and wrapped it around her. She laid down against the wall and nestled into the robes and immediately felt warmth spread through her. It was far warmer than she anticipated. No wonder Obi-Wan never complained about the cold.

In the silence, she could hear the young Jedi's faint, choked sobs as he desperately tried to repress them, and the soft whimper of his Code on his lips, and she started to rise, intent to go to him, but stopped herself quickly. A Jedi wasn't supposed to allow their emotions to rule them the way she knew Obi-Wan's were ruling him now. She could give him the respect of at least not bearing witness to what she was sure he considered his weakness, despite her desires to rush to him and attempt to soothe him. In the morning, Obi-Wan would be back to his normal, emotionless self for having released the tension that had been mounting and finally broke within him, and he would be ready. He always was.

The Death Watch compound was on high alert, the entire area swarming with soldiers as they left on their searches and returned from their patrols, the sentries tense and waiting, knowing what was to come. For two weeks, every morning saw another outpost attacked by the renegade New Mandalorian, Duchess Satine Kryze and her two exceedingly talented Jedi guards. They were a dangerous trio, but today, they would be ready. They stood, blasters in hand, jetpacks ready, speeders idling and recon and swift striking starfighters ready to take off at a moment's notice. The other day, they had nearly caught them. Today, they would.

Or, so went the whispers over the open com wired through Obi-Wan's helmet, commands and idle chatter he quietly shared with the two beside him. The night before had been hard on him, and he was left feeling completely lost, like the boy he had been when he stood before the Jedi Council mere days before he was to be expelled from the Order. Forced to confront his failure again and again and again, a thing that ended in unwanted tears before the greatest of the Jedi, last night had felt very, very similar, but with one key difference. Now, it wasn't just his life at risk. It was the lives of his beloved Master and the patience-testing Duchess, and that made it far, far worse, especially in light of his catastrophic failure before.

And Satine believed in him. Her! There was no sense in it beyond the desperate hope that they could leave this death trap. She hated him, he could sense that much. Over the past month they had been acquainted, they insulted each other with frequency, and argued more, and all the while, he could sense her temper flare, her emotions roiling with something that was far beyond description, certainly not something he had felt from anyone before. Her emotions were so strong, so consuming, that her emotions became a physical event, her heart racing, her breathing fast and shallow, her face flushed with rage.

And still, she had faith in him.

Obi-Wan didn't understand, and yet, something inside him responded to it, and in his misery outside the hideout, he felt warmth, like a gentle caress within him spiriting away his fears and insecurities, soothing his troubled mind and easing the panic he felt. It was the Force, he knew, but with it came the Duchess' words, soft and sweet and earnest. Satine's passion, which so usually overwhelmed him, suddenly seemed...warm and honest, heartfelt because she was passionate, trustworthy because she always spoke her mind. But the words were said calm, measured, like a Jedi, removed from her passionate whims and spoken from a place of truth. Obi-Wan found it moved him, so much so that it slipped by his carefully built defenses, and when the Code failed to calm him, Satine's faith in him did. He felt...strong. Confident, like he never had been before. To think that he would draw strength from Duchess Satine Kryze, a Mandalorian...
I am your mission, she had said to him. It made sense, then, that he would focus on the subject of his mission, that everything within him went to her protection and her defense. Of course she was a font of strength, she was the mission.

Beside him from their place of hiding, Satine laid her hand on top of his and gently squeezed, looking at the armored Jedi with a soft smile on her face, and Obi-Wan was eternally grateful for the helmet he wore. He was fiercely red, his ears burning from the affectionate gesture, and he was certain that the Duchess and the Master both could hear his heart loudly drumming against his ribs. Satine had always been nice to look at but...when did she become so beautiful?

"Are you ready, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked softly, and with a short, sharp gasp, Obi-Wan tore his gaze away from the Duchess and looked at his Master, the Jedi kneeling beside him, his lightsaber clacking softly against Obi-Wan's on his belt. There was no place to put it on the armor without it being a dead giveaway. He'd have to do without.

"I am." Qui-Gon drew back, his eyes narrowing as he looked the boy over and found him assured and confident and calm, a thing he hadn't seen from his student in some time. His eyes briefly drifted to the Duchess on the other side of his apprentice before he turned his attention back to Obi-Wan.

"Are you in sync with me?" The Padawan nodded. "I'll give you the signal when you should go, but I believe you will have a better feel for when that should be with a visual on the situation. It will be chaos quickly. Make certain you rush in during it, and keep yourself open to me. You will need to find us quickly once we are on the run. This is a tide that I won't be able to hold off for long."

"I understand, Master." Qui-Gon stood from his crouch, but kept low to the ground, holding his hand out to Satine, and the girl quickly took it and stood beside him.

"May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan."

"And also with you, Master." Qui-Gon turned to leave, but was stopped when the Duchess didn't move, her feet rooted to the spot as she looked at the Jedi in the armor of her enemy.

"K'oyacyi, ner di'kut," she said, soft and sweet. Stay alive, my idiot. In the safety of his helmet, Obi-Wan couldn't help but smile.

"Gar vercopa kelir nu kyr'adyc." Your faith will not be misplaced.

Satine smiled brightly, and perhaps wouldn't have moved if Qui-Gon didn't tug insistently at her arm. With a last look over her shoulder at the Jedi she was leaving behind, Satine and Qui-Gon disappeared into the thicket of forest surrounding the expansive swamp, and Obi-Wan was alone, crouching and looking at the Death Watch base from his concealed location in the brush. He was alone, and there was silence.

Not actual silence, of course. The sounds of ships and shouts and commands carried through the air like a thousand drums all beating at once. But there was silence within him, peace where before there had been none. His path was clear, and there was very little that would keep him from accomplishing his goal. He only hoped he could remain this confident once Satine and Qui-Gon were in the ship. Stealing it wasn't going to be a problem. Getting away was.

He didn't need to wait long before he saw flames from an explosion bursting out from the woods on the other side of the compound, accompanied by a loud, deafening crash, and seconds later, the hub was swarming with soldiers, in the air, on speeders, on foot, all of them rushing out into the surrounding forest and swamps in a mad dash as they fanned out toward the explosion. Obi-Wan
watched for a moment, his attention captured in rapt horror as he saw the efficiency and effectiveness at which the Death Watch mobilized. How had they managed to escape for so long? Was this a new tactic? Or had Qui-Gon just been that good, and Obi-Wan that lucky? He didn't know, and he wasn't willing to wait another day to find out. With a deep breath, the Jedi rushed out of his place in the bushes, running as fast as he could without the use of the Force toward the compound's entrance.

As he drew closer, he almost stopped and ran away when the woods before and behind him were suddenly filled with Death Watch soldiers, all of them heading back to base from their patrols, summoned to answer the call to kill the Duchess. Despite his mental hesitation, Obi-Wan's body kept moving, and he soon found himself surrounded by soldiers, running before him, beside him, behind him, and not a single one alerted to his presence. In the group, he was simply one of many, just another emerging from the woods to answer the call. Qui-Gon's intel was good. No, it was better than good, and in no time at all, Obi-Wan found himself passing through the gates of the heavily fortified compound without any suspicion, and he found himself standing amidst chaos.

Obi-Wan shut off his helmet's com as he ran through the compound, the frantic chatter disorganized and impossible to make sense of, and it was becoming apparent how, with such a quickly mobilizing force, they were able to avoid detection for so long. Without their leader present, there were too many commanders, too many vying for a very limited amount of power, too many factions, and it made even this force a splintered one. They were a weapon with no one to aim it, and therefore, it shot randomly. That may have been working in a war when every clan had turned on each other, but when looking for a teenage girl and her Jedi protectors, it was going to take much more than chance to hit them.

He managed to push his way through the chaos and make his way to the hangar, which was buzzing with pilots climbing into starfighters and troops loading up into transports that would take them to their designated search areas. Obi-Wan tore through the hangar with such intense purpose that several soldiers stepped out of his way, most of them cursing at him as he ran by, but it never amounted to more than that, as they were all trying to get somewhere as well. Everyone was occupied, consumed with their own business, and it gave Obi-Wan a clear shot to the ship he set his sights on, a small black and blue cruiser that seemed equipped to handle a crew of two, but little more than that. It was going to have to do. Anything was better than nothing, and the cruiser appeared to sit in the happy median between speed and defensive capabilities.

At least, he hoped it did.

Just as his foot hit the boarding ramp, Obi-Wan found himself yanked backwards by a hard, firm grip on his arm, and the Jedi found himself facing another soldier, his stance aggressive, and Obi-Wan planted his feet and mimicked his posture, a challenge to the other man, which he had hoped would be enough to deter him. It wasn't.

"What are you doing, fool!!" the soldier snarled in harsh, biting Mando'a, and Obi-Wan immediately felt his ire rise. It was grating, so unlike the gentle music of Satine's voice, and it immediately put him in a foul temper. No wonder the Mandalorians were always angry, their language was spoken by ruffians.

"I'm getting on the ship, what does it look like!" Obi-Wan snapped, trying to push past him, but the other soldier pushed him back.

"Not this ship! Get in your starfighter, spacer!"

"Someone took my starfighter!" Kenobi bit back, and when the soldier scoffed, Obi-Wan shoved him hard. "Look around you, shit for brains, it is chaos in here! I'm getting on that ship, I've got a job to do!"
"So do I!" the soldier snarled, shoving Obi-Wan back. "And right now, my job is keeping you off this cruiser! It's heading for Mandalore in an hour!"

"Oh, great!" Kenobi snapped. "You're just all helmet, no head, aren't you?" The soldier sputtered, so angry he found himself lost for words, and Obi-Wan found himself grateful that Satine had taken so much time insulting him. It was a crass language after all. "I'm going out to kill that little bitch, and right now, you're the idiot that's keeping me from doing that! You wanna tell the boss on Mandalore that this tiny cruiser was more important than a dead Duchess?" With a vicious snarl, the soldier shoved Obi-Wan again, this time as he passed by him, his hand in the air making an obscene gesture as he walked away. Without another moment of hesitation, Obi-Wan ran up the ramp of the ship, tore off his helmet, threw himself in the pilot's seat, and powered the ship on, the engines roaring to life, and moments later, Obi-Wan was in the air, his eyes closed as he felt through the Force for his Master.

He was easy to find, and the situation was bad. Very bad.

Qui-Gon had holed himself up at one of the outposts, the guard towers torn down to make a triangular barricade around the command center, and the Jedi stood out in front, both his and Obi-Wan's lightsabers in hand, the blades blazing around him as he deflected back a steady stream of blaster fire that came at him from all directions. The Master was soaked up to his chest, his robes covered in mud and grime, his forehead covered in a sheen of sweat, and while he showed no signs of fatigue yet, he would soon enough. Behind him in the doorway sat Satine, her rifle in hand as she took the shots she could, but her face was contorted in pain, and from the way she was sitting, it was clear that her leg was injured. Narrowing his focus, Obi-Wan pulled up the aiming module, his hands on the weapons triggers, and he opened fire on the swarming troops as they tackled the fallen watchtowers.

The intent was chaos, and within the span of a second, the Jedi had it. Instead of focusing their attack on the Jedi and his ward, the Mandalorians now found themselves fleeing from the low flying cruiser as it shot beam after beam of red plasma at them, the impacts from the blasts sending the warriors flying and scattering. Pulling back on the yoke, Obi-Wan shot up into the sky to loop around back toward the outpost, shooting at a few nearby starfighters as he did and striking two on his way back toward his Master. Slamming his hand on a button on the console, Obi-Wan kept up his rapid fire as the ship hissed, the boarding ramp extending as he flew low, sweeping in toward the outpost and slowing when he saw Qui-Gon now standing on top of the command center, Satine clutched protectively to his chest as his green lightsaber cut through the air to deflect the newly focused fire.

Hovering about the structure, Obi-Wan turned his full attention toward shooting at their assailants, a watchful eye on the shields as he shot another starfighter out of the sky. He glanced out of the viewport as Qui-Gon quickly deactivated his lightsaber, scooped Satine into his arms, and used the Force to enhance his jump up to the boarding ramp, hitting the ramp heavily and quickly rushing inside, blaster fire following him.

The moment Qui-Gon was off the ramp, Obi-Wan slammed the button to close and seal the ship and threw back the accelerator, the ship lurching forward with it's quick jump to top speed, and a loud crash followed by cursing could be heard on the deck below. Qui-Gon wouldn't be happy, but there was nothing to be done about that. Pulling back on the yoke, the cruiser shot up into the sky towards the atmosphere, the Jedi navigating by feel alone and easing left and right on the yoke to avoid fire from the starships that followed in pursuit.

As they climbed higher in the sky, Obi-Wan suddenly cut power to the main thrusters, causing the cruiser to slow considerably and the starfighters shot past. Quickly engaging the thrusters once again, Obi-Wan shot down two of the fighters, locked on to the third, and gave chase, the Jedi
managing to hit the other ship as it dove to circle around behind once again. With his immediate pursuers down, Obi-Wan put full power to the engines and flew at a gradual incline up toward the atmosphere in order to make their escape into space as smooth as possible.

Qui-Gon dropped into the passenger seat just as they breached Zanbar's atmosphere, Satine held tightly against him in his lap and the girl looking positively tiny in comparison to the towering Master. Obi-Wan looked at her through the corner of his eye when he heard her fast, shallow breathing, each breath shuddering with pain, and he saw her leg, her shoes removed and her pants cut off at the knee to expose a long burn on her calf, the result of plasma grazing her skin. Already, Qui-Gon had treated it, the wound shining with the smeared bacta, and the Master's hand hovering above it as he called on the Force to aid in her healing.

"I need a location for our jump, Duchess," Obi-Wan said softly, his voice even and impassive as his focus lay on the fight he had before him. The command ship above Zanbar was still there, and from the look of it, they had already gotten word about the escaping Duchess, and from the way the starfighters made for the ship, it seemed they had the ident as well. Obi-Wan's hands tightened on the controls. This was just like before...

"Ordo system," Satine said, her voice tight with pain. "It's home of Clan Ordo. They are divided, but I believe those that defend their home world are loyal to the New Mandalorians."

"You believe?!"

"At the very least, they have the strength to oppose the Death Watch, and we can't afford to be picky right now!" she snapped, and Obi-Wan nodded and punched in the coordinates. Thankfully, this ship was faster than the last, just under two minutes to jump.

"Understood," Obi-Wan said, yanking the yoke back and flipping upside down and spinning out of the half loop, pulling back on the acceleration and shooting forward, away from the capital ship and the quickly approaching starfighters.

Thirty seconds to their jump, the starfighters fell on them like a swarm. Despite his previous calm and confidence, Obi-Wan could feel his chest tighten with familiar anxiety quickly rising into panic. This wasn't just like before, this was far worse, and while they may have been out of the range of the capital ship's ion cannons, it was the starfighters that had dealt them their fatal damage before. His breathing became faster as fear gripped him, and he swallowed hard when he felt his mouth dry. He could hear Qui-Gon and Satine speaking to him, but they sounded so distant, so unclear, like he was under water and he couldn't make out what they had said to him. All he could see were the streaking lines of plasma bolts as they shot past, all he could feel was the rocking of the ship as it was struck by an unavoidable tide, all he could hear was the sound of the warning from the console announcing the diminishing shields. Thirty percent.

"Strap in, Qui-Gon, I'm going to do something stupid..." Obi-Wan said, not even trying to keep the fear out of his voice, his eyes focused straight ahead so he didn't need to look at his Master, and when he heard the clicking of the restraints, his hands tightened on the controls. He relaxed immediately, calm and warmth flooding him when he felt the Duchess lay her hand upon his arm, and he looked over and saw her, pain and fear and resignation on her face, but above all of that, he felt trust in her touch, shooting through him like electricity from her fingers, and he couldn't help but shiver. Biting his lip, his eyes narrowed in concentration, Obi-Wan pushed the yoke forward, and the cruiser lurched forward as it dove, spinning past starfighters as they swerved frantically to get out of the way of the larger ship.

When he was certain they were all following him, Obi-Wan jerked the yoke to the side, the rapid change in direction sending the ship rolling sideways through space right before he pulled back on the yoke, shooting upwards and clipping the wings of several of the fighters, his random,
unpredictable, and frankly reckless flying destroying any sense of formation and sowing chaos among the ranks. Fire plasma and debris filled space as the starfighters frantically shot at the cruiser, striking their own fighters more than they managed to hit the cruiser, though Obi-Wan's collisions and the damage he absorbed quickly had the cockpit blaring with alarms as shields dropped to below fifteen percent. His hand never left the trigger, the cruiser firing bolt after bolt into space with no direction at all, his own shots intended more to cause confusion than to actually hit, though some did.

In twenty five seconds, Obi-Wan had managed to create a cloud of flame and wreckage extremely dangerous to navigate, and flipping the ship around, Obi-Wan's viewport filled with the space before them flooded with hundreds of starfighters on a swift approach, reinforcements from the cruiser that needed to navigate debris and fire to get to him. Looking straight at the ships as they quickly closed, a faint, triumphant smile spread across Obi-Wan's face as the ship shuddered, the starfighters faded from view, and his vision was filled with the blue and white of safety.

The cruiser was really only meant for two people and contained a single room with a bunk bed, which the Jedi quickly relinquished to Satine for her use. Qui-Gon found a nook near the hyperdrive, which he claimed was calming to listen to, and Obi-Wan insisted on remaining in the pilot's seat, which he said was comfortable enough to nap in. Regardless, Satine felt bad about having the room all to herself when there were two beds available, but Jedi modesty and courtesy, it seemed, had no bounds. Not that she could do anything about it anyway. Walking was painful, and Qui-Gon made it clear that the wound needed time to heal. The pain pills that they found in the ship's medical supplies were making her drowsy anyway.

She didn't want to be contained in bed, of course, but as soon as they had escaped, Qui-Gon had taken the nauseous Satine into the room to lay her down to rest. She thought the Jedi Master looked sick as well, but there was no saying anything to him. Obi-Wan's flying was reckless and dangerous, as stupid as he had said his plan was going to be, and...and completely brilliant. It was difficult to remember clearly the circumstances of their crash, but this last flight seemed so much worse. She wasn't sure if that were so or not, but one thing was clear: Obi-Wan was every bit as good a pilot as he thought he was back when they first met. But this time, it was different. This time, there was no conflict between them.

She was slowly beginning to understand the Jedi need for peace. Before, they had been fighting, and had been for days, viciously, but teens stubborn in their insistence on hating the other, Obi-Wan committed to freezing her out, and Satine committed to getting a rise out of him. The results were disastrous, leaving young Obi-Wan distracted and angry, unable to focus on the task at hand because of his anger. But this time...this time, three weeks of running on Zanbar had made them close, an understanding building between them as they explored their dislike of the other, and with their views explained and the reasons for their intense aversion to the other laid bare, they pushed past it.

And they had escaped.

Satine lifted her head when she heard the door slide open, and she smiled, propping herself up on her elbows when Obi-Wan leaned in the doorway, his soft, Jedi robes back on his body, his arms crossed loosely over his chest, and a faint, genuine smile on his face. It was the most relaxed, the most confident she had ever seen him. Not the brash confidence of the warriors of Mandalore, but a soft, subtle thing he carried closely and modestly, like something secret and precious he held close and treasured. It made the young Jedi seem enigmatic and alluring, and Satine's mind started racing with questions, things she wanted to know about Obi-Wan but didn't, all about his life, his training, the feelings he kept so closely guarded, but when she looked at him, she could manage to speak none of them.
When had she ever been speechless?!

"I..." Obi-Wan began, training off as he reached up to grab his braid, the smile on his lips growing as he chuckled softly. "How's your leg?" he asked, his voice slightly hesitant, like he had meant to say something else.

"Better," she said softly, frowning when she heard that her voice sounded thick with the effects of the painkillers. The Jedi noticed her displeasure and laughed lightly, a carefree, genuine thing that sent a shiver down her spine. She...was not used to expression of any kind from the boy. It was...unsettling? She wasn't sure what it was she was feeling, but hr stomach was tying itself in knots, a thing she chalked up to the nausea she felt from the Jedi's terrible, magnificent flying.

"I wanted to thank you," Obi-Wan said slowly, as if carefully weighing each word, his cautious personality seeming to return, though he was no less expressive. Guarded, and yet somehow so much more open. "You had no reason to put your faith in me, but you did anyway." He shrugged. "Even though we have committed to a mutual dislike. I...have a great deal to learn from you, I think."

"These drugs must be stronger than Qui-Gon thought," the Duchess said, a wry smile on her lips. "You?! Learn something from a Mandalorian? Why? Is the passionless Jedi tempted by our fire?" Obi-Wan just shrugged.

"There may be something to that." He said it so casually, with such ease and openness, that Satine couldn't help but feel her face begin to burn red. The Jedi remained cool, however, as if he had already accepted and incorporated all he had done, all he had felt, all the confidence that sprang from the depths of him when his fears were conquered and his pride reclaimed. Satine felt her pulse quicken, and this time, she couldn't even pretend it was with anger or irritation. She looked at a thing of beauty. It was as simple as that. "A great deal of pain and conflict could have been avoided if I had simply been open and honest." He pit his lip, looking at the ground for a moment before he nodded swiftly and looked back up at the Duchess. "I shall try to be more transparent with you in the future."

"...I-I'd like that."

"I think I would as well." Obi-Wan frowned slightly, his features becoming more serious. "You trusted me with your life. It is only fair I trust you with something of similar value." Satine arched an eyebrow.

"I fear I'm a poor protector. Your life would never be safe in my hands."

"No, my life ultimately means very little," Obi-Wan said softly. "The Force will take me when it is my time. I trust you with something valuable to me," he whispered, unconsciously laying his hand on his chest, a faint smile tugging on his lips, and Satine's head started swimming, with exhaustion, with the effects of the drugs, with relief, she didn't know. "I've taken up enough of your time, and you need time to rest so you can recover." The Jedi bowed deeply. "Sleep well, Satine."

The door hissed closed, and the Jedi was gone, and Satine fell back on the bed and sighed, thinking that her name on his lips was the most wonderful thing she had ever heard.

---

*Entry thirty one.*

*I've lost count of how many times I owe my life to my Jedi protectors. Certainly, I will never be able to make it up to them, but if this is something they desire, they have shown no indication of it.*
Several times, I have gotten out of bed to ask what I could do to return the favor in some way, but both Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan have simply sent me back to bed. They say I need to rest to regain my strength, but my strength has returned, and the effects of the drugs are long gone, so Obi-Wan was sorely mistaken when he said my agreeable temperament was a result of the painkillers. It seems, despite his earlier sweetness, that he is still just an asshole. That whole incident must have been colored by the pain medication. I can think of no other explanation.

And yet, I find it difficult to continue my dislike of him after our escape. He's still infuriating, yes, and still terribly reserved and shy, but since our talk the other night, he has indeed been more open, almost as if he had suddenly grown into a body he was previously too small for. I know he is a Jedi, or training to be one, and his training forbids attachments to be formed, but I wonder if it's possible for us to be friends. We hate each other, yes, but perhaps that hatred isn't so deep as I thought. We have come to several understandings, so perhaps it is possible to bridge our differences and forge a friendship. Even though it's forbidden for him.

...this is very complicated.

I have been trying to sit down and talk with Obi-Wan, but every time I manage to get out of bed, Qui-Gon is with him. This wouldn't be a problem, of course, but the Master Jedi seems awfully suspicious of something, and it's keeping Obi-Wan silent. Perhaps he disapproves of his student's vow to be more open. I forget that Obi-Wan is still learning, and his position as a Jedi Knight isn't set. He could still fail and lose it all. Maybe it's wrong to try and get closer to him. If his duty says he may not have friendships, than it would be terribly selfish of me to impose upon that. I'll have to ask Qui-Gon what's allowed. He's friendly enough, so I can't see why Obi-Wan can't be friendly as well. Now that I'm really thinking about it, I want to be friends with him. I'm...drawn to him, I suppose, and no, it's not just because he's the only boy my age that's around. Or that he's brave and noble and intelligent and kind and-

I'm not making my case very well.

It's not just that he's attractive, because he is. A blind fool could see that. It's that I've seen his body, and it is covered in bruises and scars and cuts, and it's all because of me. Each one was meant for me, each and every one should be on my body, not his, but time and time again, he has caught me, only to fall himself, or sacrificed his well being for mine, and I can barely stand to think about it. I have been cruel to him. I have made him suffer. His anguish on Zanbar was because of me and the things I had said, and which he says I helped heal him, I know damn well that's not true. Obi-Wan had the strength within to heal himself all along. He just needed to find it. I don't know where he drew this strength from, but it doesn't matter, because he did draw upon it, and it made him strong enough to save us all.

I have developed such a deep respect for him on Zanbar. For Qui-Gon as well, but he isn't the learner like Obi-Wan is. He is a Master, and he commanded respect the moment he set foot on Sundari. Obi-Wan had to earn it, and I have been told my respect is a difficult thing to earn. I suppose they're right, which only serves to make him more impressive.

I've decided to grow closer to him. I will consult Qui-Gon, of course, but Obi-Wan's commitment to his Code is absolute. He is a good Jedi, and he will follow it. He is...safe. Nothing untoward, no hidden agenda, and no chance that he would take advantage of me, like so many other boys his age. I've never been around someone safe before, not like this. I shall have to be certain to push my attraction to him to the side, difficult as though that may be. There is no future there, not for either of us. He has his Jedi commitments, and I have Mandalore.

It's not a romantic attraction, of course! Of course it isn't! This is...a longing for friendship and companionship. I've been lonely for a very long time. My family is dead. My friends are likely dead. My people are dying. My sister wants me dead.
I deserve a friend like sweet, lovely Obi-Wan.
Tor Vizsla sat on the throne in Sundari Palace, the seat he had worked so hard to earn cheapened by the immediate surge of opposition he faced when he took the city. Though he declared himself Mand'alor, there were few that supported it, limited only to his fractured, broken Death Watch and a handful of clans too small and weak to bid for the title themselves. While the Civil War years earlier had put a definitive end to any real power the so-called True Mandalorians possessed, it had also ended with the vile, shameful pacifistic reign of the New Mandalorians, headed undisputably by Clan Kryze with the warlord Adonai at its head. He was not weak, but the New Mandalorian commitment to peace and rejecting the ways of the warrior made them unfit to rule, and war erupted again.

Death Watch had survived, fractured though it was, but they had been unable to get the public support to topple the traitorous New Mandalorians. Instead, the clans turned against each other, tension and fallout from the previous civil war tearing entire families apart over the matter of what direction Mandalore should be taken in, and the result was a bloody, bloody conflict, one that saw entire clans exterminating each other as their loyalties and beliefs were pitted against each other. The New Mandalorians, peaceful idiots that they were, found themselves advocating for peace and slaughtered for it. There were still many that supported the New Mandalorians, many of who were ready to fight and die for their peace, but even as the dominant faction in Mandalore, they were a minority when pitted against the hundreds of other clans all fighting for the right to call themselves Mand'alor.

The trouble, of course, was that while Tor currently sat on the throne, he was not recognized as Mandalore's ruler. With the death of Warlord Adonai Kryze and his family, the New Mandalorians foolishly selected their next leader, the obvious choice as a survivor of the nearly extinct Clan Kryze. Young Satine, now Duchess was recognized as Mandalore's leader, even by the clans that did not support her, and would remain so until she lay dead. Tor's course of action was an obvious one. Satine needed to die, and with the young Duchess' body on display for all of Mandalore to see, it would be difficult to deny his claim. The New Mandalorians would be gone, without the hope of another to take Satine's place, and Death Watch would be the last prominent faction left in the sector.

More than that, Tor kept an ace up his sleeve. Satine may have been a survivor of Clan Kryze, but she wasn't the only survivor. Dear Satine had a little sister, Bo-Katan, and her heart and soul lay with the Death Watch. What was more, the girl was particularly infatuated with another from Clan Vizsla, Pre, and with the last survivor of ruling Clan Kryze in his hands, it would be very difficult to mount a successful opposition to him. Mandalore would be his, and he would return them to their days of glory when the galaxy cowered at the sight of them.

But for now, he was pinned down in the palace that he had claimed, in a city that should be his, and was not. Day after day, he struggled to maintain hold of Sundari, and had eventually lost control of the city when Satine's allies launched a counter-offensive against him when they learned that the Duchess was alive and well and fighting, a rallying cry to the New Mandalorians that saw them gather the strength to push the Death Watch back, and now, they were trapped in the palace and under siege.

It was pathetic, but he was not giving up his seat. Not when he had lost so many to take it, and certainly not to hunt one girl. Satine Kryze was no threat to him, and he would not give her power she did not have by leaving Sundari to deal with her personally. The idea that he, Tor Vizsla, saw Satine Kryze as a threat was an insult. She would die, and he didn't need to waste his time with it.
Hie eyes drifted to the side of the throne room when Pre Vizsla walked in with young Bo-Katan Kryze on his heels, and despite his foul temper, Tor couldn't help but smirk. Bo-Katan was a true Mandalorian, a warrior, one that embraced everything it meant to be Mandalorian. At fourteen, the youngest Kryze wasn't the classic beauty that her sister was, but she was already a warrior, had already killed, had already seen battle, and had been made a woman by the older teen she now followed. It was not uncommon for their warriors to spread their legs for a man or bury themselves inside a woman before battle, since it may well be their last, and Bo-Katan was no exception, eagerly giving herself over to the older boy the moment she left Mandalore to join Death Watch against her sister.

Their families had known each other, and Bo-Katan's fascination with their warrior past led her quickly and easily into Pre's bed, the older boy already a warrior, already strong and tall and handsome, and the young Kryze admired the strength of the warrior above all else. It had been so easy for her to turn against her sister when she had a prospective new family to belong to, one that shared her ideals, one that saw the same future for Mandalore as she did. There was no strength to be had in Satine's reign. Death Watch was the only way.

When Pre stood beside the throne and Bo-Katan slid on to the arm of the mighty chair, her armored leg crossed over her knee, Tor's eyes returned to the Death Watch officer that stood before him, his helmet under his arm and his eyes cast at the ground in shame. He had returned from Zanbar that afternoon with news, though Tor had heard it before he had arrived. He wasn't happy.

"Tell me if I am understanding this correctly," Tor growled, his voice low and dangerous. "Three weeks ago, when I managed to take Sundari and that slippery bitch escaped, you shot Satine Kryze down on Zanbar. The base of all Death Watch operations in the entire sector." The soldier nodded. "And now, not only has the Duchess spent two weeks making fools of us, but now you tell me she has escaped?" His fingers dug into the arms of the throne. "How hard it is to kill one little girl?!

"She isn't alone!" the soldier quickly defended. "She has Jedi with her!"

"Jedi!" Tor scoffed, and beside him, Bo-Katan sneered in disgust. "I don't care if she's alone, or of she's with an army, I want you to kill that little bitch!" Beside him on the arm of the throne, Bo-Katan shifted uncomfortably, and Tor lay a hand on the girl's leg as Pre leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"She's an enemy, Bo," Pre said, soft and menacing, and the young redhead nodded. Slowly. "Not just an enemy, but the enemy. She has to die."

"She has to be deposed," the girl snarled, batting away Pre's hand when he ran the thick strands of her hair through his fingers, and he laughed deeply at the girl's ferociousness.

"Is she not a traitor?" Tor asked the girl coolly, and Bo-Katan sputtered and looked away, a deep, bitter frown on her face.

"...yes."

"And so she deserves a traitor's death."

"...yes." Bo-Katan leaned back and closed her eyes, and Tor patted the girl's leg. She was not conflicted, but the girl had seen the deaths of her parents and her brother, and was reluctant to see more of her family's blood spilt. Family was important to all Mandalorians, but Satine had betrayed everything it meant to be a child of Mandalore, and it left young, loyal Bo-Katan in a difficult position. Satine was dar'manda, a Mandalorian that had lost their soul, the single worst
thing that anyone could ever be, and she was better off dead. No, it was a mercy to kill the Duchess. And yet, she was still family. True, Bo-Katan hated Satine, but she also loved her, as any true Mandalorian would. Satine needed to be removed in a very, very permanent way, and Tor knew that in many ways, Bo-Katan was already preparing for Satine’s death.

"Do we know where she's fled to?" Tor asked, and the soldier shook his head.

"I'm sorry. Whoever was piloting her ship was a madman. We couldn't get any kind of lock on them at all." Tor patted Bo-Katan's leg.

"Now, where would your dear sister rush off to, hmm?" he asked, and the teenager crossed her arms over her armored chest and glared at the soldier that stood before them.

"We aren't close anymore, obviously," she snarled. "And we never traveled in the same circles." She paused, thoughtful for a moment. "Clans Cadera, Kelborn, Ordo and Itera all primarily support the New Mandalorians. Perhaps she fled to one of their strongholds. Satine never did well on a battlefield." She rolled her eyes. "She'll seek out a palace if she can."

"We don't have the forces for an assault that widespread," Pre said firmly, and Bo-Katan looked somewhat cowed. "We don't have the forces for anything if we want to keep hold of Mandalore."

"Death Watch is spread thin as it is, yes..." Tor growled in irritation. "We need time to grow our support and our numbers, which is unlikely to happen. We need the Duchess out of the way." He patted Bo-Katan’s knee. "And what would you do in this situation, little Kryze?"

Bo-Katan shrugged. "Nothing."

"...nothing," Tor repeated hollowly.

"Nothing," she said again. "I'd let someone else do the work. Set a bounty on her head. If there's one thing we're good at, it's bounty hunting, and I think if you set the right price, even the warring clans will refocus their attention." Tor chuckled deeply as he leaned back in his throne.

"Keep this one, Pre, she is clever." He glared at the soldier. "Well? You heard the girl. Contact the bounty hunters. Five thousand for each of the Jedi she is guarded by. Ten thousand credits for the head of Duchess Satine, and I will double it if they can bring her to me alive. If possible, I want this city and all her supporters to see when I execute her."

Qui-Gon frowned as he climbed up the ladder from the ship's engine compartments and hold and up into the small corridor connecting the cockpit to the single room. He could hear giggling. And whispers, breathless and excited, and though he couldn't make out what they were saying, it wasn't exactly difficult to puzzle out who it could possibly be, since there were only two other people on the cruiser. Through the Force, he could feel his Padawan, so much less guarded than he had ever been, so content, so at ease and sure as feelings of respect and trust and affection pulsed through his mind.

This was beginning to be a problem.

It was good that they were getting along. It had been the purpose of them teaching each other, after all, since group integrity simply couldn't be maintained when two of the three desperately hated each other. Satine, fiery and cruel, and Obi-Wan, cold and aloof, had both nothing and everything in common, and their forced lessons together had led to respect. Then trust, a beautiful thing that sparked the confidence of not just his shattered Padawan, but of the grief-stricken Duchess as well. Respect became a budding friendship, and with that came the inevitable
affection. Qui-Gon had meant to take Obi-Wan aside to remind him of his dedication to the Jedi Order and what that meant in regards to the opposite sex, and where such a road may lead based on his own affection and loss of dear, sweet Tahl, but in the four days since their escape from Zanbar, every time Qui-Gon went to talk privately with his student, Satine was with him.

It was innocent enough. They sat close together, always speaking quietly, and nearly always in Mando’a, which, of course, had been what Qui-Gon had instructed them to do. Satine was to teach his student her language, and Obi-Wan took to his studies the way he took to everything else. Obi-Wan Kenobi didn’t do anything in halves, and he submerged himself in his studies, which meant that now that they weren’t running for their lives, his every moment was spent with the Duchess.

*Studying.*

Qui-Gon knew better, of course. Maybe Obi-Wan could hide his feelings from his Master, and he *did*, but Satine could not, and the attraction between the two wasn’t just obvious, it was palpable. It was also to be expected. They were both teenagers, for one, the Duchess older by less than a month, it turned out, and at sixteen, their blood was absolutely raging with hormones, even though both tried valiantly to rise above it. They were moderately successful, at least on a conscious level, but beneath their actions lay biological need and desire, something that no teenager could truly repress. And if that wasn’t enough, their unique circumstances made a growing attraction an inevitability.

They were both terribly lonely people, at the heart of them, forced to live in very close proximity to each other in a stressful fight for their lives. There's was an existence based on honor and trust and emotions that ran hot with anger and frustration and fear, emotions deeply felt that so often let to something else.

It was a wonder that they hadn't already given themselves to the other in one of their secluded caves while the Master was away.

...they *hadn’t*, right?

It was possible they had. The change in the two had been very fast, almost as if something had happened between them. Satine was beautiful, her every feature speaking of her high breeding, but she was still terribly thin, not yet having filled out into the woman she would grow to be, but her face had the promise of turning from beautiful to *gorgeous*. Obi-Wan wasn't so bad to look at either, especially when he was brimming with confidence and pride as he had been the past few days. Like Satine, he was still lanky and awkward, but the month on Zanbar had made his lean muscles incredibly defined, and while he was still thin, his body now showed shadows of strength he would come to possess when he filled out.

No doubt a welcome, pleasing sight for a teenage girl.

Qui-Gon's hand hesitated over the button to the cockpit when he heard the two teens alternating between soft giggling and grunts of strained effort. He grit his teeth as he steeled himself for what he would find. He didn't want to walk in on something *intimate*, as Dooku had done to his student all too many times, and Qui-Gon wondered if the first time his Master stood above him while he was sunk deep within a girl had been deliberate, or if he had been as awkward as Qui-Gon felt now. Obi-Wan was *better* than this. He had fought too hard to get where he was, suffered too much pain to be accepted within the Jedi, and there was no chance he would throw it all away. Still, they needed to *talk*.

When the door slid open, Qui-Gon stared at Obi-Wan and Satine, the teens sitting beside each other on the floor of the thin aisle between the pilot and copilot's seats, the side paneling of the
command console open, exposing all the wires and mechanics underneath, the Duchess and the Padawan with their arms inside the machine up to their elbows as they pulled at something inside, their breath coming in small, strained grunts of effort. When Obi-Wan saw Qui-Gon behind them, he leaned back and innocently smiled up at him, laughing softly as Satine gave a sharp yank and fell backwards, a small cylinder in her tight grasp.

"Hello, Master," the Padawan said, his voice smooth and easy and even, broken for a moment by soft laughter when the Duchess held up the device and frowned.

"What is it?" she asked, holding it out to the Jedi, and Obi-Wan plucked it out of her hand.

"That, Duchess, is the locator beacon," Obi-Wan said softly, and he grinned when the girl's face paled considerably. "Don't worry, I disabled it when I stole the ship." Obi-Wan leaned back to smile up at his Master, and the grin dropped from his face when he found the man frowning, arms crossed over his chest. On Obi-Wan's suggestion, they had dropped out of hyperspace soon after they had made the jump when he had discovered that they ship was not only fully fueled, but well stocked with food and medical supplies. They had enough of everything to get them to most planets in the sector through real space, and he thought it a good idea to use the extra time that would take for rest, recovery, and investigating the likelihood of Clan Ordo being friendly toward Satine.

Three days later led them to now, drifting undetected through deep space and in perfect harmony, a vast difference from the month before when three days in space nearly led to Satine and Obi-Wan killing each other in their irritation and hunger. Now, there was only the possibility that they two teenagers were secretly sharing the single room and not taking advantage of the second bunk.

"What are you two up to?" Qui-Gon asked, his voice even, but Obi-Wan winced when he felt the chill run through their Force bond. His Master was not pleased with him, and he could feel the anxiety creep back into him, effectively silencing the naturally quiet boy. Satine didn't seem to notice.

"Obi-Wan's teaching me about flying!" Satine chirped happily. "I know a little, of course, but his knowledge is extensive. He's going to let me fly the ship after we put the console back together and shut off the autopilot!"

"Oh, is he?" Qui-Gon asked, his gaze drifting to his uncomfortably silent Padawan. "How generous of him. Obi-Wan is often reluctant to give up his seat."

"He thinks it's important that I can pilot a ship," she said firmly. "He says if..." Her voice cracked as she choked on her words, and she swallowed hard, the smile on her face wavering for a moment. "If something happens," she continued, slow and measured, "then I need to be able to fly away. I-in case."

Qui-Gon looked to his student, the Padawan sitting cross-legged, his back rigidly straight and his hands stiffly gripping his knees. The boy wouldn't look at him, Qui-Gon knew he couldn't. Perhaps things hadn't changed that much. Or perhaps he was guilty, but Qui-Gon couldn't tell because the little shit's mental walls were firmly in place, and the Master couldn't push past them. All he could here in the boy's mind was the Code, over and over, a chanted mantra and a constant reminder of who he was, and what he was meant to be. It was confusing for the boy, no doubt, and Qui-Gon could feel his displeasure give way to understanding. Teaching was harder than he expected, especially when his heart pulsed painfully in his chest as he looked at the two teenagers and only saw himself and Tahl, that wound still fresh and painful with the darkness that had so nearly consumed him.

They still needed to talk, though perhaps it would not be the lecture he had intended to give. After
all, Obi-Wan's instruction of the Duchess seemed to be in line with the mission. Preparing her for a situation where Obi-Wan wouldn't be around was...logical, and it spoke well of the boy's foresight. Obi-Wan struggled with attachment, as all Padawans did, but he had never struggled with romantic entanglements, though he had plenty of chances to submit to those desires with his friend Luminara. She was his equal in many ways, both in calm, contemplative, quiet personality and in intelligence, something the devastatingly quick Obi-Wan struggled to find. If he would have feelings for any female, it would have been the lovely Mirialan.

He needed to trust his Padawan. These suspicions were unwarranted.

"We shall endeavor to make certain it never comes to that, Duchess," Qui-Gon said, his tone much softer than before, and Obi-Wan relaxed slightly and looked up at him, his lip caught between his teeth as his eyes searched his Master's face for the disapproval he felt before. "Still, it is a good thing to know. Good thinking, Padawan." Obi-Wan looked away from the other Jedi as a faint, modest smile tugged at the edge of his lips.

"Thank you, Master..." Satine looked at Obi-Wan, a small frown on her lips as she shifted her gaze between the Master and the student, trying to gauge and understand what has happened. Her free, open protector suddenly slammed shut at Qui-Gon's presence, and she wondered if, perhaps, they were somehow crossing a boundary. She never had gotten around to asking Qui-Gon if this was alright, so swept up in Obi-Wan's company had she been. It was just so easy to forget that something as simple as friendship was denied to the stoic Jedi, and she couldn't help but think she had misunderstood something about it. Surely the legendary Jedi Knights weren't so cruel, so callous to deny them such simple pleasures as that. Now was as good a time as any. She needed to find out exactly what rules she was going to break when she befriended Obi-Wan.

"Qui-Gon," Satine asked as she rose to her feet, and she stood before him as tall as she could manage and still had to tilt her head back to look up at his face. "I have a question about the Jedi."

"Is Obi-Wan-"

"No, he is!" she quickly interrupted, knowing exactly where the question was going and not wanting to get the student in trouble. "He's taught me a great deal about the Order, but I have a question that needs clarification." She planted her hands firmly on her hips. "It's about your rules of attachment." Both Jedi sucked in a sharp breath, and she could feel them both tense considerably. She expected Obi-Wan to react this way, as he always did when they breeched the uncomfortable subject, but she hadn't expected it from Qui-Gon. It must have been difficult, she realized, to stand so far apart from other life in the galaxy. Perhaps this was what made the Jedi as effective as they were.

"I don't believe there's much room for confusion on that," Qui-Gon said softly, his tone careful and measured. "Jedi are forbidden from attachments and possessions."

"All of them?" Satine asked defiantly, and the Master sighed and sat down in the copilot's seat.

"It is difficult to explain our philosophy to those outside the Order," Qui-Gon said after a moment. "But I will attempt to explain it like this. The Jedi believe that any and all attachment is at the root of all suffering. People suffer because of their refusal to let go of that which they are attached to. The loss of an object, a home, a person, all of the suffering that comes from such starts in the individual's inability to accept that it is gone. But the Jedi attach themselves to nothing, and are therefore free of this pain." He paused and looked at the ground. "Ideally, in any case. It's a struggle, even being taught such since infancy, and all Jedi must remain mindful of any attachments they do make and remind themselves that nothing is forever, and one day, the things they attach themselves to will be lost, and they must accept that it was never truly theirs to begin with."
"...it sounds so much crueller when you say it," Satine muttered, her shoulders drooping as she stared at the ground. Obi-Wan quietly busied himself with putting the console back together.

"The only way to become one with the Force is to free yourself from all that holds you," Qui-Gon explained. "No possessions, no friends, no lovers, and Jedi that find themselves defying this rule are in danger. Attachment leads to fear and suffering. The Dark Side, are they." A small, sad smile tugged at the edge of Qui-Gon's lips, and Satine could see real pain in those deep blue eyes, and she knew he was talking from personal experience. What had the Master lost? Did he perhaps have a friend that died? A lover? Had he treaded close to this Dark Side he spoke of, something that Obi-Wan feared so strongly that he refused to even speak of it? She suspected he must have. No wonder young Obi-Wan was so distant.

"But you can't be removed from everything!" she said, almost frantically as she suddenly felt like she was about to lose her friend. "You Jedi claim to protect peace and life, but why. If you are truly unattached, than the lives of the people in the galaxy mean nothing at all!" Qui-Gon smiled, small at first, but it slowly grew wider.

"You are correct, of course. One of the main principles of the Jedi Order is compassion, and that requires a sort of love and understanding and care for those we seek to protect. We are not without emotion, we are without attachment. A true Jedi must never possess anything they will fear losing. As we let go of our attachments, we gain perspective to see a bigger picture, which allows us to make logical decisions in our missions, and if we are free of attachment, we cannot be swayed in a direction that may conflict with the greater good."

"I...understand..." Satine said softly, her eyes drifting back to Obi-Wan as he silently put the console back together, his face blank and emotionless, but her days working close with him allowed her to see his own disappointment with the situation. After all, he had been growing close to her as well. "So...I'm forbidden from..." She indicated back at the Jedi. "From him."

"I've never followed our Code well, but yes, there is little more dangerous to a Jedi than a romantic relationship." The Duchess reddened significantly, not just with embarrassment, but with indignation, and she stomped her foot on the ground.

"Qui-Gon, I am fighting a war! Does it seem to you like I have time for a relationship?! That's a luxury I can't afford, not while my people are being slaughtered by their own idiocy! Even if I wanted a lover, which I don't, I wouldn't pick some stale, emotionless Jedi!" She stood up tall, her head raised proudly. "I'd choose Mandalorian, someone who knows true passion, someone who isn't a dead end."

The Master's eyes narrowed as he looked between the proud Duchess and his ferociously blushing Padawan. "I sense attraction between you two," he said softly, and Obi-Wan looked away as shame rushed through him, but Satine didn't even flinch.

"Of course there's attraction between us, have you seen your student?" the Duchess almost snapped. "You'd have to be blind and an idiot to not see how stupidly handsome he is! And I'm the first woman he's ever seen, of course he's going to like me!"

"H-hey!" Obi-Wan stuttered, slightly offended and irritated, but mostly amused. "You are not the first woman I've ever seen! And I'll have you know, Duchess, that you are the furthest thing from what I would choose as well!" He paused. "Because I wouldn't choose!"

"But you do find me attractive..." she drawled softly, sliding closer to the flushed and flustered boy. "Your Master even said you do..."
"Y-you're physical beauty cannot be denied," Obi-Wan stammered as the Duchess smiled broadly. "This is a objective fact, not a personal preference. Mathematics and the biology of attraction state that your proportions are within the exact parameters of ideal beauty." The grin dropped off Satine's face and was replaced with a bitter scowl.

"Leave it to Obi-Wan Kenobi to take the romance out of everything. Truly, you have the soul of a poet..." she said, rolling her eyes, and Qui-Gon laughed softly, shaking his head. Perhaps this was it. They openly recognized the physical attraction between them, they knew there was no future for them, so...maybe cooler heads prevailed with the possible tension out of the way. Perhaps they only sought friendship, and that was fine. That was more than fine, that was ideal. Discussion had brought these things to light and put them in their place, instead of allowing an undercurrent of sexual tension to build, and that was how mistakes happened. Maybe it would be alright. Maybe his fears were unfounded.

They were teenagers, after all. The hormonal mess made their true feelings difficult to place.

"So long as we understand that anything more than friendship is expressly forbidden, I see no trouble with you two building a friendship." He shrugged. "So long as you place the mission first."

"I believe a friendship will benefit our ability to see our mission through, Master," Obi-Wan said softly. "We cannot place her above the mission because she is the mission. An investment in her is a necessity, and you have said yourself that sometimes the rules get in the way of the mission." A slight, clever smile passed over Obi-Wan's lips when the Master's jaw went slack in disbelief. "That is what you meant by that, right? That a deep, compassionate commitment to Satine will allow us to put her first and foremost beyond what remaining impartial would allow."

"You are turning into a manipulative bastard, my Padawan." Kenobi bowed respectfully. "I learned from the best, Master."

"Oh, Master Dooku is going to be thrilled about this..." Qui-Gon sighed. "Carry on, you two. Remember your commitments."

"We will," they said in unison, right before they dissolved into a fit of helpless laughter, and with a roll of his eyes, the Master left the cockpit. His suspicions were far from settled, but it at least seemed safe for now. He'd have to talk to Obi-Wan after the Duchess had gone to sleep. They needed to have a man to man talk.

"Do you think Qui-Gon is displeased with us?" Satine asked, maneuvering around the Jedi in the small space when he gestured to the pilot's seat, offering it to her, and she slid into it, her hands clutched tightly together, afraid to touch anything.

"Not displeased, no," Obi-Wan said, standing just behind the seated Duchess and reaching over to flick some things on the console. "He's just cautious. He's a student of the Living Force, and he believes in living in the moment, trusting his instincts and his feelings. It's...more impulsive than I like, and it can lead quickly to being swept away by the feelings of a moment. Which is exactly what he's cautioning me against. His philosophy lends itself to letting his guard down, and..." He trailed off, chewing the inside of his cheek as he thought. "...it's personal. It would be in bad form for me to share it."

"He fell in love, right?" Satine asked, her eyes lighting up with romantic idealism and excitement. "He let his guard down, and love snuck in." Obi-Wan said nothing, but the quick flick of his eyes away from her confirmed it. She frowned. "And it ended badly. It must have, or he wouldn't be so nervous about you."
"That...is the long and the short of it," Kenobi muttered, but said nothing to elaborate. Satine wasn't having it, and her turned in her seat, draping her arms over the back, the Jedi behind her so close she could smell the crisp, clean scent of his freshly washed robes.

"What is the Dark Side?" Obi-Wan's lips drew into a thin line, the indication that he wasn't going to be saying anything at all, and his eyes seemed to fill with fear which he quickly tried to repress. "Obi-Wan, I have to know," Satine said, reaching out and laying a hand on the boy's chest, and she could feel the lean muscles tense and harden under her touch. Physical contact was something the reserved boy shied away from. It was something Satine desperately needed. Again, they were at odds, but he didn't move away from her, as he usually did. "If this is something that you're in danger of because of me, if this is something that our friendship can lead you to, I have to know what it is so I can help you avoid it! You save me all the time. Let me help save you from this."

"There is nothing you can do, Satine, there is nothing!" Obi-Wan said, the anxiety and stress suddenly back in him. "I must defend myself against the Dark Side, there is nothing you or anyone can do to protect me." He sighed heavily, his gaze torn from her, and Satine felt as lost as Obi-Wan looked. "In any case, I couldn't tell you about the Dark Side, even if I wanted to. They warn us against it, but I've never felt it myself."

"But you've seen it!" the Duchess said, her hand resting on Obi-Wan's, and the Jedi unconsciously turned his palm over and closed his fingers around hers. "You must have, or you wouldn't be so frightened."

"The greatest fear lies in the unknown, Duchess." He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, and Satine could feel the pulse of his heart through his fingers begin to slow. "But yes, I have seen the Dark Side." His brow furrowed in thought. "It is... pain. And anguish and suffering. It draws from powerful negative emotions, like rage and hate and fear and aggression, and it can drive a person to do terrible, awful things."

"...you saw it in Qui-Gon?" Satine asked, and Obi-Wan carefully studied her, looking for any accusation or slight against his beloved Master, but he found nothing but curiosity and compassion. He slowly nodded. "I watched despair take him. I saw him consumed by a pervasive need for revenge. I saw hatred and murder in his eyes as he approached an unarmed man." Obi-Wan smiled gently as he breathed a heavy sigh of relief, almost as if he were reliving that moment. "And I watched him let go. I saw him reach for darkness, and before he took hold of it, he turned away." His chest puffed with pride. "My Master is too strong to succumb to the Dark Side. There isn't a greater Jedi than him."

"...because of a woman he loved?" Obi-Wan bowed his head.

"Yes...it's why he's worried about me, I already attach too easily, as I have mentioned." He twirled his braid around his fingers, lightly tugging at it until Satine reached up and touched the long, braided strand, and for a moment, Obi-Wan tensed before he closed his eyes and let his hand drop away, sighing softly as the Duchess ran the braid through her fingers. "He has always said my adherence and commitment to the Code is greater than his ever was, so..."

"So, do you think you can become attached and lose someone without turning to the Dark Side?" Obi-Wan bit his lip as he considered the question, and Satine allowed the silence to pass between them, a thing she was once infuriated by, but now saw it was simply the introvert's way of carefully choosing his words before he spoke. It was the way he was careful and cautious about everything, and the more she got to know him, the more she appreciated this side of him. It balanced her out.

"I don't know..." he finally said. "No Jedi is alike, no circumstance the same. I've heard of Jedi
who have loved and had families, some even married, and they did not fall to darkness. I've heard of others who fell for things far simpler than love. I'd like to think I'm one of those that can resist the Dark Side. I...believe I am a good Jedi..." He breathed deeply and reached past the chair, laying his hand on the control console. "I'm going to turn off the autopilot. Are you ready?"

With a swift nod, Satine gripped the yoke and the accelerator, and with a few quick swipes of his hand, Obi-Wan switched the autopilot off, and the ship pitched to the side, the Duchess cursing as she fumbled for the yoke that had escaped her grasp, and with a soft, low chuckle, Obi-Wan placed his hands on Satine's elbows, supporting her grip and gently guiding her hands on the ship's controls.

"I didn't think it would have a mind of its own!" she quickly said in her defense, a faint flush rising to her cheeks when Kenobi leaned closer. Embarrassment, she decided. A child could hold a ship steady.

"This cruiser has been modified, and it is not perfectly balanced," Obi-Wan quietly explained. "Trouble like this can occur for a variety of reasons. If the ship is struck, the balance can easily be offset." He pointed to a display on the control console. "This here is a quick scan diagnostic that will tell you if there is any trouble that may effect the ship's handling, and this," he said, pointing to a row of switches just beneath it, "is how you will compensate for it. These activate forward, rear, port and starboard thrusters to even out your controls."

"So which one will solve my problem now?" she asked, her tight grip pulling at the yoke, but Obi-Wan's supporting hands keeping the tension out of her shoulders.

"Counter the ship's current inclination," he quietly explained, and after a moment of observing the switches, Satine flipped one of them, and slowly, the yoke's sideways pressure eased. She looked back at him, a pleased look on her face, to see him smiling gently. "Very good, Duchess."

"Of course it was, Jedi." Obi-Wan frowned, biting his lip as he flushed slightly.

"Satine."

"Obi-Wan." Chuckling softly and shaking his head, the Jedi pointed to another display.

"That's your navicomputer. We're about a day's flight from Ordo. Follow the vector, and you'll lead us right to it, Captain." Slowly, as the Duchess began moving the yoke and pointing the ship in the desired direction, Obi-Wan removed his hands from her arms and settled into the copilot's seat beside her, leaning back and watching her face as she looked at him and pouted, her pursed lips growing into a pleased smile as she grew increasingly comfortable with the ship.

"If you weren't a Jedi," she asked when her shoulders relaxed and her grip on the yoke loosened, "would you have been a starship pilot?"

"I'm still not yet a Jedi," Obi-Wan said, pulling at his braid. "I'm still in training. I'd hate to projects thoughts of a future I don't want." Satine rolled her eyes and looked at him, unamused and clearly irritated by his answer, though it was exaggerated, more mock annoyance than the real thing. "But yes, I think I take well to the stars. I find I miss it when I haven't been in space for some time."

Satine sighed wistfully.

"My little starship pilot," she said sweetly. "I bet it would be an exciting life."

"Perhaps, but a Jedi does not crave excitement or adventure." Satine scoffed and playfully hit the Jedi on the shoulder.

"You really are a dull lot, you know that?"
"I find a peaceful, quiet life preferable."

"You're right about you being the sort to resist the pull of the Dark Side, you're far too boring to be tempted." Obi-Wan grinned broadly.

"Well, one can always hope." Satine pursed her lips as she looked at her protector, a neutral smile on his face as he leaned back relaxed in his seat, and for reasons she could not understand, she felt her pulse begin to race. She looked down at the instrumentations before her, at the indicators that flashed, at the displays that showed the ship’s workings, and she decided that it must have been the stress of doing something new, and the excitement of being taught by the Jedi. It had nothing to do with being in such close proximity to the charming, sweet, terribly handsome man. It couldn't.

Obi-Wan's Code dictated that he would never, ever feel love, and loyal, dedicated Obi-Wan put all others before himself. He may as well have been married to the Jedi, the cold, monastic Order sucking the passion right out of him. Even if he wanted someone, he would deny himself, she knew. The Order was alone in his heart, and so Obi-Wan was a dead end, a thing that could never be hers, no matter how far she reached for him. If she even wanted to reach for him. Which she didn't. But still, questions raced through her mind. He had told her once a Jedi shall not know anger or hatred or love, and she understood now the nature of their attachments, but...

"Have you ever been with a woman?" she blurted out before she could stop herself, and Obi-Wan looked at her, his blue eyes wide and confused for a moment before the color rose to his cheeks and he laughed nervously.

"O-of course, I'm with you now, aren't I?" he asked innocently, a clear dodge of the actual question, and Satine had half a mind to leave it at that. The question didn't just make him uncomfortable, she was embarrassed for having asked it. It was fortunate reasonable Obi-Wan had the sense to put a stop to the line of conversation before-

"That's not what I mean," she said, again without thinking, and she winced as soon as she said it when the Jedi flushed deeply, his hands clasped tightly in his lap. She sighed regretfully. It was too late to turn back now. She may as well know. "Mandalorians are unabashedly passionate," she explained, feeling the color rise to her own cheeks. "Not all of our...intimacy is done for love. A- and you said you had that friend-" Obi-Wan groaned loudly and ran his hands over his face.

"Quinlan..." he said tiredly. "As I said, Quinlan is exceptional in his depravity..." Obi-Wan held his hand to his forehead as he rubbed his temple, the deep flush spreading not just across his cheeks but down his neck and past what she could see beneath his robes, and Satine couldn't help but wonder if his entire pale body flushed like that when he got flustered.

"But it is tolerated."

"It is...tolerated," he carefully repeated, hissing out a slow, calming breath. "We are discouraged, since the Jedi are particularly susceptible to the feelings of others, and se-" He stopped, choking on the word, and he shut his eyes tightly. "Intercourse is an intimate, deeply emotional thing, in most circumstances. It lends itself to attachment, but no, the Jedi aren't forbidden from engaging in it. It's been known to happen, especially among those in the Order that understand it will never progress beyond the physical." He shrugged. "Most refrain, but the Masters have found it difficult to keep the teenagers separate. So long as they are discrete and mindful of their attachments, it's permitted."

"So..." Satine drawled, leaning in toward him with a sly smile on her face. "Have you-

"N-no!" he quickly said, his voice tight and high with an almost frantic denial. He laughed
nervously as he rubbed the back of his neck, the young Jedi burning a fierce red. "I can barely speak to a woman, let alone manage to go to bed with one." He looked away from the Duchess, his hand tightly pulling at his braid. "The act it too intimate for me. I cannot bring myself to...use someone just to relieve my own physical desires. It's...selfish," he growled. "I am a Jedi. I can rise above such desires. I have risen above such. I will not be ruled by something as base and undignified as lust."

"So...you feel nothing?" she asked, leaning in closer to the already uncomfortable boy, her hand on the yoke pulling toward him and tilting the ship sideways, and with a swift hiss, Satine righted the ship, frowning petulantly at the Jedi as he laughed at her.

"Of course I feel something, I'm not a droid," he quietly explained. "I understand the biological changes humans endure at this stage in life, I began studying it when I began undergoing the changes."

"Ever the scholar," Satine said with a soft smile, and the Jedi smiled, seeming more at ease than before.

"Proper discipline and meditation allowed me to get my urges under control," he quietly explained, and he grinned widely when Satine pouted.

"Lucky."

"And you?" he asked quietly, the red flush returning to his cheeks. "I find the question highly inappropriate and usually wouldn't ask, but..." Obi-Wan smiled slyly. "Well, you asked me first."

"Well," she began, holding her head high and regal in a show of superiority, "as you know, I am Mandalorian, and we are a people of passion and desire."

"But have you engaged in those desires?"

"I-I am the eldest daughter of Mandalore's ruling family," she said, the strength in her voice faltering somewhat. "Sundari Palace was always filled with boys of noble birth, and-

"You're avoiding the question," Obi-Wan said firmly, and Satine bit her lip and looked down at the yoke in her hands.

"I was always something of the quiet one in my family," she said softly. "Though I doubt you'd believe such a thing." Obi-Wan shook his head.

"I believe you. I see it. If you were like your kinsmen, you'd never be able to change them, and Qui-Gon and I wouldn't be here." Her heart was pounding again, so loud she was certain the boy could hear it, and she quickly pushed her rising fondness for the compassionate Obi-Wan aside.

"When I showed aptitude in diplomacy and debate and naturally shied away from our violent past, my father sent me to study politics in Coruscant so I could lead our people down a new path," she said, her voice distant and sad as memories of her beloved mother and father rushed through her mind. "My duty always came first, and my father always said I should wait until I found someone worthy of me, and...I took it to heart." Satine took a deep breath. "No, I've never been with anyone." She laughed softly. "Not very Mandalorian."

"Very Mandalorian," Obi-Wan countered. "You follow your own path, and nobody can tell you otherwise. I can't think of anything more Mandalorian than that." She smiled gratefully at him.

"I...i-it was good to talk about this," she whispered. "My friends, they..." She trailed off, her voice choking for a moment before she drew in a shuddering breath. "They're all dead now, s-so I don't
"I can," Obi-Wan said swiftly, instinctively reaching out and taking her hand in his, his heart aching with compassion for the girl he protected and all she had lost. It was far, far more than she ever showed, and she buried the pain as good as any Jedi. But still, she was hurting, and he could feel that she was. And even through all the pain and death this war had brought, all the loss she had personally suffered, Satine wanted no vengeance, no revenge. All she wanted was peace and a new way for her people so this would never happen again.

Obi-Wan felt a stirring deep in the pit of his stomach, one that ached with a need for closeness that Obi-Wan knew all too well, and tried so hard to repress. But this time, he didn't push it away. Satine was his mission, and she needed this. She needed him, a friend to share the pain she suffered, and Obi-Wan would do everything in his power to do that for her.

"I can be anything you need me to be," he whispered, squeezing her hand, and Satine looked at him, her eyes filled with gratitude and with tears she refused to let fall.

"...thank you," the Duchess whispered, her voice barely audible over the hum of the engines, and together, they sat in silence, heavy with the weight of the girl's losses, and Obi-Wan couldn't leave it at that. He could fix this. With a small, genuine smile, he leaned in toward the girl.

"Teach me Mando'a."

Surprise immediately filled the Duchess' face, and the smile on Obi-Wan's lips brightened as he felt the fear and the pain and the nearly hopeless depression of grief leave her. "Teach you?" she gasped, shaking her head in wonder at the Jedi. "You are nearly fluent!"

"Yes, nearly," he said gently. "My accent-"

"Is refined, aristocratic and beautiful," she emphasized. "You go trying to change that and I will never speak Mando'a to you again!"

"So you will teach me?" Obi-Wan asked, looking at the Duchess' face as she seemed to consider the idea. "There's so much more to being fluent than just knowing the words and the grammar," he quickly explained when she frowned with reluctance. "There's colloquialisms and turns of phrase, saying used in everyday speech I just don't understand. For example." He tugged softly on his braid when he felt her eyes on him, intense and examining. "Haryc b'aalyc. Tired and emotional, yes?" A tight smile spread across Satine's face as she tried to repress laughter. She understood. "How am I supposed to know that you're actually calling someone drunk when you say that? It's very confusing."

"Mando'a does have a lot of sayings..." she quietly confessed, and Obi-Wan leaned in toward her again.

"Teach me Mando'a." This time, Satine smiled brightly.

"Sa munit sa gar guor, ner di'kut." As long as you like, my idiot.

Obi-Wan was jolted awake from his light sleep in the pilots seat when the cockpit door slid open and the comforting, familiar presence of his Master slinking into the seat beside him. Usually warm and inviting, albeit a bit stern, Qui-Gon now felt concerned, not worried, but wary and suspicious, as he always did when he suspected his Padawan was hiding something, which Obi-Wan often was. He knew what his Master was thinking, and had been deliberately avoiding the conversation, opting instead to spend his time with lovely Satine, which only served to make the
"You have been avoiding me, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, stern but not unkind, and the Padawan sighed, his eyes remaining closed as he rested.

"I apologize, Master..." Obi-Wan said, genuinely repentant. "I was uncertain what you would think, a-and I know the subject is a painful one, so-"

"You attempted to keep me from pain by hiding from me?" Qui-Gon asked incredulously, and Obi-Wan's silence was answer enough. He leaned back in the seat and sighed heavily. "Oh, my Padawan, you have so much to learn," the Master groaned, and Obi-Wan winced, finally opening his eyes and glancing down at the control console.

"I am...truly sorry I fail to live up to your expectations, Master," Obi-Wan said softly, and Qui-Gon groaned loudly in mild frustration.

"Stop apologizing, Obi-Wan, you are an ideal student. Perhaps too ideal. You have yet to fail me, but I have been failing you." Obi-Wan looked at the Jedi, the Master's arms crossed over his chest and his noble features hard. "I cannot help you grow as a Jedi if you keep hiding behind those walls of yours. Your defenses are perfect, you don't need to practice in maintaining them by shielding yourself from me." Obi-Wan flushed with embarrassment and looked away.

"...w-what if you don't like what you see?" Obi-Wan whispered, his voice tense with the anxiety that so often ran through him, and Qui-Gon laid his hand upon the boy's shoulder.

"Then we will talk about it, I will give you my advice, and you will apply it as you see fit." Qui-Gon frowned. "I trust you enough to work diligently at any task you are given, but I can't give you the right advice if you aren't as open with me as you are with your Duchess..." the Master said pointedly, unable to keep a sly smirk off his face as the Padawan's heart began to race, his cheeks turning a vibrant red as if he had been found doing something expressly forbidden.

"M-master, I-

"I don't want your explanations or your excuses, Obi-Wan, I want your honesty," Qui-Gon said, holding up his hand to silence the boy. "I'll cut to the chase. Did you have sex with Satine?"

"W-what?!" Obi-Wan gasped, his voice high and tight with the sudden rush of anxiety that filled him. "N-no, I would never!"

"Is that so..." Qui-Gon drawled, pushing against Obi-Wan's mind with the Force, and the Padawan immediately pushed back in his panic. "Obi-Wan..." the Master softly warned, and breathing deep to calm himself, the Padawan slowly let the Jedi in, his eyes shut tight and his body shaking as he felt Qui-Gon's comforting presence surround him. Slowly, he began to relax, giving himself over to the soothing voice that spoke deep in his mind. Opening himself up completely as the Master brushed away his fears, his anxiety, his guilt, all the troubles that had built up within him over the past month. On Zanbar, they had been unable to sit like this, to be Master and Padawan like they were meant to be, and the young Jedi had suffered for it.

"I'm sorry, my Padawan," Qui-Gon whispered as he withdrew from his student's troubled mind. "You're very young to be in war like this. You should be studying the Force, not fighting for survival."

"...I've killed so many," Obi-Wan whispered, his voice wavering with emotion and Qui-Gon gasped when he felt the boy's pain shoot through the Force. "Fifty six at the very least, dead by my hand, more if the starfighters I have shot down had more than one pilot." He shivered, his
arms crossing against the sudden cold. "Satine didn't want her people to die. She wants peace, and we are here as soldiers."

"We are here as protectors," the Jedi said softly. "Never forget that, Obi-Wan. We aren't here to take life, but to protect her from her enemies, sometimes it is necessary."

"Satine says violence simply breeds more violence."

"She's right," Qui-Gon said quietly. "But if she were not surrounded by people that are willing to fight for her, and if she refuses to fight herself, what do you suppose would happen to her?"

"...she would die. They would kill her without a second thought."

"Darkness cannot chase darkness away, my Padawan, that is true, but someone must defend the light that will, lest it be smothered." He smiled gently at his student. "That is what the Jedi are for, and that is why we are here."

"She is...worth protecting," Obi-Wan sighed happily, and Qui-Gon keyed in on the sudden rush of warmth within the teen, his elevated pulse, the drooping of his shoulders as he relaxed with the memory of the Duchess.

"It seems you are finding peace from your troubles with her," Qui-Gon gently prodded, and the Padawan absently nodded. "You've grown close."

"She has suffered a great deal," Obi-Wan casually stated, and Qui-Gon's eyes narrowed, the suspicion sneaking within him again. "We are more alike than we previously believed."

"What is it that happened between you two?" the Master asked, observing very carefully as Obi-Wan flushed deeply, fidgeting nervously in his seat as he pressed his emotions down. "You fight constantly, you have openly professed to hating each other, your differences are insurmountable, you beg to be allowed to go scouting so you may get away from her. And overnight..." He held up his hands and splayed his fingers. "It's gone. Suddenly, you are inseparable."

"The ship is very small, Master," Obi-Wan said, grinning as Qui-Gon glared at him.

"You are open in your attraction for her, but your feelings-"

"I feel nothing for her, Master," Obi-Wan said reflexively, but he winced as soon as he said it, both he and the Master knowing that was the furthest thing from the truth. "...she needs a friend," Obi-Wan whispered. "She has nobody but us. Her family is dead. The people she wants to save are all trying to kill her, it does her no good for me to be distant. I...wish to ease her suffering, Master."

"A noble sentiment," Qui-Gon said, but his eyes narrowed as he examined his student. "Is that it? Your friendship with her is charity? This is pity for your charge?"

"...no, Master," Obi-Wan whispered, looking down at the ground and his ears burning with shame. Somehow, the truth of the matter felt worse than what Qui-Gon described. "She...trusted me, Master. For no reason, she-"

"No reason?" Qui-Gon gasped. "Foolish boy, for a month, you have defended her from certain death!"

"A situation she was in to begin with because of me!" Obi-Wan snapped. "My arrogance landed up on Zanbar, I-"
"Death Watch landed us on Zanbar," Qui-Gon said, calm and measured, turning his seat and pushing on the arm of the pilot's seat with his foot to turn the chair toward him, forcing his Padawan to face him. "Her faith in you inspired you to open up and become honest with her, is that it? She reached out to you, and you responded to her by letting her past your defenses." Obi-Wan started to counter the claim, but stopped quickly and averted his eyes.

"...yes."

"You see what this looks like, don't you?" Qui-Gon gently asked, laying his hand on the boy's shoulder. "There is a mutual attraction between you two, and now you are growing closer. Trust requires a deep connection, and you know how easily you become attached." The Master squeezed his student's shoulder. "You are kind and compassionate, Obi-Wan. These are good things, but be mindful of your attachments. You know where they lead."

"...is this how it happened with you and Master Tahl?" Obi-Wan asked, and immediately regretted it when Qui-Gon's eyes filled with sudden pain, the loss of his love still fresh in his mind, the woman only two months dead. "I-I'm sorry!" Kenobi fumbled, stuttering over his words when he felt the Master's own defenses shoot up, blocking him out of his mind as he privately managed the swell of emotions within him. "Master, I didn't mean to bring it up, I-"

"The situations are not dissimilar," the Master whispered, his voice and his eyes distant, as though he were not within himself. "We were friends, as you know. Far closer than we should have been. We didn't decide to fall in love, it just...happened." His eyes focused back on his student, a pained smile on his lips. "The dangers of attachment. Love can only lead to one outcome. There is a reason that rule is in place, Padawan, and I learned it the hard way."

"Master, I-"

"You've worked too hard to get where you are, Obi-Wan," the Master said, clasping the boy's hand in his own, and Obi-Wan felt that he was trembling. "Don't throw it away by not being mindful of the attachments you are making."

"I understand, Master," Obi-Wan said softly, his own hand beginning to tremble. He didn't want to lose the friendship he had made with Satine. He didn't want things to go back to the way they were before, which meant he was attached already. Satine was...beautiful. His equal in many things, his opposite in most. They were like fire and ice, like dawn and dusk, passion and logic. She was his intellectual equal, a thing he rarely found, a rare and beautiful beacon of peace in a world soaked in blood. She was his mission, which elevated her beyond what she would have normally been to him. He was attracted to her, yes, but he knew his duties, and she knew hers, and never once had Obi-Wan considered anything beyond friendship with fiery Satine.

"Do you really?" the Master asked, and Obi-Wan nodded.

"What can I do to ease your concern, Master?" Obi-Wan asked, calm settling over him as he pushed his own emotions away and focused on healing his Master.

"I cannot bear to lose you, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon softly growled. "Not in the way you almost lost me."

"And you won't," Obi-Wan said firmly. "I know where my commitments lie, Master. You're right. I've worked too hard to throw it all away for something like this." He smiled softly. "I will be mindful." It seemed to be enough, and the pain in the Master's eyes faded to be replaced with pride.

"That's my boy," he said, patting the Padawan on the shoulder. "I apologize for burdening you
with this. I ought to know to trust you by now." Obi-Wan smiled softly.

"It's my fault. I understand how this looks, but be comforted, Master, I have nothing but the purest intentions with the Duchess."

"I believe you," The Master said as he rose from his seat. "Perhaps admitting your attraction now has allowed you to set boundaries that Tahl and I never had a chance to establish. The situation is different."

"Can I continue to pursue the friendship?" Obi-Wan tentatively asked, and Qui-Gon nodded slowly, as if weighing the wisdom of the decision.

"What does the Force tell you?"

"It draws me to her, Master," Obi-Wan said, soft but confident. "She needs us, and not just for protection, but for her growth into the ruler that will lead Mandalore to peace."

"...I agree," Qui-Gon said, a smirk on his lips. "But perhaps I shall not be leaving you two alone so often in the future. Our escape from Zanbar suggests that you have a talent for sneaking about. You may be better suited to the scouting work I have been doing." Obi-Wan inclined his head.

"I will submit to your wisdom, Master."

"I don't deserve a Padawan like you, you little shit," Qui-Gon said as he ruffled the Padawan's hair, the short cut having lengthened over their month in the wilderness making him appear even more boyish than he already did, which would no doubt irritate Obi-Wan when he discovered it. "Master Dooku is fiercely jealous that he wasn't so lucky as me."

"The Force works in mysterious ways," Obi-Wan said softly, a wry smile on his face, and all his previous anxiety gone. It was a rare thing to see Obi-Wan so relaxed. Perhaps the Duchess would do him some good as well.

"That it does, Padawan," Qui-Gon said as he turned to leave. "Make certain you get some rest. We don't know what we will encounter on Ordo, and I will need you at your best."

"Understood, Master." Flashing his student a quick, grateful smile, Qui-Gon left the cockpit, and Obi-Wan leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, and despite his best efforts, he couldn't keep beautiful Satine out of his thoughts.

---

Reflection.

This has all the makings of a serious problem. This is preferable to the constant bickering, and it will certainly make the mission a great deal easier. If Obi-Wan is attached and invested close to the Duchess, no doubt he will give everything within him to protect her. Which is what the mission requires, of course. I didn't foresee this problem when I accepted the mission, but there are a unique set of problems inherent in a mission when the mission is literally a person. I hadn't realized how that has the potential to lend itself to attachment in a way that directly conflicts with the orders of our Code. We are to remain unattached so we may focus on the success of the mission, but our mission is a teenage girl, which means nothing must come before her. This is an emotional trap, and Obi-Wan is walking dangerously close to the edge of the pit.

It's no secret I never followed the Code well, which is why, I suppose, I was chosen for this mission, and Obi-Wan has been nothing if not dedicated to the Jedi. But he is still learning and growing, and what's more, he's far more sensitive than he lets on. And now, Satine has become a trusted presence to him, and he has begun to relax his guard, and that's where the trouble will
start. I need to keep a very close eye on this. Too often, friendships left unguarded become something more, and that something is expressly forbidden to us. For good reason. I never thought I would so whole-heartedly agree with the Council so strongly on a matter, but in this, they are right. Attachment leads to love, to possession, to suffering, to...

I pledge myself to you, Qui-Gon.

I can hear her voice within me. All of the time, I see her face, and it still burns with the pain of her loss. Tahl, my beloved, what would you say if you could see me now? We had only just confessed our feelings, I know, but it feels like I have loved you forever, and it feels like such a waste of such a beautiful thing that I had denied it for so long. Our bond had grown beyond friendship and into love, and despite that our lives would be filled with separations, we still decided to pledge ourselves to each other. It was beautiful, and it was fleeting, and now you are gone.

You saw what happened. I know you saw what happened. My love for you, consumed by grief and guilt had been turned and corrupted into anger and rage and I took it willingly by the hand and allowed it to lead me straight into darkness, heedless of everything else, including the student I swore to teach and protect. My darkest hour, Tahl, and it came from love. I do not regret it, not for a moment, and a piece of me will always, always love you, dearest one. But I would have done things differently.

Obi-Wan did not deserve to see his Master consumed by darkness. He didn’t deserve to follow me for four days on my quest for revenge against the criminal that tortured and killed you. He didn’t deserve to see what my heart shattered and my beliefs in ruins, if only for a time. A Master is supposed to help his Padawan resist the lure of the Dark Side, but my poor student was forced to attempt to restrain me from being a danger to myself and to others. And all of you, my love.

Everything I am would have been gone if not for him. I would have become a murderer that day if I didn’t hear your voice in my moment of need to pull me back from the edge. I owe him everything for his valiant efforts, and I owe you for...you know what I owe you for, Tahl. I know you wouldn’t want me to suffer like this, but I can’t help it. I’m in no danger of the Dark Side taking me, so don’t worry about that. But Obi-Wan...

You must see the similarities, as I do. Like me, he was consumed by guilt, he blamed himself for the events that put Satine in danger on Zanbar, just as I had blamed myself for being unable to save you. It left him unbalanced, dangerously so, just as I was, and it culminated in panic attacks and an emotional breakdown. But it was his fault no more than your death was my doing. It just happened, and believing that there was anything we could have done, that we are somehow able to influence what happened is merely arrogance and self importance. Your death...was not my fault. It was a tragedy, one that perhaps could have been avoided, but I did everything I could.

I did, Tahl. Believe me, I did.

I thought Obi-Wan would understand the dangers of attachment because he saw first hand where they lead. Darkness and suffering and misery, and I was not strong enough to keep them away when you were lost to me. And now here he is, falling into the same trap. I can sense their attraction. I can feel the desire between them, even if they cannot. Perhaps this will lead to love, perhaps their duties will prevail and they will refrain, but the risk is there, and Obi-Wan is taking it. I have advised Obi-Wan against his attachments, but on reflection...that sneaky bastard has somehow managed ease my fears about his friendship, not swear off of it like I had intended.

What do I do, Tahl? What would you suggest if you were here? Is love worth it? Brief and fleeting as it is, is it worth it to feel such beauty knowing it will end? Everything ends, and it is always sad, such is the way of things. Do I spare my student this pain before it happens, or am I to trust him to trust in the Force to lead him where he must be? Or maybe I am over thinking this. Obi-Wan is
wiser than his years, and wiser than me, certainly. Perhaps he can handle this. Perhaps he can maintain a friendship without it going further. Perhaps his duty will remain first in his heart. Perhaps...

Perhaps he will fall in love like his foolish Master. But perhaps he can handle it. Perhaps Obi-Wan can love so purely, he will never feel possession, will never put her before his duty, before her duty. But what do I do? Is it worth it? He is destined for great things within the Jedi, if I allow him to follow the whims of the moment and it leads him to darkness, I will have failed not just him, but the Jedi. He will better him, Tahl. You know. You saw it in him too.

What am I supposed to do?

I cannot allow this. I must remind him of his duty, make certain it stays first in his heart, make sure Satine understands where his commitment is, make sure she knows that a future with Obi-Wan simply isn't possible. It hurts me to do so, as it may hurt him, but I must. I can't allow him to fall to darkness, I can't allow him to make himself vulnerable to it. He saved me once, and now I will save him. If he needs it. Maybe he...

I can't do this. No more thoughts of love, not tonight. It's making me ache. I will sleep on the matter, and I will keep an eye on my student and the Duchess. Perhaps I will not be needed. I should trust my student. Obi-Wan alone knows the path the Force has set for him.

Tahl, my love, I miss you. I could use your help. Please. Tell me what's right.
Obi-Wan felt that something was off the moment they entered Ordo's atmosphere. He sat in the pilot's seat, a frown on his face, his hands tense around the accelerator and the yoke as he guided the cruiser through the sky. Qui-Gon sat in the pilot's seat, at ease and relaxed, his face calm and serene. If anything was wrong, Qui-Gon didn't feel it, or at least didn't show he did. In the aisle between them stood Satine, the Duchess' hand on the back of each chair, the tips of her fingers brushing the soft robes on Obi-Wan's shoulder, the light physical contact making the Padawan only more tense, which only served to irritate the other teen.

"You need to relax, Obi-Wan," Satine said, her fingers reaching for his braid and tugging at it when it was in her grasp, and she frowned when the Padawan's dour mood only seemed to deepen. She stood taller, her head held confidently. "Clan Ordo has been allies of Clan Kryze since the Mandalorian Wars nearly four thousand years ago."

"And are they allies now?" Obi-Wan grumbled, doing nothing to hide his displeasure and his skepticism, and Satine crossed her arms over her chest. There were many things to like about Obi-Wan, but this wasn't one of them. Stubborn, suspicious Jedi, too cautious, too wary for his own good, and Satine could feel herself becoming stubborn and argumentative in response. As they had agreed earlier, they brought out the worst in each other, and that was especially true now.

"Of course they are allies!" Satine nearly snapped. "Count Tegris was a good friend of my father, and I grew up with Veela and Edric."

"A friend of your father," Obi-Wan said, drawing out the word for additional emphasis "But what about you?"

"I'm friends with the Count's son!" Satine shouted, her temper finally getting the better of her. "And his daughter was very close to my brother! I know what I'm talking about, Obi-Wan, Mandalorians value loyalty very highly!"

"If that were true," Obi-Wan said, his tone matter of fact and so casual that Satine found it almost grating, "then why are you even fighting a war like this?"

"Ooooh, you are insufferable!" the Duchess shouted, stomping her foot and edging closer to Qui-Gon's seat. "I know you may be against me, Obi-Wan, but not everybody is!" That seemed to get to him, and he looked back at the girl, the gaze he turned on her superior, arrogant, like she was a foolish child that knew nothing at all.

"As I said earlier," Obi-Wan said between grit teeth, his voice tight with his straining patience, "I sense-"
gripping the controls so tightly she thought he may accidentally wrench the levers from their places. Satine couldn't help the smile that spread across her face at seeing the Padawan's displeasure. She leaned closer to the Master. "You don't feel anything, do you, Qui-Gon?"

"Not as of yet," the Jedi said. "If there's ill-intent here, it has yet to pass." Satine leaned toward Obi-Wan, a smug, self-satisfied smirk on her face. Kenobi did his best to ignore her, but the twitching at the corner of his eye was a very good indication that she was getting to him.

"See?" Satine smoothly drawled. "You're just nervous, Obi-Wan, your apprehension is little more than anxiety."

"Be mindful of the present, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said when the teenager made to bitingly respond to Satine, and instead he glowered and sank further down in his seat.

"...Master Yoda says I should be mindful of the future," the teenager said tightly, and Qui-Gon looked tiredly at his student.

"Master Yoda isn't training you, Obi-Wan, I am, and you should never focus on the future at the expense of the moment, as is your inclination. Remember, it's being out of step with the present that nearly saw you lose your chance at ever becoming a Jedi Knight." For a moment, it looked as though Obi-Wan would stand his ground and argue, but ended up grinding his teeth together and fixing his gaze out the viewport.

"...yes, Master." Qui-Gon reached out and laid his hand upon his Padawan's shoulder.

"Find your balance, Obi-Wan. I need you at your best, and irritation will not serve us when we deal with the Mandalorians." It was the first sensible thing he had heard all day, and breathing deeply, Obi-Wan slowly began to calm himself, his emotions and fears releasing into the Force, but still, deep in the back of his mind was a nagging irritation, like a small, buzzing insect that would not go away.

"There is no emotion, there is peace..." he softly said, and Satine rolled her eyes and turned away from the Padawan. So closely he held the Jedi's cold Code, it was a wonder that there was room for anything else within him.

"Duchess," Qui-Gon asked softly, and Satine smiled at him, pushing all thoughts of the infuriating Obi-Wan out of her mind. "Who did Clan Ordo align with during the Civil War?" Satine pursed her lips.

"My father and Count Tegris fought together, but the clan was divided." She frowned. "All clans were divided. It's much like the situation now, only...there were real factions then. Now, it's the clans that are warring, not the factions they belong to."

"If that's so, how can we be certain that Clan Ordo will not fight Clan Kryze?"

"Because there is no Clan Kryze anymore..." Satine said bitterly, clutching her arms tightly against the sudden loneliness she felt. "Our fathers fought for the New Mandalorians when so many of the faction chose to remain neutral in a conflict when neutrality wasn't an option. My father's force was small, but the warriors that stood beside him were close friends until the day he died. Tegris Ordo is an ally." Qui-Gon nodded slowly, leaning back in his seat as he considered what had been said, his eyes drifting to his student, who still sat mouthing the Code to himself, his entire bearing so much more relaxed and at peace than before. His fears from the night before were unfounded, clearly, and when he reached through the Force to measure the teenager, the Master found Obi-Wan calm, cool, dispassionate, ever the vision of a Jedi.
Qui-Gon had been paying very close attention to the two teens since his conversation with them the night before, and found that two of them argued. Often. The main staple of their conversation seemed to conflict and trading barbs with each other, though the tension between them was simply non-existent. It seemed less confrontational and more bantering, engaging in verbal sparring that sharpened the already quick Satine and allowed the usually quiet Obi-Wan a chance to banter with an intellectual equal. It was a dynamic that the Master had hoped would develop between Obi-Wan and his friend Luminara, but the two Padawans agreed on nearly everything, and so Obi-Wan's ability to navigate a verbal confrontation stagnated completely. He and Luminara would often spend hours in peaceful, like-minded discussion, and Obi-Wan was simply too shy to go head to head with bold, brash Quinlan.

With Satine, though, he had his chance, and while the Duchess tended toward the more verbose, young Kenobi often found a way to score definitive strikes against Satine using as few words as possible. It wasn't exactly the sort of training he needed, but wit and quick thinking were necessary skills to being a good negotiator, and he was getting plenty of practice with the confrontational, stubborn Mandalorian. He may have been shy, but Qui-Gon saw in his student the perfect mix of sharp wit, intelligence, and quick, creative thinking that were key components in a good negotiator, and it was an avenue he had long hoped to develop. If he could hone that talent in his arguing with the Duchess, so much the better.

But then there were those...other times. He had only seen it once that day, but on reflection, Qui-Gon recalled seeing it many times in the month they had been together. Every conflict, every argument, every verbal confrontation swiftly ended with three, simple words. *Teach me Mando'a.* No matter the argument, no matter how involved, how intense, the teens would stop, their frustration replaced with patience, their stubbornness fading into understanding, Satine so easily assuming the mantle of teacher while Obi-Wan slipped easy into the role of attentive, thoughtful student. At first, it had been an almost frantic request, the Jedi's voice tight and high with near panic, almost as if it had been an uncomfortable last resort, the actions of a child backed into a corner. But now...

Now, the request for instruction was a gentle plea, soft-spoken and almost breathless in his ease, almost as if it was a welcome respite, a thing to look forward to, and something he genuinely enjoyed. Studious Obi-Wan had always enjoyed learning, of course. Sitting quietly while another spoke not only appealed to the shy boy, but his high intelligence often left him bored, and so constant instruction was necessary to keep him engaged. But this was different. The look on his face when he listened to Satine speak was almost...*enthralled.* He had seen it just that morning as the two teenagers sat quietly in the cockpit, the Duchess speaking in her native tongue, and Obi-Wan watching her, his chin resting on his hand, his usually cold, averted gaze focused on Satine's face, his blue eyes warm and expressive, almost adoring, a breathless air setting over him as he sat entranced by Mandalore's young ruler.

And then they were bickering again, and it was as if it had never happened.

Obi-Wan's eyes widened, his chest tightening when the control console began beeping, the shipboard com erupting with a burst of static and the weapon systems flashing in warning as four ships came into their scanner's range on an attack vector, all four ships locked on to the cruiser. Satine gabbed the backs of both seats and braced herself, the young Duchess holding her breath as she watched the ships quickly approach.

"Identify yourself, cruiser," a female voice over the com strongly commanded in accented Mando'a. "Disengage your weapon's systems and come no closer or you will be destroyed."

Before Obi-Wan could stop her, Satine leaned over and pressed the com button.

"This is Duchess Satine of Clan Kryze," she said swiftly. "I seek sanctuary with Clan Ordo, I'm
fleeing from Death Watch insurgents on Zanbar. Please, I need your help." Still on the attack vector, the starships continued to race toward the cruiser, the warning's blaring as the weapon's locks remained engaged. Obi-Wan's hand's tightened around the controls, ready to take evasive action when the starfighters flew right past them, the scanners registering that the ships had looped around behind them and were now following them close on their tail.

"You're flying in Death Watch colors, cruiser," the woman's voice said, still cold and commanding, but it had taken on a cautious quality that wasn't there before. "Who's on board?"

"Me and my two Jedi guardians," Satine said. "We had to steal a ship from the Death Watch to escape Zanbar, we had been stranded there. We have heard word of fighting above Mandalore in response to my activities, so surely you have heard about my escape. Please, consult with Count Tegris." There was silence for a long while, Obi-Wan tense as the fighters behind him moved to surround the ship, the scanners alerting him to the presence of five more starfighters rapidly approaching from behind. They were trapped. If they decided to open fire, there would be very little he could do. The alarms continued to alert him to the persistent weapon's lock.

"Cruiser," the com crackled again, this time with another female voice, less harsh, smoother, but far more commanding. "This is Commander Veela Ordo. We have no way to identify your ship. Your ident has been deactivated." Satine breathed a sigh of relief, a broad smile spreading across her face.

"Veela, this is Satine," the Duchess said, her voice light and filled with excitement. "We deactivated the ident and the locator beacon so we could get away from the people trying to kill me." She leaned in closer to the com. "Is your family safe?" There was a long silence, tense and heavy, so much so that even Satine started to become nervous until the alerts on the console switched off when the weapon locks disengaged.

"The family is well, my Duchess," Veela said, her ships quickly disbursing and falling into formation ahead of the cruiser, two of the fighters flying far behind as defensive sentries. "Edric was asking about you just the other day when we got word about the attacks on Zanbar. This ship's ident has been released, and everyone is looking for you."

"Then I'm glad we found you," Satine said, looking pointedly at Obi-Wan, a smug smirk on her lips. The Jedi was not amused. "Can you help us?"

"We're here to do just that. Follow us, Duchess, we'll get you safely to our fortress." The static of the active com cut, and Obi-Wan's hands entered the data into the instrumentation to lock them on to the lead ship's vector, all the while ignoring Satine's triumphant gaze. He stopped ignoring her when she grabbed his braid and twirled the long strand around her finger.

"I told you so..." Satine drawled, a coy smile on her lips as she watched a faint flush touch the Jedi's cheeks as he squirmed away from him, his head tilting to the side when the Duchess refused to let go of the braided strand. "Feeling better now?"

"Absolutely not," Obi-Wan said between grit teeth. "Let go of my hair!"

"What, this?" she said, tugging on the braid and smirking when he winced, and she slowly let it slide between her fingers to drape over the Padawan's shoulder. "Your braid doesn't count as your hair," she said, teasingly running her fingers over the short cut hair on his head, and he quickly moved his head out of her reach, an irritated look on his face. In the month since she had met him, the short cropped hair on Obi-Wan's head had grown out just over half an inch, making his previous military rigidness seem almost boyish. It was...endearing, the longer strands catching the light far easier and showing traces of a golden, slightly reddish blond.
"Of course my braid counts as hair," Obi-Wan said, rolling his eyes. "It is hair."

"It's a symbol of rank," she scoffed, eyeing him carefully. "Or a lack thereof..." Kenobi gasped in his outrage, sputtering slightly as he grasped for a quick retort, but found none. "Why do you keep it so short anyway?" she asked. "You'd be far more handsome if you grew-"

"Oh, it is not my desire to make myself aesthetically pleasing to you, Duchess," Obi-Wan drawled. "As soon as we land and we get settled, if Clan Ordo is as hospitable as you seem to believe they will be, the first thing I'm going to do is cut it back to regulation length."

"Have I mentioned today that you are literally the worst?"

Obi-Wan smirked and leaned in toward the Duchess. "Twice."

"And that is enough for today, children," Qui-Gon said quickly before Satine could respond with her own retort that would no doubt escalate the confrontation. "It seems a few days of close proximity to each other is finally beginning to grate on us." Obi-Wan also made to speak, and Qui-Gon held up a hand to silence him, already knowing what he was going to say based on the Padawan's growing anxiety he felt through their connection. "Be at ease, Obi-Wan," the Master said in a calm, soothing tone. "Nobody is alone in this galaxy, not even the Duchess. If she didn't have allies that wished to protect her, we wouldn't be here at all." He could feel Obi-Wan's frustration rise with his anxiety, but Kenobi made no show of it.

"...I understand, Master," the Padawan said, quietly resigned, and with the confrontation out of him, Satine drew proudly up to her full height, a clear indication that she considered herself the victor in the matter.

"Since we have a few minutes before we land, I'm going to go make myself presentable," Satine chirped, turning to leave the cockpit. "Come get me when we land." A tense grin spread across Obi-Wan's face.

"Oh, of course, as you wish, Duchess." He leaned back in his chair, his tight grip on the controls relaxing. "I wouldn't waste too much time on it, though. You're about as presentable as you're likely to get." Satine turned, her gaze furious as she looked at the Jedi, a cocky expression on his face.

"You are a spiteful, awful wretch!" she said, stomping her foot. "So long as you live, you will never be with a woman!"

"That's the plan, my lady!" Obi-Wan called after her as she stormed out of the cockpit. The wide, wicked grin on Obi-Wan's face faded when he saw his Master giving him a tired, exasperated look.

"It does you no good to vex the Duchess, my Padawan," the Master said softly, and Obi-Wan bowed his head, his hands tensing again on the controls.

"I apologize, Master, she just-"

"Just nothing, Obi-Wan, we are Jedi, we are protectors, we are here in service of her, and above all else, we are gentlemen." A dark red blush stained Obi-Wan's face, muttering something so softly the Master couldn't hear. "I expect you to apologize to her at the first possible moment. Her temperament will not improve if you are deliberately difficult." Obi-Wan frowned slightly, his eyes narrowing slightly in contemplation.

"Master..." he said slowly, as if he were still choosing the words to say. "I was under the impression that you wished me to remain..." He frowned. "Distant, Master." He averted his eyes
and stared at the console, his face flushing with heat and his teeth grinding together as he thought. "You believed our friendship-" He stopped, closed his eyes and shook his head. "You believe me to be attached." Qui-Gon covered his face with his hands.

"Oh, Obi-Wan, you poor, perfect Padawan..." he sighed. "Are you trying to push her away? I do encourage emotional distance, but if you remain mindful..." The Master huffed in frustration. "I apologize, Obi-Wan. You are diligent, dedicated, disciplined, so unlike I was at your age. I am may be letting my emotions cloud my judgement. After Tahl..." He closed his eyes, his hands tightening around the arms of the chair, and he relaxed when he felt the student reach out and lay his hand over his. Qui-Gon smiled gratefully at the boy when he felt not just understanding, but compassion rush through their connection.

"I'll apologize to Satine, Master," Obi-Wan said softly. "I'll do whatever you need me to do to put your mind at ease." Qui-Gon laid his hand on his student's shoulder.

"I need you to stop acting like something's wrong." Obi-Wan frowned.

"Master, something is-"

"You being worried is making Satine less cautious because she so badly wants to prove you wrong," Qui-Gon slowly explained. "Did you truly think I wouldn't listen to you when you said you feel something? You? The boy who accidentally hid his Force talents from the Jedi High Council because he was two steps ahead of the present?" Qui-Gon chuckled softly. "Perhaps your attachment to Satine is simply making you unduly worried, but if you sense something, I would be a fool to discount it." He pointed behind them, smiling when he watched Obi-Wan breathe a deep sigh of relief and relax considerably. "The trick is keeping these things from her, because it seems as if she enjoys disagreeing with you."

"She is...highly confrontational, Master."

"An understatement..." Qui-Gon muttered, a smile on his lips when his student chuckled in agreement. "I need you to remain logical, removed, and impassive when we are with Clan Ordo," the Master said, his voice lowering in the off chance that Satine could hear them speaking from her room. "If you go in there and show them emotion, they will pounce and strike, and in such a confrontation, you will lose. They are accustomed to the sea of passion, and you are lost in it. Keep yourself open to the Force, and be mindful of your emotions. I don't want your unease clouded by your feelings." Obi-Wan nodded, his face attentive in his focus. "You or I will attend to Satine at all times. I don't want her alone with anyone, not until we are certain we can trust them."

"Do you believe they are enemies?"

"I don't know, but I do believed you have sensed future trouble, be it from them or elsewhere. We won't know until we investigate." Obi-Wan nodded.

"So...we're with Satine at all times?" he cautiously, and Qui-Gon glared and pointed a warning finger at the Padawan.

"Don't get any ideas, Obi-Wan, I will be keeping watch over her at night." The Master rolled his eyes. "Two attractive teenagers alone in a room together is an invitation for trouble."

"Master, please!" Obi-Wan scoffed, trying to remain casual, indifferent, as if the subject bored him, but his voice had risen higher and a deep flush made its way up his neck and to his face. "I wouldn't even know what to do with a woman, let alone with a creature of such intense passion and fire as Satine."
"It's true that you are no Quinlan Vos..." Qui-Gon conceded, and Obi-Wan sat up tall, his head held proud.

"Besides, Master, I'm sixteen years old, I'm practically a man now. I'm no longer a boy undergoing the growth to manhood. I've mastered my base desires."

"That so?" Qui-Gon asked, an eyebrow arched as he looked at the Padawan, and Obi-Wan nodded enthusiastically.

"That is so, Master." He gently eased back on the acceleration as the ships began to dive, beginning their approach toward Clan Ordo's fortress. "It takes a substantial amount of resistance and will to be friends with Quinlan and not break the vows of the Jedi."

Qui-Gon had to give him that one. If the wild and reckless Kiffar had been unable to lead Obi-Wan into delicious sin, it was unlikely that anyone could.

The palace fortress of Clan Ordo was a sprawling compound, a thing of beauty transformed into a thing of war, the ornate carvings in the steel of their walls the backdrop to the soldiers that trained in the halls and in the courtyard. The grand entrance showed signs of being elegant, had the long tables not been converted into tactical stations for their troop movements and their battle plans, and each room they passed through, from the hangar bay to the throne room, showed the similar conversion from luxury to military. Upon arriving, their escort had been commanded to meet with the Count in the throne room, one of the soldiers of their escort informing them that Commander Veela had rushed ahead to tell her brother about their arrival, and together, the Jedi followed the Duchess through the regal halls of the Mandalorian palace.

Obi-Wan couldn't take his eyes off of her.

He had forgotten what she had looked like when she wasn't dirty and ragged from weeks and weeks of surviving in a filthy, disgusting swamp. They did have water, of course, unfiltered and running with silt from the riverbed, but cleanliness was a difficult thing to maintain, and not a priority when being exposed like that could mean detection. By the time they had escaped, they had gotten used to the filth and the grime, and exhaustion and healing had won out over bathing with anything more than minimal effort. But at the prospect of returning to civilization, of returning to court, of seeing her friends, Satine had gone all out, and had spent ten minutes on the ship after they had landed finishing her bathing ritual.

Idle indulgence, Obi-Wan had called it. A complete waste of time. But when she emerged from the ship, Satine was glowing, her pale blond hair pulled back in a short, intricate braid, the fine strands gleaming like white gold. Her pale skin had been scrubbed clean, smooth and soft and flawless, and though she dressed in the simple, practical soft brown pants and loose-fitting blue tunic she had worn on her time on Zanbar, the girl had somehow managed to get them cleaned and despite the simplicity of her dress, she looked regal. The tunic, cinched at the waist, hung loose off her thin shoulders and made her seem less thin, less a wispy teenage girl and more of a woman, the cloth ending mid-thigh making her look taller than she was. She was...beautiful. Radiant and confident, and for the first time, Obi-Wan looked on her and didn't see a scared, wounded girl struggling to make sense of her loss, but a Queen.

He and Qui-Gon walked side by side just behind Satine, and in her wake, the air smelled sweet, like fruit and flowers, like a garden after rain, like the morning sun peeking through the trees of the forest, and the young Padawan could keep his thoughts from wandering. How did she manage such a thing? Or better yet, where did she get the soaps, the lotions, the fragrances necessary to produce such a pleasing sensation? He hadn't seen any such thing in the fresher aboard the ship, but he admittedly wasn't looking that hard. The better question, of course, was why a military
The best question, of course, was why he hadn't noticed how beautiful she was before this moment.

Obi-Wan ground his teeth together, mentally chiding himself as he pulled his gaze away from the Duchess. He was better than this. All this was, he knew, was a biological pull, the result of his blood and brain absolutely flooded with the hormones that ran rampant through humans his age. It was an easy enough thing to contain and control in the safety of the Jedi Temple, but in the presence of Satine, all fire and passion, all wild, reckless, Mandalorian beauty, he could keenly feel the need pull within him. His eyes returned to the girl that walked before them, taking in every detail of the beautiful, elaborate braid in her hair, the shifting of her shoulders under her tunic, the movement of her hips with each step, her-

No! He tore his gaze away from her before he could look lower. He felt like Quinlan. He didn't even like Satine, haughty, arrogant Duchess that she was. Yes, there were times she had her moments. Times she was kind and understanding, times he felt he could listen to her rich, smooth voice for hours on end, but he didn't like her. Certainly not like that. Still, he didn't need to like her to imagine what she looked like when she-

There is no emotion, there is peace, he thought quickly when his mind again began to wander, a fierce flush on his face when he felt his pulse quicken in response, the physical reaction to the sudden rush of hormones he felt running thick in his blood. This was a biological response, a natural thing, an expectation for a boy his age, he knew, though fierce shame and embarrassment helped keep the desire down. He was better than this, he had risen above it. No want, no lust, no desire, none of it. This wasn't love, he knew, which was a great relief, but it was shameful, disgusting need to fulfill the biological purpose of propagating the species.

As if humans weren't numerous enough.

Quinlan said it was simple recreation, that it was something fun to do, something pleasurable, something that stayed off the boredom and restlessness he so often felt. Like so many other Padawans, Quinlan justified it as a vital need, that physical release was just as important to maintaining balance and health as Obi-Wan felt meditation was, but on that count, he knew the Kiffar was wrong. Meditation brought him peace, serenity, a sense of fulfillment. Unless he was extremely anxious about something, meditating left him feeling renewed and refreshed, just like the Masters taught it would. But on the nights he would wake up flushed and aroused, in the times when he was too distracted to meditate, when every time he closed his eyes and saw bare, heated skin flushed with lust, he would give in, allow his hands to wander, his entire body aching for relief from everything he had worked so hard to repress.

Satisfaction only lasted for a moment. After that, it was all shame and disgust with himself, and he could only imagine how much worse it would be if he dragged some poor girl down with him to be used when he was at his weakest. The Jedi did not give in to desires, they rose above them. Jedi Masters never stooped so low. He couldn't imagine the likes of Grandmaster Yoda or the young and powerful Mace Windu ever being so weak. He could be strong. He would be strong.

He caught scent of Satine once again and almost came undone.

"Satine!" The deep, masculine voice called to them the moment they passed through the door into the throne room, and Satine's face lit up like the sun. Standing in front of the throne was a man clad in black and green armor. He was young, a few years older than Satine, but gone was the awkward gauntness of youth, replaced instead by the thick, strong muscles and broad shoulders of a man hardened by intensive training. He was tall, not so tall as the towering Qui-Gon, but standing at least six feet, his skin bronzed, his jaw square, his chin patched with fine, trimmed hair.
With eyes a piercing green and dark, wavy hair falling to the base of his skull, he was undeniably handsome, and though still clearly a teenager, he was far more man than boy.

When Satine rushed forward and threw her arms around him, the man returning the gesture with powerful arms that enveloped the thin girl, a flush of desire and attraction pierced through the Force. Obi-Wan felt himself burn.

"Edric, I am so glad to see you," Satine said, her voice nearly spilling over with joy as she looked at her old friend. "I barely recognize you, you're so tall now!"

"Two years is far too long for us to have been apart," Edric agreed, his face solemn and sincere. "You were still a child last time I saw you."

"I was fourteen!"

"Fourteen years old with legs like twigs and flat as a ten year old boy," he said, boisterous laughter in his voice that was both lightly teasing and filled with familiar warmth. He stopped when the Duchess' eyes narrowed, and he reached out, stroking her suddenly flushed cheek with the back of his hand. "Look how beautiful you've become..." he said, soft and breathless, his green eyes looking her up and down. "You're a woman now..."

The Force pulled at Obi-Wan, warning and insistent and hot with passion, lust, desire and jealousy, so thick and so turbulent he had to shut his eyes and look away, uncertain where the mire was originating from, and frightened by the idea that it may have, at least in part, been coming from him.

"You couldn't wait more than five minutes to begin seducing the Duchess, little brother?" a woman asked as she entered from the side of the room, her hand running through wet, curling dark hair, her own armor shined and pristine, and she glowered at the man as she drew closer. "Honestly, Edric, you stand before the Duchess of Mandalore looking like that?" she sneered, pointing to the scuffed, carbon scored and badly worn armor he sported. "Have some kriffing respect."

"We're at war, Veela, I doubt the Duchess cares what my armor looks like," the man said, rolling his eyes, and the girl pointed an accusing finger at his chest, her eyes narrowed in anger, and the bold, confident warrior shrank back before the fury of the older girl.

"She might not care, Edric, but I do," she growled. "You're supposed to be a man at eighteen, brother. Act like one." When the boy inclined his head, Veela turned to the Duchess and bowed slightly. "Satine. It's good to see you. I never knew your father and mother well, but your brother was a fine soldier and a good man. Nu kyr'adyc, shi taab'echaaj'la. He will be missed." Satine's gaze drifted toward the ground.

"Thank you, Veela..."

"Hey," Edric said slowly, looking around the two women and pointing behind them, "are those the Jedi?" Qui-Gon bowed slightly, Obi-Wan quickly following his example.

"Indeed we are. I'm Qui-Gon Jinn, this is Obi-Wan Kenobi." Edric frowned.

"Huh. I've never seen a Jedi before. I expected something...different." He flashed them a lopsided smirk. "You certainly don't look like warriors of legend. I thought you'd be super human, but you're just people."

"I think you'll find that the most extraordinary things come in the humblest packages," the Master countered, returning the clever smirk. "I have often found that those who feel the need to wear
their strength like armor have the least to show for it." Green eyes narrowed as the Mandalorian tensed and stood taller, his chest puffed in challenge as he surveyed the calm, collected Jedi before him, tall, regal and serene, and the smaller, much younger teen at his side. Slowly, a sly smirk spread across his lips, eyes predatory as he sized up their historic enemy.

"Of course," Edric said casually. "I'm certain that you are up to the task, Jedi. I just didn't think the Republic would send a child to defend the last hope for Mandalore," he said, pointing at Obi-Wan, the young Jedi's chest tightening. He didn't like this man at all, the unease he had been feeling burning to the forefront of his mind. "Do the Jedi not take this mission seriously?"

"I can assure you, your Duchess is safe in our care," Qui-Gon said calmly, his eyes briefly flicking to the uncomfortable Satine, her entire being seeming to struggle under the weight of sudden grief and the gravity of her situation, a healthy mix of confusing emotions only serving to leave the girl uneasy and lost. "My student may be young, but he was sent with me because he is up to the task. He's the best there is for the job."

"Oh yeah?" Edric asked, his tone both skeptical and amused, his posture shifting to impose domination and control, a silent challenge for either of the other males to test him. "In that case, I suppose we have nothing to fear. I am pleased to see you keep good company, Satine," Edric drawled, turning his gaze back to the Duchess, a wry smirk on his lips, and beside him, Veela chuckled softly.

"Or handsome company, at the very least," the young woman said, her eyes raking over the Jedi, and Obi-Wan quickly turned his gaze away when her eyes met his, burning and intense and far too much for his already hormone-flooded brain to reasonably take. What was wrong with him?

"Is Count Tegris here?" Satine asked swiftly, her pale skin flushed, her delicate hands wringing together as she tried to change the subject away from her protectors. It worked, and the mischievous, teasing look of the two older teens abated, their expressions becoming serious once again.

"No, father is on our front line defenses," Veela said with a frown. "The Wrens are making a push into our territory. I was just returning from battles on our western front when we caught your ship on our scanners." She frowned, her brow creasing in her irritation. "Ursa is fighting. I'm going to kill that little bitch the second I see her. But father commanded I return here to play hostess to you until he can break away and return."

"You are far more important and more valuable to Mandalore than my sister's personal vendetta," Edric said, leaning in close to the Duchess. "She and I are here because you deserve the very best defense."

"And your Jedi guard is a great deal nicer to look at than the kriiffing Wrens," Veela slowly drawled, eying the Jedi once again. "I could use a break, in any case, and I've always welcomed new blood." She grinned wolfishly at Obi-Wan when he met her gaze once again. "You, boy. How old are you?" Kenobi flushed deeply, his eyes cast at the ground once again.

"...sixteen, my lady," he said softly, his voice even and emotionless, his face becoming impassive when the Mandalorian clicked her tongue appreciatively.

"Oh, I'm a lady now, am I?"

"You are the daughter of a Count, are you not?" Obi-Wan asked softly, expressionless eyes meeting the fiery heat of her gaze, and she drew back, the predatory smirk wavering in the face of a boy that simply didn't respond to her teasing. Here, in a room full of people, faced with the bold, intimidating Edric and the sly, beautiful Veela, Obi-Wan felt his natural shyness come front and
center, and he quickly withdrew within himself, his emotionless mask sliding with ease into place, his voice even and monotone as his mental walls flew up to defend him. The emotions faded, save for the edge of his social anxiety, which stayed carefully hidden away, the hormonal rush he had felt when he walked entranced behind Satine a distant memory. Once again, he felt in perfect control. He could do this.

"The daughter of the Count, yes," she answered, leering once again at the impassive boy. "But not a Countess. I can assure you, I'm no lady..." she said, her voice low, seductive, putting meaning behind her words that wasn't missed on anyone, and while Satine flushed and glared at the older girl, Obi-Wan simply was. He bowed his head, his eyes fixed on the floor.

"I apologize. I confess that I do not know how to properly address you."

"We can talk about it later, Jedi," she said, smirking. "Do the Jedi consider you a man yet? You would be on Mandalore..."

"And we unfortunately have little time for recreation," Qui-Gon said strongly, his face stern as he met the gazes of the siblings. "Our only goal is the protection of the Duchess."

"As is our goal as well," Edric said smoothly, sliding closer to Satine. Qui-Gon cocked an eyebrow when the Duchess smiled gratefully up at him.

"It pleases me to hear that," the Jedi said. "In that case, perhaps you will be willing to render the air we need so that we may be successful in our mission."

"Master Jedi," Edric drawled. "Satine will remain safe here. With me." With a slight, sly smirk, he brought the Duchess' hand to his lips, the pale girl turning fierce red, and beside him, Qui-Gon could feel Obi-Wan tense, though his student showed no emotion, his presence completely shielded.

"I disagree," Qui-Gon said firmly, his stance firm, his presence commanding when the two Mandalorian siblings flashed with insult and anger. "If you haven't noticed, there's a war on your doorstep. Satine is being targeted by a great many of your people, and even the might of your Clan cannot hold back the tide if all those that oppose her came to call."

"You doubt our ability to protect our Mand'alar?" Edric growled, and the Jedi frowned deeply.

"Not at all, but a moving target is harder to hit. We can keep her moving, we can keep her safe, and when this war is over and Satine sits uncontested in Sundari, I am certain she will remember the clans that provided aid to her safety." Qui-Gon turned his eyes on Satine and found her conflicted, but there was a soft smile on her lips that she flashed in his direction. "Isn't that right, Duchess?"

"...I-I don't want to bring danger to Clan Ordo..." Satine said softly, her eyes drifting away from the siblings and focusing on the Jedi. "But I'd like to stay here as long as possible. Nobody knows I'm here, right?"

"Not yet, but they will know," Qui-Gon insisted. "Word spread about our activities on Zanbar, and word will spread about your presence here."

"But for now, we are safe," Satine said, her voice strained and slightly frantic as she edged closer to the cocky Edric. "Qui-Gon, I spent a month in a swamp, running for my life every day, being hungry and tired all the time..." She laid her hand on Edric's arm. "I want to stay here as long as I can. I don't have many people left, and I have known Edric and Veela a long time."

Qui-Gon sighed, bowing slightly. "We will, of course, submit to your decision, Duchess. We are
your servants, after all." A sly smirk crossed Edric's face.

"Well, my Satine..." the warrior drawled. "You certainly are something else. Jedi Knights, servants of Mandalore."

"You'll give them what they need, won't you?" the young Duchess asked, laying her hand on the armored chest and smiling up at the handsome man. Leaning in close, Edric ran his hand over her pale, braided hair, a bold, pleased smile on his face. Qui-Gon quickly looked over to Obi-Wan to find him withdrawn, but otherwise unexpressive.

"Of course we will, my Duchess..."

"What is it you need, Jedi?" Veela asked, and Qui-Gon drew up tall.

"I need a secure com connection so I may contact the Jedi High Council to check in," the Master said, his eyes drifting to his student when Veela nodded in acknowledgment. "Obi-Wan? Your needs?" The reserved boy looked up and met Edric's gaze.

"I'd like a ship," Obi-Wan said in his dispassionate monotone. "Ours is a stolen Death Watch ship, and you said many are hunting for it."

"You want a ship?" Edric said, scoffing and laughing. "We're at war, boy. We need every ship we have to fight the rival clans!"

"You can keep our cruiser to replace it, naturally," Obi-Wan said coolly. "You are allies of Duchess Satine, are you not? Your ships should be her ships." Edric's eyes narrowed in anger, drawing up tall as if he made to confront the young Jedi, but it faded quickly when Satine turned her clear blue eyes on him, a bright smile on her face.

"The Death Watch ship is small for the three of us, Edric," she said softly. "It's really meant for two, and there's only one room."

"One room, hmm?" he said, his suspicious, searching eyes boring into Obi-Wan, and the Padawan coolly met his stare. "...very well," he said. "For you, Duchess. You can pick out a ship you like, and it will be yours if you leave."

"Satisfied?"

"Almost, Duchess," Qui-Gon said, bowing. "As your protectors, I insist that either Obi-Wan or I are with you at all times." He smiled when offense stained the faces of the Mandalorian siblings. "Just in case."

"You don't think we can protect her in the safety of our own fortress, Jedi?" Edric growled, but stopped when Satine stepped forward and nodded.

"That's fine," she said, looking back at the siblings and smiling. "The Jedi are very hard to sneak up on. I would feel safer with them at my side."

"Of course you would, Duchess," Veela said, driving her elbow into Edric's side and glaring at him. "We have a war to fight, Edric, it's safer to have extra eyes on her. Don't get jealous just because she has a young, handsome protector, it doesn't become you." The man scoffed, but said nothing. "Come with me," Veela said, walking toward the Jedi. "I'll take you to the hangar, you can pick out a ship before we get Satine settled in." She walked past them toward the door, her eyes languidly running over Kenobi, a mischievious smirk on her face as her brother and Satine closely followed, arms linked together, the Jedi taking up the rear guard. Qui-Gon observed his student carefully, reaching to him through the Force, but the boy was completely closed off, his
gaze lingering on Satine's delicate hand on the tall, strong man's arm.

"Thoughts, my Padawan?" Qui-Gon whispered, and Obi-Wan's brow knit together as he considered the question.

"The feeling remains, Master," he whispered after a moment of silence, his pace slowing to put more distance between them and the Mandalorians ahead, the three teens joking and laughing, the Duchess more free and easy than Obi-Wan had ever seen her. "What's more, I'm certain. Something's not right."

"And it isn't just jealousy?" Qui-Gon asked, pointing at Satine and Edric as they walked close together, the image of lovers, not friends, the air between them charged with attraction. Obi-Wan's lips drew into a thin line.

"...I feel disquiet, Master, not jealousy," Obi-Wan said softly. "My attraction to her is irrelevant to the fact that he wants something from her."

"I couldn't agree more," the Master said. "I'll see to getting Satine to agree to leaving with all due haste. Make certain the ship is to your specifications as quickly as possible. I trust you know what to do."

"I'll get to work immediately, Master." Qui-Gon laid his hand on the Padawan's shoulder and smiled softly at him.

"She will be safe with us, my Padawan. No harm will come to Satine." Obi-Wan allowed a small, secretive smile touch his lips when he looked at his confident Master. Everything would be fine.

"Hey!" Edric called from ahead of them, his posture bold and brash. "Is it customary for Jedi Masters to take their students as lovers?" He clicked his tongue at the Jedi when they didn't respond. "Keep up. If you two want to be alone, we can certainly take care of Satine while you find release with each other."

"That won't be necessary," Qui-Gon said calmly, and with a smirk, Edric drew Satine closer and continued on. The Jedi waited for a moment before they followed. "Don't engage him, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said softly, feeling the tension within his student. "Don't react, don't respond, don't make a mistake and rise to his challenges, because I want the first shot at him." Obi-Wan looked at his Master out of the corner of his eye, eyebrow raised.

"I doubt the Council will approve."

"When have you ever known me to care about what the Council thinks?" He smiled softly as he watched Obi-Wan snort as he repressed laughter, biting down on his lip to keep from laughing.

"I'd very much like to see you take that Mandalorian to task, Master."

"I sense that by the time we leave, I will."

Satine selected a huge, beautiful yacht from the hangar bay, a construction with smooth, sweeping wings, a recreation deck, four spacious rooms in the living quarters and an impressive engine for a ship its size. In the black and green of Clan Ordo, it was a splendid craft, one that was certain to carry the trio in greater comfort than they could reasonably expect in the war-torn Mandalore sector.

Obi-Wan immediately rejected the yacht in favor of a much smaller ship, more utility than luxury, though not nearly as elegant. A Kom'rk Class fighter, the ship had dagger shaped, rotating wings
on each side of a long, knife-like body and sported a pair of extremely impressive engines. Sitting with its wings in the vertical position, a cursory glance showed that not only did the wings move to a forward facing position when in flight, but they could actually rotate **around** the ship's body, which lent itself to increased maneuverability, which was exactly what Obi-Wan was looking for. It's hyperdrive was nothing special, but that mattered less than impressive sublight speed, which the craft had, and along with two deceptively powerful laser cannons under the nose of the ship, it would be formidable in a fight, if it was needed.

Best of all, however, was that the ship was equipped with two rooms, each containing two secured bunks, one over the other connected with a ladder, which would give him a place for privacy, which he hadn't had in over a month. True, the ship was technically made for a crew of four, but Obi-Wan was confident in his abilities to pick up the slack. Qui-Gon was competent enough to run the simpler systems, and it opened up an opportunity to privately instruct Satine on running the other station. And he desperately wanted that. The ship couldn't fly properly otherwise.

His ship selected, Qui-Gon tasked Obi-Wan with tending to the ship while he went with Veela to contact the Council, leaving the Padawan to protect Satine as she flirted shamelessly with strong, handsome Edric. It would have been distracting were Obi-Wan not actually busy, the Padawan laying on the floor of the cockpit, the panels on the console removed as he fiddled with wires and components while Satine and Edric sat in the seats behind the pilots' chairs, leaning close to each other and speaking in swift, hushed Mando'a, mostly reminiscing, though occasionally, they would talk of the war, the clan alliances, how strong her enemies and allies were, and who to trust. Which led them directly to the subject of the Jedi.

"How could you even allow the Jedi to be involved, Satine?" Edric said, his gaze shifting to the boy on the ground, up to his elbows in wires and grease and lubricant as he made his adjustments. "They are historic enemies of our people. Death Watch is saying that their presence is proof of your treason." Satine frowned.

"And yet, Death Watch has killed millions of Mandalorians in this conflict alone, to say nothing of the disgusting acts of violence they perpetrated during the Civil War." She wrinkled her nose, her head held high and haughty. "And for the record, I didn't ask for the Jedi. I argued against having them here, but my advisors insisted." She looked sidelong at Obi-Wan, her frown deepening when her young protector said nothing, showed nothing, did nothing. Ever the impassive Jedi, it was like she didn't even exist. She did not like that. She scooted to the edge of her seat, bringing herself closer to Edric, and she looked at the Jedi again. Still, nothing, just his long fingered hands deftly twisting wires together and attaching them to their places within the console.

She had never hated his indifference so much.

"So, is this what the Jedi do?" Edric asked, leaning forward and watching as the Padawan pulled a small, rectangular device out of the console and set it to the side. "You just run around the galaxy, interfering in people's affairs, and fixing ships?" Kenobi shrugged, but said nothing, which didn't please Edric at all. "Hey, I'm talking to you, Jedi." This time, Obi-Wan looked over his shoulder.

"Do you mind?" Obi-Wan asked. "I'm working."

"Are all Jedi like this?" the warrior asked Satine, and the girl pursed her lips and looked at Obi-Wan as the Jedi returned to his work.

"No, his Master is friendly enough, Obi-Wan just has a foul temperament," she said slowly, her voice biting, slightly teasing, the tone she used whenever she and the young Jedi engaged in their typical verbal sparring, but this time, Kenobi didn't rise to meet her challenge, as he had done in the past week. This time, he remained cold, so like the boy she had first met in Sundari, so unlike the boy she knew him to be, and it was unsettling. "Obi-Wan!" she snapped, harsher than
intended, and the boy looked over his shoulder at her, his blue eyes cool and attentive, but nothing else. "You are representing me, Jedi, and you're doing a poor job of it."

"I apologize, Duchess," he said evenly, bowing his head, and it only made her more angry. *Three words.*

"I don't want your apologies, I want you to correct your behavior. It is *unseemly.*"

Kenobi closed his eyes and stood, wiping his hands on a rag he had fixed to his belt beside his lightsaber. "As you wish," he said softly, his eyes cast at the ground, and Satine silently *fumed*. She hadn't expected him to be agreeable, especially not since she was being deliberately rude. *Three words*. Her eyes never left Obi-Wan's face as she took Edric's hand to help her stand, the warrior bringing her fingers to his lips, but his gaze was fixed on the Jedi's weapon. *Nothing*. Aloof, expressionless Jedi that he was, Obi-Wan showed nothing, and Satine found that it *hurt*.

"Going somewhere, Jedi?" Edric asked softly, and Obi-Wan folded his hands before him.

"I'm running an engine diagnostic."

"Ah." Obi-Wan bowed slightly.

"If you'd excuse me..." the Jedi said softly, gesturing past the couple, and Edric pulled Satine against him to clear the space to allow Kenobi to pass. Satine quickly followed her protector, dragging the Mandalorian behind her, the man following without complaint.

"Seem like my sister *really* likes you, Jedi," Edric drawled, a harsh, teasing edge to his voice that Satine picked up on immediately, a normal thing for brash, boisterous Edric, but his words... *bothered* her. Veela was nineteen years of beautiful, hardened Mandalorian warrior, all fiery passion and fury, all vicious soldier on the fields of battle and training, all wild, seductive temptress when she saw something she liked. Satine's brother had never been one of those men, ever kindred warrior to Veela, not the lover, but Satine had often seen the dark beauty in the company of several men that were taken with her.

The thought briefly crossed her mind, the beautiful, older girl quietly seducing her shy, inexperienced protector, and it made Satine burn with jealousy as images of Obi-Wan's pale, thin body being touched and pleased by Veela's experienced hand filled her thoughts. She closed her eyes and shook her head to clear it, but the thoughts remained. She was *not* jealous! She just... didn't want Obi-Wan to be distracted from his duties. Surely Veela understood that as well. She must have known what a distraction she was to the men around her, and she certainly didn't have the time or the desire to seduce a dispassionate Jedi when there were literally hundreds of powerful, Mandalorian men inside the fortress that would be more than willing to lay with the daughter of the Count. She didn't need Obi-Wan. She *couldn't*.

"I told her not to waste her time," Edric said with a shrug when Obi-Wan didn't respond. "I told her you weren't much more than a child, and a Jedi wouldn't know how to treat a Mandalorian right anyway." A wry smirk crossed his face. "But you couldn't treat *any* woman right, could you, Jedi? I doubt you're even a man."

"Edric, *stop,*" Satine snapped, and she was met with a casual smile from the older boy.

"Just a bit f fun, Satine, but I apologize."

"It's alright, Duchess," Obi-Wan said softly as he pushed a button on the wall, and the doors to the engine room and hyperdrive component slid open. "It's... how boys talk." A wide grin spread across Edric's face.
"See, Satine? No harm done. I may have misjudged you, Jedi." Obi-Wan shook his head.

"You did not. Jedi are forbidden from such things." He looked over his shoulder at the Mandalorians as he began his work on the engines, a slight, faint smile on his face that made Satine's heart jump. "Be at ease, Lord Ordo, your sister will not be touched by me."

"Such a shame that sentiment doesn't go both ways," Edric said, laughter in his voice. "Still, it's good to know that Satine won't be defiled by some Jedi," he said disdainfully. "If you don't take women to your bed, you must have other things you enjoy," the man said quickly before either of the younger teens could get a word in. "Do you like music? What music do you like?"

"U-uh..." This time, Obi-Wan's mask slipped, taken aback by a question he wasn't expecting, and though it was subtle, Satine had grown used to reading his expressions, and now, it was all confusion set over a mounting social anxiety. "I-I don't-"

"Do Jedi not listen to music?" Edric asked, scoffing. "Alright, fine. Do you dance? Everyone dances." Color rose to Obi-Wan's face as he looked away and shook his head, busying himself with his work on the engines, and Edric looked at him with disgust. "No, of course not. You Jedi aren't just a boring lot, you are soulless."

"That's enough!" Satine snapped, her fists balled at her side as she stepped between the soldier and the Jedi. "Obi-Wan is my guardian, Edric, and furthermore, he's a warrior, and I won't allow you to treat him this way!"

"I want to see this warrior in action," Edric said forcefully, pointing at Kenobi's lightsaber. "Come on, boy, you and me. Show me the skills of a Jedi, show me you are worthy of defending our Duchess. No music, no dancing, no women, so you must spend all your time in training, and I want to test myself against that."

"I won't fight you," Obi-Wan said coolly. "We only draw our weapon in defense of others, not for some juvenile show of strength." Kenobi evenly met the furious Mandalorian's gaze. "I have nothing to prove to you."

"Your Jedi is a coward," Edric snarled, his gaze shifting to Satine, who met him with equal amounts of anger.

"My Jedi is not some bloodthirsty fool!" For a moment, Edric's anger spiked, the Force rippling with the waves of his wrath, his resentment, his fury, and Obi-Wan laid his hand on his lightsaber. And then it stopped, the anger on his face falling before tense, uneasy laughter, and the man ran his hand through his wavy hair.

"Forgive me, Duchess..." Edric said, inclining his head toward the angry girl. "It's this war, it's...changed us." He drew up tall, and Obi-Wan let his hand fall away from his weapon. "I apologize, Jedi. I did not mean any offense."

"None taken, Lord Ordo," Obi-Wan said evenly. "Your Duchess struggles with me as well. I am...difficult for Mandalorians to deal with, I have come to understand." He inclined his head. "The fault, unfortunately, is mine, and for that, I apologize." And just like that, the air was cleared, the tension eased, and Satine could breathe again, though she felt an aching in her chest when she watched Obi-Wan turn away and resume his work, his handsome face without a single emotion upon it. A wave of guilt washed over her for not defending her protector sooner from passionate, teasing Edric. But then again...

"Edric, dear," she asked sweetly, laying her hand upon the man's armored chest, and a charming, handsome smile spread across his face as he drew her close to him. And still nothing from Obi-
"Anything for you, my Duchess," he said smoothly, pressing his lips to her palm and bringing her hand to his cheek. "What's to your liking? My father has the finest liquors in the sector in the vault, if that's your desire." He leaned toward her and looked at her through half lidded eyes filled with desire, and she suddenly found herself unable to breathe. She hadn't ever been in this situation. Her protective brother and her fearsome father had always kept the boys her age at a respectful distance. But her father and brother were dead, and Edric Ordo had grown into manhood extremely well. "I highly recommend it."

"A-alright..." she said breathlessly, and the man took her hand, gently pulling at her arm toward the door.

"Come on, I'll give you the full tour on the way to the vault..."

"I'm afraid that's not possible," Obi-Wan said, his voice in his even monotone, but there was a hard edge to it that had never been there before, and it snapped Satine out of the breathless haze she had found herself in. Blushing furiously, she took her hand from Edric and held it to her chest, willing her heart to stop beating so quickly and her wayward thoughts to come back under her control. Edric glared at Obi-Wan, but the Jedi was not effected. "As per our arrangement, the Duchess must have a Jedi guard with her at all times."

"Fine. You come with us."

"I can't," Obi-Wan said quickly. "My Master ordered me to check and service the ship. I will not be done for some time yet." Satine shot Edric an apologetic look.

"Sorry, Edric..." she said, her voice warm and genuine. "Perhaps later when Qui-Gon returns."

The warrior sighed and pressed his lips to her cheek, the Duchess flushing deeply and unable to meet his gaze.

"I understand. Another time. I am going to go get you that drink, though."

"I look forward to it," Satine said, smiling as she watched the warrior leave, and as soon as the door closed and Edric was out of sight, she turned and laid a furious gaze on the Jedi. He met her evenly, the ice in his stare effectively stopping the fire of hers. "Why are you doing this?"

"I am safe," she said defensively. "But you-"

"Am I supposed to be displeased by the arrangement?" Satine said nothing, but shot him a glare to indicate her displeasure, her lips drawn into a thin line, her anger and frustration palpable, and though he showed nothing, Obi-Wan felt his chest begin to ache, the pull within him to soothe her almost overwhelming, but he held back, his toes curling in his boots in tension he felt unsafe to show in any other way. "Satine..." he said softly, taking a small step forward. "Your safety is the only thing that matters to me."

"I am safe," she said defensively. "But you-"

"If I appear cold, I apologize," he said, bowing his head slightly. "I'm... uncertain how you wish
"I don't know, any way but how you are!" she cried, throwing her hands up in frustration. Why was she bothered? "You said you'd trust me with your feelings, you said... oooh, you are the worst, Obi-Wan! You're retreating back within yourself because you are jealous!" she said, her head held high, her frustration with the Jedi spiking when he arched an eyebrow in confusion.

"I said I trust you with my feelings, yes," Obi-Wan said softly. "I didn't say I trust him."

"See?" Satine said, a triumphant smile on her face. "Jealous."

"Shy," Obi-Wan countered.

"Well, he's not here now, Obi-Wan, so start talking." She leaned in closer. "You. Are. Jealous."

"I'm no such thing, Duchess," Obi-Wan said dismissively. "You have made it clear what it is you desire. You are driven to passion and confidence, and he is certainly filled to the brim with it." He tugged at his braid. "You are attracted to him as well, I can sense that much." Satine gasped, outraged.

"I'll have you know, I grew up with Edric! I've known him for a very long time, this isn't just some physical thing!" She smiled slyly. "Though he is extremely pleasing to look at."

"Which makes this even more natural," Obi-Wan said softly. "This was to be expected." For just a moment, Satine thought she saw the shadow of something darken Obi-Wan's features. Not jealousy, like she had been hoping to incite within him, but...sadness. Her heart hurt, and she quickly shook her head. Why. What would she even want to make Obi-Wan jealous? Prodding the young Jedi simply to watch him react had been great fun, but this... wasn't going as she expected it to. Instead of a reaction, instead of his endearing, tongue-tied frustrations, the alluring flush on his cheeks, the almost captivating anxiousness he showed when he tried to control emotions that escaped him, she got nothing. Just blank, withdrawn, emotionless Obi-Wan. And she hated it more than she had ever hated anything before.

"I-it is, isn't it!" she countered, her desperation rising when a small smirk touched Kenobi's lips.

"A little brutish for you, I thought. For a woman dedicated to peace, I expected you to find someone a bit more..."

"A bit more like you?" Satine asked, and the slight amusement the Jedi was displaying faded instantly into hard lines and a stern expression.

"I will be a Jedi Knight one day, Satine," Obi-Wan said, his features hard, but his voice soft and understanding, much more like the friend she had come to see in him over the past few days. "My life is not my own, and has never been my own. I thought you understood that," he said, his tone hardening slightly. "You are in the same position. Duty before yourself, always before yourself."

"... it's not fair, is it?" she asked in a soft, trembling voice, turning her back to the Jedi and sitting up on one of the workstations. Obi-Wan looked at her for a moment, trying to remain distant, aloof, like his Master had said... and failed. With a sigh and a heavy weight in his heart, he wiped his hands on the rag on his belt as he moved beside the Duchess and leaned against the workstation.

"No, it isn't..." he affirmed softly, laying his hand close enough to hers for their fingertips to lightly touch, and despite the minimal contact, Obi-Wan felt as though electricity shot between them, his heart beating so fast he could hear it in his ears. His eyes lingered on Satine's delicate hand, her fingers wiggling discretely to increase the contact between him, and he could see her thin, pale
wrist throbbing with her rapid pulse, and knew she felt the same.

"I don't even like you," she muttered half-heartedly, a small smile on her lips that she couldn't contain, despite her best efforts, an expression that Obi-Wan quickly mirrored.

"Nor I you, Duchess. I'm not jealous of your...paramour because there's nothing to be jealous of." She swiftly hit him on his chest, a pout on her face.

"You brute," she hissed, frowning further when the Jedi laughed softly. "I'll have you know, Edric is a real man. Unlike you, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"...surely you must see what it is he wants from you," Kenobi said softly, his tone much more serious than before, and the expression on Satine's face told him she knew very well.

"Of course I do. I'm not blind. Do you really think I'd encourage his advances if I wasn't interested?" She scoffed slightly. "Or did you think I was simply leading him along in an attempt to make you jealous?"

"I don't believe you to be so childish as that, no," he said softly, and Satine looked away, newfound guilt suddenly welling up inside her. It hadn't been all to illicit a response from the Jedi...had it? Edric was the Mandalorian ideal, the sort of man Satine had dreamed about many, many times, strong and bold enough to sweep her off her feet, and kind enough to care. Not like scrawny, lanky, passionless Obi-Wan. Shy, quiet, brave, beautiful Obi-Wan...

"I would be cautious around him, if I were you," the Jedi softly continued. "Not just for the obvious, but you are a powerful woman, and people will seek to use you for their own ends."

Satine looked at him, completely unamused.

"They are allies, Obi-Wan. Not everyone wants this fight, and not everybody is against me."

"I hope I am wrong," he said softly, a slight, sad smile on his face. "Truly, I do. As..." He paused, frowning slightly as he considered his words. "I desire your safety and happiness...as your friend. An...argumentative, antagonistic, frustrating friend." A slight smile tugged at the corner of his lips, nodding slightly when he decided he liked the sound of it. "I'm not jealous, Satine, because your happiness is more important than anything I feel."

She stared at him, her jaw slack in a rare moment of speechlessness as she looked at the Jedi, his eyes averted, a shy smile on his lips, and faint color staining his cheeks. Edric, bold and brash and handsome, a childhood friend, passionate and strong and clearly interested in her, and when she looked at him, she felt a pooling of desire in her gut, could feel the stirrings of arousal within her, and she wanted him, Mandalorian passion overtaking everything else. She was attracted to Obi-Wan, yes, but he didn't inspire in her the powerful lust she felt for Edric, the older, larger male so open and so receptive to her, which she so easily reciprocated. He was like an amplifier, while Obi-Wan merely seemed to dampen her, a one way exchange that resulted in ultimately nothing.

Obi-Wan was nice to look at, a much appreciated sight over the month they had been faced with certain death, but when she looked at him, she never felt the burning deep in her core that made her feel reckless and stupid and so unlike herself. Instead, she felt...lightheaded, slightly dizzy in a struggle to catch her breath, the soft, gentle warmth that started deep in her core and brought color to her face. Her heart didn't pound so much as it fluttered, which was a sensation that was both frustrating and delightful, a subtle change within her that compelled her to draw closer to him to feel it again.

"How do you feel?" she asked breathlessly, her hand beginning to tremble when his eyes met hers.
"I feel that you deserve better than a quick tryst with the first man that takes an interest in you," he said firmly, his voice just as breathless as hers had been.

"And if he's what I want?" she asked, and her heart ached when the Jedi looked away.

"Then I wish you the best," Kenobi whispered. "You deserve to be with someone, Satine. You are a creature of passion. You should be with one of your own."

"...and what about you?" Beside her, she could feel Obi-Wan tense, a deep shudder running through him, his breath hitching in his throat.

"There is no emotion, there is peace..." he muttered. "A Jedi shall not know anger nor hatred nor love." Obi-Wan looked at Satine, a small, genuine smile on his face that made Satine's heart jump. "Don't worry about me, Satine. I'll be fine."

---

Qui-Gon frowned deeply, his eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the helplessly laughing hologram of Jedi Master Dooku. "It is not funny," he insisted, which only made the Master laugh harder. After telling him about their mission and their current situation, Qui-Gon quickly turned the conversation toward his fears about his student's growing affection for the Duchess they protected. Dooku wasn't handling it the way Qui-Gon wanted him to.

"It is funny, my friend," Dooku insisted, slowly regaining control as he took long, deep breaths. "Obi-Wan is doing this? Your Obi-Wan? It's unlike him, are you certain you are not projecting?"

"I'm telling you, Dooku, he's making eyes at her," Qui-Gon stressed, frowning when the Master began laughing again.

"Puberty, my friend, will do that. And more, as you well know."

"How did you get me to stop?!!" Qui-Gon cried in desperation, and Dooku simply rolled his eyes.

"I didn't. You spent your entire teenage years to the hilt within women, it's a wonder I managed to train you at all." Dooku gruffed as he crossed his arms. "I suppose the Council believes I didn't train you."

"Surely I wasn't that bad..." Qui-Gon drawled, and Dooku shot him a pointed look.

"Compared to Obi-Wan, you were Quinlan Vos." Qui-Gon winced.

"Alright, fine, but I wasn't attached! Obi-Wan-"

"Oh, for the sake of the Force!" Dooku growled. "Obi-Wan Kenobi is not, and will never be you." His features softened considerably. "You miss Tahl, my friend." A statement, not a question, and Qui-Gon felt a lump in his throat.

"...yes."

"And you are imposing your feelings and your pain on your student because you see your struggle in him, but he isn't you, and the little Duchess isn't her." The hologram drew closer to the chastened Qui-Gon. "Obi-Wan has never had a drunken night, has never rebelled against anything, has never known the touch of a woman." He scoffed. "Does he even know what he has between his legs?" Qui-Gon shook his head, chuckling softly.

"I'm certain he does, yes, though I doubt he knows it well. He spends a great deal in his meditations seeking to rid himself of his desires."
"And you think to compare him to you?" Dooku asked, and Qui-Gon's eyes narrowed.

"It's the quiet ones one must be wary of," Qui-Gon grumbled, and the patrician Dooku sighed deeply.

"Perhaps. But Obi-Wan knows his duty. I think drawing a teenage mind to the idea of something more between the only female he has ready access to is a poor idea, my friend." Qui-Gon was still for a moment before he gasped, his eyes wide as he looked at his former Master.

"You don't think I gave him the idea of a physical relationship between him and Satine, do you?" Dooku gave a short, amused laugh.

"Not at all. He's a teenage boy, he thought of that all on his own. But as you have said, your student takes great pains to repress those urges. He seems dedicated to Jedi chastity. Discussing it is only drawing his mind to the idea, and I promise you this, every time you sit him down and have the talk," he said, making quotations in the air with his fingers, "your student goes to sleep that night struggling with himself because he can't stop picturing the Duchess in a state of complete undress." He paused, a slow smirk spreading across his lips at Qui-Gon's horrified expression. "At least."

"Alright, stop, stop!" Qui-Gon glared at his smirking former Master. "I don't know why I talk to you, you always make everything worse."

"I've no better way to get back at you, Qui-Gon," Dooku drawled. "In this, Obi-Wan has failed spectacularly to cause you sufficient stress. Someone must pick up the slack." He sighed when Qui-Gon shot him a vexed expression. "Obi-Wan is dedicated and diligent. If he senses there is a problem, he will consult you. Trust him in this. If he doesn't believe he can speak to you, your concern for him might drive him into the arms of this woman."

"...sage advice," Qui-Gon muttered, a relieved smile on his lips as he sighed. "Thank you, Master. I am glad we discussed this."

"As always, I am happy to be of assistance," Dooku said, his deep voice low and soothing. "Have you contacted the Council?"

"Tch, no," Qui-Gon scoffed. "I was going to, but I called you instead."

"What. Me above the Council?" Dooku said in an amused voice.

"Always, Master."

"You flatter me," Dooku said, bowing mockingly at the other Master. "You should, though. They believe you are dead."

"Wait, what?!" Qui-Gon cried in disbelief, his jaw slack as he stared at the amused Jedi.

"Over a month away in a war zone, and not a word from you, the Padawan, or the Duchess. What are they supposed to think?"

"Have they so little faith in me?" Qui-Gon asked, and Dooku tiredly shrugged.

"It is the High Council. You know how they are."

"And this is why I contacted you, not them," Qui-Gon grumbled. "And what about you? Did you think I was dead as well?" Dooku scoffed.
"Hardly." Qui-Gon smiled. "I had proof you were alive, so I never had the chance to think so." The smile dropped off Qui-Gon's face.

"I don't know why I talk to you..." Qui-Gon said, rubbing his temple. "Did you at least tell the Council?" Dooku looked at him with a superior, patronizing stare.

"Have you ever known me to consult the Council when I could reasonably avoid them?" Dooku said, his deep voice twinged with bitterness.

"How did you know I was alive?" Qui-Gon asked, shifting the subject slightly to something the older Master could address with less bitterness. "We were stranded on Zanbar. Did talk of our activities there reach Republic space?"

"Hardly," Dooku said, reaching out of frame and grabbing a datapad, his finger running over the screen. "But word of your survival did, though not through any official means." He turned the datapad around, and Qui-Gon squinted, leaning in to observe the screen through the hologram. He gasped softly when he understood what it was.

"A bounty," he whispered, and Dooku nodded gravely.

"And a very high one at that. Your actions in defending the Duchess has made someone very angry."

"Or desperate..." Qui-Gon muttered, his thoughts racing. "The bounty is bad enough, but..." He shook his head. "If you managed to get word of this bounty all the way out on Coruscant, then it's certainly readily available in the home of the galaxy's most adept bounty hunters. So why didn't Veela and Edric tell us about it?"

"Mmm..." Dooku stroked his beard in thought. "A good question, and a valid concern."

"And Obi-Wan has been sensing something off since before we landed," Qui-Gon bemoaned. "I was hoping it was something more personal, jealousy that Satine was very receptive to the advances of the Clan Leader's son..." He sighed. "I suppose it was too much to hope for."

"You may be in grave danger, Qui-Gon," Dooku said, his voice even and serious.

"I agree," Qui-Gon said. "We were told that people were looking for us, but it is a very different thing to have a bounty on our heads." Qui-Gon huffed in disappointment. "Damn it..."

"Nobody said this would be easy..." Dooku said. "If things are going to be bad, at least the Council had the good sense to send you. You need to discover what is happening there."

"Delicately, because Satine seems content to stay," Qui-Gon growled, and he gasped in realization as his mind swiftly ran through everything he knew. "Oh, those Mandalorian snakes, they're trying to drive a wedge between us and Satine." He smacked his head with his palm. "Seduce the teenagers to cause a rift between them. If they sew distrust between her and her guards, they get her." He frowned. "Perhaps Satine's death isn't the goal of Clan Ordo, but these are not our allies."

"I concur," Dooku said quietly. "It seems like extracting her may be difficult."

"Very, she grew up with these people. She doesn't see betrayal here, and running has made her weary."

"Sounds like you have your work cut out for you, my friend," Dooku said, waving Qui-Gon away with his hand. "Go. Take care of your charge, Qui-Gon. I'll give your report to the Council."
"What, you?" Qui-Gon asked, deeply amused despite the gravity of the situation. "Mighty Master Dooku, willingly stepping before the Jedi High Council?"

"Go before I change my mind, fool," Dooku growled, and with a bow, Qui-Gon cut the com and made haste to take Satine from Obi-Wan's care. They had some investigating to do.

Meditation

Qui-Gon came by to pick up Satine a little while ago, thankfully before Edric returned with that promised drink, which I didn't approve of at all. She's easy enough for him to manipulate without the use of alcohol. I can only imagine how quickly she would surrender to her desires if he pried her with liquor, as was his intent. I'm sure. He may be everything she wants, but she is still inexperienced, and more nervous and uncertain about the prospect of intimacy than she lets on. Which is...good, I suppose. I don't like the idea of her debasing herself with a brute like that, and her natural modesty should be respected. Edric clearly has no respect for her, or for anything other than his own selfish wants.

I wish she could see it. I wish she could understand what exactly he would do to her. I can feel the desire between them, I can sense her lust and her attraction, as much as I try to ignore it. I find it...difficult to look away from her when she is burning like that. Before, it was so hard to look at her because of her passions, but something about the things roiling in her now draw me to her. It's...intoxicating and infectious. I know it's wrong, but I can't help looking. She is beautiful. A thing of life and passion, and though her gaze isn't for me, I-

No! You can't think like this, Obi-Wan, come on. She's not for you, she was never for you...

Edric would be a good match for her, if he weren't up to something sinister. She has expressed a desire for one of her own, a noble warrior, and Edric at least looks the part. No wonder the attraction between them is so strong, though I find it something of a contradiction. He is a Mandalorian warrior, the very thing about her people that Satine seeks to change, so what is she doing, lustng after a boy like that? I suppose it is wrong of me to judge her for a biological urge. She can't help it. It's natural for teenagers to be driven to engage in intercourse, even more so for a passionate Mandalorian. It must drive her mad to be in the presence of someone she is so clearly attracted to. It's no wonder he barely had to try to get her so willing to take her clothes off and give herself to him, and-

...oh. Oh, no, we can't start thinking about that, not now...

It's a good thing Qui-Gon is with her. Even if Edric hatches his sinister plot to intoxicate her, if that is in fact his plan, Master will be with her to make certain nothing happens to her. He certainly wouldn't allow Edric to force himself on her. Even if she wanted it, even if she commanded him to leave, Qui-Gon wouldn't. Of course, he may not stop them from getting close. Maybe by morning, Satine will be committed to stay. Maybe she'll want him even more. Maybe he'll do other things, touch her in other ways that would open her up to him easier later. I'm not a fool. I know what a man can do to a girl like Satine. Quinlan's told me all of it, and Edric is in a good position to take full advantage of her. Intimacy can still occur without penetration, and Satine was so willing...

Obi-Wan, stop it, seriously!

It's not that I'm jealous of Edric. I'm not. Satine's life is her own, and I have no bearing upon it, no claim to her, and one cannot lose what one never possessed. She was never mine, because she isn't some belonging, she is a person, and claim to her can belong to nobody but herself. Which
isn't to say I want it! I don't. Satine and I are friends, I believe. Nothing more, and nor shall we ever be. We have our duties to think of, and even if we wanted something more...well, it just isn't possible. I'm to be a Jedi Knight. Such a thing is forbidden to me.

No, what I feel is apprehension. Edric is up to something. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it in the Force. Something here isn't right. This is more than a simple seduction, but I cannot place exactly what. If the desire weren't so thick, if the emotions not so turbulent and confused, if it weren't so difficult for me to look at them without feeling the pull of arousal myself...if Satine...Satine...

She has been on my mind often as of late. I can't allow this. I need to meditate to purge myself of these desires. I can't tell Master Qui-Gon, he is worried enough as it is, and I can't imagine he will take it well if he learns that his fears are very well founded.

Keep her safe, Master. I can't bear the thought of that brute's hand upon her.

Goodnight, Satine...
Iron Will

Chapter Notes

I did it...

Holy crap, these just get longer and longer...in the event that you guys are bothered by this sort of thing, there are a few very dubious things in this chapter that push the rating a bit. It's not explicit by any means, but we're diving right into some things that may boarder on uncomfortable for a few people. Consider that your warning. Otherwise, my lovelies, enjoy! It's a big one!

"You are so lucky!" Quinlan bemoaned, hissing in frustration when Obi-Wan just rolled his eyes. "And you don't even know it! That's the worst part about this, Obi, you don't even know!"

"There's nothing glamorous about this war, Quinlan, it's a bloody affair," Obi-Wan said softly, absently twirling his braid between his fingers in thought as he leaned back in the pilot's seat. His work and modifications on the ship complete, all that was left was to test the systems to be certain that everything was running as he wished, which meant a test of the shipboard com system he had encrypted for their use. And that meant checking in with his friends. Luminara hadn't responded, which left Obi-Wan with his Kiffar tormentor.

"It's better than being stuck in the Temple," Quinlan scoffed with a roll of his eyes. "I don't know why Master Tholme keeps doing this to me!"

"Maybe, Quin, it's because your behavior is unbefitting of a Jedi Knight," Obi-Wan said with a disapproving tone in his voice. "You're on the fast track to knighthood, and you possess a rare gift. You shouldn't squander it. You're fortunate to be talented, not all of us are."

"You know, you sound just like my Master..." Quinlan grumbled before he sighed in exasperation. "It isn't fair! I should have been Qui-Gon's apprentice, he lets you do whatever you want!"

"He most certainly does not!" Obi-Wan said indignantly. "I just follow the rules, I give him no cause to reprimand me!"

"I'm not being reprimanded, I'm being imprisoned!" Quinlan said dramatically, his arm covering his face in a show of melodrama. "Enslaved! Obi-Wan, it's awful! I'm not allowed to do anything!" The Kiffar pouted, running a hand through his thick, dreadlocked hair, which he had stubbornly refused to cut short as the Order recommended. Obi-Wan ran a hand through his own lengthening hair and frowned. He wasn't one to talk at the moment, though he had a better excuse than his friend.

"Well, what did you do to deserve it?"

"Nothing!" Quinlan cried, a betrayed look on his face, his hand laid over his chest. "I am a perfect angel, you know that, Obi!"

"Right..."
"...though I may have missed my morning lessons three days in a row." Obi-Wan sighed heavily and shook his head. "...oh, what!" the Kiffar cried. "I was sleeping, it's unfair to have training so early in the morning, you know how I like to sleep in!" Obi-Wan stared at his friend blankly, clearly unconvinced. "...I may have also been drunk." Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow. "...very drunk, look, Obi, it doesn't matter! I'm grounded! Like a younling! It's embarrassing!"

"Well, if you didn't act like a younling, Quin..." A wry, cocky smirk slowly grew on the Kiffar's face, the gold band tattoo across his face crinkling with his delight.

"Oh, Obi-Wan, my poor, innocent dear, a younling can't do what I do..." Kenobi stared flatly at his fellow Padawan.

"...not just drunk, then?"

"Serifa..." the Kiffar moaned, dragging his hand slowly down his chest, and Kenobi just groaned and buried his face in his hands. "Don't be like that, Kenobi, you haven't seen her! She's smart and beautiful, and the things she can do with the Force!" Quinlan groaned loudly, his eyes closed as he lost himself in the memory. Obi-Wan's jaw dropped.

"Wait, she's a Jedi?!" he gasped, his eyes wide as he watched a wolfish grin spread across his friend's face.

"Well, a Padawan, technically..." He frowned. "Her Master wasn't happy..."

"I know! Great, isn't it?!" The Kiffar laughed loudly when Obi-Wan put his hands over his face. "Still, I don't like being confined, and Master Tholme has been watching me very closely, so..."

"Serves you right," Obi-Wan muttered. "If you're going to break the rules, at least be discrete about it..."

"Hey, I'm not breaking any rules, Obi!" Quinlan said defensively. "We're allowed to drink, and the only Padawan in the entire Order that is completely sexless is you."

"I am not!" Obi-Wan countered, a deep, red flush staining his face when the Kiffar grinned, finally realizing his implication. "I-I mean, I'm not the only one!" he backtracked, his tongue feeling thick in his mouth as he stuttered with embarrassment.

"Uh huh, sure..." Quinlan drawled.

"I'm not!" the boy protested again. "Luminara-

"Luminara," Quinlan interrupted, "doesn't look interested because she only has eyes for older men." He smiled deviously. "I saw her making eyes at Master Soffran in class the other day." He grinned broadly. "A harsh, stern instructor, so difficult to satisfy...no wonder his star student is swooning over him, it's so easy to want to please your teacher..."

"Q-quinlan, stop it!" Obi-Wan gasped, his voice high and tight with tension, a thing that was not lost on the Kiffar, his dark eyes widening with mischievous glee.

"Or better yet..." he said, his voice low and deep and seductive. "How about you. An extended mission protecting a Duchess. Nobility, Obi-Wan! And there she is, helpless, dependent on her strong, handsome Jedi guardian to keep her safe..." The Kiffar moaned loudly, his voice rising in pitch in the closest imitation of a woman he could manage. "Oh, Obi-Wan, how ever shall I thank you for your tirelessly dedication to my safety..."
"Kriff, Quinlan, why do I even talk to you?!"

"Because you have a burning need to share all your dirty secrets with me!" Quinlan cried gleefully. "You've been away for a while in defense of this girl. So, how is she? You've had lots of time to make a move on her, and I'm sure she has lots to thank you for, so..."

"Quinlan, we've been running for our lives!" Obi-Wan said, his voice raised and irritated, his face dark red as he tried desperately to push down the idea of Satine as Quinlan described her, but it was no good. He swallowed hard when flashes of pale, naked skin and soft, breathless moans ran through his mind, and despite his best efforts, he could feel arousal churning low in his gut with no sign of letting up. "Every single day, we're living hand to mouth and we have no idea if we'll survive to see another day!"

"Mm, sounds romantic..." Quinlan frowned when Kenobi averted his eyes and bit down on his lip. "Hold on...there something wrong with this Duchess? She old?" He gasped, "Oh no, is she ugly, is that the problem?!" Obi-Wan shook his head.

"No, she's young, my age..." he whimpered, and Quinlan leaned in, his head tilted to the side as he struggled for understanding. "Smart, passionate, and so, so beautiful..."

"Damn..." Quinlan whistled. "You are getting some of that, aren't you? It's about time, Obi-Wan, I keep telling you." Kenobi said nothing, simply held his breath, his already flushed face turning a deeper shade of red. "Like I said before you left, you're going to get sucked off every night..."

"N-no..." Obi-Wan said, avoiding eye contact and shaking his head. "I can't..."

"You can't?" Quinlan said in disbelief. "Of course you can! I've seen you get aroused, Obi, you can get it up! And the Code doesn't forbid us from having sex, we just can't..." Hard blue eyes glared pointedly at the Kiffar, his words catching in his throat as he understood. "Oh...oh..."

"Y-yeah..."

"Damn, Obi..." Quinlan whispered, leaning in toward his friend, his usual carefree expression gone and replaced with genuine concern. "How did this happen...and to you of all people, you're so careful, so guarded!"

"You haven't met this girl, Quinlan..."

"Shit..." Quinlan ran his hand through his hair and absently tied it up behind him as he thought. "Have you told Master Qui-Gon?"

"Are you kidding me?" Obi-Wan said, laughing nervously and tugging on his braid. "I can't tell Master Qui-Gon, about this, not after what happened with Master Tahl..." Obi-Wan stared at his feet, slowly running his braid through his hands. "He's already worried about me because of what happened to him. I am supposed to be better than this...h-how am I supposed to tell him that his fears are well founded..." He shook his head. "He's already talked to me several times about it, if he knew..."

"Can't handle disappointing your Master like that?" Quinlan asked without a touch of his customary teasing, and Obi-Wan shook his head.

"It isn't that. I fear that I will become his focus, and it will impact the mission. We can't afford distractions if we want to keep her safe, and I won't allow myself to become a distraction to Master Qui-Gon."
"Never let it be said you aren't a good Jedi, Obi-Wan..." Quinlan said, a slight smile on his lips. "Selfless, dedicated student, committed absolutely to the mission..." He gave his friend a hard glare. "But what about you, Obi-Wan? They aren't the only ones that matter, you-

"My affections for Satine would cause a great deal of problems if acted upon," Kenobi said swiftly. "Not to say anything of it breaking the Code, Quinlan."

"Satine, huh?" Quinlan mused, a slow, sly grin on his face. "I like the way if feels to say it. The perfect name to be whispered when you're breathless."

"Quinlan..." Obi-Wan warned, color rising to his face again. "Satine..." Quinlan said in a heady, breathless whisper, and Obi-Wan tore his gaze away from his friend and clamped a hand over his mouth as he moaned, the sudden pulse of desire within him almost crippling him with arousal. "You're a mess, Obi-Wan," the Kiffar said. "Something's gotta give."

"And Force willing, it won't be me, despite your best efforts," Kenobi said between grit teeth, the color rising quickly to his face as he tried to calm himself. "In any case, she has someone she's attracted to. A Mandalorian, someone who can..." His jaw clenched tightly as he ground his teeth together. "Someone who can attend to her desires." Quinlan sighed in irritation and gave his friend a stern look. "You can't just meditate this away, Obi, you need release! Look at you! I say her name and you're nearly undone!"

"I most certainly am not! I-"

"Satine..." Obi-Wan gasped sharply and shut his eyes, biting down hard on his finger to keep himself silent, Quinlan's low, seductive tones sending a shiver up his spine. When he managed to glance up with half lidded dilated eyes, his heart pounding and his face flushed with desire and burning arousal, the Kiffar had a knowing smirk on his lips. "Undone," Quinlan slowly drawled. "You're distracted. Unfocused. You better take care of yourself, Kenobi. Do you know how?" He grinned. "Want me to teach you? It's easy."

"I don't know why I even talk to you..." Obi-Wan growled, his eyes flicking to look behind him when he heard an echoing tapping in the ship, and he reached through the Force and frowned when he sensed another on the ship. "I need to go, Quin, someone's here."

"Oh yeah?" the Kiffar asked deviously. "Isn't a bit late there? Someone come to tend to your desires?"

"Goodnight, Quinlan," Obi-Wan growled as the Kiffar began laughing. "Wear them out, Kenobi! May the Force be with you!"

With a roll of his eyes, Obi-Wan shut off the com, quickly checking the readings from the call to make certain the encryptions were working properly, his breathing slow and even as he attempted to calm himself, the Jedi Code on his lips in an effort to clear his mind from the heedless, lustful thoughts that plagued him. It was working, as it always did, but it was slow going. Still he could feel desire sitting heavy in his stomach, a slow, beating pulse sending tremors of pleasure through him that threatened to stir him to arousal. It was a frustrating, shameful thing to be thinking of Satine in such a way. She was his charge, trusted by him by the Jedi Council to protect, not defile, and still, he couldn't help but think of her melodious voice husky and breathless as she moaned her
pleasure, the look of her beautiful, angular face as ecstasy overwhelmed her, the feel of her pale, smooth skin hot against his as they moved together...

Quinlan may have been right. He was distracted.

"Working late, Jedi?" He knew there was another on the ship, but still he jumped from his seat and quickly turned to meet the amused, sultry face of Veela Ordo, her green and black armor light and closely hugging the curves of her body, and Obi-Wan couldn't help his eyes from roaming over her, catching himself doing so a moment too late, and he closed his eyes and bowed. It hadn't passed by her notice either.

"My lady..." Obi-Wan muttered, his gaze rising as he felt her draw closer to him, a wicked look in her piercing green eyes that sent a shiver up his spine. "How can I serve you..."

"Oh, I could think of a few ways, sweet thing..." the Mandalorian said, her voice low and seductive as she reached up and ran a strong, firm hand along his jaw, her fingers coming to rest under his chin to direct his gaze at her. A sly, sultry smile touched her lips when she looked into the Jedi's eyes and found the bright blue of his eyes barely visible around the expanded black of his pupil, a clear indication of arousal. "But I'm not here for that," she drawled, releasing the Jedi and smirking when she heard him softly gasp. "I'm just here to check on you."

The Jedi cleared his throat. "Bit late for a social call, isn't it?"

"Nonsense, you're my guest," she said softly. "It's my duty to care for you, Master Jedi..." Veela dragged the tips of her fingers down his chest, an excited smile on her face when Kenobi's breath hitched, recoiling at her touch and taking a step back.

"I-I'm not a Master," Obi-Wan protested, taking another step back when the Mandalorian sauntered closer.

"And I am no lady..." Veela whispered, watching as the Jedi took another step back, allowing him the chance to take a relieved breath when she didn't move. "Is the ship to your liking?"

"I-it is," Obi-Wan said tightly, his eyes on the ground to keep himself from looking at the beautiful woman, so inviting, so tempting, so... "I thank you for allowing us to have it. It will serve us well in protecting the Duchess."

"I am pleased to hear that. Pretty little Satine deserves the very best." Veela smirked as the Jedi shut his eyes, his carefully regulated breathing shuddering for a moment, the pink flush on his cheeks deepening to red.

"Y-yes, she does..."

"I don't know about the Jedi Knights," Veela said, stepping forward again and looking at Kenobi predatorily as he stepped back, only to find himself pressed against the ship's control console. With the woman in the aisle before him, there was nowhere to go. "But my father does," she continued. "Peerless, dangerous warriors, made so through focus and dedication with no passions to distract them..." The Mandalorian laid her hand on the Jedi's chest. "Is that true?" she asked, her voice low and heavy with promise. "Do you have no passions?"

"T-there is no passion, there is serenity, there is no emotion, there is peace, there is...t-there is..." He couldn't think straight. His mind was thick and hazy when Veela took a step closer to him, her hands resting on his sides and gently, maddeningly stroking. He...wanted her, could feel his body so eagerly respond to her touch, despite his best efforts. The Code didn't forbid this. Sexual release was normal, healthy, even, but it was a thing that Obi-Wan had avoided. After his introversion
and his shyness, it was guilt that kept him from indulging the desires that he tried so hard to repress. It felt...wrong, not just to submit to the cravings of the flesh when a Jedi was to be a master of self-control, but to use another just to chase relief. It was selfish, and it wasn't right to use people in such a way when the act was ultimately meaningless, when the other partner was nothing other than an object to expel sexual tension.

But Veela wanted it. She had come to him, she had initiated this. Perhaps she wanted something else. Perhaps she was just using him, but...that was the best a Jedi could expect from a sexual partner. Mutual use with no attachments, a meaningless act that would end as soon as they had both achieved the satisfaction they sought. This was allowed...and being with Satine was not.

"No passions, then?" Veela whispered, her hands running down his sides as she pressed against him, an excited smile on her face when the Jedi gasped and swallowed hard. "Let's see if we can find them, shall we?" she asked, her hand drifting to the lightsaber on his belt and unclipping it, the blue eyes suddenly clear and nervous as he watched with rapt attention as she took the hilt and tossed it on to the copilot's chair. With a coy smirk, she placed both hands on his chest and leaned up to kiss him, only to have the Jedi gasp and turn his head away. Undaunted, Veela grabbed the thin braid hanging behind his ear and pulled it, exposing his neck and she quickly pressed her lips to the pale flesh, the Jedi's surprised gasps becoming soft, breathless moans as the Mandalorian gently nipped and sucked at his soft skin.

Obi-Wan had no idea what to do, so he did nothing, his eyes closed and his jaw slack as his breaths came in soft panting between his moans, his hands tightly bracing himself against the console behind him. This was Quinlan's fault! If he hadn't been open and exposed, if they hadn't discussed Satine, if the lustful Kiffar hadn't proven his point by stoking Kenobi's own desires with the breathless moans of the Duchess' name...he wouldn't have been struggling so hard for balance now, he wouldn't have been left on the edge of arousal just before the seductress had wandered in, leaving him eager, willing prey for fiery Mandalorian passions...

"Oh, there it is..." Veela said teasingly, pressing herself closer and palming the Jedi's quickly growing arousal, the younger teen groaning loudly from the contact. "When are Jedi considered men?" she asked, taking his hands in her own and placing them on her chest, and Kenobi swallowed hard, whimpering softly when she took her hands off his, leaving him to gently, hesitantly pet on his own. He couldn't speak. He couldn't think. A crooked grin spread across her face. "Are you a man, little Jedi?"

"Y-yes..." Obi-Wan whispered, his voice thick with desire, and with a grin, Veela placed her hand on the Jedi's shoulder and turned him around and insistently pressed him back into the pilot's seat. Hands on his knees, Veela lowered herself to kneel between his legs, pressing her lips to the inside of the moaning Jedi's thighs.

"Here among the Mandalorians," she said between kisses to the Jedi's leg and the quickly growing bulge in his pants, "we claim each ship we own by bringing someone on board and taking them in every way we can think of." She slowly, languidly traced a hand in circles over the moaning Jedi's arousal, smirking as she kissed his stomach, his blue eyes fixed on the woman and watching her hungrily. "As many times as we can..." Her hands moved up to his belt and slowly began to undo it. "You're the pilot, yes?"

"Y-yes..." he said absently, and Veela smirked as she pulled aside his robe and slipped her hand under the thin cloth of his tunic, the Jedi hissing as her fingers touched the hard muscles of his abdomen.

"That makes this your ship," she sweetly explained. "And since you're among the Mandalorians, you should follow our customs..."
It was the best idea Obi-Wan had ever heard, and lacking the ability to speak, he slipped a hand into her hair, his breathing growing faster when the woman took the gesture as the encouragement it was intended as and she returned to her attentions, her hands continuing to pet and stroke as they wandered, kissing and licking the lean muscles just above the waist of his pants.

She was...beautiful. Alluring and seductive, a temptress, not yet out of her teenage years, but fully a woman. She was, in many ways, the opposite of Satine. Veela's skin was tanned and tough, her hair a lustrous jet black, her eyes a deep green, the line of her cheeks smooth and round. Satine, by comparison, was a stunning pale blond, her hair soft and smooth like woven white gold, her eyes a crystal blue, light and clear as the beauty of the kyber in his lightsaber, her cheekbones high and sharp and angular, her skin pale and smooth. Veela had the body of a woman, her hips curving in all the right ways, her breasts ample, he imagined, based on the shape of her armor's chest piece, and it was difficult to ignore her rounded backside when she wiggled it in open invitation as she circled his navel with her tongue.

Satine was...all long, lanky arms and legs, all early teenage gauntness, hopelessly skinny with thin, barely rounded hips and breasts that Obi-Wan had taken great care to not notice.

And it was all he wanted.

When Veela started to undo his pants, Obi-Wan grabbed her wrist in a tight grasp, preventing her from continuing, and she looked up with confusion at his cold, hard stare. "Stop," Obi-Wan said, his voice soft but commanding, and Veela's mouth parted as her jaw went slack.

"...excuse me?"

"No more," Kenobi said firmly. "I...don't want this. Not here. Not with you."

"Your body says otherwise, Jedi," Veela growled, grabbing the hard length of his arousal through the crotch of his pants, and faster than she could see, Obi-Wan's hand shot out and grabbed her other wrist, pulling both hands away from him.

"No more," Kenobi growled, this time in warning that the Mandalorian couldn't ignore. When Kenobi released her wrists, her eyes shot between the Jedi's face, his eyes closed and face drawn in concentration, and the physical proof of his need to bury within a woman.

"...you're just going to stop??" she cried in frustration when she realized that her needs wouldn't be met either. The Jedi opened his eyes and stared at her with a cold, dispassionate gaze. "You can't just stop, nobody just stops!" Kenobi remained unmoved, his chest rising and falling rapidly in his arousal, his face flushed, but he made no move to touch her. "You Jedi are cold, truly without passion."

"Yes..." Obi-Wan said softly. "I am flattered by your interest, though. You have taught me a great deal about myself." He pointed to the back of the cockpit. "You know the way out."

With a vicious sneer, Veela rose and glared coldly at the Jedi, her eyes drifting to the lightsaber on the copilot's seat, and the moment her gaze landed upon it, it flew from the seat and into the Jedi's grasp. When their eyes met, Veela felt as though he were looking right through her, saw into her soul, saw everything she had intended, both that night and after, both for the Jedi and th Duchess. It was far more unsettling than she imagined it would be. A focused Jedi was fearsome.

"Very well..." the Mandalorian said, slowly backing up toward the door, a sly smirk on her lips. "It's a shame we could not tangle. I think you would have found me more pleasurable than the Duchess." She scoffed. "Or your Master..."
"Oh, I sincerely doubt that, Lady Ordo." With a mocking smirk, the Mandalorian bowed.

"I look forward to serving beside you in defense of the Duchess, Jedi. As does my brother. He is...deeply passionate about her safety..."

"I'm sure he is..." With a final glare in Kenobi's direction, Veela Ordo left the cockpit, and Obi-Wan sat in silence, his breath held as he listened to the sound of her walking through the ship, felt her presence, irritated and aroused and seething as it grew more distant. When he was certain she was gone, Obi-Wan rushed to the cabin he decided would be his, threw himself on the bed, and pushed through a healthy layer of shame and disgust to bring himself to desperately needed satisfaction, trying valiantly and failing to banish Satine from his thoughts.

Qui-Gon sat in the large, comfortable armchair, his cheek resting on his hand as he stared, bored and unamused, at the two teens on the couch as they sat close and whispered, giggling and touching and flirting in a way that just bordered on what Qui–Gon considered appropriate. He had stopped them twice, much to their annoyance, once when Edric's hand crept up much too high on Satine's leg, and once again when Satine had insisted that the man remove his armor with all due haste. After that, they had been a bit more cautious and aware of the company they kept, gazes always drifting over to the stern Jedi Master when they thought they may be pushing the line, and a deep frown or a raised eyebrow was all the answer they needed to know he was displeased.

The bottle of Edric's fine liquor sat on the table empty, the two glasses long since drained. Satine wasn't drunk, Qui-Gon observed as the evening went on. She was very drunk. Not to the point of being in danger of sickness, but her inhibitions were nearly completely gone. Qui-Gon had tried to stop her, and did after her third glass, the Duchess stubbornly refusing to listen to his advice to not drink at all. Mandalorians, she had informed him, were introduced to alcohol early, and she had been practically raised on the stuff. A few glasses would do her no harm.

It had been either a very long time since she had been drinking, or else puberty had made her a lightweight, because Duchess Satine Kryze was intoxicated ten minutes after she had finished her first glass, and by then, she was halfway through her third. It was too late to stop her, so Qui-Gon had settled down in the armchair for an evening of babysitting drunk teenagers, his payment for having a Padawan that never misbehaved. All the while, he looked at Edric, the man not nearly so drunk as the Duchess, despite having consumed more than twice as much, Dooku's words never leaving him for a moment. Edric looked amicable enough, acted well enough with the Duchess, and Qui-Gon could feel real attraction between the two, nothing faked or insincere, just genuine teenage hormones creating genuine desire.

But Qui-Gon knew something was up. Bounty hunters. He frowned as he looked at the pair, the Duchess' hand lingering perhaps a little too long on the man's chest. Clan Ordo was up to something, that much was clear, though what it was still eluded him. What purpose could they have had for hiding the fact that bounty hunters had been sent after them? He had asked Edric about such a thing, but the boy simply dismissed the notion, which meant one of three things. He was ignorant of the bounty hunters, and the deception belonged to his sister alone, he was an idiot, or something was up, and he was lying in order to hide important information.

"And then," Satine drawled, leaning in closer to Edric, her hand planted firmly on his chest for support, "we attacked the outpost and, and we had to hold there until Obi-Wan managed to steal a ship!" She swayed slightly where she sat, softly giggling to herself for a moment and stroking the green armor on the man's chest. "We had to wait forever..."

"Leave it to a Jedi to keep a lady waiting..." Edric said, his voice low to keep out of earshot of the Jedi aster in the room, but he didn't look up to see if the man had heard. He somehow knew he did.
"I know!" Satine said with great emphasis as she swung her leg up and laid it in Edric's lap. "I even got shot!" She pointed to her leg. "There, see?" With a slight, cocky smirk on his lips, Edric looked at Satine's flushed, beautiful face and didn't once break eye contact as he rolled up the cuff of her pants, the Duchess gasping softly, her breath becoming uneven as the handsome Mandalorian took her thin leg in his hands and gingerly touched the faint traces of plasma burns on her otherwise flawless skin, soon to be faded completely due to regular bacta treatments.

"My poor Satine..." Edric said softly, smiling as he kissed the scar on her calf, the Duchess moaning softly. "You need a real man to protect you..."

"Y-yes..." Both teens jumped when Qui-Gon loudly cleared his throat, and Edric shot the Jedi a nervous look when he saw how intensely the man was glaring at him, how the lightsaber at his hip was left intentionally in plain sight. He wondered how much Mando'a the Jedi could understand, if any at all. He made no indication of comprehension, but he knew better than to make assumptions. The Jedi weren't known for being stupid.

"The war will be over soon enough, with any luck," Edric said, returning his attentions to Satine and slowly letting go of her leg. "Clan Ordo is in the best position to seize the throne of Mandalore. We have the greatest force, the Death Watch that holds Sundari is tattered and fractured..." A slight smirk touched his lips as he looked at the girl, his eyes roving over her as she wriggled and swayed on her seat, completely drunk and hopelessly aroused, and Edric mentally cursed. Had the Jedi not been there, this conversation would be very different. "You and I, Satine...we will rule together..."

"W-we will?" she asked, breathless and whimpering when his fingers slowly drifted down her side.

"Mmm..." His hand drifted lower, and the girl moaned softly, her hips rolling slightly in his grasp as she ached for contact. "You will give us what we need to take Sundari, beautiful Satine..." With a low, lustful whimper, the Duchess crawled into Edric's lap, her long fingers threading through his hair, her usually clear blue eyes clouded and hazy with liquor and lust and-

"That's enough," Qui-Gon commanded from his chair, a needy whine of frustration torn from Satine as she looked over her shoulder and glared at the Jedi, the girl gasping softly when Edric's large, strong hand grabbed her backside and drew her closer to him, a triumphant smirk on his face.

"You're supposed to protect me, Qui-Gon, not keep me from doing what I want!" Satine snapped, the Jedi arching an eyebrow in response.

"Oh? And what do you suppose I should do when what you want is exactly what you need to be protected from?"

"I thought you were supposed to keep her alive," Edric drawled, his fingers moving toward the junction between her legs, and the Duchess moaned loudly at the light, teasing contact, her back arching as she pressed back into his touch. "I didn't think you were here to protect her from the natural course of her passions..."

"The terms of the agreement were very vague," Qui-Gon said as he removed himself from his chair and raising his hand, and with a sharp squeak of surprise, Satine was lifted off Edric, held gently in the arms of the Force, and deposited gently into Qui-Gon's vacant chair. "But," the Jedi said, smirking at the shocked, outraged look on the Mandalorian warrior's face, "given that her judgement is severely impaired, I find it is my duty to protect her from herself."
"I do not need a Jedi telling me what I do and do not want!" Satine cried, leaping up from the chair and immediately finding her legs unsteady, and she tumbled drunkenly back into the seat. "I want this, Qui-Gon..." she muttered. "I do, everything in me aches for it..."

"I am certain you do, Duchess," Qui-Gon said quickly. "And tomorrow when your head is clear, you can still make this decision."

"Are all Jedi like this?" Edric growled, groaning with effort as he stood as well and moved to stand before the Jedi Master. "Stiff, passionless, cold, ruining everyone's fun..."

"If by ruining fun, you mean introducing logic and good decision making, than yes, that is exactly what the Jedi do."

"You should see his student..." Satine drawled from the seat, the girl draped invitingly over the armrests, and with a growl of desire, Edric dragged her out of the seat and pulled her against him, the Duchess giggling drunkenly as her head rested against the man's strong, broad chest, the armor he wore doing little to conceal how thick the muscles were, so unlike her thin, lanky Jedi protector. "Obi-Wan..." she drawled slowly, softly giggling as she heard how breathy the name sounded when she said it. "I've never met anyone so cold and passionless..."

"I agree..." Edric said, pulling her away from the wary, attentive Qui-Gon. "It was like he had no soul in him at all. And what's more, he's a child. Too thin to be a warrior."

"That's because he isn't a warrior..." Satine said, her voice wavering and becoming distant. "Obi-Wan is...a protector."

"A protector that got you stranded on a Death Watch world for a month, by the way you tell it," Edric sneered, switching back to Mando'a and smirking when the Jedi's eyes narrowed, clearly unable to understand the harsh language. "He is unfit to serve as guard to you. I can at least pilot a ship."

"W-well..." Satine's lips pressed together in a thin line as she struggled to think through the haze in her mind. "His flying got us off the planet."

"A correction of a mistake doesn't excuse that the mistake was made to begin with," Edric said firmly.

"M-maybe..."

"You need someone at your side that will slay your enemies," the warrior said, bringing her hand to his lips and kissing it, the Duchess' eyes downcast, her breathing a mix of soft moans and panting as she swayed on legs that rebelled against standing, the alcohol and arousal in her blood making her knees weak. "Does your little Jedi do that for you?" Satine shook her head.

"N-no...Obi-Wan is adverse to killing, he..." She took in a sharp breath and closed her eyes, leaning her head against the armored chest as Edric pulled her close. "Killing makes him ill..." Edric scoffed.

"Some great warrior the Republic sent you. Such a man can never protect you."

"B-but he does," she whimpered. "He won't kill, if he can avoid it, but he protects me. H-he was shot twice for me, his blood has been spilt in my defense, he-"

"Will die quickly," Edric finished. "Such a waste. A lightsaber, a deadly weapon in the hands of a man too weak to use it." His eyes drifted to the lightsaber at Qui-Gon's waist, greed and desire on his face. "If I had such a weapon, I would put it to good use. Nobody would stand before me."
"...maybe that's why you don't have one," Satine said, her voice cold and distant and clear despite the arousal and alcohol that impaired her. She stood up taller, wavering slightly, but her feet were firmly planted. "Obi-Wan may not be...strong, or fearless, or passionate. He's not a warrior, or a soldier. He's too thin, too pale, too timid, too shy for a boy his age. His lack of confidence, his blank stares, his stupid braid, it's infuriating, all of it, all of him!" Satine met Edric's gaze, her blue eyes cold and narrowed in fierce conviction. "But he is brave, and noble and good. He's smart and he's sweet and he's selfless. He may not be a warrior, or a fighter, but he is a protector, and only draws his weapon in defense of others, will sacrifice himself to protect the weak and the helpless, and if the Mandalorians were more like him, we wouldn't be in this stupid, pointless war!"

There was silence between them, long and heavy and fraught with the tension of passion. The Duchess stood, her breathing heavy, soft whimpers in her throat as she struggled with the arousal heavy within her, pulsing and rising as new waves of desire spiked through her. She closed her eyes, her hand to her forehead as she felt her heated skin, her whimpers becoming pleased gasps and moans she tried desperately to repress, but her intoxication kept her from it, her mind racing with newly surging lust and desire she only felt more keenly when Edric reached out and grabbed her chin between his thumb and forefinger, forcing her clouded eyes to meet the green intensity of his gaze.

"You have feelings for this Jedi..." Edric gasped, his voice accusatory, his face almost betrayed before it hardened. "Is that how it is, Satine? Did this Jedi defile you?" Whimpering, the Duchess closed her eyes and shivered, the soldier grabbing her hips and pulling her against him as she moaned pitifully. Qui-Gon watched, his eyes narrowed as he cautiously observed the scene before him, unwilling to interfere as he silently gathered information, reading the Mandalorian's intent through the Force as he became less guarded, showing more of his true colors, and discretely, Qui-Gon tapped a button on the comlink on his wrist as he continued to silently observe.

"N-no!" Satine sputtered as she looked at the much taller man. "No, Edric, he's-

"Because you are nothing to him..." he growled, running his thumb over her lips and grinning wolfishly when her mouth parted slightly in a breathless, wanting moan, and before she could struggle for control over the desire pooling within her, he slipped the tip of his thumb past her lips, the girl whimpering as she closed her mouth around the digit and involuntarily began to lazily suck on it. Edric grinned as he looked at her, the red flush on her face growing darker as the pupils of her bright blue eyes rapidly expanded in furious arousal. With a growl of warning, the Jedi stepped forward.

"Satine..."

"All you will ever be to the Jedi, Satine," Edric drawled as he gently encouraged the lust-soaked girl's continued loss of control, "is a pleasure slave." He lifted her head up and forced her to look at him, his thumb still tantalizingly in her mouth. "You would never be anything more than that. No passion, no feeling with the Jedi makes every time you tumble with them meaningless, no better than any number of the galaxy's stupid sluts."

"That is enough!" Qui-Gon snapped when the man didn't step away, and with a vicious sneer, Edric looked at the Jedi, his breath catching in his throat when he saw the Master's hand on his lightsaber. "No more. The Duchess is unable to consent to any of this, and I won't allow you to take advantage of her for a moment longer." Qui-Gon's eyes narrowed. "Perhaps I cannot protect her from bad decisions, or getting drunk with fools, but I believe that when I took on the task of protecting her, it included shielding her from rape."

"Wait, what??" Edric snapped. "I'm not raping anyone, she wants this!"
"Be that as it may, she is too intoxicated to make an informed decision, and certainly too drunk to know what she wants. You've had your fun, Edric Ordo. Now leave." The warrior sneered as he looked at the Jedi with disdain and drew the softly moaning girl against him, the Duchess' hands petting at his stomach and chest in her frantic need.

"Accept that this is going to happen, Jedi. What are you going to do about it?" His smug smirk dropped off his face immediately when a snapping hiss filled the air, followed by the thrumming and the glow of green plasma as Qui-Gon ignited his lightsaber, a slight, challenging smile on the Jedi's otherwise stern, cold face.

"Sometimes," Qui-Gon drawled, "the Jedi Code gets in the way of our mission. My student may not hurt you, but I will."

"...I'll just say goodnight, then," Edric said nervously, swallowing hard, and the Jedi nodded, but very notably did not switch off his lightsaber.

"A wise decision," Qui-Gon said, his lightsaber moving with a soft thrum in the air as he took a step back to allow them some space. "You have one minute."

"Satine..." Edric said softly, his fingers touching her sharp, angular cheek, her wavering focus drifting from the glow of the lightsaber to the handsome face of the warrior. "You need someone with passion, understand? A real man that will desire you with everything in him, not some cold, soulless Jedi. You want that, yes?" he asked when the girl shivered with another aching wave of desire. "You need someone that can properly pleasure you, my fiery Mandalorian..."

"Y-yes..." the Duchess whimpered, her breathing becoming helpless panting as Edric stroked back her hair and leaned down to claim her lips with his own. He was tall, dark, handsome, strong and accomplished, a warrior of renown, the Mandalorian ideal. And his wasn't the one running through her mind, making her feel lightheaded and warm. Her heart suddenly pounding, Satine closed her eyes, and turned her face away, the warrior meeting her pale cheek instead, her shoulders shaking with a swell of sudden emotion. Qui-Gon stepped beside the Duchess, his free hand taking the girl by the shoulders and drawing her against him, and Edric sneered in contempt.

"You must choose sooner or later, Satine," he growled. "You can have something deep and meaningful and passionate with one of your own, or you could be some Jedi whore and mean nothing." The girl's hand tightened in Qui-Gon's robes, and she buried her face against his chest, her thin frame trembling with the painful ache of arousal as she whimpered. Qui-Gon's eyes narrowed as he looked at the man and pointed his lightsaber toward his chest.

"Time's up. Leave." With a final glare at the Jedi, Edric left, the door hissing closed behind him, and Qui-Gon deactivated his lightsaber and the comlink with a sigh. Satine clung tightly to him, her body tense and hot and shaking, her hips slowly rolling in search of contact to ease the ache of arousal she felt, and the Master took the girl to her bed, peeled her off of him, and set the shivering girl upon it.

"I've never been this intoxicated before..." she muttered, her voice ever so slightly slurring, and Qui-Gon smiled softly as he draped a blanket over her shoulders. "I drank all the time when I was younger with my father and brother, I never felt like this..."

"I'm certain your father and brother weren't trying to get you so intoxicated that taking advantage of you would be easy," Qui-Gon said, picking up the bottle on the table and examining it. "I wonder if there is anything in this that acts as an aphrodisiac, or if your emotional state going into this evening was simply a perfect storm..."

"...I feel so stupid..." she whimpered, curling up with the blanket and her hands tightly clasp
her arms to keep her hands from wandering. With a sigh, Qui-Gon sat on the edge of the bed and laid his hand on her feverish head, the Duchess gasping softly from the contact and the new heat that rushed through her from the Jedi, not the blazing fire of passion that had sunk its claws deep within her, but something much more soothing, washing over her like a gentle stream and easing some of the haze from her mind.

"All of us are young and stupid at some point, Satine. Even Duchesses." She looked up at him with wide, inquisitive eyes.

"Even Jedi?" she asked in barely a whisper, and the Master slowly nodded.

"Yes, even Jedi."

"...I wonder what Obi-Wan is doing..." she whispered, curling up in the blanket and grabbing the Jedi's robes tightly, the Master laying his hand on top of hers and feeling the slight tremble in them as she struggled to ride out the churning arousal inside her.

"Minding the ship, most like," Qui-Gon said calmly. "When I removed you from his custody, he had a great deal of upgrades he wanted to instal. I believe he said something about taking components out of other ships when the hangar emptied out for the evening." Satine's nose wrinkled in distaste before she laughed softly.

"He's terribly clever, isn't he?"

"Or in this case, a terrible thief." She gasped softly, her eyes shut tightly as she quietly moaned into the blanket.

"I-I wish he was here..." she whispered, her hand running along Qui-Gon's thigh as she let go of him, her fingers lightly running down her chest before the Master quickly took her wrist to stop her.

"I'm glad he isn't," Qui-Gon muttered. "I think he would have literally had a brain hemorrhage." Satine chuckled drunkenly for a moment, wriggling on the bed in a lazy attempt to free her hands.

"We should go see him..." she drawled slowly, giggling maniacally for a moment as she pressed her feet to the mattress and arched her hips off the bed. "Obi-Wan..."

"You are going to feel so stupid tomorrow, Duchess..." Qui-Gon sighed as he released the girl's wrists and stood, checking around the room to make certain it was secure as the intoxicated Satine wiggled on the bed in a lustful haze, her hands running lazily over her body as she sought to relieve the pulsating, maddening ache she felt. Confirming that the room was safe, Qui-Gon leaned over the Duchess, brushed her hair back and kissed her forehead. She gratefully appeared too drunk to do little more than stay in bed which, on reflection, had probably been the intent. The Jedi sighed when she reached up and twirled a lock of his hair around a long finger, a desperate and frightened look on her face.

"Don't go..." she whispered, her voice trembling with the confusing mess of her emotions, desire and fear and depression and uncertainty meeting in a chaotic clash within her, everything enhanced by her lowered inhibitions. "Please..."

"I'm not going anywhere, Duchess," Qui-Gon calmly reassured her. "But I feel you may need some time alone. I'll be just outside." She bit her lip and nodded as she looked away, her eyes closed as she held her breath in another failed attempt to control herself.

"...maybe we should leave tomorrow," Satine said softly as the Jedi made his way to the door.
A wise decision, Duchess. We'll leave as soon as Obi-Wan is ready." Without another word, Qui-Gon left the room, leaving the young Duchess to attend to herself while he meditated on the best course of action and prayed that her sudden interest in his student was simply the result of arousal and alcohol. In the morning, sense would prevail.

Satine and Qui-Gon stood in the hangar the next morning after a large, hearty breakfast made specifically to ease the Duchess' mild hangover, staring in awe at the ship that Obi-Wan had been working on, the Padawan's pants rolled up and wearing only his thin tunic as he made adjustments to the engine on the left wing. Gone was the black and green of Clan Ordo, the hull and wings painted chrome silver and blue, the external thrusters and sublight engines having undergone several upgrades since they had seen it last. It was...impressive, sleek and beautiful, the slight adjustments making it seem like an entirely different ship, and even Satine found herself approving.

"Been busy, my Padawan?" Qui-Gon asked softly when the teen noticed them and quickly approached, a light, easy smile on his face and a faint flush on his cheeks, calm and relaxed in a way the Master hadn't seen him in ever. He frowned as he watched his student bow and gently greet the Duchess, which she cordially responded to. This show of emotion, as slight as it was, bespoke of an openness that Obi-Wan rarely showed. Something had changed in him, and that something became very obvious when Qui-Gon spotted the bruise-like mark on the teenager's neck, and despite himself, he couldn't keep a wry smirk off his lips.

That sneaky devil...

"I couldn't sleep," Obi-Wan said, pointing back at the ship. "I thought I'd get some work done since I was up anyway."

"You don't say..."

"She's beautiful, Obi-Wan!" Satine said, a wide smile on her face for a moment until she saw the look on Kenobi's face. It looked almost adoring. Her heart wouldn't stop fluttering. She frowned, turning her nose up in the air. "At least there is something you're good at, Jedi. I hope you didn't mess with the engines, I want the ship to fly, not just stand as a piece of art."

"My Duchess is ever gracious," Obi-Wan drawled with a roll of his eyes. "I had thought that a beautiful exterior was enough for you. It seems to be what you're drawn to." With a sharp, outraged gasp, Satine placed her hand on the Jedi's chest and shoved him back.

"You uncultured, uncivilized brute!" she snapped, glaring furiously at the smug, self-satisfied Padawan. "What would you know of beauty?! You are not moved by anything, you soulless beast!" She stormed toward the ship, stopped, and quickly reeled on Kenobi. "Is there anyone on the ship?" He shook his head, and her eyes narrowed almost dangerously. "I'm going to go look at my ship. I'm not to be disturbed, especially by you!"

"Please do, Duchess," Obi-Wan said, bowing slightly when the girl huffed and turned from him. "And don't touch anything!" One very rude gesture later, Satine had disappeared up the boarding ramp, the Jedi standing in silence, and with a heavy sigh, Qui-Gon grabbed hold of Kenobi's braid and pulled hard, the Padawan sharply hissing as he was yanked off balance.

"What did I say about vexing the Duchess?" Qui-Gon said evenly, the faintest hint of irritation within the Force, and Obi-Wan frowned, his braid in his hand, stroking it as though it was wounded.

"I apologize, Master, but it's just so easy." He smiled as he looked back at the ship. "She did start
it this time, Master, and I do so enjoy seeing her frustrated..."

"Hmm..." Qui-Gon flicked the mark on Obi-Wan's neck, the Padawan flinching and swiftly bringing a hand up to rub the spot, irritated at first and quickly turning a fierce shade of red when he realized what his Master was looking at. "Obi-Wan. Dear and faithful student. What is that."

"...I dunno..." Qui-Gon smacked the Padawan on the back of the head with an open hand, and the teen winced as he stumbled forward, looking over his shoulder at his Master with considerable apprehension and anxiety. "Master, um..." Qui-Gon cocked an eyebrow, and with a heavy sigh, Obi-Wan shuffled to stand before him. "Master," he began in a whisper, looking around to make certain nobody was around, "last night, Veela Ordo came to the ship while I was working on it. I just finished testing the com, we have it perfectly encrypted!" he said excitedly. "I called Quinlan, we-"

"Obi-Wan, focus," Qui-Gon said softly as he rolled his eyes, the Padawan quickly biting his lip and nodding. If Quinlan was involved, this couldn't be good. Nearly every time his perfect Padawan had gotten himself into trouble, it had been started by Quinlan Vos.

"She came to me, Master," Kenobi continued. "To check on me, she said, but she actually-"

"Oh, for the love of the Force, Obi-Wan Kenobi!"

"I didn't do anything, Master, I swear it!" the Padawan said frantically, wincing when he realized how loud his voice sounded in the spacious hangar. "She tried to seduce me!" he hissed, much quieter this time. "I was already struggling, and when she came in, she noticed it immediately and started trying to...w-well...Master, she was on her knees between my legs!"

"...and you resisted her?!!" Kenobi bit his lip and nodded, averting his eyes and rubbing at the mark on his neck before his fingers drifted to grab at his braid. Qui-Gon whistled, long and low and very impressed. "Damn, Obi-Wan..."

"So...not mad?" Obi-Wan asked sheepishly, a nervous smile on his face. The Master shook his head.

"Not mad," he confirmed. "I wouldn't have been mad if you did take her to bed." He paused, frowning when the Padawan looked at him in disbelief. "In this case, I would have seriously questioned your judgement, but...well, you have a man's needs. It's natural to want to fulfill them." Qui-Gon's eyes narrowed as he leaned down to his student and took his comlink off his wrist, offering it to Kenobi. "No, we have bigger problems. The Ordo siblings appear to be in cahoots, because Edric tried to seduce Satine last night." Kenobi tensed, his breath catching in his throat. "You're instincts, as always, were spot on. They're up to something."

"He was unsuccessful, I take it?" he asked cautiously, taking the comlink into his hands, and the Padawan breathed a sigh of relief when the Jedi slightly nodded. "What's this?"

"Part of the conversation between Satine and Edric after things became a bit tense between them. I thought it might be important, but my Mando'a is rusty, and the Ordos speak in a rather heavy accent." Qui-Gon put his hand over Obi-Wan's when the teen made to play back the recording. "You might...not like what you hear on here. Satine wasn't in her right mind. It may be difficult to listen to for a number of reasons."

"...do we need to know?"

"I feel it may help our mission, yes." Biting his lip and nodding, Obi-Wan adjusted the settings and played the recording back, the volume low enough for only them to hear. Qui-Gon watched
his student carefully as a mess of quick emotions flashed through the Force, anger, desire, nervousness, a mounting feeling of apprehension growing within the young Padawan. When the recording was over, he listened to it again, the emotion gone and replaced with the cool, clear head that Qui-Gon had become so accustomed to.

"Poor Satine..." Obi-Wan said softly, his hand gripping the comlink tighter. "Nobody should ever be spoken to like that..."

"That bad?" Qui-Gon asked, and the Padawan nodded tightly, his lips tightly pressed together.

"Savage, uncivilized, awful oaf. Brainless, stupid, son of a-"

"Focus, Obi-Wan..."

"What could she possibly have seen in him..." Obi-Wan asked under his breath to nobody in particular, and for just a moment, Qui-Gon could feel his student's deep affection for the Duchess they protected, so different than it had been only days before. There was no hurt within him, no jealousy, just...affection, simple and private, a soft, warm thing meant only for him. It was a selfless thing, so unlike what Qui-Gon had feared. Perhaps Dooku had been right.

"Obi-Wan..." the Master said gently, and the Padawan quickly looked up, his eyes focused and intense.

"You're right, there's something here," Obi-Wan whispered. "He's trying to drive a wedge between us and her." Obi-Wan frowned, looking up at his Master with apprehension. "We are here in defense of the Duchess. If they were her allies, they would want to keep us united, not drive us apart."

"My thoughts exactly. Hatred of the Jedi is not the way of the New Mandalorians. That is a very traditional stance. Not exactly the thing you'd expect to see out of allies of Satine the Reformer."

"We're in danger here, Master," Obi-Wan said, looking back at the nearby ship that Satine had gone to explore. "We need to leave."

"And I managed to convince the Duchess of exactly that last night," Qui-Gon said, a smile on his lips as he looked at his adoring Padawan.

"Damn, Master...you're good." Kenobi smirked. "I can get her to do what I want as well, by the way."

"Oh, can you?" the Master asked, his eyebrow arched, and Obi-Wan met his gaze with a confident and cocky smirk.

"Of course I can. I just need to say I want the exact opposite of the outcome I desire, and she's guaranteed to go against me." Qui-Gon snorted with laughter.

"Can't argue with results, I suppose." Qui-Gon laid his hand on the student's shoulder. "How long before we can leave?" Obi-Wan breathed deep, his eyes running over the ship as he thought. "I won't have everything I want done until tonight, but in a pinch..." He looked at the engine he had been working on, quietly muttering something to himself, one hand absently twirling his braid around his fingers. "I can have the ship flight ready in a couple of hours."

"See that it is. I intend to leave as soon as possible." Obi-Wan nodded.

"Where are we going?"
"Anywhere but here." A small smirk spread across Kenobi's features.

"You know, Zanbar is lovely this time of year..."

"And such a friendly populace," Qui-Gon drawled with a roll of his eyes. "We'll discuss it with Satine once we're in hyperspace. I'm going to take her to get supplies for the ship. Make haste, my student."

"I will, Master." Obi-Wan smiled softly when Qui-Gon laid a reassuring hand on his shoulder and disappeared inside the ship, returning with a very uneasy Satine a moment later. Obi-Wan bowed deeply to her as she left, the two making eye contact for a fleeting moment and flashing small, shy smiles at each other before she turned from him and glued herself to Qui-Gon's side. Kenobi watched them until they were out of sight before he returned to his work, his hands moving swiftly over panels as he made necessary adjustments, through wires as he remade connections and bypassed additional loops in the system to maximize efficiency, and over the screen of his datapad as he commanded systems to begin running tests.

It was silent, focused work, the sort that Obi-Wan had always taken to best, the exact kind that harkened back to his time as a youngling, when he would spend countless hours in the Jedi Temple Hangar, speaking with starship pilots and watching the mechanics, and later trying his hand at making repairs on his own. It was a difficult time, one that was rife with conflict for the young Obi-Wan, one that saw him torn between what he wanted and what he was good at, a time when his future was much more uncertain. He approached the work in a meditative state, the young Padawan feeling almost one with the Force as he dug through consoles and ran diagnostics, a habitual double-check just in case, since he always knew the results of the scans before he ran them.

Time was lost to him, and he wasn't sure how long it had been before Qui-Gon and Satine returned with the first round of their supply run, the Jedi and the Duchess disappearing inside the ship and properly store the supplies before they emerged the Jedi Master leaving to finish up a few things while Satine leaved against the ship's vertically positioned wing and watched Obi-Wan work, a small, secretive smile on her face. Despite his focus, Obi-Wan was made clearly aware of her presence, and quickly found his attention divided. Nothing had changed, but...everything felt different.

"Are you going to say something?" Obi-Wan said, his voice smooth and even and purposefully keeping his eyes fixed on his work. "Or are you just here to admire the view?" The Duchess stared at him for a moment, her lips pursed indignantly before she understood the implication and flushed fiercely, and feeling the sudden jump in her pulse through the Frce, Obi-Wan tried to repress the smile tugging on the edge of his lips.

"I thought you liked silence," she said in a tone that would have been harsh had she not looked so demure. "Since we're trying to be fast, I didn't want to distract you, since I know how you need to focus so you don't mess up."

"Mm, your very presence is a distraction, Duchess," Kenobi drawled, smirking when he watched the girl redden considerably. "You don't need to speak for me to feel the emotional mess that is your head space."

"At least I have emotions," she countered, crossing her arms over her chest. "Anyway, I came to watch because it's such a rare thing to see you do something you're actually good at."

"Insult me too much, Duchess, and I'll crash this ship too. You know how easily my pride is wounded." Satine pouted when she saw the small, good natured smile creep across the Jedi's face, and she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling as well. He was...infectious.
"I was trying to be helpful!"

"If you wanted to be that, you could actually help," Obi-Wan said with a roll of his eyes, holding out a tool and a handful of small electrical components. "Here, you can hold these so my hands are free."

"I am not your servant, Obi-Wan!" the Duchess huffed, but took the things from his hand anyway, coming around to stand beside him and watching with rapt attention as his deft hands quickly worked within the engine, his eyes intense, his face drawn in concentration. "If you stop and think about it, you're actually my servant." The Jedi's lips twitched ever so slightly, his concentration shattering as he looked at her from the corner of his eye.

"Ever your servant, Duchess," he said, holding out his hand for his tool, and Satine placed it on his palm. "I'm glad you decided to leave," the Jedi said after a moment of silence. "Master Qui-Gon said you had some trouble with Edric."

"Trouble I brought upon myself, yes..." she muttered, looking away from him and staring at the components in her hand, taking the tool back from Obi-Wan when he handed it to her and dropping the small pieces into his hand when he pointed to them. "Qui-Gon tells me you had a bit of trouble with Veela," she said, her fingers lightly touching the mark on his neck, and the Jedi gasped and quickly jerked away, his hand quickly rising to rub self-consciously at the spot. Kenobi laughed nervously when silence held between them, not the comfortable silence he had grown accustomed to, but a deeply awkward one.

"Nothing I couldn't handle. She's, uh..." he stammered, flushing deeply as he returned to his work. "She's a woman that knows what she wants..."

"...what's it like?" Satine asked softly, her voice just barely a whisper as she ran the Padawan's braid between delicate, hesitating fingers, and for a moment, Obi-Wan found himself at a loss for words because he couldn't breathe.

"I-I don't know..." he said, breathless and barely audible as he looked at the wide-eyed, curious Duchess, her entire being filled with something, he couldn't place it. "I turned her away. She's, uh...not exactly my type," Obi-Wan said, a faint smile on his face despite himself, his breathing shuddering from the warmth he felt from Satine's touch on his shoulder, and the Duchess looked away from her protector, her hand covering her mouth to hide the wide smile she couldn't repress.

"Perhaps it is hasty to leave," Satine said when Obi-Wan quickly closed the engine panels, sealing the compartment and wiping his hands on the rag at his belt. "It's not like we're in any danger here, the Ordos are allies, I just...don't agree with their ideals."

"And which ideals are those?" Obi-Wan dryly asked as he walked around the ship, Satine in tow as he checked the various junctions and compartments he had been working on, setting his datapad to prompt the ship's systems to run the final diagnostic, a lengthy process, but a necessary one that would clear them for safe travel, at least so far as the integrity of the ship was concerned. "The ideals that make it alright in their minds to get their childhood friends too drunk to protest to their advances? Or is there some other ideal they have I am unaware of?" Satine glared pointedly at her young protector.

"Their dedication to our warrior ways," she said through clenched teeth. "And I'll have you know, Jedi, Edric Ordo is a very handsome man, and I wouldn't have protested his advances, even if I was completely sober."

"Well, you certainly did encourage him enough yesterday with all your flirting," Kenobi said, glowering slightly when the Duchess smacked his arm.
"Don't be crass, Obi-Wan! What does a Jedi know about passion?"

"We know it leads to terrible decisions."

"Oh, does it?!" Satine snapped, scowling as she followed the Jedi. "Well, I made the decision to leave on a whim! Maybe I should stay here!"

"Going somewhere, Duchess?" Satine and Obi-Wan both quickly spun around when they heard the cold, tight voice, and the Jedi instinctively stepped in front of Satine, his eyes narrowed in focus as he watched Edric Ordo, flanked by six heavily armed Mandalorian warriors, approach the pair. "I can't advise that you do," Edric continued when neither said a word. "Things are...dangerous out there."

"All the more reason for us to leave," Obi-Wan said calmly. "We'd hate for your hospitality to be thanked with violence when her enemies find her." Edric's eyes narrowed, and he sneered viciously.

"You'd let this Jedi filth speak for you, Satine?" the warrior growled, sharp green eyes studying the teenager that stood between him and the Duchess.

"Obi-Wan's right, Edric," Satine said quickly, rushing to stand at Obi-Wan's side and laying a hand on his arm. "You said the Wrens are at your doorstep, they are bound to Clan Vizsla, and when they find out I'm here, the entire might of the Death Watch is going to come down on you! I won't be the reason for that kind of violence, I won't be the cause of your clan's execution!" Her hand tightened at her side as she held her breath and tried to swallow the tears that rapidly threatened to fall from her eyes. "Death Watch has already destroyed my family, isn't that enough?!"

"Hmph." Edric crossed his arms over his chest and drew up to his considerable full height. "In that case, let me accompany you." The delicate hand on Obi-Wan's arm tensed as Satine sucked in a sharp breath. "I can protect you from everything out there, Satine. Point me at your enemies, and I will destroy them all." Slowly, the Duchess exhaled, her grip loosening as she raised her head.

"I have a protector, Edric."

The deep green eyes widened in disbelief as he stared at the calm face of the Duchess, and narrowed viciously when his gaze snapped to Obi-Wan. "Him?!" he snarled, pointing an accusing finger at the Jedi. "You would continue to be protected by him?! A boy not yet man enough to shave?! You would choose the Jedi over your kinsmen!"

"I would choose peace over violence!" the Duchess spat, meeting his outrage with fury of her own, which was immediately quelled when Obi-Wan brushed his hand over her shoulder.

"Duchess..." Kenobi said softly. "Let it be. Fighting will bring us nothing."

"And you think that can protect you?!" Edric said, laughing in disbelief as he pointed at the Jedi. "There is no victory in peace, Satine! What do you mean to do, armor yourself in words and foolish ideals?! Your reality is war, Duchess! Face it like the warrior your father raised you to be!"

"My father," Satine hissed, her fury rising as the wound within her split wide open, "raised me to forge a new path for Mandalore! He may have been a warrior, but he was a wise man that saw the truth of our old ways as one that would lead us to ruin!"

"We are warriors!" Edric shouted, his face reddening in anger. "War is our way!"
"And war will be the end of us!" Satine countered. "Everything I do, everything I have ever done has been for Mandalore, for the love of my people, and if it means incurring your scorn, if it means allying with our ancient enemies, then so be it!"

"You've made your decision then?" Edric growled, looking between the Duchess and the Jedi. "Fine." He pointed an accusing finger at Obi-Wan. "Step forward, Jedi, prove to me you can defend our Duchess. Fight me, show me you're more worthy than I, show me why she has such faith in an enemy!"

"Obi-Wan," Satine said firmly, her eyes never leaving the enraged Mandalorian. "You have nothing to prove to him. Don't fight him."

"I wasn't going to, Duchess."

"Coward!" Edric snarled, rushing forward and stopping before Obi-Wan when he grabbed hold of Satine's hand to pull her out of the way and stepped protectively before her. "You think you can defend her?" Edric hissed menacingly, standing mere inches from the stalwart Jedi. "Do you truly think you can stand against the might of Mandalore?"

"If I remember correctly, the Jedi have fought the Mandalorians in the past," Obi-Wan said, calm and devoid of emotion. "And you lost." "This war will not be won by refusing to fight!"

"That is exactly how this war will be won, when all you fools drop your weapons and come to the table to talk," Obi-Wan said. "Just as every war must ultimately end. With talk, with negotiation."

"Let's see how much your words help you against an opponent who will stop at nothing to see you dead," Edric said, soft and menacing and laying his hand upon the blaster at his hip. "Just like all of Satine's enemies, each and every one of them wishes her not capture, but dead, and they will stop at nothing. They are strong, and they are fierce, and they will kill you, Jedi, and they will make Satine watch her peace die before she is executed. You can't stand against such strength." He grinned wickedly. "But I can. I am strong, and I will kill every enemy that stands before her. Unlike you."

"Taking up arms is easy," Obi-Wan said, drawing up to his full height, which was still a good deal smaller than the tall, broad shouldered Edric. "It takes strength to find a way other than violence to settle conflict. Those that take that path are strong," he said, looking back at the nervous, fraught Satine. "Stronger than you'll ever be."

There was silence for a moment before Edric began laughing, shaking his head, and without warning, he took hold of Obi-Wan's shoulder and drove his knee into the Jedi's gut, the younger teen grunting in pain from the force of the powerful impact, and gasping for breath, the Mandalorian threw him to the ground. With a cry of desperation, Satine moved to rush by Obi-Wan's side and was quickly stopped by one of the warriors that Edric had brought with him, the six of them moving to encircle the coughing Jedi as he struggled to his hands and knees, and their furiously pacing leader.

"What's wrong, Jedi!" Edric cried triumphantly, his voice dripping with mock concern and cruelty, his eyes lighting up with the anticipation of a fight. "Come now, fight back! You're supposed to be some great protector!" When Obi-Wan planted his hand on his knee to hoist himself to his feet, Edric swiftly kicked him in the stomach with all his strength, a pained cry torn from the Jedi's throat as he collapsed and curled up on the ground, each breath painful as his ribs seemed to shift unnaturally with his every move.
"Obi-Wan!" Satine cried, moving to rush forward to his side once again, but one of the soldiers gripped her firmly by the wrist to hold her back. Thrashing in his grasp, the Duchess tried to no avail to pry his fingers from her. "Let me go! Obi-Wan!"

"You think he can defend you, Duchess?" Edric drawled, swiftly punching the boy in the lower back when he started to rise again, and when that didn't seem to move him, he threw his armored knuckles against the back of the Jedi's head, the dazed boy dropping to the ground and groaning softly in pain. "He can't even defend himself."

"You are supposed to be my ally, Edric!" Satine cried frantically, pulling against the man that held her. "Stop this!"

"Do you see now that your way doesn't work?" the warrior cruelly said, a smirk on his face when her eyes widened in sudden fear for her friend. "I don't want to stop, and your great protector already said he won't fight back." He grinned at the Duchess as he drew closer. "But if you want to negotiate for your friend's life, we'll do it. Dismiss your Jedi, send them away, and you remain in our custody. Clan Kryze is finished. It's time you accept that."

"Not yet it isn't..." Obi-Wan groaned, standing on shaking legs behind the warrior, and Edric turned to face him, surprised for a moment before anger gripped him.

"You don't know when to quit, do you, Jedi."

"Nope."

"You are a brave one, aren't you?" Edric drawled, his hand closing into a fist as he slowly stepped toward the Padawan. "Too stupid for sense..."

"Tell your men to let Satine go," Obi-Wan said calmly, no hint of pain in his voice at all, and Edric's eyes narrowed. How was the boy even standing?

"Make them!" the man snapped, pointing a finger at the Duchess. "You want to save her, boy, you're going to have to do it yourself! We're only seven men, Jedi, certainly no match for someone like you!" The moment Obi-Wan's gaze drifted to the Duchess, Edric's fist slammed into his chest, sending him stumbling backwards, but he kept his balance and managed to duck under the next wild swing, his hands raised and quickly managing to block and deflect the flurry of punched and strikes that the Mandalorian threw against him. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye just too late to block a punch from one of the surrounding warriors, the armored fist catching him in the side of the jaw, and the Jedi's vision went white, his feet swept out from under him a moment later and he slammed to the ground, his back striking the hard metal of the hangar floor.

Groaning and moving as swiftly as he could, Obi-Wan rolled over on to his stomach to push himself to his feet, only to have pain lance through his leg when Edric put a heavy heel on his calf. Gritting his teeth to keep from shouting in pain, Obi-Wan hissed sharply when a large, powerful hand reached down and grabbed his hair, grown out just long enough get a firm grasp, and yanked his head back, pulling him up to his knees, the Jedi gasping in pain through short breaths. Fear and panic rushed through Satine as she watched the Mandalorians brutalize her peaceful Jedi defender, and instead of continuing her pointless attempts to free herself from the powerful grip, she quickly reached out to her captor's hip and grabbed his blaster and shot a bolt of red plasma into the man howling in pain as he released her, hands held tightly to the burning wound as he fell to the ground. The loud whine of the discharging weapon made the remaining soldiers reflexively draw their own sidearms as Satine leveled the blaster at Edric, the warrior staring at her with shock in his eyes, his hand tightening around the captive Jedi's hair.

"That is enough!" Nobody moved, but everyone's eyes shot to gaze at Qui-Gon as he entered the
hangar and approached on long, confident strides. As the steps of the Master echoed louder as the distance between them closed, Obi-Wan slowly began to laugh.

"Took you long enough, Master..." Kenobi said between grit teeth, and the Master stopped in his tracks when the Mandalorians in the room turned their blasters on him.

"Sorry, I had a matter to attend to," Qui-Gon said softly. "Are you alright?" Hissing in pain, Obi-Wan nodded as much as Edric's tight grasp permitted. "Having fun?"

"Oh, absolutely, Master..." Obi-Wan said in a whimper when Edric pressed his knee into his back. "Seven on one's a bit much, though, I thought it best to wait for you to join the party..." He winced when Edric drew his blaster and placed the barrel to Kenobi's head.

"Understood." Qui-Gon drew his lightsaber and ignited the green blade. "You wanted to fight a Jedi, Edric, you fight me. You're standing between me and my mission, and that's a very dangerous place to be."

"Kill him!" Edric commanded his men. "Kill the Jedi!"

The sound of blaster fire and the hissing of the plasma bolts as they struck the lightsaber filled the air, and before he could pull the trigger, Obi-Wan grabbed the hand that held Edric's blaster, angling the weapon away from him as the blaster discharged. Grabbing the man's elbow, he twisted Edric's wrist outward and pulled down as he pushed the elbow forward, the swift opposing motions causing the Mandalorian to flip over the Padawan's shoulder and land flat on his back right before him. Keeping a firm grasp on his wrist, Obi-Wan brought his newly freed leg forward, slamming his knee into the hyper-extended elbow, and with a snap and a sharp scream of pain and disbelief, Edric's arm bent backwards at the joint, hopelessly broken.

His lightsaber blazing to brilliant blue life in his hand, Obi-Wan reached out with the Force and took hold of Satine and pulled her into his protective grasp just as the Mandalorian soldiers opened fire on the trio, holding her close and deflecting red and green plasma bolts away from the Duchess. Qui-Gon ran in, quick and aggressive and stood next to his Padawan, his blade expertly swinging and batting the blaster fire back at the ones who shot at them, the deflected bolts striking hands and blasters and shoulders, and before long, all seven men lay groaning in pain and wounded upon the ground.

"To the ship, Obi-Wan, quickly," Qui-Gon said, the three of them turning to see Veela Ordo between them and the boarding ramp, a line of nearly twenty people flanking her, men and women, all of different races, in different armor, and all heavily armed, and all weapons pointed at them. "Bounty hunters. Qui-Gon held his saber out before him, watching out of the corner of his eye as Obi-Wan's arm tightened around the Duchess, Satine's cheeks streaked with tears and tightly clinging to her protector, her face against his chest, her shoulders visibly shaking.

"Brother," Veela said with a sigh. "You had one job." She glared at the man in disdain as he screamed through clenched teeth, clutching his broken arm. "How difficult is it for a warrior of Mandalore, of Clan Ordo to beat a sexless, soulless boy and a pacifist? The Jedi wasn't even here!" She sneered. "They are children." Edric screamed in outrage between clenched teeth, and Veela turned her gaze on the Duchess and smiled. "Sweet Satine. You should have spread your legs for my brother like the whore you are. It's the only use you have left."

"W-why are you doing this!" Satine cried, her eyes wide and begging for answers, and Veela sneered, the coldness of her glare making Satine clutch Obi-Wan's thin tunic tighter, her distress making the Padawan pull her closer.

"Because!" Veela chirped. "You are a traitor to Mandalore, you are a disgrace. Dar'manda,
"You are supposed to be my ally, Veela, Clan Ordo has stood beside Clan Kryze for ages!" Satine cried desperately, and Veela's face hardened.

"We stood by your father, a mighty warlord! We stood by your brother! But you?" She scoffed. "You turn to the Jedi, the enemies of Mandalore! You renounce our ways, you go against everything it means to be Mandalorian! It's good thing your father and brother are dead, because your actions would have shamed them." With a whimper, Satine laid her head on Obi-Wan's chest, the strong, slow, even beat of his heart calming her, despite the blasters trained on them.

"Do we kill them now?" the bounty hunter at Veela's side growled, and the woman smirked. "Not yet. Remember, these are the Jedi that escaped the Death Watch on Zanbar."

"You were supposed to divide them!" a Rodian female hissed, and Veela shot her a pointed glare.

"It didn't work out," she said, her voice tight with anger. "I didn't think the Jedi were actually without passion. I didn't think that Satine had become a slut for the Jedi. I thought there was something left of Mandalore within her, I thought Edric was man enough to bury himself inside her and pump it out." She smiled sweetly at Satine. "What's it like to be soulless, Satine? What's it like playing the whore for the Jedi to keep your power?" She waved a dismissive hand in the air. "You won't have it for long."

"Obi-Wan..." Qui-Gon said softly, his voice drowned out by the sound of their thrumming lightsabers and neither one daring to move. "You have no restrictions. Get Satine to the ship, no matter the cost. Remember, the rules get in the way of the mission. Feel the Living Force, trust your feelings." Obi-Wan's arm tightened around Satine, pulling her close, his hand soothingly stroking her shoulder, and he could feel his resolve strengthen.

"I understand, Master."

"After we kill your Jedi, Satine," Veela drawled, "we're all going to have a talk with Tor Vizsla. He's very interested in having you. Or..." She grinned wickedly. "Having you here with Clan Ordo will significantly strengthen our ability to take and hold Sundari. We'll have to see what father says." She pointed with her chin at the disabled Edric. "So good of the Jedi to break you in, because you'll be spending lots of time under my brother..."

"Enough, Veela," Qui-Gon said softly. "Let us go, and nobody will be harmed." She stared at him for a moment, then laughed harshly.

"Let me explain what's going to happen, Jedi. You're going to die. You can try to escape, of course, but every bounty hunter in the system knows you're here, and if you happen to get into the sky, our fortress is equipt with ion cannons, and you won't get far." She laughed and pointed her blaster at the trio. "Kill the Jedi first. These two ran circles around the Death Watch." Two dozen blasters emitted a high whine as they were primed, and before they were fired, Qui-Gon extended his hand and pushed back with the Force, sending a group of the bounty hunters flying backwards, their blasters discharging randomly into the air. Master rushed forward, his lightsaber swinging and deflecting the rapid fire, drawing the attention of the majority of the hunters as the greatest threat when the glowing green blade bit through the arms and legs of the hunters that got too close, sending much of the group into a retreat as they took cover.

Gripping Satine close as blaster fire flew in the air around them, Obi-Wan deflected the shots focused on them from two nearby hunters and reached out with the Force, grabbing the two men and lifting them into the air. With a swift cut downwards with his saber, the hunters were slammed
down to the ground, moving sluggishly on the floor as they struggled to rise, only to be swept aside with a powerful push of the Force as Obi-Wan rushed by, Satine clutched closely to him as they ran for the ship.

The moment their feet hit the boarding ramp, Obi-Wan gasped in pain, stumbling forward as he lost his balance, and the Duchess quickly caught hold of him, lending him her shoulder so he could rise, a smoking hole burned into the lean muscle of his thigh. He whipped his lightsaber around and deflected the next volley of blaster fire, his teeth grit and his eyes narrowed in focus as he looked at Veela Ordo, twin blasters in her hands and furiously glaring at the Jedi and the Duchess.

"Stay behind me, Satine..." Obi-Wan said softly, stepping before her and wincing as he put weight on the injured leg, his lightsaber held before him as he faced off against Veela. The warrior primed her weapons and rapidly fired, the Jedi deflecting the bolts away, fighting through the pain as he defended the Duchess. One bolt got past his defense, striking him in the hip, his knee giving way from the impact and pain, allowing a second bolt to hit just below his navel, and the Jedi dropped to his knees.

With a wicked grin, Veela rushed forward, her weapons whining as they primed for a final round, and just before her feet hit the boarding ramp, a powerful impact slammed into her shoulder, her weapons dropping from her hands as she staggered back and looked in shock at the blaster that Satine had pointed directly at her. The weapon discharged again, the next two shots striking her in both legs, and Veela dropped to the ground, her jaw clenched in pain and she stared hatefully at the Duchess.

Qui-Gon rushed to the ship when he felt pain in the Force, abandoning his fight with the remaining bounty hunters, the majority of their number laying dead upon the ground, leaving the tattered remains behind to regroup before making their next assault, and in the distance, he could hear the shouting and commands of Mandalorian soldiers as they rushed into the hangar. When Qui-Gon got to the ship, he found Satine acting as support to Obi-Wan, his arm draped over her shoulders and his lightsaber in hand, pale and sweating and breathing in ragged gasps. Without a word, he rushed past them as Satine began frantically screaming at him for his help, running through the corridors of the ship to the cockpit, where he quickly powered the ship on, reaching out with his senses to detect if anyone was hiding aboard the starship and found nothing, but double checked on his way back to the ramp anyway.

Satine and Obi-Wan were standing in the hatch when he returned to them, the Padawan swinging his saber and deflecting the fire of the newly arrived forces as Satine shot back at them from behind the cover of the doorway and Kenobi's body. He put his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder and pulled him out of the way, the boy whimpering in pain as he staggered for balance on wounded legs, and with a cry of desperation, Satine rushed to his side, glaring at the other Jedi until she saw that his own robes sported several holes made from blaster fire.

"Satine, take him to the cockpit, have him get us in the air," Qui-Gon quickly commanded, his saber swinging with deadly precision and expertly deflecting bolts back at the soldiers that shot at him, giving the others pause and forcing them to form into groups to take cover.

"Qui-Gon, I don't think-"

"He can do it, Satine, trust him!" the Master snapped, and with a nod, the Duchess took her place under the Padawan's arm and helped him limp into the cockpit. With a groan of pain, Obi-Wan lowered himself into the pilot's seat, quickly activated the weapon systems, and directed the aiming module at the large, closed doors of the hangar.

"Satine..." Kenobi said, soft and quiet and laced with pain. "Go tell Master Qui-Gon to seal the
ship up, he's not going to like what I'm about to do." Without wasting a moment, Satine rushed to
do as she was told, getting to the Master just in time to feel the ship shudder as the forward
cannons were fired. She heard the loud crash of explosions and metal twisting and grinding as the
ship rapidly fired, and a second later, she felt the oxygen sucked out of her lungs as superheated
air from the explosion blasted past them in a fiery blaze, the force sending the warriors flying
through the air and scattering as jetpacks exploded and armor was burned and melted.

Qui-Gon slammed his fist on the control console, retracting the ramp and sealing the hatch shut as
the ship shivered, lifting off the ground and vertical wings rotating to lay horizontal along the
ship's cabin, the ground beneath them lurching forward as the engines engaged, and the ship shot
out of the large, melted hole of the hangar doors.

Qui-Gon and Satine threw themselves into their seats in the cockpit as soon as they arrived, the
Duchess nervously looking at the deathly pale Padawan, his eyes focused intently out the
viewport, his hair wet with sweat as it ran down his face, a dark bruise forming on his cheek from
where he was struck earlier. Satine closed her eyes, her chest aching with the threat of tears. She
couldn't look at him.

"The ion cannons have locked on to us..." Obi-Wan said weakly as the console lights began to
flash in warning, and Qui-Gon laid his hand on the boy's shoulder, smiling softly as he channeled
the Force into his student with the direction to heal.

"They won't be a problem," Qui-Gon said softly, his faint smile becoming a wide grin when Obi-
Wan looked at him from the corner of his eye. "I told you. I was late to your fight because I got
hung up." He shrugged. "You sensed danger, Obi-Wan, and that is not to be ignored. And ion
cannons are so easy to disable." Through the pain, Obi-Wan smiled softly, shooting up into the
atmosphere completely unhindered, and as soon as they cleared Ordo's gravitational field, the ship
made the jump to lightspeed.

"We need time to regroup..." Qui-Gon said as soon as the stars blurred into blue and white,
quickly rising from his seat and handing Satine a datapad. "I've acquired a great deal of
information from the Ordos. Go through it, see if there's anything of interest. Enemy strongholds,
potential allies, anything."

"A-alright..." the Duchess said, clutching the datapad tightly in her hands as she watched Qui-Gon
quickly pull Obi-Wan's tunic off, and she quickly turned away when she saw the boy's pale body
a mess of blue and black and purple bruises. "Obi-Wan..." she whimpered, laying a hand on his
bruised shoulder and quickly drawing her hand away when the boy flinched. "...I-I'm sorry..." she
whispered, wringing her hands before her and staring at the ground as she felt her world shatter. "I
should have listened to you. You felt things were wrong, and I-" She was silenced when Obi-Wan
reached up and gently ran the back of his fingers down her pale cheek.

"No harm done, my Duchess..." Kenobi said, soft and gentle, a pained smile on his face.

"No harm?!" the Duchess gasped. "Obi-Wan, look at you! You look like you're dying!"

"He'll be fine," Qui-Gon quietly assured her, a hand on the cauterized wound in his abdomen, his
other hand resting on his chest.

"This is my fault!" she insisted, her eyes wide as she looked at Obi-Wan as he closed his eyes, his
breathing shuddering as the Force flowed through him. "None of this would have happened if I
just listened to you from the beginning!"

She couldn't bring herself to look at him, and when she felt her chest tighten again with the threat
of tears, she ran from the room, the cockpit door hissing closed behind her.

"Master..." Obi-Wan said after a long moment of silence. "I-"

"Hush," Qui-Gon quickly commanded. "I'm working. You rest." The Padawan didn't say a word as he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, relaxing into his Master's touch and the feel of the Force. Qui-Gon gently pat his bruised chest. "Well done, Obi-Wan." With a faint smile, he gently tugged on his braid, the injured Padawan chuckling softly as he did so. "You are allowed to defend yourself."

"Against seven aggressive men while defending the Duchess?" he asked, arching an eyebrow. "No thank you. If I'm no threat to them, their guard relaxes. I just needed to wait for you to even things up."

"You possess a super human defense, Obi-Wan. I doubt anyone can take a beating like you."

"As you said, trust in the Force..." He frowned, opening his eyes as he looked at his Master's serene face. "...Master?"

"Hmm..."

"About the Living Force...a-and trusting your feelings..." He took a deep breath, his chest tightening. "Master, I-"

"Qui-Gon?" Kenobi hissed as the door slid open, the Duchess peeking inside, her eyes cast at the ground. "I...just wanted to say thank you..." she whimpered, her hands tightly clutching the hem of her tunic. "I was reluctant to have Jedi protectors, but...I'd have nobody else." Despite the pain, a gentle, genuine smile spread across Obi-Wan's face, a warmth spreading in his chest that wasn't just from the Force. "I'll try to be an easier charge..."

"You are most welcome, Duchess," Qui-Gon said warmly. "Please, get some rest. This day hasn't been easy for any of us."

"I will..." She turned and paused in the doorway. "...rest well, Obi-Wan."

"Rest well, Satine," Kenobi said with a smile, and the door slid closed as the Duchess swiftly left.

"You were saying?" Qui-Gon asked, looking at his Padawan curiously, the boy unable to take his gaze from the cockpit door. Finally, he looked at the Master and smiled weakly.

"It's nothing, Master." Closing his eyes, Obi-Wan relaxed, and with warmth pulsing through his veins, the Padawan quickly fell asleep.

---

Entry thirty nine.

My mother always said that writing can help lift the veil of sadness and bring perspective to a bad situation, but she never said anything about it lifting the weight of depression. There is no perspective to be had here. She's dead, my father is dead, my brother is dead, and I don't even know where to begin mourning them. I've been running for so long, I've scarcely had the time to think about it. But on Ordo, with Veela and Edric...we talked about my family. They knew them, fought beside them, and everything came flooding back. All my mother's lessons in how to navigate a social scene and how to debate. All the times my father took me aside and quietly taught me how to spar, not with weapons, but with words. All the times my brother privately instructed me in combat, even though I was always reluctant. All the times Bo-Katan and I would read the histories of our people together...
All of it, lost to me.

I only realized how much on Ordo. I thought they were my friends. No, they were my friends. Veela, always so strong, a warrior my brother admired, my sister looked up to. And Edric, a dear friend of my brother that I have watched training in the Sundari courtyard on several occasions because I thought him strong and handsome. I don't understand how they could have come to turn on me as they had. I have always been different, something of an oddity in my family, but to think they believe me soulless when all I ever desired was what's best for Mandalore. How can they not see what this war is doing to us? How could they think that I...and with the Jedi!

I feel sick thinking about how foolish I was. I let my guard down. I trusted them, I trusted him, and for my trust, I nearly lost everything. He made me...ache, and he knew it, he preyed on it to come between me and my protectors, to get me away from the Jedi so Clan Ordo could rise, so they could do what they wished with me. My name still carries weight, and I still have supporters...I think. And they were going to use that to seize power, and I'd have ended up dead, or little more than a pleasure slave to...

No, I don't want to think about that.

I can still feel him touching me. I can still feel how close I came to letting him use me. I thought myself better than that. I thought I was stronger than that. I thought he actually cared. And what he did to Obi-Wan...

Dear, sweet Obi-Wan...

He's been on my mind a great deal as of late, as he should be, for all the pain he's suffered on my behalf, for all the sacrifices he has made for me. I don't know when I came to think of him so fondly. I was certain that just the other day, I hated him. He is frustrating and stubborn, imperious and arrogant when he knows he's right, which is often, no small feat for an idiot. And he is so stupidly sweet, so frustratingly kind, maddeningly brave, infuriatingly beautiful...

See, this is what I'm talking about.

Last night, when I was so foolishly drunk and alone in bed and aching with need that cruel, awful Edric put inside me, all I could think about was Obi-Wan. I dare not repeat the things I thought of him, but they were not exactly befitting a woman of my station. It had to be the alcohol. I can't explain it any other way. Alcohol and lust and aching for company at night. Of course I'd think of Obi-Wan. He's my age, and we already spend far too much time together. Who else should I fantasize about than him?

I need to go to him. His injuries are severe, and each one of them is a direct result of my foolishness. It isn't right for him to suffer because of me, but I look at him and feel I am suffering too. It's only right that we should suffer together. Perhaps we can find some solace in each other as well. I won't leave his side until he had recovered.

I must go tend to my shining Jedi Knight. He may not need me, but I certainly need him.
ALRIGHT! Here we are, kids, slowly getting closer to "The Shit." Excited? Yeah, me too. Alright, don't expect this one to update until the weekend. I need to get another Chapter of From Flames, I Soar, and I'm going to spend tomorrow writing a pretty swank one shot based on another work. It's...dark. Like...Kriffing Sith Hells, DARK. I'm so excited.

Anyway! Enjoy this! I did! Peace out, lovelies, let me know what you think!

It had been nearly four days since Satine had seen Obi-Wan. After they had escaped Ordo, after the severity of the Padawan's injuries, Qui-Gon had put him away in the room they shared, and he had yet to emerge, had yet to make even a single sound within the room, though Satine had knocked several times, despite Qui-Gon's insistence that she not disturb him. After all, Obi-Wan had been so badly wounded in the line of duty as he so fiercely protected her, and Satine wanted to make certain that the young Jedi knew his efforts were remembered and greatly appreciated. Qui-Gon was having none of it. The Jedi Master spent a good deal of time with his student as he attempted to heal him, both with the medical supplies and through the Force, and despite her insistence to see him, Satine wasn't permitted to be near her Jedi protector. It was pointless anyway, as Obi-Wan spent a great deal of the time sleeping. She caught sight of him once when she was passing by to her own room, the Jedi's door open as Qui-Gon knelt beside the bunk, his hands on the thin chest, his eyes closed in concentration as he focused his efforts in healing the boy. From what she could see, Obi-Wan's entire body was a patchwork of dark black and purple bruises, the result of the severe beating he had endured at the cruel hands of Edric Ordo.

All Satine could do was imagine the broken bones, the internal bleeding, the extreme pain that must have accompanied such bruising, and she was glad for the boy's unconsciousness. At least he could heal in peace. But what struck her most was even in the dark patchwork marring his beautifully pale skin, she could clearly see the blackened indentations where Veela Ordo had shot him. He was so still, his chest barely rising and falling with breaths that were far too shallow, and Satine felt a stab of guilt as she remembered that this was her fault. She tore her eyes away from the Jedi and rushed to the safety of her room. She didn't have the courage to look at him.

Satine grew quickly restless after that. Being on a ship in deep space when their pilot was out of commission was deeply unsettling, and the Duchess finally decided on a course of action. She slipped herself into the pilot's seat, her brief lessons in flying with Obi-Wan in her mind, and she set a course for Concord Dawn. It wasn't safe there, but being on Ordo had taught her that nowhere was safe, not even with supposed allies. Concord Dawn was a large planet, one that had a varied terrain of jungles, forests, deserts and plains, the landscape peppered with fortresses and cities and farming communities, all under the banner of one of several clans that made Concord Dawn their home.

It guaranteed that there would be fighting on the planet, but the clans that occupied Concord Dawn had been greatly diminished in the last war, most of them having aligned with the True Mandalorians, and the majority of them had been wiped out by the Death Watch. She was hoping that the presence of the Journeyman Protectors, the planet's stringent, respected law keepers,
would help in keeping the peace in at least some places, and there was always a chance that the clans on the planet still harbored a resentment of the Death Watch. The chances weren't great, but it was all Satine could come up with, and so, with the help of Qui-Gon, they piloted the ship to Concord Dawn.

The arrived out of hyperspace to see Concord Dawn hanging within its orbital asteroid field, the rocky debris having come from the planet itself. Past wars had devastated the planet, leaving roughly a third of its mass blasted away, a massive, jagged crater all that was left of so much of the world. Even still, orbiting among the debris of the planet's devastation, Concord Dawn was beautiful, a deep, rich purple due to its swirling cloud cover with the faintest traces of the greens of the forest and the golds of the farmlands visible where the clouds parted. They were silent in their approach, the Duchess holding her breath and praying that they would go unnoticed by any ships in the surrounding area, the prospects of bounty hunters keeping her on high alert. Satine flew carefully closer, Qui-Gon beside her managing the other systems and giving her support as she directed the ship to fly far around the asteroid field, adding a great deal of time to their trip, but keeping them much safer.

As they drew closer to the planet, they began to realize that the close proximity to the asteroid field was making them much more difficult to detect, though they understood this was something of a double edged sword, as bounty hunters no doubt knew the trick and would use it to their advantage. Still, no ships were in sight, no weapon systems locked on to them, and if anyone was watching them, they were keeping well out of the way. As a planet, Concord Dawn was a bit technologically backwards, so it was possible that their defense forces didn't know they were there. It did a great deal to set Satine's mind at ease, but not enough, and when one of the instruments on the control console loudly chimed, she jumped in her seat, her hands wrapping tightly around the yoke and jerking it swiftly, the responsive ship quickly wrenching sideways before she quickly resumed their course, a deep flush of embarrassment on her cheeks.

"It was just the navicom," Qui-Gon said, chuckling softly. "Informing us we have reached our destination."

"Y-yes, of course..." Satine muttered, sinking down in her seat. "I knew that. Of course I knew that..."

"You're just nervous, I understand," Qui-Gon said kindly. "We all are. This hasn't been easy."

Satine laughed nervously, her hands tightening around the controls.

"If Obi-Wan were flying, we'd be on the ground by now. He'd have gone right through the asteroid field! A-and he's good enough that he could pull it off too." She sighed, her eyes continuously darting to the scanners to check for nearby ships, and she tensed further when the scanner picked one up. She watched it tensely, her shaking hand poised over the pre-prepared hyperdrive lever, but the ship continued on, paying them no mind. A freighter, not a warship. She released a shuddering breath that she didn't realize she was holding, though the tension never left her shoulders.

"I wish Obi-Wan was here..." Satine squeaked, her hands shaking so badly that Qui-Gon had to assume control of the ship. "He'd be able to feel if something was wrong, he'd."

"Obi-Wan is correct about many things, Duchess, but he isn't infallible," Qui-Gon said softly. "Remember, he is still learning, and accurate as his feeling about the Ordos was, there are many things that can lead his feelings astray."

"I-I know, I just..." Satine sighed heavily, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. "I-is he going to be alright?" She turned wide, wet blue eyes on him, and Qui-Gon felt his immediate clinical answer die in his throat. She wasn't simply nervous, the Duchess was tormented. "Qui-Gon, I saw him a
few days ago, he looked like he was dead." She sniffled and wiped her eyes swiftly, biting her lip to keep unwanted tears from falling. "Is he going to die. Qui-Gon? I remember how awful it was to see him suffering the day we escaped, I remember how pale he looked, I thought...I-I thought..."

"Hush, Satine..." the Master said soothingly, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder, and he could feel her tremble under his touch, her restraint finally collapsing and leaving her to throw herself at the Jedi and sob helplessly into the folds of his robes. Sighing heavily, he gently clutched the girl to his chest, his hand running soothingly through her pale blond hair, the ends still wet from bathing recently. "He's not going to die. I know he looks bad, but his condition is stable. A few more days and he'll be back to arguing with you, and you'll wish he was out for a few days more." Between her sobs, Satine managed a choked laugh, her face burying deeper into the Jedi's soft robes.

"He can't help arguing, he's an idiot..." she sniffled, and Qui-Gon arched an eyebrow.

"I'd like the remind the Duchess that it takes two to argue."

"Y-yes..." she said drawing away slightly and pouting. "But I'm not the idiot because I'm right."

"Ah, yes, of course." Satine rubbed at her eyes, her lip trembling slightly as her fist balled into the Jedi's robes.

"What happened to him is my fault..." she whispered. "I caused this. If I was smarter, if I wasn't so eager to..." She trailed of, biting down on her lip in embarrassment. "It won't happen again, Qui-Gon. At least not like that."

"I believe you," the Jedi said, angling the ship to gently enter Concord Dawn's atmosphere. Watching the Duchess out of the corner of his eye as she untangled herself from him with a shy smile and settled back into the pilot's seat. She didn't assume control of the ship, instead wiping at her eyes and sniffing softly, looking over her shoulder toward the cockpit door, the living quarters resting in the hallway just beyond.

"Satine," Qui-Gon said, soft but gently admonishing, and the Duchess gasped as she jumped, suddenly torn out of her thoughts. "He needs to rest. You must allow him to sleep and recover, or when you need him again, he may not be able to defend you."

"I-I know that!" she said defensively. "I don't know why you're telling me this, I wasn't thinking about him or anything!" Qui-Gon arched a disbelieving eyebrow, and the Duchess' face, red from crying, grew three shades darker. "I wasn't! I was just...daydreaming!" She winced when she realized how that sounded. "My thoughts were wandering, that's all..." Qui-Gon sighed as Satine quickly took back control of the ship, her hands clutched tightly on the yoke and accelerator as she slumped in the seat, her jaw tight and her gaze fixed stubbornly out the viewport.

"Duchess," Qui-Gon said cautiously, almost as if he were uncertain about approaching the subject with the volatile girl, "you have previously expressed something of an...attraction to Obi-Wan. In the past, you admitted to it despite your personality conflict, but if that's changed-"

"It has changed," Satine hissed, her eyes narrowing dangerously as she glanced sidelong at the Jedi. "I can't very well continue to dislike him after what he did, now can I?"

"If your attraction to him has become something deeper-"

"It hasn't!" she snapped, cold and harsh and angry, though Qui-Gon could feel something deep within the girl tremble and shrink back, not angry, but terribly afraid. "Obi-Wan is my protector,
maybe even my friend, but he will never be *anything* more than that!" She laughed bitterly. "How could he be? If being a Jedi wasn't enough, I can't trust *myself*! You saw what I became with Edric! You saw where attraction led me! I can *never* give myself over to those feelings, not when they have led me so astray!" The Duchess bit down hard enough on her lip that she tasted blood, the forests and farms of Concord Dawn beginning to swim in her vision, her heart aching in her chest. "My emotions blinded me to what Edric was. I just so badly wanted..." She shook her head, but said nothing else, sucking gently on her bleeding lip as she guided the ship down toward a small clearing in the forest not too far from the edge of the fields of farmland.

"You mustn't blame yourself, Satine," Qui-Gon said kindly. "It's natural to want to be loved."

"What I felt for Edric wasn't love, Qui-Gon," the Duchess said flatly. "He knew that, and he used that to manipulate me, and I stupidly let him because I so badly wanted it." Her hands tightened on the controls as she flew lower, the ship jerking in her uncertainty, and Qui-Gon quickly supported her in her efforts to land. She smiled gratefully at him, though it never reached her eyes, the usually clear, bright blue dark and stormy with uncertainty and fear and deep sadness. "I won't let it happen again. Not while Mandalore suffers."

"That would be for the best," the Jedi softly agreed. "It's just another way for you to be used and manipulated by those who seek power or those who wish to harm you. Perhaps after the war," he softly offered when the girl's face fell slightly, the already saddened girl having the look of someone who's heart was broken, and despite his misgivings about the feelings between Obi-Wan and Satine, Qui-Gon felt the girl's pain and wished he could end it. "Mandalore will have to be rebuilt. It will be easier to do that with someone by your side. Someone you determine you can trust, after this war is over."

"...yes." She frowned, her brows knitting together in concentration while she fiddled with the ship's controls. "Obi-Wan didn't teach me how to land..." With a small smile, Qui-Gon transferred the flight controls to the copilot, and after a moment of trial and error, he figured out how to activate the landing mechanisms and set the ship down in the clearing. As soon as the ship settled, Satine undid her restraints, flashed a small smile at the Jedi, and left the cockpit. Qui-Gon nearly stopped her, nearly reached out to tell her of his own poor experience with love, and how all three of them were in the same boat, albeit for different reasons. Love was a complicated emotion, one that would make their task very difficult, and when survival was all that mattered, sacrifices needed to be made.

But he let her go, unwilling to press his luck. It was possible that her very near rape at the hands of Edric Ordo would be enough for her to push those desires deep down inside her, which wouldn't just be safer for her, but for Obi-Wan as well. And yet...there was something there, a small thread that bound them together, not just because of their obvious attraction, but because of something far, far deeper. A beautiful friendship was growing between the two teenagers, something far different from the physical lust Satine exhibited with Edric. It was a delicate balance, and Qui-Gon didn't want to draw attention to the matter or his nagging fears about it. It...wasn't in his hands. Obi-Wan would follow the Force. He'd do what felt right, and that was all the Master could ask for.

Qui-Gon got out of his seat, went back to check on the deeply sleeping Obi-Wan, the boy not having moved an inch from when the Master last left him. Sighing heavily, he shut the door and walked the few steps across the hall to Satine's room, tentatively knocking upon the door. She opened it quickly, a soft excited smile on her face for a moment before she quickly returned to a more neutral state, the girl trying desperately to control and conceal her emotions. Qui-Gon couldn't help but chuckle softly. Perhaps the Duchess had something to learn from the Jedi as well. Cooler heads would need to prevail if she were to tame her wild Mandalorian brethren. Perhaps this time would be just as formative for Satine as it was for Obi-Wan.
"Do you need me, Qui-Gon?" Satine whispered, her eyes cast at the ground.

"I'm leaving the ship to get a look at the area." The Duchess' eyes snapped up to the Jedi's face, wide and filled with fear, and Qui-Gon put a soothing hand on her shoulder. "I will not be far. I won't be out of sight of the ship. I just want to get a feel for the area." The girl relaxed immediately and slowly nodded.

"I'll seal the ship when you leave." Smiling faintly, Qui-Gon turned to leave, the Duchess walking silently behind him toward the boarding ramp. Satine reached out and touched the sleeve of his robe, and Qui-Gon looked back to find the sullen girl staring at the floor, nervousness and guilt rushing through her. "Please be safe..." she whispered, and Qui-Gon smiled kindly at the girl, fear and uncertainty making her seem so much smaller than she was. He tapped the comlink on his wrist.

"You contact me if you need me, and I will come running, understand? For anything at all." Satine said nothing, but she nodded slightly, and the Jedi patted her shoulder reassuringly before he walked off the ship and into the clearing. Satine watched for a moment as Qui-Gon slowly walked away, and when she could no longer see him, she quickly put her hand on the console on the wall, watching as the boarding ramp retracted, the door sealing closed with a hiss, and with a sigh, Satine returned to her room.

For the next two hours, Satine alternated between trying to rest in her room, leaving quickly when she found herself completely restless, and wandering the ship, examining every detail and doing her best to mimic the maintenance work she had seen Obi-Wan preform the week before. She was too afraid to touch the engines, though she did look at them a fair bit, trying to decide if she should remove the panels and look inside, as she had seen the Padawan do, but quickly decided against it. In the cockpit, she ran the post-landing checks and a quick diagnostic of the ship when the check came back clean, just as Obi-Wan had taught her in their lessons.

When the diagnostic came back, she checked over the reading, couldn't remember what all the values meant, and decided to run the diagnostic scan again. Then again. Then once again, after she had paced back to the engines and back again to the cockpit, slowing as she passed Obi-Wan's room, her eyes fixed on the door as if conflicted before tearing her gaze away and continuing on. After some time, Qui-Gon returned and reported the surrounding area to be completely clear, and with temporary safety secured, the two walked outside, Satine squinting against the bright sun. The Jedi took up watch at the edge of the clearing, the point closest to the neighboring farms and the most likely point of attack, should they be discovered. The Duchess stayed in the clearing, quietly examining her new surroundings.

The forest was not particularly thick, a result of land that was only barely fertile, grass and vegetation only sprouting in earnest around a wide, winding stream, no doubt the source of water from which the nearby farms depended on. The sound of chirping birds and the soft calls of the native fauna drifted through the air, and though Satine's chest was tight with nervousness and apprehension, her entire body tense and tight in her vigilance, it felt...peaceful. She knew it wasn't, but it was the first time in two months when her feet touched the ground and she couldn't hear the distant sound of blaster fire and explosions and screams. She felt the now familiar twang of guilt in her heart, the calm and peace reminding her of her battered, broken protector, and she bit down on her lip. If anyone should see peace, if anyone would appreciate the respite, it was Obi-Wan.

Resolving herself, Satine rushed back on the ship and headed straight for the galley, searching through the cabinets and quickly setting to the task of preparing tea, a luxury item that she had taken the liberty to appropriate from the Ordo kitchens on her supply run with Qui-Gon. She was a Duchess of the noble blood of the Kryze Clan. She may be on the run, but she felt entitled to some things, and she decided that tea was one of those things. Besides, the Ordos owed her far
more than some tea for their abuses, so she took the entire stash. It wasn't theft, it was recompense.

Satine quickly carried the cup to Obi-Wan's room, her hands steady despite the swift beating of her heart, and she stood before the door, breathing deeply to calm herself, silently chiding herself for being so foolish. He most likely wasn't even awake, and Qui-Gon had said not to bother him, that the student needed rest to recover. Satine sighed, shifting her weight from foot to foot as she deliberated her course of action, torn between allowing the boy to rest and directly aiding in his recovery. The decision was made for her when she heard a hiss of pain from inside the room, and without thinking, the Duchess slammed her hand on the console, the door sliding open with a hiss, and she swiftly stepped inside without a second thought.

Obi-Wan sat up in his bed, his bruised and wounded chest bare and his soft, cream colored robes laying across his lap, the boy grasping the fabric in one hand as he attempted to push a needle and thread through the cloth. He froze when he saw her, his eyes wide and an expression on his face that made it seem as though he were caught doing something he should have been. Satine couldn't help but smile, which only seemed to further fluster the Jedi. Quickly, he dropped the needle and threw the robe over his shoulders, wincing as he drew it together in an attempt to cover his bare chest, his face a deep red, save for the purple bruise on his cheek.

"Duchess, I..." Obi-Wan muttered quickly, sliding to stand on his feet, and he gasped in pain as soon as he put weight upon his right leg, immediately shifting his weight to the left. The Jedi cleared his throat. "S-sorry, if I knew you were coming, I'd-"

"I don't mind," Satine said softly, taking the few steps necessary to stand before the Jedi. "I didn't know you were up, I just thought to check on you." She tilted her head as she looked at the needle in the boy's hand. "What were you doing?"

"...oh." Obi-Wan held up the needle, his hand gently twirling his braid around his fingers, the long strand loose and fraying, and Kenobi frowned slightly as he felt the unkept feel of it beneath his fingers. He laughed nervously. "I meant to repair my robes and tunic, since...w-well, there are holes in them, and the change of clothes my Master and I had brought blew up in our ship back on Sundari, so..." Again, a slight, nervous laugh. "I haven't had much success, m-my hands won't stop shaking. He held out a hand toward her, indeed trembling as he said, and with a sigh, Satine set the cup down on the side table and took his hand in hers. She gently ran her thumb over his palm, the boy gasping with a sharp inhale as she did so, and she peered closer at the long fingers to find a dozen little bleeding pinpricks all along the soft pads of his fingertips.

"Oh, Obi-Wan..." Satine smiled coyly at him, clutching his hand tightly. "Why didn't you come get me for help? I feel I am a fair bit better than you at sewing."

"W-well, it's my robe, so..." He trailed off when the Duchess shot him a look that conveyed exactly how unimpressed with him she was. "...y-you'd help me?"

"Of course," she said, extending her hand to him expectantly, and with a faint smile, Obi-Wan dropped the needle on to her palm. "Sit," she said, reaching over to grab the cup when the Jedi quickly did as he was told, breathing a sigh of relief to be off his feet once again. He sat for a moment, his eyes averted and fidgeting uncomfortably, and didn't look up until Satine reached out and touched him on the shoulder, smiling faintly and a light pink flush on her face. "Your robe, Obi-Wan," Satine said, holding out her arm for the heavy cloth. "I need it."

"Y-yes," Obi-Wan said swiftly, his voice tight and high with tension, and he cleared his throat. "Yes, of course..." He winced as he slowly shrugged the robe off, his eyes averted as he draped it over the Duchess arm, and she pressed the cup she held into his shaking hands and sat beside him. They were silent for a while, the Duchess running her hands over the robe and locating the singed holes in the fabric, and she swiftly set to work, her lips pursed for a moment before she decided
how best to mend it, and pushed the needle and thread through. Obi-Wan watched her with fascination, his eyes fixed on her dexterous fingers as she pushed the needle in and pulled it through, the stitching close and tight, and she smiled softly to herself when she finished the first one and tied off the thread, cutting away the frays of burned fabric and leaving the repaired hole as smooth as she could make it.

"You know..." Satine drawled, laying her hand over Obi-Wan's. "I didn't make you tea so you could warm your hands." Obi-Wan looked down into the cup, watching the surface ripple in his tight, shaking grasp, though with the Duchess' hand over his, it was less disturbed than it had been.

"You made it for me?" the Jedi asked, and Satine absently nodded, holding up the robe and searching for the next spot in need of repair when she determined the first one good enough. "I thought I was just holding it for you." Satine cast the Jedi a stern look, and flushing deeply, Obi-Wan looked away and silently began sipping at the tea, a small smile curling his lips as he breathed in the sweet scent.

"Are you feeling any better?" Satine asked quietly after she had finished mending the second hole, the silence between them calm and peaceful, though it was making the Duchess restless and awkward. Obi-Wan shifted slightly beside her, groaning softly as he did so, and she didn't need to hear his answer to know he was still in pain.

"Much better, yes," Obi-Wan said, smiling warmly when he caught her looking at him out of the corner of her eye. "I'm a bit sore, but I've been healing, and Qui-Gon has been giving me drugs to ease the pain." He took a long sip of the tea, watching the Duchess as she found new things on the robe to mend, the wear it had undergone glaringly obvious under Satine's close examination. "We've landed?" the Jedi asked. "I don't hear the engines."

"A little while ago, yes. I didn't feel safe up there because..." She frowned, her hand lightly stroking the soft fabric under her fingers. "I'm not a pilot, if anyone hunting me found us, there wouldn't be anything we could do. At least we have cover down here, and anyone after us would have to meet Qui-Gon." She gasped and quickly looked at the Jedi, and she reached out and laid her hand on his chest, his heart beating swiftly under her fingertips. "And you, of course..."

"Of course..." Despite his best efforts, Obi-Wan couldn't breathe, and he set the cup aside for fear he may drop it, his skin prickling under Satine's touch as her fingers lightly traced along his chest to the old wound on his shoulder, the first shot he had taken for her, long healed now, though the indentation in his skin remained. She touched lower, to the scar in his side from that first day on Zanbar, over the dark purple bruises on his ribs where they had almost certainly been broken, over the still charred flesh surrounding the most recent blaster fire wounds on his him and below his navel. She drew her hand back when the lean muscle twitched in sudden contraction, the slight whimper in the Jedi's throat filling her with concern that she had hurt him.

"I'm so sorry this happened to you..." Satine whispered, her eyes fixed on her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her own heart racing and he stomach fluttering terribly. But the Jedi simply smiled, small and sweet, his eyes closed and his face peaceful.

"I'm not. It's my duty to defend you. If I get wounded or killed in the process-"

"No!" Her voice was harsh, tight with panic and fear, her eyes wide and wet, and Obi-Wan couldn't look away, the fiercely protective instinct within him rising in response to her distress. "So many people have already been killed for me. No more, I won't have it!"

"Satine-"
"I won't!" she snapped. "Death and betrayal has seen everything taken from me. I won't lose you too. Promise me," she said firmly, her hand grasping his shoulder tightly and Obi-Wan winced from the pain. "You aren't just some shield to me, Obi-Wan, you're..." Satine trailed off, unable to look at the Jedi for a moment and biting her lip, her tight grasp loosening to pet gently at his neck and chest, impervious to the way the boy shivered under her touch and so subtly leaned into it. "You're my friend," she whispered, finally turning her eyes up to meet his. "Please...promise me you'll defend yourself, promise me you'll stay safe."

"...only if you're safety is secured." Biting her lip, Satine nodded, and Obi-Wan laid his hand over hers upon his chest, the pounding of both their heart's felt keenly between them. "Then I promise..."

Obi-Wan's face was impassive as always, but to Satine, it was full of passion and promise, those blue eyes bright and beautiful and absolutely brimming with the fire of soul filled with kindness and gentleness and endless compassion and love. It was nothing like the souls of Mandalore, fires that burned too hot and too bright, too wild to be contained, the fires of fury, of war, of consuming passion bursting from their cores. Obi-Wan's fire was warmth, calm and contained and gentle, a comfort and a respite, never too hot, never too bright. To a girl brimming with Mandalorian wildfire, Satine had seen ash in Obi-Wan, cold and lifeless and incapable of burning, her own fire overtaking and blinding her to the soft, gentle glow of the Jedi's carefully tended flames.

She felt like a fool for never having seen it before. She was blind and cruel, just like her kinsmen. Just like the Ordos. But she would change. She had to change, or Mandalore never would. And to think it took a Jedi to show her such a thing...

Satine only then realized how close she was to him, how strong his heart beat beneath her fingertips, how warm and smooth his skin was, how strong his chest felt, despite his gauntness. She could feel his slow, shivering breaths upon her skin, his noble blue eyes looking right through her, and a tingling down her spine, a warmth collecting deep in her core and spreading outwards compelled her even closer to her brave protector. The Jedi looked away first, his eyes darting to look at the floor and a soft groan in his throat as a deep pink flush stained his high cut cheeks, and it took every ounce of restraint within the Duchess not to run her hand along his jaw and force him to look at her again.

"Do you want to come outside with me?" Satine asked, her heart beating faster when the Jedi's lips twitched into a faint smile. "You've been in bed for days, and it's beautiful out there, a-and I know you need to rest, so if you don't want to-

"I'd love to," Obi-Wan whispered, and Satine thought her chest would burst. She jumped off the bed and extended her hands to help Obi-Wan up, and he hesitated for a moment, uncertain and insecure and looking at her hands with apprehension. Slowly, he reached out and took her hand, grimacing with the effort as he was pulled to his feet, and he slowly shifted his weight and tensed his muscles, testing the feel of the movement, more sore than pained, though his leg and his abdomen still shot sharp pain through him when he moved in a way the injury disagreed with.

"You needed other things mended?" Satine asked, a small smile on her face as she folded his soft robe and draped it over her arm, and he looked gratefully at her.

"M-my tunic, yes," he said, reaching behind him to the bed and picking up the much thinner cloth.

"What about your pants?" Satine asked, her tone almost clinical, though the notion seemed to cause the Jedi some discomfort. "You were shot in the leg, weren't you?" Obi-Wan nodded.

"I-I can repair those later myself, I'm not-"
"Nonsense, since I'm doing the mending now, you may as well give them to me." She frowned when the Jedi grabbed his braid and began running it through his fingers, and gasped softly in understanding as she looked at him, not noticing how her eyes roamed over him. "Oh, you said you don't have a change." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "What about your armor from Zanbar? Did you bring that with you, or did you leave it on the other ship?"

"O-oh, um..." Obi-Wan breathed a sigh of relief, his unease replaced by shyness, a thing that Satine used to find infuriating, but now found it terribly endearing, gratefully so unlike the bold, brash confidence of Edric. "Yes, I brought it. I forgot about that. It's, um..." He pointed to the drawers under the bunk, and Satine quickly bent down and pulled them open, the black and blue armor of the Death Watch laying inside. She pulled the armor out and laid the folded protective cloth on the bed.

"I'll leave you alone to change," Satine said, picking up the Jedi's robes and tunic and grasping the small sewing kit in her hand. "Do you want me to wait for you? Do you need help walking?" She held up a hand just as the Jedi started to talk. "No, never mind. I'll wait." Satine left the room quickly, a spring in her step, the door hissing closed behind her, and with a soft groan, Obi-Wan collapsed on the bed, attempting to slow his breathing and trying very hard not to notice the churning heat deep in his gut, whimpering quietly as he began to slide his pants off, which made the process of calming himself very challenging.

"There is no passion, there is serenity..."

He hadn't felt this out of control since he was on the edge of thirteen years old, barely a year into his apprenticeship with Qui-Gon Jinn when he began to transition into manhood, his nights plagued by vivid dreams of want and women. They weren't graphic by any stretch of the imagination. Obi-Wan's focus had been on the metaphysical in his furious devotion to his studies of the Force, his training to become a Jedi Knight superceding everything within him when he was so close to almost losing the opportunity, so there was little time for him to sit and wonder about the opposite sex, as so many of his peers did. He did know about the female form from the biology classes he had taken, but Obi-Wan had approached the subject of sex and reproduction with the same clinical mind that he approached everything.

When he had awoken the first night feeling feverish, his heart pounding in his chest, his rapid breath exhaling with soft, needy whimpers and hard with painful, aching arousal, he simply couldn't understand what was happening to him. The dreams that had so rudely awoken him were vivid, not with images, but with feeling. The images were blurred and hazy, all pale, flawless skin, flushed and covered in the thin sheen of rigorous effort, the soft, breathless moans of female voices still echoing in his mind, but there was little more than that. No details, no glimpse of long, sensuous legs or soft, rounded breasts, no images of the act itself because Obi-Wan knew nothing about that. No, what woke him was burning, the deep, raw pooling of desire and lust, the maddening urge to be within someone clawing at the core of his being like an itch that could not be scratched.

In the dark of his room, the young Obi-Wan had been too ashamed and too timid to touch the offending flesh, to bring himself the satisfaction his body craved so badly it had sunk into his unconscious mind. His resistance hadn't lasted long, each night bringing him more dreams and more shameful torment that only served to amplify his need, his soft, desperate chanting of the Code during his meditations only doing so much to repress the ever-growing desire he felt until he finally gave in. It was like a wash of relief, a need as vital as eating or breathing finally being met after weeks of suffering and countless hours laying agonized and aroused in his bed in the dead of night. When the tension had pulsed out of him, when the primal need was sated in a wave of euphoria, he hated himself, and did every single time he failed to resist the urge. He was a Jedi. He was better than this, and as time went on, as his studies into the Force intensified, he became
better at repressing his desires. The times when he would fail in his resilience became less frequent, and while never completely cured of his biological drives, the times he lost himself to pleasure became few and far between.

It was different now, like it was different the night that Veela Ordo had tried to seduce him. Now, the once vague images in his mind took clear and vivid shape, no longer the pure imagination of a boy who knew too little, but the maddening, persistent thoughts of a teenager who knew exactly what he wanted, though he refused to admit it. Satine. Satine, always Satine, despite his fervent attempt to push her from his thoughts, despite his desire to return to the vagueness of before, though something inside of him clung desperately to the image of the young Duchess, the crisp and clear visions lending itself to pooling desire far beyond what he had experienced with his more vague dreams.

It took everything in him not to brush his stirring arousal as he tugged his pants off, the feel of Satine's drifting hand on his jaw, his neck, his chest, his stomach still burning on his bruised skin, sending warmth shooting through him and easing his physical pains as it added to the insufferable ache within him. He couldn't decide which was worse.

It would be so easy to stick his head outside the room and tell sweet Satine that he wasn't feeling well, that the pain was too much, that Qui-Gon's advice for rest was best heeded, and the girl would be on her way, leaving Obi-Wan alone to indulge as he had done after Veela had stirred his desire and broken his restraint. It would be so easy...

With a growl of irritation and disgust at himself for even entertaining the thought, he tore his pants off, wincing as he suddenly jerked his wounded leg, and pulled on the black pair that belonged to his armor, securing it with his belt and clipping his lightsaber to it. He stood, groaning as his sore, aching muscles screamed in protest, and he knelt down, gathering the discarded armor in his arms, struggling with all the loose pieces before he has the idea to use the chest piece as a tray to carry it all. Tucking the bundle under his arm, he quickly took the cup of tea from the side table, finished the remainder of the cooling liquid, snatched his discarded pants from the bed and strode to the door, walking out after it had hissed open. Satine smiled at him briefly when she saw him, and quickly frowned in her confusion.

"...I thought it may be a poor idea to defend you in Death Watch armor," Obi-Wan muttered. "Your Mandalorians seem to shoot first, and I'd hate to have your potential allies attack us."

"I don't think you should get rid of it..." Satine said warily, but Obi-Wan shook his head, handing the Duchess the armor when she reached for it, and she put the heavy pile on the floor, swiftly snapping the pieces together into a much neater, more compact and much more portable stack.

"I was going to paint it," Obi-Wan muttered, watching the girl in fascination as her deft fingers rolled the armor in his robes and handed it back to him.

"You have paint?" Satine asked, moving closer to the Jedi and wrapping her arm around his waist, careful to avoid the wound on his hip, and she grabbed his arm when it draped over her shoulders, the smaller girl smiling when Obi-Wan leaned his weight on her with a quiet sigh of relief.

"Yes, in the maintenance corridor," Kenobi said as he and the Duchess began the slow trek to the boarding ramp. "There was extra from when I painted the ship, I thought I'd keep extra in case it needed a touch up." Satine looked at him, arching a curious eyebrow.

"We're running for our lives, my Jedi, and you're worried about the cosmetics of the ship?"

"It's a nice ship!" Obi-Wan protested, and Satine laughed softly, shaking her head.
"My little starship pilot...whatever shall I do with you?" A list, a highly undignified list of things came to Obi-Wan's mind, but he said nothing, a soft, nervous chuckle escaping his throat instead, and together, he and the Duchess stepped out of the ship, the bright morning sun filtering in through the trees and blinding him for a moment, his eyes sensitive from his days asleep. He could feel the sun on his bruised skin as he slowly limped beside Satine, the girl leading him across the dry, earthy clearing toward a small river, its banks covered in fine, thin grass and large, flat stones, the air feeling of peace and serenity, a thing Obi-Wan hadn't felt since he had last been home on Coruscant. Satine was right. It was beautiful here.

Satine helped ease Obi-Wan to the grass, quickly pulling off his boots and dipping his feet in the cool, languidly flowing water, the roll of his armor and robes beside him, and she immediately took off running back to the ship, leaving the Jedi to sigh in contentment, his eyes closed as the sun speckled across his skin warmed him. Breathing deep, Obi-Wan sunk into the Force, feeling its ebb and flow in the calm of his meditation. He could feel his Master, so close, so vigilant, his presence sharpening when Obi-Wan brushed against him. He could feel others, not close, small, wary presences, powerful and battle hardened and war weary, not actively hostile, but they could easily become so. Still, he didn't feel the same nagging in the back of his mind that he felt on their approach to Ordo. If there was danger here, it wasn't immanent or inherently malignant. He knew it wouldn't stay this way, but it didn't stop him from being surrounded by the serenity of the moment.

"Obi–Wan." He felt the voice more than he heard it, his consciousness returning as he slipped out of his meditation, becoming keenly aware of the strong hand upon his shoulder, the large shadow that fell over him and shielded him from the sun's warmth, the familiar, comforting presence of his Master, and Kenobi opened his eyes and smiled up at the worried Jedi. "You slipped away for a moment there," Qui-Gon said, his voice filled with concern for his farsighted student.

"Sorry, Master," Kenobi said softly, his eyes closing again when he felt peace wash over him. He was so weary, the calm and the serenity a welcome respite from the months of fear and anxiety, and he was brought back quickly with a sharp stab of pain when Qui-Gon tugged on his braid. Frowning less because of the Master's treatment of him and more because of how disheveled and frayed the lock of hair looked, Kenobi's slightly unsteady hands began unraveling the braided hair.

"Don't let your guard down, Padawan," Qui-Gon gently admonished, his eyes slowly surveying the ship, the clearing, the forest, and everything beyond. "It's times like these we are most vulnerable to attack."

"I don't sense immanent danger, Master."

"Nor do I, but that doesn't mean it isn't there. Do not forget, you are in pain and have been heavily medicated the past few days. Your vision may not be so clear as you think." His lips drawn in a thin line, his eyes intense, Obi-Wan nodded in understanding, his fingers still slowly at work to undo the messy braid. Qui-Gon knelt beside him, a hand on his student's shoulder, and Kenobi looked up, fear and panic plain as day upon his Master's face, and his breath caught in his throat at the sight, a look that he remembered seeing upon his Master only once before in a much, much darker time for the duo. "There were times I thought you were going to die, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon whispered. "Force help me, I thought I was going to lose you. You were on the brink of death for two days before you stabilized." Obi-Wan sucked in a sharp breath, his fingers wrapping around the loose strands of hair in his sudden spike of anxiety.

"W-what? No, I was hurt, yes, but we made it off Ordo fine! I was fine!"

"For a time, yes," Qui-Gon softly agreed. "I thought you were alright as well. Then the shock wore off, and within seconds, you were nearly gone." He looked over Obi-Wan's shoulder and saw Satine walk down the boarding ramp, a container clutched tightly in one hand and a bundle
tucked under her other arm. Obi-Wan followed his Master's gaze, his chest tight as he looked at the
 girl he had nearly died defending.

"Does Satine know?" Kenobi whispered, and the Master shook his head.

"It would have served no purpose to put the girl under that stress. She does not need more guilt on
 her soul."

"...I agree." He looked up at his Master, a grateful smile on his lips. "Thank you, Master. For
 looking out for her, I..." With a sharp, strained exhale, Satine dropped the small bucket beside Obi-
 Wan and laid the bundle in his lap, her fingertips lightly brushing his shoulder as she moved past,
 a gesture that didn't evade Qui-Gon's watchful eyes.

"I don't know if I got you the right things, Obi-Wan," Satine said, sitting herself beside the
 Padawan and smiling brightly at Qui-Gon. "Look how much better he looks, Qui-Gon!" the
 Duchess chirped, sliding her feet in the water next to the Padawan, their legs brushing together
 slightly, and despite his previous misgivings, the Master felt a timid, careful harmony between the
 two teenagers, peace in a system at war, the fiery Mandalorian's passions balanced by the young
 Jedi's serenity. It was...something beautiful, a rare and shining thing that sang of life and purity
 and innocence even in the darkest times, a thing to be protected and defended, fleeting as it may
 be, and worth it because it, like all things, was destined to fade.

Qui-Gon had thought that war would be what forged his young, shy, insecure student into a man,
 but from where he stood now, it seemed very likely that the horrors of war would roll off him like
 water, tempering him, yes, but leaving the forging to be done instead by love.

He didn't approve. He couldn't approve, not after what had happened to him when love led him
down the path of darkness, temporarily though it may have been, but if this is what the Force
intended, if this was where his student was being called to, if this is how he would find the
strength within him to see Satine Kryze safe from harm...he may not approve, but it would be
wrong to stand in the way of such a thing. It was not his place to determine the will or the flow of
the Force.

It is good to see him up and about, Duchess," Qui-Gon amicably agreed, smiling at her softly as
he stood. "Can I count on you to watch after her, Obi-Wan?"

"Always, Master."

"I'm going back to my post to keep watch. We shouldn't stay here long." Both the teens looked
 disappointed, and Qui-Gon sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It's not safe for us to remain
 still. It's one thing to be a target of the Mandalorians, as they are all fighting a war, but we are
 being hunted, and bounty hunters don't rest." The teens nodded in resignation, and Qui-Gon felt a
 sudden stab of guilt for having to drag these two from the peace of the moment and back into the
 war that surrounded them, but the feeling passed quickly, strengthening his resolve to end this
 matter as quickly as possible. "We leave at sundown at the latest. Be ready." The teens sighed as
 they watched Qui-Gon leave them, returning to his place at the edge of the woods, and when
 Satine leaned back, her hand brushing against Obi-Wan's, both of them jumped away from each
 other, looks of uncertainty on their flushed faces, and after a strained moment of heavy
 anticipation in the silence, they began laughing, the tension leaving them as suddenly as it had
 come.

"How long have you been growing this out?" Satine asked, reaching over and grabbing the long,
 loose lock of Obi-Wan's hair that grew from behind his ear, the blond strands catching the light
 and looking a soft, reddish gold as she ran it through her fingers.
"We start when we're children," Kenobi said, pulling the strand from her grasp and smoothing it out. "Three or four, I suppose."

"And all in anticipation of acquiring the position of training for your knighthood?" Obi-Wan nodded, separating the strand into three parts to begin braiding it when Satine reached up and touched his hand. "May I do it?" Obi-Wan drew back, his eyes narrowed in suspicion, and she could feel him withdrawing behind those walls of his, his gentle face becoming hard and distant, and as the boy exhaled, it all faded away, his body easing into relaxation as he shed his insecurities and his innate shyness.

"Nobody else has ever done it for me before," Obi-Wan said, edging closer and handing the strand to her, and with a bright smile, Satine's long, dexterous fingers took the golden strand, wetting her hand in the water and slicking the Padawan's hair, the gold darkening to an auburn red.

"Well then, Obi-Wan, I am happy to be your first," she said coyly, though she did not make eye contact with the blushing Jedi as she parted the hair and quickly set to weaving it in a tight, secured braid, not a single strand fraying loose. "I've never braided hair so long," Satine said softly. "Even if it's just a little bit. It isn't common on Mandalore to grow hair long. It isn't so comfortable under a helmet."

"Is everything on Mandalore centered around war and your ability to fight it?"

"It won't be when this stupid conflict is over," Satine growled through clenched teeth, her grip on Obi-Wan's hair tightening and the gentle pulling becoming hard yanks. "Either I will end our cycle of violence, or this war will kill the Mandalorians, they won't stop fighting until they are all dead..." She sighed heavily, her grip becoming gentle again, a hand dipping into the water to wet the strand, her fingers brushing his chest apologetically. "Yes, everything is about war..." she whispered, her eyes downcast, and Obi-Wan felt his heart ache. "It doesn't have to be. There are beautiful things about Mandalorian culture. Honor, family, fierce loyalty, passion..."

"You'll change them, Satine," Obi-Wan said softly, and the girl silently nodded, looking into his eyes and smiling faintly.

"I will. I must." She swiftly tied off the braid, her hand running over the tight rope and she held it up before the Jedi. "How did I do?"

"It's never looked so good," he said, running the strand between his fingers as he so often did. With a small, modest smile, Satine laid Obi-Wan's tunic in her lap, quickly threading the needle and set to work repairing the holes she felt responsible for. She felt her heart stop and suddenly lurch forward when she felt Obi-Wan's hand reach out and stroke her cheek with the back of his fingers, barely touching, but she could feel heat burning across her skin, the Jedi tenderly tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. She held her breath, too afraid to move, lest the Jedi be frightened away from the tentative, affectionate gesture, and Satine didn't want that to happen, didn't want to see him retreat back inside that shell of his. The shell was infuriating, even more so now when she knew how precious the man that lived within it was.

"May I braid yours?" Obi-Wan asked, his voice trembling and nervous, like he was asking something expressly forbidden, something awful, something he should have known better not to ask, but somehow found the courage in the event that maybe, just maybe, the rules were different today. "You did it when we were going to Ordo, I've never seen anything so..." He stopped and cleared his throat. "I-it looked alright...f-from what I remember."

"You may," Satine said breathlessly, and the Jedi beside her shifted, groaning quietly from the aches in his body as he moved to kneel behind the Duchess, his fingers shaking slightly as they
ran through Satine's pale blond hair, pulling the fine strands back and smoothing them out as he parted it and gently began weaving them together. Satine mentally chided herself for being so foolish, not a week after Edric, and she was already rushing to the comfort of another man. She needed to be stronger, she needed...

It wasn't the same. It didn't feel the same. Gone was the overwhelming lust, and in it's place, something warm and familiar, something she didn't know she needed, but now that it was in her grasp, she wasn't certain she could live without it. Grief had held her for so long, she had forgotten what it felt like to be close to someone, but Obi-Wan made her remember. With a sigh of intense relief, she leaned back against her Jedi and continued her work on mending the thin, light tunic, a peaceful smile on her lips as she felt Kenobi's fingers raking through her hair, lightly stroking her neck when he reached for new strands to add to the braid. If she could never be with the Jedi, so be it, so long as they could be just like this...

"Satine?" Obi-Wan asked tentatively. "What is it you saw in Edric Ordo?" The Duchess pouted, the threading of her needle through the leg of the Jedi's pants slowing as she considered the question.

"We are raised," she slowly explained, "to value strength and confidence, the things that make someone a good warrior. Qualities that my father possessed, my brother possessed, and Edric was close to my brother. I saw a lot of my brother and his friends, they were always around, always training, always..." She trailed off when she felt her skin flush with heat, the all too familiar lust churning within her at the memory of the strong Mandalorian warriors in training that so often occupied her young teenage mind before the war. "I-it's hard to deny he's attractive," is what she finally settled on when she felt her hair tied behind her, the touch of the Jedi's gentle fingers on her shoulder cooling the unwanted lust within her, though her heart beat no slower. "I do have eyes."

"And you are a woman of Mandalore, yes," Obi-Wan said as he scooted away from behind her and returned to his previous place at her side, his hands on her shoulders and turning her to face him, his eyes narrowed as he seemed to appraise her, slight touches to her chin prompting her to turn her head to the sides.

When he nodded, a small, pleased smirk on his face, Satine asked, "Well? How do I look?"

"Beautiful..." was the Jedi's breathless, whispered reply, the blue of his eyes intense and piercing, made only more brilliant by the light pink flush on his face. He cleared his throat and looked away from her, reaching for the paint and the mandalorian helmet, selecting a brush from the bundle that Satine had brought for him. "F-for a Mandalorian, of course..."

"Of course," the Duchess said, trying to repress the smile on her face as she returned to the sewing, looking out of the corner of her eye as Obi-Wan painted over the black with pale, silvery white. "So, what do you like?" Satine asked casually. "I can't imagine not finding the Mandalorians the ideal for beauty. You must have a type."

"S-sorry..." Obi-Wan said, his tone smooth and relaxed, a pleasant smile on his face as he focused on steadying his hand to paint along the fine, contoured lines. "Jedi, you know? We don't have a type."

"No?" the Duchess asked, scooting closer and nudging him teasingly when the brush was off the helmet as not to disturb his work. She folded his pants and tunic and laid them on the flat rock, putting the needle and thread away, and she reached for a brush and the chest piece to help him with the task. "Given your policy of non-attachment, I'd have thought the Jedi ideal to be indiscriminate, loose, easy women..."

"H-hardly!" Obi-Wan said, laughter in his voice. "You've got a strange view of the Jedi, if that's
"Well, perhaps you should be teaching me more about them," she drawled, leaning in toward him again. "All I know so far is that they're emotionally dead and they treat themselves like living shields..." She gently poked at one of the dark bruises on his strong stomach, and he reflexively winced, the lean muscles flexing and hardening in anticipation of pain, and she couldn't help but admire him. A life of hard, intensive training and the past two months of constant running and eating what little they could get their hands on had made the Jedi almost statuesque, like a work of art. "At least you bruise in such lovely colors, I have always said you are far too pale."

"Oh, your Highness is too kind," Obi-Wan said, rolling his eyes. "I'm so glad that my physical state is pleasing to you, Duchess."

"It is." Obi-Wan chuckled under his breath, a wry smirk on his lips as he leaned in toward the grinning girl and stopped, the sudden tightness in his chest too heavy to be ignored, and he quickly jumped to his feet, his eyes darting across the line of the woods, searching for something, anything that could point him toward the source of his tension. The sudden seriousness of her protector put Satine instantly on edge, and when Obi-Wan extended his hand to her, she quickly took it, the Jedi pulling her to her feet and holding her close, heedless of the painful breaks and wounds in his body, the Duchess laying her hand upon his hip and gripping it tightly, as if a light hold would see her protector disappear.

"Qui-Gon!" Obi-Wan shouted, and the Master was at his side in a moment, already rushing to the teens by the time the Padawan had called.

"I felt it too," the Master said, his voice low and deep, his eyes focused on the woods around them. "What do you sense?"

"I-I don't know, Master, it's-"

"Focus." The harshness of the Master's tone snapped the teenager out of his momentary stunned state, and his eyes narrowed in concentration.

"I don't sense malicious intent, Master, I sense...caution. Defensive, protective."

"Which can become dangerous very quickly," Qui-Gon said evenly. "We need to leave. Now." Obi-Wan nodded in agreement, pulling Satine closer as he stepped back, and before he could take another step, a shot rang out across the clearing, loud and harsh, not the familiar high whine of blaster fire, bit a much sharper crack, like wood snapping in a storm. Immediately, Qui-Gon took his hand off the lightsaber at his belt and raised his hands in the air, Obi-Wan following suit with one hand while he pulled Satine flush against him, the shaking Duchess wrapping her arms around her protector, grasping at the strong muscles in his back and hiding her face against the flat plains of his chest, the even pulse of his heart felt against her forehead.

"Don't move," Qui-Gon commanded. "Don't draw your lightsaber, that's a slugthrower rifle, we can't deflect those." From the woods before them came a ruddy skinned girl no more than ten years old, grasping previously mentioned rifle in her hands, the weapon raised and aimed at the trio. Her short black hair was tied back, several strands of the unruly locks falling about her forehead and neck, her expression serious, her eyes drifting to the armor on the ground, and then snapping back to the group. She didn't wear armor herself, and was dressed instead in dark brown pants covered in dirt and dust and a tanned, oversized tunic stained with sweat and tied at the waist with a length of rope.

When Satine found her courage to look at the assailant, she relaxed slightly, though she couldn't keep the whimper of fear out of her throat. She didn't believe this child to be anything other than a
farmer from the nearby range, but she had gravely misjudged a situation before, which had led to
the brutalizing of her Jedi guard. She didn't know where these farmers stood, which clan they
were under the banner of, and that could make all the difference. There was a bounty on them,
after all. A large one, and wealth to poor farmers could make most any of them give them up.
They were strangers, after all, and possibly enemies.

"Gar olar'or the te aka'an?" the girl asked, her high voice strong and commanding despite her
youth, her Mando'a heavily accented, and she felt Obi-Wan lean in slightly, the deep growl in his
chest giving sound to his frustration. He likely didn't understand all of her words through the
accent and the local dialect. The girl's eyes narrowed when nobody responded. "Elek? Sirbur'ni!"

"Y-yes!" Satine said almost frantically in her own smooth, elegant Mando'a, a far cry from the
drawled twang of the girl before them, and the child gripped the weapon tighter. "Yes, we came
from the war. We're trying to escape."

"Tion'jor cuiyir gar jorha'a'ir gu'uror ibac? Gar shebs ve'vut? Gar jaon'yc alor?" Obi-Wan leaned
down toward the Duchess, his jaw clenched tightly.

"Did she just ask you if you shit gold?" The Jedi asked, and Satine nodded.

"She wants to know if I'm a lord because of the way I talk."

"Well, there goes our cover," he said between clenched teeth when several more people emerged
from the woods, all of them sporting the same old, outdated weapons, more effective in this case
than their modern counterparts. A tall man stood beside the girl, the little thing speaking in a quick,
incomprehensible blurt to the man, his own dark eyes darting to the armor she pointed to, and he
frowned.

"You Death Watch?" the man asked in Basic, a hard twang to his otherwise slow, easy drawl, his
rifle pointing at Obi-Wan. The Jedi swallowed hard and said nothing, uncertain of which answer
would get them killed, slowly lowering his raised arm to wrap defensively around Satine. "I
reckon you ain't," the man said when the teen didn't answer. "You been painting that armor, so
most like, you killed a Death Watch soldier. That so?" He took a step closer, his boots sinking into
the stream. "You look like hell. You been in the war?" Slowly, the Padawan nodded, and the man
smirked.

"The way I figure it," the man drawled, "you been fighting Death Watch, and with little miss there
speaking so fancy my girl can't understand a damn word she says..." He whistled. "Now, I'm not a
betting man, but I'd put money on that there being the Kryze girl everyone's been running in
circles looking for." His eyes narrowed as he leaned in, examining the trio closer. "It true that you
destroyed the Death Watch base on Zanbar?"

"Not the base, no," Obi-Wan finally said. "But several outposts."

"Just the three of you?" Kenobi nodded, and the man raised his weapon. His eyes narrowed, and
Obi-Wan turned his body just slightly, enough that should the rifle fire, there was no danger of the
bullet passing through him and into the girl he held. "Well damn if I'm not impressed." The man's
arms relaxed, the weapon not dropping, but his grip on it now loose, despite the barrel still being
pointed at the Jedi Padawan. "They got bounty hunters looking for her. Death Watch is offering a
fortune to anyone that brings her in. Got the whole sector up in arms trying to catch her." The man
spit on the ground. "Armies and criminals all hunting one little girl? That ain't right anywhere.
Don't matter how important she is."

"Are you allies of the Duchess?" Qui-Gon asked, stepping forward when the man lowered his
hand, all the others that stood around them lowering their weapons and backing off. The man
"No," he said flatly. "We stand with Clan Fett. Our leader took our warriors and headed for Mandalore after you lot escaped Zanbar." He laughed loudly. "Brought the war away from us for now. Nobody cares 'bout Concord Dawn, ain't nothing here." He spit on the ground again. "You're no leader of mine, girl, but an enemy of those Death Watch bastards is a friend to us."

"Can we stay here for a little while?" Satine asked softly, and the man scoffed and looked at her like she was crazy.

"Aw, hell no! The whole of Mandalore is looking for you, ma'am. They gonna find you, and when they do, the war comes back to us." He laid his hand on the little girl's head, the child still not having dropped her weapon. "Our clan leader's after Tor Vizsla with all our fighting force. We're just simple farmers. We got no defense against the likes that are chasing you. I got things to protect." He patted the child's head. "Understand?"

"I do..." Satine said sadly.

"Sorry, ma'am," the farmer said. "You best be leaving soon. Our cities have been destroyed, most of our farmland burned in the first month. Most everyone here's dead, and, well..." He shrugged. "They ain't coming back on their own. But they'll come back for you."

"Do you know where we could go?" Obi-Wan asked quickly, pulling Satine closer to him, his hand held gently to the back of her head, and the man looked at the pair, a knowing smirk on his lips. "We're just trying to protect her, she must have allies somewhere."

"Aw, damn..." the farmer said, running his hands through his short, curly black hair. "You could try Clan Itera. Clan Cadera might be the biggest supporters of the New Mandalorians, but..." He shook his head. "They're right in the thick of the fighting. Ain't no safety there. Itera's smaller. Not so threatening. Might be safe there for a while."

"Thank you," Qui-Gon said, bowing to the farmer. "I apologize about intruding on your land."

"Don't apologize, just get going, the farmer grumbled, though not unkindly. "You here by the time I do my evening rounds, I might reconsider all those credits, even if it means bringing Death Watch here."

"We'll be gone within the hour," Qui-Gon promised, and the farmer just waved his hand dismissively, snapping for the others to return to the field, and the other farmers turned away and headed back into the forest, all save for the girl, who had yet to lower her weapon.

"Take care, little Kryze," the farmer said to Satine. "I don't hope you win, but it'll be nice if you survive." He shrugged. "You won't, but I hope you do."

"I'll remember your clan well if I do," she said, bowing toward the man, and with a hearty laugh, the farmer turned and left, the child in hand and telling her excitedly that her mother was going to die when she heard that not only was royalty in their woods, but the Duchess had bowed to him.

"Gather your things," Qui-Gon said, kneeling down to pick up Obi-Wan's armor, and the teens slowly gathered the rest, following behind Qui-Gon back toward the ship.

"Is that a common dialect?" Obi-Wan asked. "I could barely understand the girl when she spoke."

"There are many different dialects, yes," the Duchess confirmed, gripping the newly mended robes, tunic and pants close to her. Beside her, Obi-Wan smirked and leaned in closer.
"Seems to me like my Mando'a lessons are far from over."

"Oh, my sweet Jedi," Satine said, reaching up to run a gentle hand along his jaw. "You have no idea."

"We can begin once we set our next course, if you like," Obi-Wan drawled, leaning in toward her with a clever smirk on his face. "Teach me Mando'a, Duchess..."

Two steps in front of them, Qui-Gon Jinn rolled his eyes and wondered what he did to deserve this.

Reflection.

I'll make this quick, because I suddenly find myself managing quite a bit, and my time for meditation has become distressingly limited. The long and the short of it is this: teenagers will be the death of me. It is a truth that every Master with a student has come to know and understand, Master Dooku has told me on several occasions, and I foolishly thought I would avoid it. I have the perfect Padawan. Loyal, dedicated Obi-Wan, not a thought in his head for anything but the Force, too insecure to venture outside his comfort zone without his Master, too timid to strike up a conversation with anyone outside his very small circle of friends.

And here he is, in the middle of a war. Flirting.

Their arguments are still frequent, but I see them now for what they are. Banter. A way to get the other riled up because they like seeing the other flushed and flustered. And don't get me started on their Mando'a lessons. You'd laugh, Master Dooku, because my student is far more clever and creative than I ever had been. He only looks perfect. Obi-Wan Kenobi is an insidious little shit. Is this how this is all supposed to work? I get punished for being a difficult Padawan, just as you were punished with me for putting every single one of those wrinkles on Grandmaster Yoda's face for all the trouble you caused. Is that it? Will one day, Obi-Wan teach a student even worse than him? If he does, I hope his Padawan is like Quinlan Vos.

All this is only made worse by the fact that I told them to teach each other. These lessons were my idea, a thing that Obi-Wan has been very quick to remind me of, and as his instructor, Satine insists that he is simply awful in the nuances of the language, though from the way they prattle on, you wouldn't think it. Because it isn't true. The Mandalorian is lying. Or at the very least, distorting the truth.

Still, they both seem hesitant to go further than they have. They stand firmly in friendship, both acknowledging their mutual attraction, but neither willing to take the step to make the friendship something more. I'd approve of this, but all it has done is made the two insufferably flirtatious with each other. And they act like I don't see all their little touches, all the whispered words tucked into secluded corners of the ship. They're getting very good at hiding from me, an impressive feat, because this ship isn't that big, and when I do find them, it's usually because something happens to raise their excitement levels. And when he asks her to teach him, kriffing hell... "Teach me Mando'a." When he says it, it sounds like seduction. Do teenagers really think the adults around them don't know what's going on? Just because I can't catch you in the act, Obi-Wan, doesn't mean I don't know what you're up to!

I'd be more upset about all of this if Obi-Wan were less of a model student. His rapidly growing friendship with her has only tightened his focus and resolve. There isn't a moment he isn't aware of her emotional state, not a second where he doesn't know where she is. His connection to her has made him a fierce and attentive protector, more dedicated to the mission than I could have possibly hoped for. I just hope he knows that one day, the mission will be over. One day, Satine
Kryze won’t be Obi-Wan’s mission, and he will have to leave her. It will be painful for both of them, but they must know that their paths diverge. They must, or they will be unable to fulfill their duties. I can already sense that they care too deeply for each other to allow themselves to stand in the way of the other’s dreams.

When that day comes, I only pray they make the right choice.
Krownest

Chapter Notes

Happy Mother's Day, my lovelies! This one is a little later going up than I expected it to be, but it ran away with me in several places. Expect things to pick up very, very soon. Let me know what you think, kids!

Qui-Gon awoke early to find that Obi-Wan was already up and out of the room, his bunk neatly made as always, not a trace of the boy or his meager belongings anywhere in the room. It wasn't uncommon for young Kenobi to wake before his Master. Though Qui-Gon had always been an early riser, Obi-Wan's constant state of anxiety ensured that he was always awake first, the product of a difficulty sleeping that had only gotten worse in his teenage years. It wasn't like that for Qui-Gon when he was a teenager serving under Dooku. He would have slept well into the afternoon if his Master had allowed it, which he never did, and he suspected that his own early rising habits now were simply the product of Master Dooku forcing the routine upon him for so long.

With a groan, the Master turned over and nestled into his pillow. It wouldn't be so terrible to sleep in and allow himself to indulge in his natural inclination to not wake up before the dawn. Not that there was dawn in space. It was highly disorienting. For all he knew, he may have already slept longer than usual. He felt well-rested, in any case, but a few minutes longer couldn't have been a great crime. They were still a ways off from their destination on the planet of Krownest, a decision they didn't make lightly since the planet had the potential to be more dangerous to them than most, and there was little to be done on the ship outside of meditation and speaking to his young charges, or watching as they...

"Aw, damn it..." With a heavy groan, Qui-Gon rolled out of bed and lethargically shrugged on his tunic and robes, running a hand through his long hair to make him appear less disheveled from sleep. He had forgotten that he had teenagers to babysit. He grabbed his datapad from the small desk as he left the room, keying in the information for the planet they were heading to so he could get a grasp of what they faced. Satine had told them what she knew, but she had been uncertain and unsure about the loyalties of her people since the trouble with the Ordos. Still, her information had been very valuable, and when combined with what he knew of the planet from the records taken from the Ordo Archives, Qui-Gon was beginning to have a fairly clear picture of what they would be facing.

Krownest was the seat of Clan Wren, a clan with very close ties to the Vizslas, which made them almost certain enemies of the peaceful New Mandalorians. The cold, harsh terrain of their planet only served to harden the warriors into a group as harsh and uncompromising as the world they called home, which left little compassion or care for the weak within them. They served the Vizslas because they were strong, adhered to the ways of the past that they saw as the glory of Mandalore, which made them natural enemies of Satine's peaceful rule. However, the clan had been fighting the Ordos on their world in great strength, meaning that, like most clans, the Wrens may have been spread thin, and coupled with inter-clan fighting, it seemed very likely that the stronghold was left with a minimal force, one strong enough to hold their position and repel an invading clan until they could call for reenforcements, but not for much more than that.

But more than that, Krownest was also home to Clan Itera, a much smaller clan in tight alliance
with the much more powerful Clan Cadera, historical allies of the New Mandalorians. Satine's faith in that alliance had been shaken, as Clan Ordo was once allies of the Calderas as well, but the word of the farmers on Concord Dawn had convinced her that it was worth at least investigating. After all, it would be madness to for the Duchess to flee to a planet largely controlled by known allies of Clan Vizsla and the Death Watch after her very near capture on Ordo. It was far more likely that the bounty hunters searching for them would prowl around planets like Kalevala, the home world of Clan Kryze, or Mandalore itself, the home she had come to know as the daughter of the ruling family.

If Satine had allies on Krownest, they would find them, though it was just as likely that Clan Itera had been destroyed by the Wrens when the war broke out in an effort to establish dominion over the planet, the constant border skirmishes finally escalating with the outbreak of the new conflicts. It was possible that fear of the wrath of Clan Caldera kept the Wrens away from their less powerful allies, the Death Watch severely fragmented and diminished after the last conflict. With the Vizslas' barely maintaining control in Sundari and losing respect each day the Duchess continued to live after the attacks on Zanbar, they may have been directing the remainder of their allies to attack stronger targets. It explained the presence of Ursa Wren on Ordo, the fearsome eldest child of Clan Wren's warlord, sent to destroy the powerful, opportunistic Clan Ordo on behalf of the Vizslas trapped in Sundari.

There were a lot of unknown factors. There was a great deal of danger and nowhere was truly safe, but they knew a great deal more about the situation on Krownest than they did about anywhere else, which made the icy planet as good a place as any to set down the ship and resupply in the modest trade city situated on the boarders of Wren and Itera land. It was a neutral zone, at least it had been, established as such to draw merchants to the planet to secure much needed supplies to support both clans on the uncompromising planet. The guarantee of safety had the intended effect, leading to a firmly established trade city that was allowed to flourish even when the clans were at each other.

But that was before. Everything could be different now, was almost certainly different now. If it wasn't to their liking, they would just leave and come up with another plan, though Qui-Gon hoped that they at least had the chance to restock and refuel first. Healing Obi-Wan's injuries had torn through their medical supplies, and already they were running out of rations. With fuel getting low, they needed to make port soon, and Krownest was as good a place as any, since there simply were not any good places in the Mandalore sector. At least they'd be able to gather information. Understanding the situation was key to survival, and being able to keep up with the ever-shifting political situation was how they were going to eventually prevail. This was a war of diplomacy and alliance, rendered unspeakably bloody when its leaders failed to recognize that.

As soon as Qui-Gon stepped out into the hallway, he heard the pleasant trill of Satine's laughter, and he found himself frowning despite himself. It was early, and the Duchess had no business being up, unless she was following a certain Jedi Padawan around, as she had been doing the past few days. The early hour, however, suggested that this morning meeting was instigated by Obi-Wan, that devil. He'd have to corner the Padawan again and remind him of his duty, it seemed, though that had been of little use as of late. Obi-Wan was getting...bold. Brash. Confident and comfortable with himself, at ease in his own skin when before he had been skittish and disquieted. It was good, all things considered, Qui-Gon's earlier assessment that this war would forge the boy into a man proving accurate. He only wished that it wasn't happening around her.

Qui-Gon entered the cockpit to find Obi-Wan and Satine sitting huddled close together on the floor at the rear of small space, their backs against the hull and Obi-Wan's armor laid out before them, the two teens splattered with drops of paint as they finished the work of coloring the armor to Obi-Wan's specifications. They had nearly finished, the intimidating black and blue of Death Watch replaced with the lighter blue and silvery white, colors inspired by the halls of Sundari that
Obi-Wan had seen on his first days on Mandalore. They were talking softly, smooth and eloquent Mando'a rolling off their tongues and sounding like the soft cadence of music, their conversation punctuated by light, pleasant laughter. They stopped only for a moment when Satine reached up and ran her thumb across Obi-Wan's cheek, the boy closing his eyes as the Duchess wiped a smudge of paint from his face, and with a bright grin, they quickly returned to laughing.

When Qui-Gon cleared his throat, his arms crossed in front of his chest and clearly highly suspicious of the whispers, the giggles, the touching, both teens looked at them and the grins on their faces only widened, which immediately disarmed the Jedi Master, displeasure replaced with confusion. He was supposed to be the bad guy here. He was breaking up the party. They weren't supposed to be happy about it.

"Good morning, Master!" Obi-Wan chirped, quickly standing and helping the Duchess to her feet, and Qui-Gon's suspicion returned. His little Padawan was definitely up to something.

"Padawan..." the Master acknowledged, and bowed slightly to Satine. "Duchess. Good morning. You are certainly up early..."

"Obi-Wan came and got me up," Satine explained, rocking back and forth on her heels. "There was a solar flare off the star Harswee that lit up in every color imaginable!"

"It was very beautiful, Master," Obi-Wan said softly, and the Master arched an eyebrow, observing his student, reached toward him with the Force and felt...nothing. The little shit was guarding himself.

"Oh, you don't say..." Qui-Gon mumbled suspiciously, eyeing his student as the teen's eyes slowly drifted toward the Duchess.

"We've finished Obi-Wan's armor!" Satine said, carefully picking up the helmet and holding it out to the Master, and Qui-Gon took it, eyes narrowing as he glanced between it and the two teens. "It should be completely dry and ready to use by the time we get to Krownest."

"It's fine work..." Qui-Gon said softly after examining the helmet. "When do you suppose we will arrive, Obi-Wan?"

"Two hours, perhaps," Kenobi said, leaning over to gaze at the navicomputer. "Longer if I have to divert from our course again." He looked back at Satine and smiled, soft and shy as the girl took the helmet back from the Jedi. "Maybe we can have a real meal when we get there, I think we're all getting tired of rations." Satine wrinkled her nose, but couldn't keep the smile off her face.

"They are a bit stale, aren't they? I think chalk would have more flavor." The Duchess ran a hand through her hair, her lips pursing as she tucked a rogue strand behind her ear. "Well, my Knight, if you're taking me out for breakfast, I'm going to go get ready." She looked back at Qui-Gon, a faint flush to her pale cheeks. "Do you need the shower, or can I..."

"Be my guest, Duchess." With a bright, excited smile, Satine rushed from the cockpit, a slight bounce in her step, and Obi-Wan leaned over to watch her retreat down the hall. His gaze was only torn away when his Master's hand hit him on the back of the head, the Padawan hissing softly and rubbing his neck as he drew up.

"Did I...displease you, Master?" Obi-Wan asked quietly, looking up at Qui-Gon's stern face, his arms crossed over his chest, and where the Padawan before would have averted his eyes from his Master, chastised before the conversation even began, this time, Obi-Wan met Qui-Gon's gaze.

"Not yet..." Qui-Gon muttered. "I simply thought it necessary for me to remind you to be mindful
of your attachments, my Padawan. I understand your attraction to Satine. I understand that it is
natural to want to connect to a girl your age, especially since we are forced to work so closely
with her. But I would advise caution in this, Obi-Wan," he said, laying a hand on his student's
shoulder. "Be mindful of your duty, my Padawan." A slow, slight smile touched Obi-Wan's lips,
and Qui-Gon drew back slightly when he saw the flash of something in his student's eyes.

"Is my duty not the Duchess, Master?" Kenobi innocently asked, and Qui-Gon found himself at
an immediate loss for words. That was the trouble, wasn't it? They had been skirting around this
matter for weeks now, ever since the teens began to grow closer, ever since their arguments
became less antagonistic and more flirtatious, ever since they pressed harder and harder against
the line separating them as protector and charge, making them something more. Usually, the Jedi
placed their mission above all else, and in the past, their missions had been easy, clear cut affairs.
Stop the bandits, negotiate a cease-fire, save a hostage, all things they could accomplish through
focus, all things that only benefitted from the Jedi policy of emotional detachment.

But this was different. Obi-Wan had finally given voice to the complication of this assignment.
Their mission was inexorably tied to the fate of Satine Kryze. They were to protect her and defend
her as the last hope for Mandalorian peace, and while Jedi did occasionally serve as bodyguards, it
was never for such a prolonged time, rarely in situations so stressful. This was different. Their
survival depended on the three of them working together. It wasn't just her life in their hands, they
also relied upon her. At best, the situation was tricky, the Jedi dedication to the mission
complicated by the fact that their dedication applied to this girl. The very nature of the mission lent
itself to attachment just in order to see it succeed.

That being said, Obi-Wan was being a devious little shit.

"She is the mission, yes," Qui-Gon slowly explained, working out in his head exactly what he
was going to say to the Padawan. He wasn't even sure what he was going to say. "However, we
are still expected to remain unattached. Her wishes may not always be what's best, and if we find
ourselves giving in to her will because of our attachments, the mission may be compromised."

"It's our mission to ensure her safety, is it not?" Kenobi asked. "How can we do that if we are not
invested in her well-being?"

"Of course her safety is our priority," Qui-Gon sighed. "But that's it, just her safety! What you are
doing, Obi-Wan is far beyond the call of your duty."

"What am I doing, Master?" Qui-Gon shot him a pointed glare.

"You know damn well what you are doing," he softly hissed, tugging at the braid behind his
student's ear. "You are getting very close to her, far closer than your duty demands." Obi-Wan put
his hands in the air, a placating gesture that only served to rankle the Jedi.

"I wanted to keep my distance, as I'm certain you are aware," Obi-Wan said. "You ordered me to
learn from her, Master, I'm only doing as I'm told."

"Oh, really!" Qui-Gon managed to gasp. "And all those little touches, all the flirting, all the sitting
right next to each other is in accordance with my instructions?" He placed a hand on his chest and
sighed dramatically. "Oh, Satine," Qui-Gon drawled, raising the pitch of his voice and affecting it
with his student's clipped, refined accent. "Teach me Mando'a!" Despite the furious flush on the
boy's face and the braid wound tightly around his fingers, Obi-Wan drew up, his head held high, a
pleased smirk on his lips, and refused to look away from his Master's gaze. "Don't think I don't see
what is happening, Obi-Wan, I was young once too. These...sessions need to stop before you are
in too deep."
"Have the orders changed?" Obi-Wan asked softly, respectful, ever the perfect student if not for the sudden streak of defiance Qui-Gon saw in him. "Am I to stop learning from her?"

"It's for the best," Qui-Gon said firmly, his eyes narrowing as Kenobi's lips pursed in thought, which couldn't have been good. "I can sense your attachment to her, and you have long since become fluent in Mando'a. These lessons now only serve to deepen the emotional bond between you two, and as a Jedi...these things are forbidden to you."

"Master," Obi-Wan said after a moment of silence, "the Jedi Code compels us to seek knowledge over ignorance. I can't very well stop now, there is so much about Mandalore I do not know."

"Ooh, you little devil!" Qui-Gon growled, but despite himself, he couldn't keep the traces of a faint smile from his lips. "If you fail to become a Jedi, Obi-Wan, you would make a fantastic politician."

"I certainly hope it doesn't come to that, Master."

"But it may, since you seem intent on rushing headlong into the arms of this girl! Need I remind you that the Code also demands peace and serenity over emotion and passion?" Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow at his Master, and Qui-Gon could already feel defeat and resignation sink into him. "You are lecturing me on the Code, Master? Are you truly that concerned for me?"

"You know I am, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said softly, sinking into the copilot's seat and sighing heavily, his hand pressed to his forehead. "I just want to spare you the pain of what I have suffered. You...saw the result of my love for Tahl. I was..." He stopped, his chest tightening, and he flinched when Obi-Wan sat in the pilot's seat beside him and gently took his hand. "...we were careless..."

"What if..." Obi-Wan began, but quickly trailed off, his hand suddenly shaking. "What if I feel peace and serenity in the emotions I feel for her?" He could no longer hold his Master's gaze, his eyes drifting away to stare at the console before him, the blinking lights and the scrolling data giving him something calming and monotonous to focus on as his mind began reeling. "You keep telling me to trust my feelings, Master, but...what do I do if my feelings are for her?

"...well, you picked a fine time to start following the Living Force, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon groaned. "Listen, whatever it is you have going on with the Duchess needs to end," the Master said softly, and his heart ached when he watched his Padawan's face fall, his gaze drifting to the floor. "Am I not allowed a friendship with her?"

"And all that is fine, but you and the Duchess looked awfully cozy when I came in." A shy smile spread across Obi-Wan's face, followed by the telling flush upon his cheeks. Qui-Gon leaned in toward his student. "Master, she's all alone. Her family is dead, she's hunted everywhere she goes. I feel...I feel it's wrong and cruel to remain unattached when she needs empathy more than anything. We are protectors. How can we protect her if we don't care for her?"

"Master, seriously?!" Obi-Wan balked, the flush deepening from light pink to a dark, fierce red. "Do you really think she could bring herself to do such after what Edric Ordo did to her?!" Obi-Wan laughed almost bitterly and shook her head. "She has a need for physical closeness, and she is so open with me because I am a Jedi." He inhaled deeply and released a long, shuddering
breath, a hand tightening in his robe as the other pulled at his braid. "She feels completely safe and comfortable with me because she knows I am forbidden from such things. I won't take advantage of her, so..." Obi-Wan sighed and turned his chair to the control console, his hand stroking the accelerator as he pulled back on it, the soft hum of the engines growing louder as he increased their speed. "My feelings are irrelevant because my life belongs to the Jedi. I have my duty, and she has hers. We both know this."

"...these feelings are natural, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said softly when he felt the boy's presence in the Force tremble. "I just-

"I know, Master," Obi-Wan whispered, meeting the Jedi's eyes once again and smiling softly. "As you said, I know the dangers of attachment. I know why the Jedi say we are not allowed love. I saw what it did to you. The Duchess and I...we're just friends. I know better. She knows better." He returned to staring out the viewport. "You don't need to worry about me."

"But I always do," When Obi-Wan looked Qui-Gon's way to protest, the Jedi Master was chuckling softly, leaning back in his chair and relaxed, all his tension from before gone. "I owe you an apology, Obi-Wan," the Master said kindly when he felt his student begin to become flustered. "I've been suspicious of you when I have no cause to be. You've always been a model student and I...trust you to do what's right in regards to the Duchess." Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow as he looked at his Master.

"And what's the right thing?" Qui-Gon simply shrugged.

"How should I know? Trust your feelings, follow the will of the Force. Just be mindful and know that when the time comes, you must let go."

"...yes, Master," Obi-Wan said, his chest aching with the warmth he suddenly felt and doing all in his power to repress the smile that was spreading across his face. "I won't disappoint you."

"I know you won't." He sighed and looked sadly at his student. "I've been seeing shadows of Tahl everywhere. It seems my own love for her is still clouding my judgement. I...didn't mean to project my fears about myself on you. Your dedication to the Jedi Code is greater than mine has ever been." He laid a hand on the Padawan's shoulder. "I trust you not to stray."

"I-I won't..." Obi-Wan absently pressed buttons on the console before him, prompting the ship to run a completely unnecessary scan to give his hands something to do other than pull at the braid that hung behind his ear. It wasn't approval for the feelings he was keeping safely tucked away inside him, and it certainly wasn't permission to search for something more from the Duchess, if she was willing. But it was relaxed acceptance of the friendship they were forming, which immediately made Obi-Wan feel more at ease. It would certainly relax the tensions between them and would alleviate the need for secrecy. But all this was fine. It wasn't like he was in love with Satine or anything.

No, that would be crazy.

They had known Krownest was going to be cold, but they weren't expecting it to be this cold. Docking the ship had been easy enough, the trading port bustling despite the ongoing war. There were hundreds of ships docked in the spaceport of different classes, different origin, different purpose, and theirs wasn't even the only Kom'rk class, which was hardly surprising, given the war. The danger of Mandalorians that the presence of such ships carried was balanced by the fact that the docking officials didn't look twice at another of the fighter transports coming into port, and some smooth talking by Obi-Wan had secured them a private docking bay, a small, indoor space that protected the ship from the harsh climate outside. Snowy conditions forced Obi-Wan to divert
his full attention to landing the ship, a task made more difficult by howling winds, poor visibility, and a lack of experience in dealing with this kind of weather.

Once safely landed, Obi-Wan put the ship through all the necessary post-landing scans and procedures while Qui-Gon and Satine gathered their few belongings in preparation to leave, and as soon as the ship was secured, they stepped out on the extended boarding ramp, only to rush back inside and quickly seal the hatch, their teeth chattering and their skin tight with goosebumps. Cold didn't describe the bitter, biting hell they had walked out into, and that had been inside the shelter of their private docking bay. Cold like this could kill a man, and it would certainly be uncompromising to the two rail thin teenagers, both of whom had left Sundari months ago in a rush and were completely ill-prepared.

Qui-Gon sat on the ground, the short time the hatch was open freezing the cabin enough for their breath to be seen in the air, and he slipped into meditation, leaving the teenagers to come up with a plan for getting through the mess. Brushing his hand along the Duchess' shoulder and beaconing for her to follow him, Obi-Wan led her back to his room, the door sliding closed behind them, and the Jedi quickly began shrugging off his robes. The Duchess was left to stare, eyes wide and jaw slack as her Jedi friend and guardian swiftly and efficiently dropped the robes and pulled his tunic over his head, leaving him bare chested and exposed, the dark bruises once covering him faded significantly in the past few days.

Flushed deeply and struggling to find her voice, Satine gaped at the boy, her eyes raking over him, though trying to pretend she wasn't, frozen to the spot, though she tried to look away, trying to find it in her to protest the Jedi's indecency but could only stand on weak-kneed legs as her hands shook and warmth pooled in the pit of her being. Before she could regain a modicum of her swiftly fled dignity, Obi-Wan pulled the tunic over her head, the thin fabric warm from his body heat, and carefully draped his robes over her, her shivering ceased as he gently pulled the robes closed around her.

"Obi-Wan..." Satine managed to breathlessly whisper, her tongue found when the Jedi ran hesitant hands across her shoulders, smoothing the folds of the cream colored robes. "I-I can't take your clothes..."

"You can't very well walk around in what you're wearing, it isn't nearly warm enough," Obi-Wan muttered, unfastening his belt before stopping himself, biting down on his lip as he became keenly aware of the girl's eyes on him. "...turn around, please." Satine reacted to the Jedi's modesty with embarrassment of her own, her heart seeming to jump as she swiftly turned and faced the wall.

"W-what are you going to wear?" Satine stammered, covertly turning her head and straining her eyes to glance at the boy behind her, only able to catch the faintest look at thin, bruise-marked skin over strong, lean muscles as he rifled through the drawer under his bunk.

"My armor," Kenobi said, pressing his pants into Satine's hand, and with a gasp, the girl quickly reeled around to face the Jedi, the boy already in the black, insulated pants belonging to the armor, the rest of the pieces laid out on the bed. "It must be warm if your people wear it out here." He pulled the black, long-sleeved shirt over his head, slowly adjusting it as he thought, a hand running through his messy hair, and he frowned as the thick, blond strands slide between his fingers. It was getting quite long, long enough to look disheveled and messy if he didn't smooth it back, far longer than was typical for Padawans. And still he couldn't grow facial hair. "Are there different varieties of Mandalorian armor?"

"Y-yes..." Satine whispered, her voice trembling, and with a worried look on his face, Obi-Wan gently ran his hands down her arms.

"Are you alright?" he asked, his voice tight with concern. "You're shaking..." Satine looked away
and nodded slightly.

"Yes...i-it's just cold, that's all..."

"Would you prefer to wear my armor?" Obi-Wan asked, immediately beginning to remove the shirt when the Duchess reached out and quickly took his hand.

"N-no! No, it's alright. It wouldn't fit me, and there is little that attracts attention like a Mandalorian in ill-fitting armor." She crossed her arms and snuggled into the soft, thick robes around her. "This is warm enough. We won't be here long, in any case, and there will be shelter in the town."

"And it might help disguise you," Obi-Wan muttered, quickly fastening the armored greaves to his legs. "Your clothing doesn't exactly make you look common." The Duchess frowned.

"I'll have you know, Obi-Wan, I selected my clothing specifically for the hardships we may be facing! They are practical!"

"Practical, yes," Kenobi agreed, buckling armor to his hip and thigh and frowning when it doesn't sit quite right. "And made by the finest tailors in all of Mandalore, I'm sure. From the finest, most expensive cloth. Face it, Duchess, you look like royalty."

"I am royalty," Satine said flatly, crossing her arms in front of her chest and rolling her eyes when Obi-Wan undid the last piece of armor and fumbled to get it on. "Oh, stop it, give me that!" she snapped, snatching it away from him, the straps running through her fingers as she straightened them.

"They're very difficult to get on right..." Kenobi grumbled, and the Duchess shot him vaguely disdainful expression, her fingers hooking into his belt as she threaded the buckle through.

"It isn't difficult, Obi-Wan, you just lack the practice." She pulled the strap hard and buckled it into place, reached behind the Jedi to the bed and grabbed the armor for the opposite leg. "You think I should dress more commonly?" she asked softly, her voice thin and unsure, her iron resolve giving way to self-consciousness.

"U-uh..." Obi-Wan found himself at a loss for words as he watched the Duchess fiddle with his armor, her deft fingers making short, easy work of the process. He had no idea how to respond to a woman's uncertainty, not like this. The Jedi did not focus on such things, and he wasn't sure how he was expected to respond. Frankly, he didn't know what Satine was feeling self-conscious about. There was nothing for her to actually be self-conscious about. "I think dressing modestly will help hide who you are," he said, hoping that would be enough. It wasn't.

"W-well..." she took a step back and held her arms out, the robes hanging loose off her shoulders, made for the much taller Kenobi, the robes hanging just below the knee, his pants on her much smaller body hiked up as high as they could go, the waist line rolled over several times to rest at her hip and tied off with the belt to keep them from falling. "H-how do I look?" Obi-Wan failed to repress a snort of laughter, the girl's pale skin reddening quickly in fury.

"Well, you appropriately look like a vagrant."

"Oh, I suppose that's perfect!" the Duchess snapped, her hands balled into fists by her side as she stamped her foot in her displeasure. "Figures it would be dressing like a Jedi that makes me lose my noble bearing since you have none!" Obi-Wan laughed softly as he bent down to pick up the heavy belt to cinch the robes, eyeing the furious Duchess and adjusting it to fit her slender waist. She took a step back with each step he took toward her, not getting very far until her back hit the wall, her eyes narrowing hatefully at the man as he wrapped the belt around her and buckled it.
"Has anyone told you that you are a cold, cruel, tactless brute, Obi-Wan Kenobi?" Satine hissed, and the Jedi chuckled softly, shaking his head at the furious girl.

"You do, Duchess. Nearly every single day at some point or another."

"Well I say it because I mean it," she growled, batting his hands away when he tugged at the robes to straighten them. "I suppose you're very pleased with yourself for having gotten me to look as plain and drab as you."

"Don't be ridiculous..." Obi-Wan muttered, fixing his lightsaber across his belt at his lower back and grabbing the helmet off the bed. "You're beautiful, Satine, irregardless of what you wear." He nudged her gently when her anger flushed face became even darker, her breath held and her pulse jumping to new heights. "Come on."

Satine didn't move from her spot for a moment, watching the Jedi as he opened the door and retreated into the hallway. He had said it so casually, so matter of fact that Satine had almost missed what he had said, focusing on his dismissive, honest tone more than the words he said, but she did hear them. They weren't the words of the people at court slinging tired, mechanical or fake praises her way. He had nothing to gain, said it like a casual observation, like he was pointing out the color of the sky, like something plain and obvious that didn't need to have attention drawn to it.

When her heart decided to start beating again, Satine followed her Jedi out into the hallway to meet up with Qui-Gon, the Jedi Master still sitting cross-legged on the ground in his meditations. As they approached closer, he slowly opened his eyes and looked the pair over, nodding in satisfaction after his examination as he rose.

"Are you warm enough, Duchess?" the Jedi asked softly, and Satine quickly nodded, drawing closer to Obi-Wan as he put the helmet on. "Very well. Come, we will find ourselves a restaurant. I believe you were promised breakfast." The hatch was opened and the biting cold air rushed in, and Obi-Wan and Satine quickly huddled close together, shivering even with the additional warmth. Qui-Gon was fine, the Jedi having meditated to center himself and bolster his resistance, making him nearly impervious to the harsh climate. Breathing as deeply as he could through his chattering teeth, Obi-Wan touched the Force and tried to do likewise, but it was ineffective. He had only just started his training in this particular skill, and he would need a great deal more time before he was even close to proficient.

As they hurried their way through the biting wind, passing by merchants huddled in the wind-protected streets within the warm confines of their shops and stalls and by a thin, cautious crowd of armed civilians, Obi-Wan realized that his previous fears were very well founded. The goal had been to make the Duchess appear like one of the common folk by giving her his plain, oversized robes not just for warmth, but to hide her finery. It was completely pointless. Satine's noble bearing went beyond just her dress. She carried herself like royalty, her fine, angular features practically screaming her noble birth, and there was little they could do to hide that. She'd need her own set of armor to hide the truth of her high-born genetics. It was probably wise to have a set for each of them regardless. Perhaps if Clan Itera proved to be amicable, Qui-Gon and Satine could get fitted.

Qui-Gon had managed to quickly find a diner off the main street, and they ducked inside, shaking the snow off themselves as they walked in. Qui-Gon drew Satine close to him, his much larger size drowning the girl within the folds of his robes, and quickly led them to a table in the back corner, away from the windows and with a clear view of the front door and the much smaller side door near the kitchens, easily accessible from where they sat. He waved Satine into the booth, the girl sliding in and tucking close into the corner, and the Jedi took Obi-Wan by the shoulder and directed him to sit beside the Duchess. When the Padawan was seated, Qui-Gon slid into the seat
opposite them and leaned in close.

"It is," he said softly, "disgustingly cold."

"You don't seem cold, Master," Obi-Wan said, pulling off the helmet and setting it down on the table, running a hand through his unkept hair and scooting closer to the shivering Satine, the Duchess grabbing on to his arm and nestling beside him. "Do we have a plan?"

"I believe so, yes." He raised his head and looked around the diner and carefully observed the guests and the rushing service droids. "Do you sense anything, Obi-Wan?" The Padawan closed his eyes, slowing his breathing as he reached deep within the Force, the feel of Satine's hand lightly brushing his own focusing him.

"Something, Master..." Kenobi whispered. "But I don't know what. There's just..." He shook his head. "Everything's disturbed, this war is making it so hard to see..."

"Try, Obi-Wan, focus."

"I am trying, Master," Obi-Wan hissed through clenched teeth. "Everything feels hostile, everything is violent and just...wrong."

"Are we in danger, Obi-Wan?" Satine asked softly, her hand clenching tightly around his hand.

"We're in danger everywhere, Duchess," Qui-Gon whispered. "The question isn't if we are in danger, but how immanent it is. Obi-Wan is more far-sighted than I am. If something has locked on to you, he'll sense it before I do."

"Right, no pressure..." Obi-Wan muttered, slinking down in the booth. "This is the home of the very hostile Clan Wren, so yes, I feel a disturbance. If there's anything else..." He shrugged. "How could I possibly tell..."

"One day, you'll have the confidence in your abilities equal to my faith in you," Qui-Gon said as he stood, laying his hand on the teen's shoulder. "The difference between a Padawan and a Knight isn't just a matter of experience, but one of confidence and faith in your trust in the Force. You have no limits but those you put on yourself." Obi-Wan nodded, but stayed silent, and the Master pat his shoulder. "I'm going to take a look around town to collect the supplies we need and gather information. You two stay here and order breakfast. Stay vigilant, and if something comes up..."

"Contact me immediately."

"We will," Satine said, laying her hand over the comlink on Obi-Wan's wrist when he made no indication that he would respond. With a final squeeze to his student's shoulder and a small smile at the Duchess, Qui-Gon left the teens alone, his long stride carrying him out of the diner and into the snowy, windy streets. The service droid was over shortly after to take their orders, the Duchess leaning forward and quietly ordering for both of them before ducking back behind the Jedi and snuggling in close to him, hidden from view from the rest of the diner.

"What's wrong?" she asked, and the Jedi breathed deep and looked at her, a small smile on his face.

"Nothing, Duchess. I was just up early." She gave him a look that said she knew he was full of it, and Obi-Wan sighed. "I'm supposed to protect you..." he whispered, picking at one of the tight, perfect mends the Duchess made in the robes she wore. "If I can't sense the danger to you in time..."

"Are you always so hard on yourself?" Satine asked, a bright, gentle smile on her face that Obi-Wan thought could melt all the snow on Krownest for the warmth it made him feel. "You
shouldn't be. I think you're amazing." Flushing a deep shade of red, Obi-Wan looked away from the woman, struggling to keep his heart from beating out of his chest, a feat that was accomplished when Satine ran her elegant hand across his jaw and directed his gaze back to her, his pounding heart seeming to stop.

"I'm far from it, Duchess, you should see my fellow Padawans..." Obi-Wan said modestly, and Satine tilted her head, observing the other teen's faint, distant look, a bittersweet thing that felt content and sad and pain all at once, a look Satine often saw on her own face when she looked at herself in the mirror. She hadn't considered it before, but Obi-Wan had left home for war, left his friends to defend a girl he didn't know, had been forced to kill when his own Code demanded peace and respect for all living creatures. He missed his friends, despite his claim for non-attachment.

"Tell me about them?" Satine asked sweetly when two cups of tea were delivered with the promise that the food would be out shortly. Obi-Wan ran his finger along the rim of the cup, his distant gaze slowly coming back to focus on Satine, and he smiled tightly, his finger dipping into the hot, flavored water.

"Quinlan and Luminara..." He took a deep breath and sighed wistfully. "They're only a year older than me, but they are so much more talented. They were apprenticed very early, and I..." Obi-Wan's voice faltered, the insecurity creeping back into him. "I was so hopeless, so untalented that the Jedi Council nearly threw me out of the Order as a lost cause."

"I bet they feel real stupid about that."

"N-no..." Obi-Wan said, smiling softly. "No, they..." He cleared his throat. "I don't think they spare a thought toward me, not when there's real talent in my age group." He grinned brightly. "Like Quinlan. He has an ability that is so rare that he was apprenticed at eight. That is very, very young. He can touch an object, and he can see its history, he can feel the emotions of the people who have touched it and used it." Obi-Wan smiled brightly. "Or Luminara! She has the calm and patience of a Master, is wise beyond her years, and is such a talented combatant that the other Padawans in our age group have made a game of trying to best her. They never succeed, she's too fast and too flexible."

"They don't sound like much," Satine said as she shrugged, and the Jedi frowned, displeased that the Duchess appeared unimpressed.

"If they don't, it's because I am not doing them justice," Obi-Wan grumbled. "You just don't know because you haven't seen them in action."

"No," she said lightly, smiling at the droid when it delivered their food. "But I've seen you." Obi-Wan scoffed, poking at the array on his plate with a fork and watching as the Duchess happily tucked in.

"Me...I'm nothing. You have a better example in Qui-Gon. He's amazing."

"I've seen you take a beating from a man nearly twice your size, and you stayed on your feet," the Duchess said evenly, her gaze never leaving his own. "I've seen you throw yourself into a direct line of fire to protect someone you didn't even like. I've seen you continue to stand and fight after getting injuries that no man should be able to withstand." She laid a hand on his cheek. "So don't tell me you aren't amazing because I have seen it."

Obi-Wan didn't know what to say, so he said nothing, simply watched the Duchess as she returned her attention to her food and quickly ate, far faster than expected from a girl of her size, and with his heart frantic in his chest, Kenobi turned his attention to his food as well, not at all
hungry but eating all the same in an attempt to get it to stop fluttering the way it was. It wasn't working, the warm, pleasant sensation only spreading as they flashed each other covert glances and shy smiles, their legs lightly brushing and their fingers occasionally grazing the other in soft touches that lingered slightly too long to be the accidents they were pretending them to be.

Qui-Gon returned far too soon, by Obi-Wan's estimation, though by the time the Master dropped into the seat opposite them, they had been through three cups of tea each, and the fourth was sitting half finished and cold. Obi-Wan wasn't sure where the time had gone, but nearly an hour of just sitting and basking in Satine's presence had gone by in an instant. Upon observing him, Obi-Wan saw that Qui-Gon was wearing a dark brown cloak, much like the one they had originally arrived in Mandalore with, the originals destroyed in their month on Zanbar. Not only that, but in the seat next to him, Qui-Gon had two more of the heavy cloaks, another in brown and a smaller, less coarse one in dark red. Obi-Wan frowned. While he was happy for the prospect of additional warmth, something was up.

"It seems as though the Wrens are maintaining a minimal presence here, as expected," Qui-Gon said in a hushed tone. "Word is they defeated Clan Ordo and have killed the clan leader. Ursa Wren is returning home, though the remainder of the force is staying behind to lay siege to the Ordo stronghold."

"Is this our fault?" Satine asked softly, her eyes downcast, and the Jedi sighed heavily and shook his head.

"I've no doubt that debilitating the siblings was a factor that led to their defeat, but no, I wouldn't say it was our fault." Satine offered no response. "Small as a force as they have here, that doesn't mean there isn't fighting. There are skirmishes along the borders between the Wrens and the Iteras, mostly to keep each other on edge. Clan Itera doesn't have the strength to attack the Wrens at their stronghold, and the Wrens don't have the numbers to take the Iteras. Until things change, its stalemate."

"Master, if Clan Itera stands against the Wrens, it's no guarantee that they are allies of Satine," Obi-Wan said softly. "The Ordos stood against them, and we all know how that went."

"Yes, I am aware. However, it would seem that the Iteras are in fact currently aligned with Clan Caldera, as we suspected, and they have just called for the complete extinction of Clan Ordo." Qui-Gon rubbed his temples. "Really, this is all very complicated."

"Is that true?" Satine asked, her eyes wide, her hands covering her mouth as she stared at the Jedi as he nodded. "Qui-Gon, Clan Caldera and Clan Ordo have been allies since the Mandalorian Wars thousands of years ago. If they've turned against them..."

"Something must have happened," Obi-Wan said, his eyes widening with understanding.

"I'm willing to bet that something was us," Satine whispered excitedly. "It's very possible that Clan Itera will side with me."

"That was the impression I got in town as well," Qui-Gon said, a slight smile on his face as he reached beside him and grabbed the folded cloaks and passed them to their respective recipients. "The ship has been re-supplied with rations and medical supplies, and it is currently scheduled for refueling. "Within an hour, I think we can be underway to the Itera stronghold." Satine breathed a sigh of relief, a relaxed smile on her face as she took in the first good news she had in a very long time and clutched the soft, heavy fabric of her cloak to her chest. Obi-Wan carefully examined his, a small smile of satisfaction on his lips when he found it to be very similar to the one he burned for warmth back on Zanbar. That nagging suspicion was back in his mind again as he watched the older Jedi order a coffee from the service droid.
"Master..." Obi-Wan slowly asked. "How are we going to pay for breakfast? We don't have any credits, they blew up on the ship back in Sundari." He paused and pursed his lips as he watched the older man casually sip from his cup when it was promptly delivered to him. "For that matter, how did you pay for any of the things we needed?" Satine slowly joined Obi-Wan in looking expectantly at the Jedi as he downed the coffee.

"I won the credits," Qui-Gon said casually, and gave him a look that balanced somewhere between revulsion and betrayal.

"You won them?" Obi-Wan croaked.

"I joined a friendly game of dice with some very pleasant men." Qui-Gon shrugged, a slight smirk on his face as he looked at his outraged Padawan. "Suffice it to say, the stakes of the game ended up being quite high." Obi-Wan's head hit the table.

"Master..." the Padawan said, his voice muffled against the synthetic wood. "First of all, you are terrible at gambling! Absolutely terrible! And to say nothing of the fact that Jedi aren't allowed to gamble!"

"No?" Qui-Gon asked innocently. "Where does it say that?"

"I don't know, but I know it's a rule somewhere!" Obi-Wan choked out. "What would have happened if you lost the bet, Master? We don't have any credits, we'd be in debt!"

"Oh, I was in no danger of losing," Qui-Gon said confidently. "I was born with certain..." He smirked and drummed his fingers upon the table, the indignant Padawan quickly becoming horrified. "Advantages."

"You cheated?!!" Obi-Wan said in disbelief. "Master, honesty is a major tenant of the Jedi, and that is about the most dishonest thing I have ever heard!"

"Well, you certainly haven't been around very long, that's for sure..." Qui-Gon drawled, his cup in hand and held out as the service droid refilled it.

"This is...absolutely against the Jedi Code!" With a smirk, Qui-Gon took a long sip of his coffee.

"As I said, my Padawan," the Master said softly. "Sometimes, the rules get in the way of the mission. We need supplies to keep the Duchess safe. And I will complete my mission, my Padawan. The rules can be damned if they prevent me from doing so."

Obi-Wan frantically tugged at his braid, stress and anxiety plain on his face and drawing his shoulders and the muscles in his back into tight, tense knots as bad as Satine had ever seen him. Struggling to keep his silence, he eventually failed, and Obi-Wan stood, stuttering as he grasped for words and...suddenly stopped, the indignation dropping from his face, his intense eyes suddenly looking somewhere far away, his tight shoulders dropping, not in relaxation, but in tense alertness. Qui-Gon swiftly stood, his hand on his lightsaber underneath his cloak. He knew that look all too well, even though he didn't yet feel what it was that had the Padawan so alert. He never did.

"Master..." Obi-Wan whimpered. "I sense something."

"I know," Qui-Gon said swiftly, taking his student by the arm and dragging him out of the booth, and Satine rushed to hide within Qui-Gon's cloak, throwing her own on as soon as she was out of the seat and pulling the hood over her head. "How close, Obi-Wan? Can you tell what it is?"
"I don't know..." Kenobi stammered, grabbing his helmet off the table and quickly putting it on. "We need to go, whoever they are, they know we are here."

"Right," Qui-Gon said, drawing the teens close to him. "Stay close to me." They said nothing as the Jedi Master pushed them toward the back door, throwing some credits on to the table as they left, and they pushed through the door in to the frigid, snowy air, the teenagers drawing their cloaks around them. Obi-Wan discretely unclipped his lightsaber from its place on his lower back and moved it to hang much more accessible at his hip, his hand shaking in anticipation and ready at his side, his focus narrowed, driven by the need to protect the girl beside him from whatever it was that was making the Force pulse with warning in his mind.

"If something happens, Obi-Wan, you are in charge of the Duchess," Qui-Gon whispered. "I'll create a diversion and you take her to safety. Stay where you are when you are certain you have escaped and wait for me."

"Are we going to the ship?" Obi-Wan whispered.

"If you can make it there safely. That ship is a lifeline and I don't want waste it if it can be avoided. I don't believe stealing another will be very easy." Qui-Gon leaned down close to the teenagers, his slow, even breath freezing in the air before them in frigid puffs. "All that matters is getting Satine somewhere safe, understand? You will do whatever necessary to ensure that. No matter where you go, I will find you."

"Master, I-" Whatever Obi-Wan was going to say was cut off by a startled yelp when Qui-Gon pushed the Padawan and the Duchess to the ground, the two teenagers hitting the cold and snowy streets hard as a loud, reverberating whine tore through the air, followed by a powerful gust of wind and the sound of wood splintering and glass shattering. Scrambling for purchase on the icy ground, Obi-Wan threw himself over Satine just as stones and chunks of ice and debris began pelting the ground, the ringing in their ears fading to the sound of screams as merchants and townsfolk rushed for cover. Obi-Wan extended his hand and channeled the Force, stopping the wave of wreckage rushing their way in midair, a protective shield around him and his charge as anything that drew too close was grabbed by the Force and held still.

Obi-Wan looked up to see Qui-Gon standing in the middle of the street, his feet dug into the hard ice of the streets to root him in place, his robes whipping around his ankles as the Force flared around him. The street was a mess of rubble and chaos as people ran screaming from stalls tat had been torn apart by a furious blast, and Obi-Wan looked past his master to see a line of bounty hunters standing opposite them behind portable energy shields, a large, imposing weapon whining as it charged and fired a pulsating sphere of energy that Qui-Gon pushed back against with the Force, the two energies colliding to create another explosion of cyclone-force wind and debris.

"Are those pulse weapons?!!" Obi-Wan shouted to his Master when the howling of the wind died down.

"They came prepared to deal with Jedi," Qui-Gon snapped back at him. "Go, get the Duchess out of here." Obi-Wan didn't need to be told twice as he scrambled to his feet and pulled Satine up and began running away from Qui-Gon and the bounty hunters, only to find the streets behind them beginning to swarm with heavily armed and armored hunters and without missing a beat, Obi-Wan pulled Satine down an ally, his feet slipping and skidding on hard, compacted snow in his haste, the sound of Qui-Gon's lightsaber igniting following them as they ran.

There was a brief moment of panic as Obi-Wan dragged Satine down small streets and alleyways. Though the Master had told him to run, he felt as though he had abandoned him, left him to die surrounded by bounty hunters who came prepared to deal with two Jedi. Obi-Wan quickly brushed the thought aside. There wasn't a bounty hunter alive prepared to deal with Jedi Master
Qui-Gon Jinn, a Jedi ready and willing to shatter the Jedi Code to accomplish his mission, be it cheating in a game of dice to successfully rob much needed credits from his fellow gamblers, or in abandoning the Jedi policy of peace and defense in order to draw his weapon very offensively, wielding the green blade with the fatal precision of a practiced Jedi Master.

There were many in the Order that called Qui-Gon Jinn Gray Jedi, one who walked the line between light and dark, one who distanced himself from the demands of the Council with his constant defiance of them. On his best days, Qui-Gon was a renegade, one who followed his own feelings before the demands of the Council, trusting his senses as the will of the Force, allowing it to guide him where ever it may take him, Council approval be damned. It made him seem reckless, dangerous and impulsive, more concerned with the moment than the bigger picture, much to the frustration of the Masters of the Council. However, if something needed to be done, the Jedi knew to send Qui-Gon Jinn, because he would do anything to see it through. They may have disagreed with his methods, but it was hard to argue with the results.

Qui-Gon was the exact opposite of Obi-Wan, which, Kenobi supposed, was why they made such a good team. Despite his own conflicts with the renegade Jedi, Obi-Wan couldn't have wished for a better Master.

Obi-Wan's guilt for leaving Qui-Gon quickly left him when he heard the thundering of heavy footsteps behind him and the high whine of weapons priming, and he quickly looked over his shoulder to see a hoard of bounty hunters following them down the narrow, winding streets. At least Qui-Gon wouldn't be fighting an army of hunters on his own, he'd only be fighting half an army. That was a vast improvement. There went the hopes of making it to the ship. With this many after them, they would never get to it and get it ready for take off before they were destroyed. At least he had the foresight to put the ship away in a private, secure hangar. It at least gave them the chance that when they were eventually able to return, the ship would still be there waiting.

With their options limited, Obi-Wan grabbed tightly on to Satine's hand and increased his speed, the two teens dashing together through the winding ally. They burst out of a side street on to a wide, open avenue, the additional space and the distance giving them the chance to slip and slide their way to a full sprint before the bounty hunters followed. As soon as blaster fire began flying past them and filling the sir with its distinctive whine, Obi-Wan pulled Satine toward the side and the two began weaving through stalls, grabbing hold of supports and allowing their momentum to fling them forward in a quick burst of speed. Obi-Wan was confident in his own ability to evade the danger, his connection to the Force allowing him to sense danger the moment before it happened, but Satine had no such advantage.

Even without the Force, the thin, wiry Satine was proving to be a small and difficult target to hit. With adrenaline and fear rushing through her veins, the Duchess was proving to be both remarkably fast and agile, easily diving through stalls and catching her footing on the slippery ground as she launched around corners and into smaller streets, the noble-blooded Satine proving to be far more athletic than Obi-Wan had realized. Her entire body was swift and efficient, cut for speed and possessing a strength that he hadn't believed her to possess, but he had made a point of averting his eyes from the girl. That was, perhaps, a mistake, one that he would rectify if they somehow managed to get out of this alive.

A slight misstep sent Satine slamming into the Jedi at her side, and clutching her to him as they fell, the two teens went crashing into a door of a local establishment, tumbling into the store with all the grace of an intoxicated Neimoidian. Obi-Wan quickly scrambled to his feet, dragging Satine up with him, and the two dove behind the counter just as two broad shouldered bounty hunters crashed through the door, blasters raised and immediately opening fire on the screaming patrons inside. Horror gripping him, Obi-Wan grabbed the cashier's ankles and pulled, knocking
the terrified woman to the ground, a shrill scream escaping her throat, and with a tense, hiss, Obi-Wan passed his hand before her face.

"You will be silent," the Jedi said in a smooth, calm voice, and the woman immediately did as commanded, her mouth closing and her body slumping against the counter, her eyes wide with fear and too afraid to move.

"We can't stay here!" Satine hissed, her hand on Obi-Wan's arm as he drew his lightsaber into his hand. "They're killing innocent people, we need to draw them away!"

"Away where, Duchess, they are all over the town, there's nowhere safe for us!" The stone cold determination in Satine's eyes made the Jedi realize exactly what she had in mind. "...oh."

"Please, Obi-Wan, I won't have more people die for me! They are here because of me, every death that happens here today is on my hands." There weren't any other options, and Obi-Wan knew it before she had said it. With a growl of frustration, he ignited his lightsaber and stood, immediately drawing the fire of the bounty hunters and effortlessly deflecting the bolts, plasma striking walls and displays before they were directed back to strike the hunters, the men screaming as their own shots burned through them. Reaching out his hand, Kenobi pulled the weapons to him as they dropped, swiftly holstering a pair of blasters at his own waist and dropping a rifle into Satine's lap, the Duchess quickly setting the weapon to stun.

With more bounty hunters fighting each other to pass through the door, Obi-Wan switched off his lightsaber, took Satine by the hand, and bolted out the back door into the alley. Two bounty hunters were in the back street waiting for them, and as Satine quickly primed the rifle, Obi-Wan pushed them back hard with the Force, the limited space pressing the large, reptilian pair against the wall and holding them there, their limbs straining against the invisible hold. Within seconds, Satine raised the weapon and shot the two men with the stunning rounds, their bodies falling limp in the grasp of the Force, and Kenobi released them when they stilled.

The sound of the rifle shots drew the sounds of shouting and heavy stamping feet toward their location, the hunters quickly closing in on them from both sides of the alley and the store behind them, and with nowhere else to go, Obi-Wan picked Satine up in his arms, crouched down, and jumped. Augmented by the Force, the Jedi landed on the rooftop, giving the pair a clear line of sight to the snowy plain just outside the city, a winding, icy river leading to white woods not far away. With silent understanding, Satine clutched the Jedi tight as he carried her across the steep, slippery roofs, running quickly and slipping often as he jumped over the gaps between houses and avoiding blaster fire from the bounty hunters shooting from the streets below.

He jumped off the northermost roof, setting Satine down, and the pair quickly sprinted out of the city, the snow and wind tearing at them as they rushed through the snowy field along the banks of the river, the open space allowing them the freedom to move but also making the easier targets. They were slightly more than halfway to the tree line when they heard the deafening shriek of ships in the air and the whine of speeder bikes quickly drawing closer. Satine wordlessly put her hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder, grasping it tightly as she jumped, the Padawan scooping her out of the air, and with the speed granted to him by the Force, he sprinted toward the woods, thick enough to make travel by vesical impossible and ruining the line of sight by air.

Rapid fire from the air struck the snow behind them, sending up columns of dirt and ice as green plasma collided with the ground, but Obi-Wan's quick, random changes of direction kept their attackers from striking them. They had just reached the edge of the forest when their luck finally wore out, a shot from one of the ships' bombardments striking close enough to send the Jedi and the Duchess flying into the forest, Kenobi curling protectively around the girl right before they struck a tree, the impact making the wood creak and groan under the force. Groaning in pain, Obi-Wan dropped into the snow, the Duchess slipping from his grasp and landing with a soft thud in
the snow beside him.

She scrambled to her feet just in time to see the oncoming speeder, her hand quickly grasping the Jedi's, and she pulled him with her into the forest as the speeder's rider began firing, red bolts flying at them striking snow and wood and finally the blade of Obi-Wan's lightsaber as he drew it. One deflected shot his the speeder's rear thruster, setting the engine on fire, and with the steering compromised, the quickly moving bike couldn't avoid the collision course with the thick trees of the forest, the explosion lighting up the area with a blinding flash. The teenagers' relief lasted only for a moment when they realized that the explosion acted like a beacon that drew the attention of the ships overhead, and plasma began to rain down again as Obi-Wan and Satine sprinted deep into the snowy woods.

The sounds of ships overhead and the raining bombardments in spots throughout the woods both far and near to their location kept Obi-Wan and Satine running as fast as they could, the shouts of hunters on foot behind them driving them harder then they had thought themselves capable, the heavy snow covering their tracks as they went, though they knew it wouldn't be enough. These were professional trackers, certainly capable of finding two cold, scared teenagers in the woods. Twice, Kenobi and Kryze were forced to turn and deal with bounty hunters that had managed to get too close, their combined efforts making quick work of people who gravely underestimated the determination of a Jedi and the fury of a Mandalorian. When their attackers had been dispatched, Obi-Wan pushed out with the Force, sending the snow scattering into the air and effectively clearing the area of their tracks. It wouldn't be enough, but with night quickly falling, it would at least make it more difficult to find them.

As another group of hunters drew near, as exhaustion and fatigue and cold finally began to set in, as prolonged adrenaline began to fade from their systems, their hard run through the forest became less careful, and a misstep on the top of a snowy ridge sent Satine tumbling over the sloping edge, the ice and snow preventing her from catching herself, and she rolled helplessly down toward the river below. Without thinking twice, Obi-Wan leapt after her, sliding down on his feet after her until he too lost control and went tumbling down, the two teenagers striking the icy water with a splash not ten feet from each other.

With a shivering gasp, they flailed at the surface, their legs kicking downward and finding the river much more shallow than it had appeared. With Satine clinging to his back, the girl soaked through and shivering uncontrollably, Obi-Wan forged through the river to the opposite bank, hoping against hope that their path through the water and their swiftly beating hearts sending heat and warmth through them, but that all ended now as the cold forced their pace to slow.

They jogged hand in hand along the river, their breaths freezing in the air before them, following the line of the ravine until they found a diverging path. They followed it back, the space between narrowing and widening intermittently, the small space making it difficult for movement, even for the gaunt teenagers, which meant that larger people wouldn't be able to follow at all. It made the prospects of evading their large hunters a great deal better, though at this rate, it wouldn't be bounty hunters, but the cold that killed them.

They followed the path until it let out into a cave, their feet striking ground that didn't crunch with snow or ice, the dying light in the sky giving them just enough to see the small area dotted with rock outcroppings. The snug area was much warmer than the frigid cold outside, the little cave insulated from the snow and the wind, and Obi-Wan shrugged off his cloak and quickly ducked outside, leaving a whimpering Satine alone for just under a minute, the Jedi returning with his
arms full of sticks and branches. He dumped them in the center of the cave, his lightsaber igniting and touching the pile, the burning plasma quickly setting fire to the foliage. Using the Force, Kenobi moved the scattered rocks onto a wide circle around the quickly growing fire, creating places to sit and lean against in close proximity to the blazing warmth.

They were silent, their ears straining as they huddled close to the fire and listened for the shouts, the barked commands the explosive sound of ships' cannons and heard...nothing. Nothing but the crackle of the fire and their chattering teeth as they sat quiet in the cold.

Obi-Wan took off his helmet, his hair damp from the water they had fallen into, and stepping outside the cave, he immediately began retching, the hard, prolonged physical exertion and the dying effects of a system that had been running on adrenaline causing him to upheave the contents of his breakfast. A minute later, Satine shuffled beside him and did the same.

"What a waste..." Obi-Wan choked as he looked mournfully at the evidence of their late breakfast on the ground. "The first real meal we've had in months, and it ends up like this..."

"Did you not eat when we stayed with Clan Ordo?" Satine whimpered, coughing into the bend of her elbow and wincing at the vile taste in her mouth. Obi-Wan shook his head.

"I had rations, I was making modifications to the ship." He stepped over the wasted breakfast, walked out a few paces, and scooped up too handfuls of snow, shoving one in his mouth as he walked back, allowing it to melt and swishing it around to clear the taste.

"This was a mistake..." Satine muttered, silenced when Obi-Wan shoved the other handful of snow into her mouth, the girl giving a small squeak of surprise before she understood and followed Obi-Wan's example.

"It wasn't like we had a lot of options," Obi-Wan said after he spit the water out of his mouth, grabbing Satine's cloak from her shaking shoulders as he walked back into the cave and laying it on a rock beside the fire. He quickly began unbuckling his armor and laid it neatly in a pile as he removed it. The fire was roaring now, the little cave heating up quickly, and he tugged off the tight black shirt he wore, the garment soaked through and dripping, and with a look of displeasure at the state of it, he laid it on another rock to dry.

"Do you think Qui-Gon is alright?" Satine asked softly, her voice tight and tense with emotion she was struggling to repress. She sat beside the fire, drawing her knees to her chest, her thin shoulders shaking from the cold.

"He's alive," Obi-Wan gently reassured her. "I can sense him." She nodded, but said nothing, drawing her knees tighter to her chest and looking at her protector as he picked up his cloak and examined it. There was a new, dark bruise on his back from where he had struck the tree, the cold paling his skin and making the faded bruises appear dark and fresh upon his thin frame. Nodding in satisfaction, Obi-Wan turned to Satine and held his cloak out before her. "Take your clothes off."

"E-excuse me?!!" Satine gasped, her heart jumping and the sudden warmth spreading through her making her forget about the cold.

"We have survived Death Watch, crazy, traitorous supposed allies, and an army of bounty hunters. I don't think it would do for the Duchess of Mandalore to freeze to death in a cave." He held up the cloak. "It's already dry, and your clothes are completely soaked through." Finally, a red flush came to his cheeks and he broke eye contact. "I-I won't look." With a faint smile, Satine took the cloak from the Jedi, retreated to the far side of the cave, and shed the wet robes, and the two tunics she had layered over her. Obi-Wan's tunic, the material thin and breathable, was
already well on the way to being dry, and picking up the garment, she pulled the Jedi's tunic back on and tied it at her waist. She slid into the oversized cloak and collected the wet robes, laying them on the rocks to dry. Safely wrapped in the cloak, she wiggled out of the pants she wore and laid them beside the tunic.

When she turned around to look at Obi-Wan, the Jedi had settled beside the fire, his legs crossed and his thin form shaking violently from the cold. She looked down at herself, wrapped in Obi-Wan's cloak and wearing Obi-Wan's tunic, not warm, but the bone chilling cold taken out of her, and she felt terribly for the shivering Jedi. She opened the cloak and looked down at herself, nodding in approval and taking the cloak off. The tunic she wore fell to mid-thigh, and given the circumstances, it was modest enough.

"I can't take your clothes, Obi-Wan," Satine said softly, handing him the cloak, but the Jedi simply looked at her, a slight smile on his face and not moving from his spot.

"I'm fine, Satine," he whispered. "Please, keep it."

"You are not fine, Obi-Wan, look at you!" she snapped, sinking to her knees beside him and holding the cloak out. Still, he did not take it. "Look at you, you're shivering, you're half naked, your pants are wet..."

"They're drying."

"You promised me you would protect your life!" she said firmly. "For me, Obi." He stared at the cloak in her hands, almost not daring to breathe, and he slowly took the cloak from her, shook it out and draped it over her shoulders.

"I swear to you, Satine..." he whispered, his fingers brushing the line of her jaw as he withdrew his hand. "I will be fine. It...pleases me to know you will be warm." Satine examined his features carefully, ignoring the pooling of warmth deep within her as she looked into his half-lidded gaze, his small, pleasant smile, the strong muscles of his chest and torso as they trembled from the cold, and the Duchess made a decision. She scooted closer to the Jedi, watching as the blue eyes widened, his breath catching in his throat as she pressed right next to him and draped the cloak over his shoulders, covering them both.

"We'll just have to share, then," she said, stronger than she felt with her heart pounding the way it was. "It is very cold, and it will only get colder the later it gets. We'll...be warmer if we stay closer together. I don't want to go to sleep and not wake up because I froze to death in the middle of the night."

"I-I..." Obi-Wan swallowed hard, absolutely certain the Duchess could feel his heart pounding. He forgot how to speak. It was easily the best idea he had ever heard. "I suppose it would be safer that way..." he said, his voice trembling with cold and excitement.

With a shy, grateful smile, Satine lightly pressed back on the Jedi's shoulder, Kenobi breathlessly following her lead and laying back on the ground before the fire. Satine pulled the cloak over them, and when they were wrapped up in the warmth of the heavy brown cloth, she nestled herself in the crook of Obi-Wan's arm, her head on his chest and her long fingers absently tracing his ribs. Neither said anything for a long while, and Satine slowly relaxed as she listened to the strong, even beat of Obi-Wan's heart, the warmth radiating off his body making her curl even closer to him. In her exhausted mind, she wondered if she could hear the Force within him if she listened hard enough, if she could feel it beneath her fingertips pulsing through his blood like a heart beat, and found herself wiggling closer.

"Obi-Wan?" Satine asked softly, and the Jedi tensed in surprise from the sudden sound, his heart
rate suddenly jumping.

"Y-yes?" he asked, hesitant and unsure, and from her place against him, the Duchess looked up and met his gaze.

"Did you...mean what you said? W-when you said I was beautiful?" Confusion marred Obi-Wan's face, his breath catching in his throat as he looked at the flushed, hopeful face of his Duchess.

"A-are you serious?" he asked, a nervous laugh on his voice. "Surely you must know, Satine, I'm sure people tell you all the time, that-" Obi-Wan cut himself off when Satine's eyes narrowed, her lips drawing together for a moment as she pouted, and then looked away, the displeasure melting into disappointment, and Kenobi's chest ached. He pulled her closer against him, the girl gasping softly as he did so, his fingers sliding into her pale blond hair and letting the still damp strands to slip between them. "Yes," Obi-Wan whispered. "I meant it." Satine's fingers tensed, gripping his ribs tightly for a moment before her entire being seemed to melt against him.

"I'm glad they sent you to protect me, Obi-Wan," Satine whispered. "I didn't think I'd be able to trust a man again after what happened with Edric, but...I trust you." She sighed as she felt Obi-Wan's fingers slowly drift to her neck and gently began rubbing the tension out of her muscles. "I feel...safe with you..." Weariness overcoming her, Satine let the even, rhythmic sound of the Jedi's pulse and breathing lead her into a deep, restful sleep.

Meditation.

I can't sleep. I can't sleep at all. I can't even take solace in meditation, because...because what if the fire goes out? Because what if the temperature drops so low that we start to freeze, despite our close proximity? Because what if the bounty hunters find us? Or even worse, what if Master Qui-Gon finds us?!

Or it's because the Duchess won't stop moving.

It's bad enough that I can't sleep because being unconscious would leave me unguarded to protect myself against things that would be, quite frankly, extremely embarrassing in such close proximity to a lady. But now, I can't even be awake without my traitorous body reacting to her...her wiggling.

Putting distance between us has been largely unsuccessful, as every time I manage to free myself from her grasp, she somehow finds her way back to me. Or her shivering becomes so severe that I find my way back to her so the poor thing will stop being so cold. I confess, sharing body heat is more effective than I imagined, and as the night has gotten colder, I have come to be grateful for the additional warmth provided by Satine. More specifically, I am grateful that, as a living being, her body generates heat by virtue of being alive. I am significantly less grateful for the heat that her body had produced in me, despite my best efforts to resist. It's...it's her hips. She keeps moving them against mine and I can't...I can't...

Ah, Satine...

No, stop! Focus, Obi-Wan, you are not a child anymore! This is a serious matter! Our survival is on the line, this is not the time to be thinking about how it feels to have her so close to me. Or how soft her skin is. Or how...inviting her movements are. Or how sweet the sounds she makes in her sleep are. Or how...how...

Oh, Force help me, stop it!
Since she fell asleep, it has been a struggle to keep arousal from rising up within...no, no, Obi-Wan, stop it. Rephrase that. You can't think like that, you can't think things like that at all.

Once more. Since she fell asleep, it has been a struggle to control myself. I tried in a very misguided attempt to still her movements by holding her hips, but it only made the matter worse. Since then, I have kept my hands to myself, but she isn't so kind. It is innocent, I know. She is sleeping, she cannot help it and would certainly be horrified to know what her touch had done to me while she slept. She would certainly never trust me again. She wouldn't feel safe around me like she does now. And I can't allow that, I can't. She is my mission. She needs to feel I am safe and trustworthy, or else, what is the point of me?

Edric's treatment of her wrecked her. I see it when she thinks I am not looking. I see it when she finds herself moving toward me sometimes, and the memory of being in that brute's control enters her mind and she flinches away. She flinches from me and I have done nothing, and she does it for fear of what may happen to her. As if the constant fear of death wasn't enough, she now fears she will be taken advantage of. Which is...reasonable, I suppose. The bounty hunters have seemed content to kill her, but the reward for her alive is double the pay of delivering her dead. Qui-Gon and I have no such stipulation, of course. The only good Jedi is a dead Jedi, so far as they are concerned, and we have a reputation of being very dangerous captives.

If they manage to capture her, there's no doubt what they would do to her. She isn't just young and beautiful, she is of noble birth, far above the vile ruffians that hunt her. More than that, she's a symbol of hope, and her enemies are cruel enough to defile that symbol before they kill her. It's...disgusting. Reprehensible. And in her innocence, Edric Ordo had manipulated her to crave her own abuse. It has shattered her naivete, it made her realize what she could lose to a selfish boy. And still, she trusts me...

She feels safe with me, and I cannot betray that by allowing my body to do whatever it wants. She is my friend. I am her friend and protector, and that is all I will ever be. This is how I remain a place of peace for her. This is how I keep her from being afraid of what I may do, though I would never do it. I am a Jedi. A Jedi is not ruled by their urges, or by the wants and needs of the flesh, or by the lusts and desires for a sweet, smart, beautiful woman...

I wonder if she knows what she does to me...

Oh, Satine, my Satine...

I don't understand what I feel for her. What I feel now in the very pit of me is strictly physical desire, a mess of hormones released by my brain due to the close proximity of a beautiful woman. It's a mating instinct, and it is common in boys my age, and I have done well in the past not to be slave to such urges. I could justify my physical reactions were it only that. But it's not. It's really not...

I think about her constantly. I have grown accustomed to the elevated pulse, the rising heat, and the fluttering in my stomach when I am in her presence. I had thought at first it was an aspect of my attraction to her, my physical pull to be with a woman, but it isn't. It's not the same as the burning need I felt with Veela Ordo. It's something...something deeper, perhaps. Something soothing, not burning, maddening only in the fact that I don't understand it. Is this what happens when you become friends with someone you're attracted to? It can't be more than that. I like her, yes, and in another lifetime, in another place, maybe Satine and I could have had a future together. Maybe...maybe...

I don't know. I don't know anything. I don't understand the things I am feeling, and Master Qui-Gon can't help me. I can never tell him this, I could never do that to him.
All I know is that we are surrounded by war and death and cold, and despite all this, with her here beside me...nothing has ever felt so right.
Holy shit...

This was going to go up days ago, but it just kept going and going...I'm really pleased with it. Let me know what you think so I can validate all the time I spent on this...

Excuse me while I go die.

Qui-Gon hid up high in one of the massive trees of the Krownest wilderness, a tight bundle tucked under his arm as his sharp eyes scanned the snowy ground below. The early morning sky was filled with fog and shards of sharp, crystalized snow that caught the light of the early morning sun and made the world seem as though it was made of crystal, like the caves of Ilum, where the younglings were brought to search for their first kyber crystals. It was eerily beautiful, despite the faint, acrid smell of smoke and burning plasma in the air and the distant sounds of angry shouting and screeching engines and booming explosions.

It wasn't the peaceful morning he had been hoping for. The city when he left it had sustained substantial damage in the fight between himself and the bounty hunters, and after Satine and Obi-Wan had successfully fled, Qui-Gon had taken the fight into the woods where he could properly engage the foes to the fullest of his abilities without fear of collateral damage or civilian casualties. It was before dawn when he returned to the town to see people already walking the icy streets, the town waking long before dawn to get business underway as the populace began repairing the broken town. Qui-Gon had only managed to purchase extra clothing for himself and his charges before the bounty hunters found him again and he was once again forced to take off for the woods.

The dark of the pre-dawn world made escaping his hunters an easy thing, the Jedi rushing between trees and through deep, untrodden snow until their voices grew distant, only to then ignite his lightsaber, the green glowing light cutting through the dark and drawing his hunters toward him, the Jedi luring them deeper and deeper into the frigid woods. It was easy to get lost out here, and it was bitterly cold, and soon enough, they began falling to the wayside when a chilling wind bit through clothing and armor and cut bone deep. Qui-Gon cloaked himself in the Force, drawing from its warmth to banish the chill from him, but even now, high up in the trees, he could feel the creeping cold in his fingers and the tips of his ears. He clenched his fists, grimacing when he felt how tight and stiff his fingers felt and rolled his eyes in distaste. Just over fifty, and already his joints were rebelling against the weather. He was getting old.

Closing his eyes, Qui-Gon sunk into the Force, reaching through to feel the lives in the forest below him, the hunters racing on foot, on speeders, on jetpacks in search of their prey, could feel them in the skies above him in their ships as they flew low in search of the renegade Jedi. But most importantly, he could feel his student, the young Padawan's presence alert and vigilant, the bond between them filled with Obi-Wan's persistent anxiety and worry, and with a small smile, Qui-Gon gently tugged at the connection between them, as he had several times that night. The teenager responded with almost desperate relief as the Force flushed warm with Kenobi's presence, with the rush of affection for his Master, assurances that both he and the Duchess were fine.
It was exactly the reprieve that Qui-Gon needed, exactly the thing to chase away the cold and recenter himself in the Force, to refocus on the mission and not the biting cold or the wrath of the creatures chasing him. Sending the silent promise to his student to find them in all due haste, Qui-Gon looked away from his Padawan and felt...something. Something new. Something focused and dangerous, violent, but not bloodthirsty, so different from the wild, reckless greed of the bounty hunters. And it was close, passing through the woods like a wave, like flowing water, not like the thudding stones of the bounty hunters. This new element was familiar with the woods, at home within them, an apex predator on the scent of something lesser.

His head whipped around when he caught movement out of the corner of his eye, squinted against the rising of the morning sun, the white snow bathed in golden light washing out the source of the movement. He looked below him to the speeders zipping between the trees, the bounty hunters shouting and raising their weapons, and with the sharp screech of blaster fire, the hunters began to fall, their bodies riddled with holes that smoked in the cold morning air. Qui-Gon shut his eyes, leaned against the tree and calmed his breathing, lowering his pulse as he listened to the screams of people dying, the whine of blasters, the sound of pulse grenades detonating and speeders with dead drivers crashing against the thick trunks of trees. When the Force tugged at him, gentle but insistent, Qui-Gon called his lightsaber to his hand and stepped off the branch he stood perched upon.

The Jedi Master landed with a soft thud in the snow below, his lightsaber swinging a green shield around him as he deflected plasma bolts away to sizzle in the snow or strike trees with blackened furrows, the redirected shots deliberately directed away from those that shot them. With a swift, sharp command in harsh Mando'a, the high pitched whine of blaster fire ceased, the sound of the weapons aimed and primed filling the misty air. Qui-Gon quickly looked up and found himself surrounded by Mandalorian warriors in green and blue armor, their weapons trained on him, but none of them firing. His eyes roved over the soldiers surrounding him and beyond them to the bodies of the hunters they had killed.

His gaze settled on a warrior with a black swath of cloth fastened under one of his shoulder pauldrons and hanging across his back, a thing he knew to be a sign of command, and very slowly, Qui-Gon sunk to his knees and raised his hands in the air, his lightsaber switching off and held in a loose grip. He sensed wariness from these warriors, unease and tension, but no violence or hostility.

"Jetiise cuyir draar solus," the commander said harshly, his modulated voice seeming to echo in the misty, eerie morning. "Gayiylir dayn'bal echoy par'te ashi." A group of the warriors quickly turned and ran into the woods, some taking to the air on jetpacks and others rushing effortlessly through the snow. He raised his weapon, the high-pitched whine of the plasma priming sounding in the air, and he pointed the barrel directly at Qui-Gon. "Meg cuyir gar aka olar, Jetiise? Vaii cuyir gar burc'ya?" Qui-Gon remained blank and expressionless in his silence, his dark blue eyes following the commander's every move. When the Jedi did not respond, the commander growled deeply, a savage, feral sound when filtered through the modulator, and he strode forward, his weapon held mere inches from Qui-Gon's head.

"Vaabir gar soeak Mando'a?" the man growled, and Qui-Gon's eyes lit with understanding. He hadn't the time to study Mando'a like his Padawan, and only understood some words and phrases. Jetiise, Jedi, he knew that, but had yet to determine if a confirmation of such would turn these soldiers hostile. But this phrase, he recognized, despite the heavy accent.

"Nayc," Qui-Gon said slowly, a frown on his face when he heard how flat the word sounded, devoid of the natural, melodious rise and fall the language possessed when Satine and Obi-Wan spoke. "Ni vaabir not jorhaa'ir Mando'a. Shi Ika'dyc." Qui-Gon winced. What he knew was passable, but it was wholly insufficient for this mission, and the local dialects made understanding
nearly impossible. He'd have to get in on these Mando'a lessons. Perhaps he'd be able to put a stop to the teenagers' flirtation. Two problems solved at once.

With a growl of irritation, the Mandalorian pulled off his helmet, the man underneath no more than forty years of age with short brown hair streaked with graying lines, his pale blue eyes sharp and intense, the color similar to Satine's were her gaze edged with the willingness to kill. "Jedi," the man snarled, his accent heavy, but his words easy to understand. "What are you doing so far away from your Republic?"

"I'm on a mission," the Master said calmly, and the Mandalorian frowned, clearly unimpressed with the answer.

"The Jedi are no friends of the Mandalorians," the man snapped. "And what's more, your kind are never alone. Where's your partner?" Qui-Gon was silent, his eyes narrowing in defiance. "My men are already searching for the other. These are our woods, and nobody knows them like we do. Mark my word, we will find him, and you will wish you told us."

"If these are your woods, you are Clan Itera or Clan Wren," Qui-Gon said, his eyes on the commander's face and watching with interest as the pale eyes narrowed. "I'm willing to put credits on you being from Clan Itera."

"How do you figure?" the man growled, and a slow smirk spread across Qui-Gon's face.

"Because you haven't killed me yet, and the Wrens and their allies have taken out a bounty on me and my fellow Jedi." The Mandalorian looked at the Jedi for a long while, his frown growing increasingly deeper as the seconds ticked by.

"I am not from Clan Itera," the man said, drawing up to his full height and lowering his weapon, an armored hand reaching out to the kneeling Jedi. "I am Clan Itera. Count Artus Itera, and this clan is mine."

"Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn," the Jedi said, taking the man's hand and rising to his feet. "I've heard your clan opposes the Wrens."

"Because the Wrens and their allies are traitors to Mandalore," he said softly, dangerously, and Qui-Gon could feel the man suddenly become aggressive. "I hear you are in possession of something the Wrens very badly want."

"Not just the Wrens, it would seem," Qui-Gon said, pointing back to the bounty hunters, and the Mandalorian inclined his head, conceding the point to the Jedi, and he edged closer to the wary Qui-Gon.

"My clan has been allied with Clan Kryze since the Mandalorian Wars thousands of years ago, I was good friends with Adonai and Shae Kryze, I mentored their son Kandosii," Artus whispered, his tone low and earnest and hopeful. "Is it true? Is Satine alive? Do you have her?"

"She's alive, yes..." Qui-Gon said quietly, watching carefully as the man sighed softly, a greatly understated gesture given the intense relief the Jedi felt from the Mandalorian. "My Padawan has her in his care."

"Where?" Artus asked quickly, making to grab hold of the Jedi and stopping himself, his hands clenching in the air. "Take me to her, please!"

"I'd rather not." Artus stared at Qui-Gon in disbelief for a moment before his eyes narrowed in anger, his entire being becoming tense and hostile, and the Jedi raised a placating hand in the air. "I mean no offense, Count Itera," the Jedi said quietly. "But last we heard, Clan Ordo was an ally..."
of the Duchess. Do I need to tell you how that ended?" A brief surge of anger flashed across
Artus' face, his jaw clenching tightly in his fury.

"I know of Clan Ordo's betrayal," the Count quietly growled. "I do not need to be told that Edric
and Veela Ordo are vile, treacherous snakes and disgraces to the long, proud history of their clan,
though I should like to hear the tale anyway when Satine has been brought to the safety of my
stronghold." The Jedi remained cold, impassive, cautious, saying not a word as his eyes searched
the Mandalorian lord, and Artus sighed. "I understand the need for discretion, Master Jedi, and I
thank you for your diligence in defending our Duchess, but she does not belong out here in the
cold. The wilds of Krownest are dangerous, and if we can find you, the Wrens can as well."


"Please, Master Jedi," Artus whispered, drawing closer to Qui-Gon again, his eyes on his men. "I
don't know yet what happened with the Ordos, but I can guess. Satine may be reluctant to trust
me, and that's fine, let her keep her distance. But let her keep it where she is at least safe and
sheltered from this cold."

He could sense no malice, no ill-intent, no ulterior motive in Count Itera, only desperation and loss
and a protective instinct so fierce it nearly defied explanation. He had said he was close to Satine's
family, and looking at him, Qui-Gon believed it, though the longing the man felt went far beyond
simply that. Whatever it was, Qui-Gon didn't feel there was anything to fear from it. After months
on the run, it seemed as though he had finally found one of Satine's allies.

"I don't know exactly where he has hidden her," Qui-Gon said softly, raising his hand and calling
the tightly rolled bundle to him from where he left it in the tree. "But he and I share a connection
through the Force. It won't take me long to find him."

"Let me come with you," Artus said quickly, not waiting for the Jedi to respond before he turned
to his men. "Yaimpar at'e allit bal tsikador bic par cuun Mand'alor," he said, his voice firm and
commanding, and the warriors drew closer, turning to whisper to each other, their tones hushed
and excited. "Satine cuyir olayc. Ni slanar at mar'eyir kaysh bal yaimpar kaysh yaim at mhi."

Qui-Gon didn't understand everything, but it was enough. Mand'alor. Satine. Home. Enough to
ease any apprehension that the Jedi had. The warriors quickly rushed away, save for two, a large,
towering male that was almost certainly not human under his armor and a small, lithe female, the
two quickly flanking the Count as he walked off into the woods toward a line of idling speeder
bikes, gesturing for the Jedi to follow.

"Can you guide me to their location?" the Mandalorian asked as he mounted the bike, gesturing
for the Jedi to sit in the seat behind him, his two bodyguards quickly mounting the second speeder.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Qui-Gon said, sliding into the seat, his eyes closed as he plunged
into the Force, his hand on the Count's shoulder for balance. "We have a ship in town," he said
quietly. "We had to leave it when the bounty hunters attacked. I wouldn't be bothered, but my
Padawan has put a lot of work into it, and-
"

"When we have the Duchess, I'll send my bodyguards to retrieve it." His hands tightened on the
controls, the speeder's engines revving and rising to a high pitched thrum. "Which way, Master
Jedi?" Feeling the pull of the Force through the strength of their connection, Qui-Gon pointed the
way, and without another word, the speeder jolted forward, bearing them swiftly across the snow
as they wove through the trees toward the Duchess and the Padawan.

Qui-Gon hadn't realized how far he had led the bounty hunters into the wood until the fog burned
away with the rising of the morning sun. The frigid air as they cut through the woods tore at his
face and cut through his robes and chilled him right to the bone, the cold he had so successfully kept at bay the previous day and all through the night finally having an effect as his focus drifted to his student, the Padawan also cold and shivering as he reached out toward him. Perhaps, Qui-Gon mused, it wasn't just him that had ventured deep into the woods. Satine and Obi-Wan had fled as well, and the journey was long enough that Qui-Gon couldn't help but be impressed with how deep the two managed to press.

It wasn't until they had reached the river that ran from high up the frozen mountains and down to the city by the ocean that Qui-Gon told the Count to slow, the speeder's high hum lowering as he broke, their swift pace exchanged for a more careful one so Qui-Gon could pinpoint the location of his Padawan. They were close. He could feel it. They cut along the top of a snowy ravine, looking down at the icy river below, the Jedi shivering when he imagined his student and the Duchess running here in the dark, pursued by hunters. It was not anything that children should have been exposed to, and a swift flash of guilt pulsed strong in Qui-Gon's chest. Sweet Satine and Gentle Obi-Wan deserved better than being fugitives on a cold, unforgiving world.

He could feel Obi-Wan before him, beneath him, then behind him, and Qui-Gon quickly directed Artus to circle back around, the bodyguards following closely behind them as they dove down the sides of the ravine, pulling up at the shore of the river and speeding along the winding route. Without warning, Qui-Gon jumped off the speeder when he felt the Force pull him like a tether, landing with a soft thud in the snow before a thin pathway branching off the ravine, the speeder screeching as the Mandalorians quickly stopped and joined him. They said nothing as they followed the Jedi into the small, winding cut through the rock, the largest of the guards waiting behind, too large to fit in the narrow path.

As they slowly made their way through the claustrophobic path, it began to narrow, slowly and hardly noticeable until neither man could squeeze past, opting not to send the much smaller woman behind them for fear of frightening the Duchess and the Padawan into doing something rash. Peering down the small space, Qui-Gon could just make out the faint flicker of light in the darkness, could feel the tight apprehension of his student. He was in there, Qui-Gon was certain.

"Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon hissed, his voice sounding louder as the sound bounced off the close walls of the ravine. There was no answer, but they could hear scuffling in the passage beyond, and before long, Qui-Gon caught sight of his student, peeking his head out from where he had hidden, a look of intense relief upon his face.

"Master..." Obi-Wan sighed wearily, the tense and distraught boy finally surrendering to the feel of relief and safety at the presence of the Jedi.

"Don't relax quite yet, Padawan," Qui-Gon gently admonished. "Gather Satine and come out. I'll wait for you by the river. Tell her I have located Clan Itera, we are heading for their fortress." Obi-Wan's eyes narrowed, a suspicious frown on his face as he peered beyond Qui-Gon, only just catching the faintest glimpse of the others behind his towering Master in the thin corridor.

"Master, I don't-"

"Do as I say, Padawan," Qui-Gon commanded, and the teen lowered his head, his braid tightly winding around his fingers as he ducked back into the safety of his hiding place. They retreated from the pathway, coming out into the open ravine beside the freezing river and silently waited, the entire group tense and apprehensive, the bodyguards keeping their watchful gazes on the sky above. The threat of attack and discovery hung heavy above them, both from the bounty hunters and from their fellow Mandalorians belonging to the more hostile clans. They all jumped at the sound of scuffling from the narrow path, all of them on their feet and watching intently as a thin, disheveled boy slid out of the space, his hair thoroughly ruffled and rough scratches on his face, the blue and white Mandalorian armor he wore bearing evidence of the struggles he faced the night
Obi-Wan only gave the others a cursory glance before turning back to the crevice and reaching in, grasping hold of Satine's arm and gently helping the girl out, the thin teen nearly drowning in the heavy cloak she wore and still shivering despite it. She froze the moment she saw the Mandalorian, her body tense and rigid, and Artus dropped to his knee, a soft gasp on his lips as he looked at her. Satine took a few quick steps toward him before her froze, her legs shaking and her hands reaching out to him hesitantly, and she quickly turned back to Obi-Wan and grasped his arm tightly, looking over her shoulder desperately at the man she clearly recognized.

Obi-Wan finally turned his attention on the warriors, his eyes narrowed as he seemed to gaze right through them, his focus clear and intense with the feel of his charge against him. None of the Mandalorians moved, hardly daring to breathe in the presence of the Duchess and under the scrutiny of the young Jedi. It felt like an eternity before Kenobi's hard glare softened somewhat, the cold frown on his face replaced with a tired, impassive expression as he lightly brushed his fingers across Satine's shoulder and leaned over to whisper in her ear as he gently nudged her forward. It was all she needed. With a strangled whimper in her throat, Satine rushed forward and threw herself into Artus' arms, the Count clutching the girl close to his chest as she grasped hold of him and cried, the culmination of grief, fear, stress, and the sudden relief of the safety of a warm, familiar embrace.

It took almost three hours on the speeders to reach the Itera stronghold high in the mountains of Krownest. Satine had sat on the speeder behind Obi-Wan, her arms wrapped around his waist and her head resting on his back as she allowed weariness to finally overcome her. The wind whipping around them had been bitterly cold, but Qui-Gon had brought them more appropriate clothing from the town, and Obi-Wan had carefully wrapped her in his cloak before he got on the speeder, and clinging tightly to her Jedi protector on the way to safety, Satine felt warm.

As soon as they had arrived at the stronghold, Satine was guided inside the halls of the fortress, the entire compound crawling with Mandalorian warriors that stopped what they were doing and knelt when she passed, the low buzz of excited whispers following her everywhere she went. She was quickly overwhelmed, a simple matter of courtly behavior and attention that was the result of her social status suddenly unbearable. She was once used to such things, but nearly three months of running and close contact with only two other people had made all the attention seem overwhelming.

When people rushed forward to attend to her, Satine, grabbed hold of Qui-Gon's arm and meekly huddled next to him, almost disappearing in the thick folds of his cloak. She looked back, trying to get a glimpse of Obi-Wan, a sudden and fierce panic gripping her when she didn't immediately see him. He was her protector, her lifeline, and despite the fact that Qui-Gon was more than capable of defending her, far more capable than his student, she found she didn't feel safe without Obi-Wan by her side.

After being shown to her quarters, Satine fell asleep immediately, only to wake two hours later with crippling hunger pangs, a thing shared by the Jedi silently meditating nearby, though when asked, Obi-Wan confessed to being unable to meditate because he couldn't stop thinking about food. The Jedi and the Duchess went together to attend to their hunger, the kitchens providing them with ample helpings of hot stew and freshly baked breads, but neither teen ended up eating much, despite their overwhelming hunger, their bodies having grown accustomed to very little food, and the memory of their vomited breakfast the day before suppressing their initial desire to gorge themselves.

She sat now in the courtyard, bundled up in warm cloaks and clothing, a mug of tea in her hands as she watched her Jedi protectors train, their lightsabers glowing and thrumming in the air as they
moved in perfect tandem through the steps of a kata. It was...beautiful, a stunning thing to behold that attracted a fair bit of attention from the passing Mandalorian warriors, many of who stayed to watch the fabled Jedi Knights at their work. While the Jedi seemed unaware of the crowed they were attraction, Obi-Wan seemed to slip back into his old habits, donning the mantle of anxiety and unease as he focused beside Qui-Gon, his attention disrupted by his uncertainty in his ability and his desire for perfection, his fragile confidence shattered when he fell short of his goal time and time again.

"I hear you're not eating." Satine yelped in surprise and swiftly turned around to face the voice behind her, and a swift curse and a sharp hiss from the lightsaber drew her attention back to the Jedi to find Obi-Wan grimacing as he clutched his hand, the Master fretting over him and lightly scolding him for losing his focus, and then again for fumbling his lightsaber, the weapon laying deactivated upon the ground where Kenobi had dropped it. She smiled brightly at Obi-Wan when his eyes met his, worried and concerned, and she recognized immediately that she had been the cause of his error. She flushed a light pink as she smiled shyly at him, quietly mouthing an apology to her defender, a thing he acknowledged with his own charming smile and a nod of his head, his cheeks also stained red, though Satine thought it could have been from the cold and his exertion.

She looked up when the owner of the deep voice that had so startled her sat beside her, a plate of warm food in his hands. "It wouldn't do for our Duchess to waste away now that she's safe," Artus said kindly, placing the plate between them. "You are so much thinner than when I last saw you, Satine. You need to eat."

"I did eat," the girl said, a bright smile on her face as she looked at the man. "And before you ask, I slept a bit as well." She bit her lip, her gaze falling to her wringing hands. "I...t-thank you for taking us in..."

"You are our Mand'alor," Artus said swiftly, hushing her by pressing a finger to her lips. "It's my pleasure to aid you in returning you to where you belong." He held up a piece of bread from the plate, and with a small smile, Satine took it from his hand, her gaze returning to the Jedi as they moved from katas to the swift, elegant movements of combat practice, the blades hissing and thrumming as they struck. "The Jedi are something else, aren't they?" Satine absently nodded.

"You have no idea..." the Duchess said, her voice distant and wistful as she watched the pair. "They're wise and kind and strong and brave. I haven't seen their like ever before."

"They are certainly warriors with no equal to have kept you safe for so long in such hostile situations." Satine slowly shook her head, absent mindedly nibbling on the bread in her hand, watching as Obi-Wan fell into a rhythm of ducking and dodging and striking, his movements fast and relaxed, graceful and elegant, much more the man Satine had come to know, rather than the boy she once believed him to be.

"They're so much more than that..." Satine whispered. "Being warriors isn't the point, they...t-they..." She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "I can't explain it..." She smiled at the older man. "We're going to end the war, Count Itera. I promise."

"I believe you," he said, a sad, small smile on his lips. "We have lost so much already. This war is destroying everything it means to be Mandalorian." He scoffed softly, his eyes on the Jedi as they sparred. "In the absence of a Mand'alor, family is supposed to come first. The good of the clan above all else." His jaw clenched, teeth grinding together in his agitation, and Satine laid a delicate hand upon his, the burning rage leaving him and replaced with sadness. "My youngest son has taken up with that Wren bitch, Ursa."

"The Wrens again..." Satine muttered. "The Ordos were struggling against them as well. Have
"Only because Clan Vizsla is, and Ursa is a rising officer in the Death Watch." Artus closed his eyes, his teeth grinding together for a moment. "She leads Clan Wren now, and she's even worse than her father was..."

"Count Wren is dead?" Satine asked softly, and Artus nodded.

"Killed in the assault that chased you from Sundari," he whispered. "And since, Countess Ursa has won countless battles on Tor Vizsla's behalf, killed three of my sons, both my daughters and my wife." He stopped, his voice hitching in his throat for a moment before he cleared it, the muscles of his neck knotting with tension. Satine gasped, her hands flying to cover her mouth her eyes wide and beginning to fill with tears.

"T-they're dead?" she squeaked, her voice a barely audible, thin whisper. "Y-your family is all dead?" She shook her head, jarring loose the tears in her eyes, and she rubbed her face against her arm. She grew up with those children, though she never knew any of them terribly well. The boys were more often than not with her brother, and the girls were a bit too rough and tumble for the gentle Satine, though they were often around. Clans Itera, Kelborn, Ordo and Cadera, the staunchest supporters of Clan Kryze, hopelessly fractured, torn apart by this bloody war.

"I'm sorry for telling you like this..." the man muttered, averting his eyes and squeezing her hand tightly. "There is no good way to break news like this, and I have never known how to do it."

"Nu kyr'adyc, shi taab'echaaj'la," Satine whispered, and the man nodded.

"Ni partayli, gar darasuum." Artus ran a hand over his face. "And then my traitor youngest runs away with the bitch that slaughtered his family. His brothers, his sisters, his mother." The Count's shoulders shook with tension and rage, his fury so palpable in the air that Obi-Wan slowly drew closer to the pair, his lightsaber held tightly in his hand, and Satine had to wave him off, holding his gaze until the boy turned away from her to return to his training, but his watchful eye didn't leave her. "He is Death Watch," he growled bitterly. "He is lost to me. And it is Ursa Wren's doing."

"It's awful..." Satine whispered, her voice catching in her throat as she tried to hold back her own grief. This was far too close to what had happened to her own family. "M-my father..."

"Your father..." Artus said, wrapping his arm around the girl and pulling her close, the Duchess sniffling and laying her head against his strong, broad chest. "Your father, your mother, your brother...they would have all been so proud of you." He breathed deeply when he felt the girl tremble in his grasp, "Your father was an honorable man. Brave and strong and wise. Your mother, beautiful and fierce, and your brother..." He chuckled sadly and shook his head. "Their loss was a great loss to Mandalore."

"Y-yes..." Satine choked, her hand tightly gripping his. "Artus..." she whispered, so quiet he had to lean in to hear her. "My sister...Bo-Katan, she-"

"Hush, Satine, I know..." Artus said, gripping the young Duchess closer to her.

"Tor Vizsla slaughtered my family like animals a-and she...s-she..."

"Like my son," he whispered, tightly embracing the girl as she silently cried against his armor. Her body was far too thin, a wispy teen that his strong, warrior daughters had never been, but Satine held within her the fire of her father and the passion of her mother, just as her brother possessed, but instead of the wild and reckless abandon of her brother and his own children, Satine was
focused and tempered, by no means patient, but determined and strong in her convictions. Her weapons weren't blasters and staves and blades like other Mandalorians. The eldest Kryze daughter was made of something different.

"She wants me dead..." Satine whimpered, sniffling when the man quietly shushed her.

"I know..."

"-have you heard news of her, Artus?" Satine asked in a hushed, nervous voice, drawing away from the man and rubbing her eyes before she looked up at him.

"I have..." he said slowly. "Nothing you would like. Nothing you would want to hear."

"I do want to hear," the Duchess insisted, her voice strong and devoid of the emotional timbre it had before, and Artus knew that tone, the exact same one her mother had always used right before she got whatever she wanted.

"She fights for Death Watch, as you know," the Count said quietly. "And she's dangerously effective. Vizsla keeps her close to his side, for the obvious reasons, but she's gotten out and spilled her fair share of blood in Sundari against Death Watch's enemies."

"My allies..." Satine whispered, her eyes drifting away from the Mandalorian and looking back toward her Jedi. They had moved from sparring each other, and Obi-Wan, wooden staff in hand, was squaring off against one of the young Mandalorian warriors, a teenage boy that seemed a mighty tree next to the sprouting twig that was Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"There isn't a family on Mandalore that hasn't been torn apart by this conflict," Artus said quietly. "If not by death, by taking arms against each other. My losses have...broken me, Satine. I am so weary of this war..." He ran a hand through his graying brown hair. "But Ursa Wren isn't, and right now, she's the biggest threat to Clan Itera and to you."

"Can she be reasoned with?" Satine asked, and she was met with bitter, harsh laughter.

"I am the last of Clan Itera. My sons, my daughters, my wife, all dead at the hands of Ursa Wren, and last I heard, she is returning home to Krownest." He sighed as he watched the Jedi spar with his young warriors, the Jedi starting off timid at first and slowly becoming more relaxed, more fluid, the fights lasting longer as the boy moved like water around his opponent.

"Are we in danger here?" Satine asked, her voice tight with fear, and Artus looked down at her sadly and saw the same pain within her that rested in him.

"Nowhere is safe anymore, Satine," he said quietly. "But I promise you this. So long as you are in my care, no harm will come to you. Her delicate hand lightly squeezed his, a grateful smile on her lips as she looked at the older man. "Nobody knows you're here, so you should be safe for a little while. Long enough to contact Clan Cadera. They're powerful enough to protect you." He rested a hand on her shoulder and gently squeezed. "I know it doesn't seem like it, Satine, but you have allies, and not just in the old clans that support you. I'm not the only one who has grown sick of the fighting. It's leading us nowhere but to our own destruction, and the longer this war goes on, the more obvious it becomes."

"So many of our people are still so, so blind to that," Satine said. "I'll make them see. I swear to you, I will." Artus smiled sadly at the girl, his hand squeezing her shoulder.

"You are so much like your father..." Artus said almost wistfully. "He spoke of Mandalorian unity under a banner of peace as well, and he always spoke of you when he did..." Satine turned her gaze away from him, her eyes focused on the winter flowers in the garden, her throat tight as she
Satine tried to press back the sudden tide of emotions. If being with the Jedi had taught her one thing, it was that emotion had its time and place, and now, in the courtyard full of Mandalorians who had gathered to test themselves against the Jedi or to gaze upon the girl that would rule them all, was most certainly not the time. Mandalore valued strength, and she would be strong.

"Will Clan Wren come here?" she asked after a long silence, and Artus nodded.

"When they learn of your whereabouts, they most certainly will. You're too tempting to pass up, even with the minimal force they have here. They will abandon their stronghold to launch an attack on us the moment they know, and at the front of the charge will be Ursa Wren." He sucked in a sharp breath and held it, only barely aware of the soldiers who had gathered near. "And when she comes here, I will kill the bitch, I will end her clan. The Wrens will be no more, and Krownest will belong to Itera, as it did so long ago."

"...but isn't that the problem?" Satine asked, her eyebrow raised skeptically. "Destroying the Wrens will solve nothing. All it will do is end another clan, all it will do is call their Vizsla allies down upon you. You'd be swarmed with the Death Watch before you knew it." Satine laughed bitterly when his eyes narrowed slightly. "And will it stop there? Or will Cadera rise to avenge you? How far does this go before it ends."

"You would deny me revenge for my family?" he asked, his tone disbelieving. "What about your family, will Tor Vizsla just get away with what he's done?"

"Who here hasn't been complicit in contributing to the fall of Mandalore?!" Satine snapped. She had tried to remain cool and removed, but it was for naught. She was a daughter of Mandalore, passion and fire, and she was too tired, too haggard to keep it contained. "I don't seek revenge, I seek justice, and when I am back in my place in Sundari, I will see justice done! But our cultural thirst for revenge and demand for satisfaction for the wrongs we have endured are destroying us!"

There was silence in the courtyard, the attention of every Mandalorian warrior upon her, the eyes of her Jedi alert and watchful, even the sound of the wind blowing across the peaks of the mountains seemed to stop, and Satine wished she could disappear into the walls and never come out. Artus' face fell, his gaze drifting to the ground as a deep, sad chuckle reverberated in his chest.

"You're right, of course..." he said, his tones hushed and quiet, but in the silence of the courtyard, the lone sound carried. "Of course you're right. I want the Wren girl dead, and if she comes here, mark my word, I will kill her. But..." he took a deep breath and held it, suddenly keenly aware of the presence of his warriors around him. "If giving up my personal revenge meant peace and justice for my family, I would gladly give it up."

"I will see justice done, Artus," Satine said, her hand resting on his shoulder. "For your children and your wife, for my mother and father and brother, for anyone who has lost in this war, I will have justice for them."

"And for that you have my loyalty, Mand'alor," Artus said as he rose to his feet, offering his hand to the girl, and she gratefully took it, the older man pulling her to her feet. "Change will not be easy, but we'll do it." His hands brushing her thin shoulders, he looked the girl over, a slight smile on his face for a moment before his attention was diverted to the people around him. "Well, what are you all waiting for?" he snapped at the warriors. "Fortify our defenses, get the scouts in the field. We share a planet with Clan Wren, and when they come for our Mand'alor, we will be ready." They didn't need to be told twice, and within seconds, the soldiers disbursed, rushing to do the bidding of their commander while others resumed their training against the Jedi, the Duchess and the Count standing apart and watching as Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon prepared themselves.
"What will we do if the Wrens come?" Satine asked after a long silence, after the Jedi and the Mandalorians began their match, and Artus pulled the teenager beside him.

"We will see to it you find your way safely to your allies. The Cadera's on Vorpa'ya are your best bet, but..." He drew her closer and bent down to whisper in her ear, the girl hardly daring to breathe as she felt the tension running through the man beside her. "Satine, we have it on good authority that a very close ally of Clan Vizsla has turned against them." The Duchess looked up at him, her eyebrow raised skeptically.

"Who?" she asked carefully. "Why. This sounds like a trap."

"We never thought it was. Anyone that knew your brother knew it wasn't." He shook his head. "I'm getting ahead of myself. Clan Rodarch has declared for the New Mandalorians, and they have taken your homeworld as their base of operations in order to keep Vizsla and the Death Watch off."

"Clan Rodarch," Satine said, completely deadpan. "As in, the Asharl Panthers? That Clan Rodarch." Artus slowly nodded, and Satine laughed under her breath. "Impossible. They have had close connections to Clan Vizsla since...I don't know, since forever."

"Until your brother came along," the man said, his voice kept low to ensure their conversation was not overheard. "You had left for your diplomatic training on Coruscant, so I don't know if you heard, but your brother took up with the eldest daughter of the clan leader. They weren't together terribly long, but it was enough for them to make their intentions known, and then Tor Vizsla executed your family, Clan Rodarch turned their backs on him."

"But why," she whispered. "Clan Rodarch are fierce warriors, they wouldn't abandon the old ways when they suit them so well." She shook her head. "No, more than that. With my brother dead, they have no ties to Clan Kryze, I certainly never met this girl."

"No," Artus quietly agreed. "But this isn't about you. They turned on Tor Vizsla because he murdered your brother. And they continue to fight for your clan because he didn't just leave behind a girl that desperately loved him, he left behind a child within her."

"...w-what?" Satine slowly lowered herself to the ground, her legs turning to jelly, her hand out and grasping the man's arm for support. She felt stupid for how slowly her thoughts seemed to move through her mind, sluggish and nonsensical, the words repeated over and over in her ears, and she could scarcely believe a word of it. "I-is that true?" she croaked, her voice aching and raw with emotion, and she touched her cheek to find them wet with tears she didn't know were falling.

"It's true," he said softly, kneeling beside the girl so she could use him for support. "Everyone who was close to your brother knew about it. My children, Edric and Veela Ordo, the Kelborn twins, the Cadera Clan leaders."

"H-how could I not know?" she whimpered, her thin frame trembling.

"You were on Coruscant, Satine, and war had just broken out. It wasn't exactly a priority."

"And they never told me?!" Satine snapped, her temper flaring. "I was with the Ordos for two days and they never told me that I have family?!" She gasped softly, the strength leaving her body as she sagged against the older man. "I-I have family...Ka'ra be Manda'yaim gaa'tayl ni, I have family." She quickly grasped Artus' arms, her long fingers digging into his muscle through the flight suit beneath his armor. "Is she alive? Has the child been born? Is it safe?!"

"Peace, Satine," he said, his voice deep and soothing, but the girl remained frantically excited. "I
don't have answers to your questions. However, if she is still alive, the child will not yet be born. A few more months, perhaps, but I only met the girl once. My children would have known better..."

"But the Kelborn twins and the leaders of Clan Cadera know, right?" she said quickly, and the Count nodded. "I have family..." she whispered, a smile on her face that she failed to suppress. "I'm going to be an aunt."

"You have allies, Satine," Artus said quietly, his gaze returning to the Jedi, their sparring bouts ended and now congenially talking with the warriors they had fought. "Never forget that." The Duchess smiled brightly at the man, the burden of her responsibility seeming just a bit lighter.

"Whatever happens, Artus Itera, I am glad we found you."

"As am I, Duchess," he said quietly as the Jedi slowly approached. "As am I."

It was the first good, restful sleep that Obi-Wan had in what felt like forever, certainly the best since he had come to Mandalore. He had almost forgotten what peace felt like, what it was like to feel the Force in a relative state of calm. True, there was still the agitated buzzing in the back of his mind, the deep, unsettling churning just beneath the waters if the Force that filled him with a sense of foreboding every time he looked too deep. But it was distant, like some faded, forgotten memory, the shadow of a bad dream that fled upon waking, allowing a languid peace to settle around him.

It was almost like being back in the Temple, almost like being home on Coruscant, surrounded by the busy bustling of billions of lives and somehow still managing to find a slice of calm among them. It was that which he missed most about life in the Jedi Temple. The mornings of waking up and knowing that the days would be filled with peaceful contemplation and study of the Force, or sequestered away to practice the graceful art of the lightsaber. There were the moments he spent in quiet discussion of the Force's mysteries with Luminara, or listening with infinite amusement as Quinlan spun one of the elaborate tales of his many missions. It was hard work, but it was rewarding, even when he was plagued with his persistent anxiety and self-doubt, in the peace of the Jedi, all his troubles seemed transient, like all things, and he knew that one day, they would pass as well.

It was that same sense of peace that he awoke to early that morning, safe in the cold and frigid mountains within the Itera stronghold. The weight of war and the fear of running and fighting for the life of his Duchess had been purged from him, leaving his soul light and easy within him, unburdened by the anxiety that usually plagued him. The soreness and heaviness that sat in his body the day before had been washed away, and even the dark, residual bruising covering his pale skin, the physical reminders of pain's touch, had seemed to fade. It was truly remarkable what a good night's rest could do, not just for the body, but for the spirit.

After bathing, a usually quick routine that he extended far past the time he normally allotted for such things, the warm, clean water he usually took for granted suddenly a luxury, Obi-Wan dressed in the new, clean tunic and robes that Qui-Gon had procured for him, the soft, heavy fabric nearly a perfect match for the robes provided by the Jedi Temple. He left the small room that had been provided to him, stopping briefly just outside the much larger rooms that Satine occupied to feel for her presence, and when he found her peaceful and content in sleep, her security guarded by the ever-watchful Qui-Gon in deep meditation in the room with her, the Padawan took off, his step light as he made his way down the halls of the Itera stronghold.

He stopped by the kitchen on his way out, the cooks and other staff only having just got there themselves to begin preparations for the day's meals, all of them tense and anxious for the task of
having to serve and please royalty. He had quietly spoken to one of the particularly nervous bakers as he waited for her to pull the bread out of the oven, gently smiling at the girl that exhibited the same anxiety he could empathize with so very well, and by the time she placed a roll in his hand, still hot from the oven, her fears had been soothed over by the young Jedi and she playfully sent him on his way, armed with the promise that he would come see her again, if for nothing else, to make sure that some fool mistake didn't cause the Duchess to call for her execution. It was an easy thing to promise, and Obi-Wan left the kitchen sighing in contentment as he savored the sweet, buttery taste of his freshly baked breakfast.

A quick patrol along the outer walls led to an inspection of the stronghold's defenses, the Jedi asking the guards posted to walk him through their plans and strategy, teaching him about the large cannons built into the dense, heavy walls. If they were offended by this child, this outsider inquiring about the level of their safety, they showed no sign of it, most of them older, seasoned warriors that showed no qualms about briefing the Duchess' bodyguard. When he was satisfied, the Padawan ran out of the large, barred door of the fortress, opened for a moment to allow his exit, and he disappeared into the snowy mountain forest and the brisk air of the morning, his breathing deep and even as he absorbed his surroundings, so much more beautiful now that he was not running for his life.

Unlike his unconventional Master, who was always running from one mess to another, Obi-Wan enjoyed his long hours of quiet and peace and reflection. The solitude suited him, though Obi-Wan knew that nobody was ever truly alone. All around him, he could hear the call of large forest birds as they hunted for food to feed their young, could feel the skittish unease of the large, native quadrupeds as they nosed through the snow to pick up the scent of others of their kind, be it to mark their territory or to find a mate. He could sense the quiet prowling of predatory felines and canines, in packs or in solitude as they hunted. All of them, the avians and the earthbound, the hunters and the hunted, the large and the small, the old and the young, all of them as one with Obi-Wan in the Force, bound and united with the pulse of life that tied them all together.

It was symbiosis, and it was beautiful, and the Jedi knelt at the base of a mighty tree, wet dirt and thin light blue grass clinging to its roots in a wide circle, a single spot of spring in the vastness of the winter around him, and with a deep, calming breath, Obi-Wan sunk into the Force, deep in meditation and allowed his mind to wander. As they always did, his thoughts turned to his mission and the turns it had taken. Things were different now that they had allies, many allies, if Count Itera's accounts could be believed, though it didn't change the fact that they were still hunted, and even with allies, the conflict still raged, a thing Satine was growing more and more sick of with each passing day.

For Satine, today would be spent sequestered away with Qui-Gon, Artus Itera, and the holographic images of her allies among the clans that supported her, discussing strategy and plans for ending the war and Satine's place in it, if the peaceful girl even had a place. Last night, Qui-Gon had suspected that their role would not change, that the Jedi would continue to be required to keep Satine out of harm's way, as being among the clans fighting the war would invariably endanger her, as well as make her a much easier target. Times like this, times of relief and peace, would be few and far between, as the Jedi Master didn't foresee any near end to the conflict.

The war was only made more complicated by the multitude of factions, a war where there were not two combatants, but dozens, any unity among the groups transient at best as Mandalorian ambition rose and fell with the opportunity to seize power. An ally today could be an enemy tomorrow, and removing one leader from a position of power only served to bring further chaos instead of the unity that should have occurred when the leader of an opposing army was killed or detained. Tor Vizsla, Veela Ordo, Ursa Wren, and hundreds more just like them were only one part of a very large problem. Killing any of them would bring the war no closer to its conclusion unless the Mandalorians somehow managed to unite behind a strong leader that opposed them.
Someone like Satine.

Obi-Wan knew that this war would get worse before it got better. The fact of the matter was that the Mandalorians were prideful and stubborn, a group of people that took orders as vague suggestions, which only served to further fracture clans when they disagreed with each other, and being the warriors they were, those disagreements led to bloodshed more often than not. The war would see these people killed before it was over, allies and enemies alike, and Obi-Wan wondered if, by the end of it all, Satine would even have a people to rule over.

Satine... 

Obi-Wan sighed heavily, his eyes opening to gaze at the stark, harsh beauty around him. With the disquieting buzz of warning far back in the depths of his mind and surrounded by the peace and calm of the morning, it was easier for him to sift through the restless sea of emotions within him, far easier to be honest with himself when he wasn't so frightfully on edge with the threat of death around every corner. Always, always, his thoughts, when allowed to drift, would fall upon Satine.

Sweet, beautiful, passionate Satine. She was like the forest lit by the soft golden glow of a crisp dawn, like the afternoon sun high over a brisk, gently rolling sea, like the reds of twilight over vast fields of swaying grass, like the night in a desert under a blanket of starlight. She was like the natural seasons of an untouched, undiscovered world, blazing summer, vibrant autumn, pristine winter, and gentle spring. She was like the wind and the rain, the day and the night, like all things, and yet like nothing else in the entire galaxy. Obi-Wan saw something of the girl in everything around him, a problem, he knew, but he couldn't help it. The way the snow caught the golden light of morning nearly exactly matched the exact shade of her silky hair, the ice blue winter flowers at the base of the tree nearly the exact color of her eyes.

It wasn't always good, of course. After all, a being could never be purely positive. No creature was. In the war they fought, he saw the same fierce stubbornness in the Duchess. Her argumentative nature was mirrored perfectly in the Mandalorian warriors she was committed to changing. She was like fire, warm, yes, but also destructive and consuming. And she was like war, constantly at battle not just with the ways of her people, but with herself as well. She was gentle in a world where gentleness was seen as weakness and destroyed, and so she turned her nature into a weapon, militant pacifism coupled with the burning desire to shape the world around her into one where she determined the rules. Because she knew what was best. She was rigid and uncompromising, single-minded and stubborn, she had to be, lest she be seen as weak, and Satine Kryze was not weak. She was, after all, Mandalorian, just like the rest of them.

Out here, away from the war and the fear, away from his frayed nerves and his hormonal confusion, away from his quietly grieving Master and the Duchess that inspired his wayward feelings, it was easy for Obi-Wan to examine himself, to sit in meditation and contemplate his emotions. Out here, he was not influenced by the fraught, charged situation that being Satine's protector carried with it, or by the involuntary rush of hormones that being in the presence of an attractive woman caused within him. Here, it was just him and the Force, and it lent itself to true honesty, if only he was willing to look for it and accept what he found, and Obi–Wan was never one to turn away from the truth, no matter how difficult, no matter how painful.

It was painfully clear that what he felt for Satine went beyond simple physical attraction, and well beyond the bonds of a normal friendship, certainly crossed the line between protector and protected. But exactly the nature of his feelings was a bit of a mystery to him. Obi-Wan had never felt this way before. The absolute closest he had come to this was when he was just beginning to become a man, just when the hormone-fueled dreams began, just when his voice began to crack and deepen from his light childhood tones to the smooth, easy drawl of his clipped accent. Just when he began noticing that women were mysterious, alluring creatures, frightening and beautiful,
a thing that made him both want to run away and be very close to.

Obi-Wan had felt the gentle fluttering in his stomach once when he and Luminara were sparring, both he and his Mirialan friend sweating and out of breath, and young Kenobi had noticed for the first time that she wasn't just a friend, but she was a girl, something he always knew, but now held different, new meaning to his pubescent mind. It was a thing the empathetic Mirialan picked up on immediately, something she had felt herself, and like good Jedi, they sat, they acknowledged the feeling for what it was, the rush of teenage hormones, and they let it go. And that had been the end of it. The feeling had passed, at least in regards to his friend, though he still experienced the pull within when his dreams awoke him.

What Obi-Wan felt for Satine was nothing like that.

His heart skipped a beat every time he looked at her, his stomach twisted in fluttering knots every time they touched. He could feel her presence even when she wasn't there, could smell the faint, sweet smell of flowers that was just her every time the breeze blew, could hear her melodic, captivating Mando'a when he lay awake at night. They were friends, yes, admitted they were attracted to each other, and passed it off as simply that, teenage desire latching on to literally the only female he had access to, and they left it at that. Neither of them could have anything more anyway, not with a war going on, not with his future as a Jedi Knight, not with her path as the ruler of Mandalore.

But that wasn't it. Unlike the matter with Luminara, it didn't go away once they had faced and accepted the emotions they felt. He couldn't speak for Satine, of course, but for him, it got worse, each new thing he learned about her only making him fall deeper, each moment spent with her precious and etched into his mind to be remembered later while he sat on lonely watch while the Duchess slept. He was...changed. So different from when he had left Coruscant to begin this mission. At first, he feared the feelings within him, tried to banish them as a good Jedi would, but now, he relished them, looked forward to each interaction with his charge, delighted in the way his heart skipped, in the fluttering of his stomach, in the way he could feel the heat rising in his cheeks.

It was far more than hormonal. This wasn't just the physical pull of lust that pulsed within him and kept him awake and needy long into the night, though he did feel that as well. It was more than feeling her beside him, more than allowing himself to get lost looking at her as they sat beside a fire, more than imagining her flushed with passion in the rare times he was completely alone and allowed himself to close his eyes and bring himself to blissful satisfaction with her name upon his lips. Obi-Wan delighted most in listening to Satine speak in her beautiful, melodic native tongue, not just for the easy flow of her voice, but for what she had to say. She was fire and opinionated, perhaps not wise like the Jedi, but passionate like they could never be, and it made her infectious. He didn't agree with her on most things, would often find himself arguing with her, her sharp tongue a fair match for his quick wit, and through their heated debates, they honed each other, shaped each other's opinions, grew together, and with each moment that passed, he could feel his attachment to her deepen.

He was a Jedi, unwise in the ways of emotion, partially because of the restrains that he had imposed upon himself, but when he thought of love, an emotion that was forbidden to him, he imagined it was very much like the feelings he had for Satine.

Obi-Wan didn't know, of course. He had never been in love, had never known what it felt like and therefore could not identify it. There wasn't anyone he could ask about it either. Master Qui-Gon had been in love, but the man had been worried enough as it was about his young student, and Obi-Wan was reluctant to discuss it with him, not just to keep Qui-Gon from worrying, but so that his interactions with the Duchess could continue unimpeded by the older man. She was his
mission, after all. He couldn't compromise that.

There was, of course, the constant underlying panic within Obi-Wan when he thought of Satine, revealed in the warmth of the emotions that she stirred within him, and then remembered how horribly it clashed against the Code of the Jedi, the guide by which he lived his life, the rules which he so tightly clung to. So strict were the Jedi on the matter that of the five tenants that comprised the Jedi Code, two of them were dedicated to this exact manner. A full twenty percent of the Code designed, at least in part, to warn a Jedi away from deep, powerful emotions like love, and additional rules had been added to make the matter even more clear, to make the Council's stance even stronger. Even his unconventional Master was staunchly against the emotion, had warned him away from it on many occasions, had constantly told him to be mindful of his emotions.

A Jedi shall not know anger, nor hatred, nor love. The quickest path to the Dark Side, the fastest, most deceptive way a Jedi could fall. Love embodied the seduction of the Dark Side, the emotion that drew the unsuspecting in with the allure of the feeling, with the emotion and passion that the Jedi were told to avoid. Obi-Wan had seen that first hand in his Master. He had seen how Qui-Gon had struggled when Master Tahl had died, saw how he suffered, watched as thoughts of revenge consumed him, and the young Padawan stood by in horror as his beloved Master nearly murdered a man. And all because of love, because the gentle emotion let the gate open for darker things, because when it was taken away, what was left was an open space that so easily filled with depression and anger. And yet...

And yet Qui-Gon had always told him to trust his feelings, to follow the Living Force, not to envelop himself so much in the future and to walk in the present at the whims of the Force. Be mindful of the future, but not at the expense of the present, a philosophy that his Master adopted that put him in direct conflict with the Council on more times than he could count. He never forgot the missions he was assigned, never forgot their greater purpose, but in setting out to accomplish his tasks, Qui-Gon Jinn always found things along the way to divert his attention, always claimed they would come to serve the greater picture, always claimed them to have a purpose, no matter how unlikely it seemed. It made him short-sighted, according to the Council, and perhaps it did, ruled by his feelings, but it was in this that Qui-Gon was at his strongest.

Trust in your feelings, his Master had always said. For so long, Obi-Wan rejected it, knew his feelings to be wrong because he was wrong. He was broken, a struggling, pitiful excuse for a Jedi, one that lacked talent, one the Jedi nearly tossed aside as hopeless. In reality, he was simply another of Qui-Gon's causes, another lost soul with a place and a purpose in the greater plans of the Force that only Qui-Gon could see. How was Obi-Wan supposed to trust his feelings when he was filled with self-doubt and anxiety, when he questioned everything he did, when he struggled simply to keep up to his peers? His Master called it modesty, but Obi-Wan knew better. He was nothing special, a simple boy surrounded by the extraordinary.

But here on Mandalore, here where he was tested every single day with his life and the life of his charge as wager, he felt stronger. He saw his abilities, he saw his failings, his circumstances pushing him to the outer edge of his abilities and beyond, and he felt himself becoming...confident. Sure and certain of his powers and abilities, yet mindful of his limitations. He was still learning, yes, but being here had opened him, had changed him, had helped him grow into a body that had previously felt too big for him, and sweet Satine and the feelings she inspired in him had a great deal to do with it.

Regardless, his emotions were irrelevant. Satine would go on to rule Mandalore, which made her completely untouchable. And...that was fine. He could quietly have these feelings, secretly harbor them deep within him to draw upon when things seemed hopeless, when he was in need of strength, when the weight of the war and death that surrounded them became too much to bear.
Whatever it was that Obi-Wan felt, it was a font of strength, the power of will that made the Force run pure and clear within him. It didn't matter that the emotion was just for him, a thing to never be shared. Satine was wild and free, a force that could not be contained, and certainly not by him. Satine was not for him. She was not for anyone, a beautiful life free to do as she chose, a woman of pure and perfect ideals that belonged to no one person. And that was fine.

Obi-Wan didn't need Satine to return his affections. He didn't expect her to love him in return. He would never ask that of her. It was...selfish, and Obi-Wan was not so important to demand her attention when her people needed her. What he felt for her...he respected her enough, loved her enough to be content in watching her walk her own path, and would gladly aid her in achieving what she desired.

Love...

Obi-Wan shook his head as he stood, grabbing three of the flowers from the base of the tree and holding them gently in his grasp. This would require more thought, more meditation, but for now, he needed to return to the stronghold. Satine was going to be in strategy meetings the rest of the day, and their ship had been recovered from the village and needed to be put through the paces just in case they needed to quickly flee. He wanted to see her at least once before they attended their duties for the day, once while they were surrounded by peace and serenity, the environment he wished he could have gotten to know her in. The environment she deserved to live in. They would make it happen. The three of them together would bring peace to Mandalore.

The run back to the Itera stronghold was faster than the run out into the woods, and it had only taken ten minutes to find his way back to the fortress, the warm, dimly lit halls a stark contrast to the chill of the bright morning. He started across the courtyard to get to the main complex where Satine had her room and quickly stopped when he felt the Force gently tug at him, drawing his attention away from his goal and out to one of the peaceful winter gardens tucked away at the edge of the courtyard. His breath caught in his throat, his feet seeming to move toward it on their own accord when he spotted the Duchess herself standing among the thin, willowy trees and the delicate winter flowers beside Qui-Gon, the ever-vigilant Jedi protector.

"You're up early, Padawan," Qui-Gon said as Obi-Wan approached, the boy bowing deeply to both his Master and the Duchess, the two returning the gesture with a nod of their heads.
"Restless?"

"Not at all, Master," Obi-Wan said softly, a faint smile on his lips. "I thought to take advantage of the respite and go for a run in the forest. We don't have snow on Coruscant. It's quite beautiful when you're not being shot at or freezing to death."

Qui-Gon chuckled deeply as he shook his head. "Well said, Padawan."

"Are you doing likewise, Master?" Obi-Wan asked, peering at Satine out of the corner of his eye. "I thought you and the Duchess were to be in meetings today."

"There is little I can contribute to the discourse that I have not already said," Satine said firmly, her head raised high for a moment before her shoulders relaxed, the bold, imperious look on her face melting before a warm, shy smile. "And as you said, Obi-Wan...it is beautiful."

"I will be attending the meetings in her place," Qui-Gon said quietly. "She trusts me to represent her best interests, and..." He sighed and absentlly stroked his beard, the fine hairs damp from the gently falling snow that melted as it touched his face. "She is young. The field of war is no place for a teenager. This entire situation..." Qui-Gon growled softly in irritation. "It is a great disservice to both of you. As her guardian and as your Master, it is my responsibility to shield you two from what I can. Any chance for a peaceful moment should be taken."
The Duchess smiled softly as she stepped toward Obi-Wan. "We just needed you. Qui-Gon isn't comfortable with the idea of not having you around to watch me."

"Y-yes..." Obi-Wan stammered, his hands tightly behind his back, his shoulders tight as his heart began jumping. "I...apologize for keeping you waiting, Duchess..."

"Don't worry about it," she said slowly, a coy look on her face, though she couldn't meet Obi-Wan's eye. "I'll think of a way for you to make it up to me."

"Y-yes, of course..." Obi-Wan stammered, his Master chuckling softly as he approached him and lay a large hand on his student's thin shoulder.

"Can I trust her to your care?" Qui-Gon asked, and the Padawan drew up tall, a small, confident smile on his lips.

"Always, Master." Qui-Gon nodded.

"Very well. I leave her in your hands, Obi-Wan." With a quick squeeze to his shoulder, Qui-Gon turned away from the teenagers, his long, slow stride carrying him away from the garden and across the courtyard to disappear into the main building, leaving Satine and Obi-Wan to stand awkwardly and look at anything but each other. Their night huddled closely together in the cave had...changed something. Obi-Wan wasn't sure what it was, but had only realized it now, the first chance the two had to be together since that night, and even now, the memory of her slight frame pressed close against him burned deep within him. He knew Satine was feeling the same. Perhaps, for himself, at least, it was the recognition of the feelings he secretly harbored for her.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat, the Duchess startling and gasping at the sudden noise, her light blue eyes wide and focused upon him, and with a shuddering breath, Obi-Wan steeled himself, his chest tightening as he held out the icy blue winter flowers in his grasp to her, his face flushed not just from the cold.

"F-for me?" Satine asked, her voice trembling and thin as she looked at them, and the Jedi nodded ever so slightly.

"I found them on my run." Obi-Wan quietly explained. "They...reminded me of you, so..."

"What..." Satine asked, soft, nervous laughter in her voice as she took a small step back. "Pale and fragile? I know, Count Itera has told me so multiple times already." Flushing deeper, Obi-Wan simply shook his head.

"N-no..." he stammered, taking a step forward, bringing them closer than they had been before, and once again, he held the delicate flowers out to her in his open palm. "O'r a aru'ela taap, mesh'la kebise liser motir," he whispered, breathless and sincere, and Satine ceased to breathe. Because...even in the harshest environment, something beautiful may grow."

For a long moment, Satine's chest ached as it tried to pull air into her lungs through a throat closed with emotion, her face burning under the gentle intensity of the Jedi's gaze. She managed a shuddering gasp, her lungs filling with the cold air and jolting her heart to a rapid beat, a shy, almost nervous smile on her lips as she reached out and took Obi-Wan's hand in hers, the touch lingering just a moment too long as she reveled in the pulsing warmth within her as their bare skin touched.

"Thank you..." Satine managed to say in a thin whisper, the small smile on her face growing when the Jedi's eyes lit up, and she took the fragile stems of the flowers in her delicate grasp, holding them close to her chest as she watched her shy protector fidget nervously and wind his braid.
around his fingers, a nervous habit she once found infuriating, one that now seemed nothing but endearing to her.

"Y-you must think me terribly foolish," Obi-Wan stammered, laughing softly as he shook his head, his entire being relaxed and at ease, but the iron grip he had on his braid betrayed how tense and uncomfortable he was, and Satine couldn't help but allow a bright, easy smile to spread across her face. Not long ago, she would have seen his expressionless face simply for the mask as it was intended to be, but now, she easily saw beyond it, saw the emotion contained in the empathetic soul he tried so desperately to hide and protect.

"Perhaps a little," she said, stepping toward the flushing boy. "I don't mind. I think it's sweet." Swallowing hard, Obi-Wan plucked one of the flowers out of her hand and tucked it behind the blushing girl's ear, his fingers lightly dragging down her cheek and her long, slender neck, his hand resting on her shoulder as the Duchess slid her hand up his chest. The two teens remained completely still for a moment, neither daring to move until Obi-Wan's hand rested gently on her hip, and Satine laid her head upon his chest as she held him in a gentle embrace.

They had been close before, but it was nothing like this. Before it had been out of need, to protect her, to survive in dangerous situations. They had been flirtatious with each other before, lightly touching and gentle brushes when they sat close, but nothing they had done had been quite so sincere and honest as this, and despite they could feel each other's hearts beating wildly in their chests, neither were willing to let go. A line had been crossed, a silent, physical admission that the attraction they felt for each other was something more, something deep that they were both afraid to give voice to and too unsure, too uncertain to take further.

It took a while for them to draw themselves out of the moment, to become aware that they were not alone, that the busy courtyard was so very near, and they reluctantly pulled away, the Duchess' fingers still brushing the Jedi's chest, his hand still resting lightly on her hip, and neither teen able to look at the other, though they could do nothing to keep the deep flush and the bright smiles from their faces.

"Satine..." Obi-Wan said softly, and the Duchess glanced up at him to find the Jedi looking at her, a cunning, devious glint in his eyes. "You may also be pale and far, far too thin."

"Oh, am I?" the Duchess scoffed as she quickly grabbed Obi-Wan's sides, her long fingers pressing hard against him as the gasping Jedi squirmed under her grasp. "You are a fine one to talk about that, I can feel your ribs through your robes, Obi!" She turned her nose in the air, her expression imperious and haughty as it always got when they argued, but the delighted smile never left the corners of her lips, despite her best efforts. "Do you not have the wits to know how to eat?"

"I would, Duchess..." Kenobi drawled. "Were I not giving my rations to you so I can have a moment's peace." He rolled his eyes. "Force, but do you complain when you are hungry."

"I complain, Jedi, because my company is atrocious." She scoffed. "Thin, gaunt, uncivilized brute that you are."

"Be that as it may, Duchess, but I am your uncivilized brute." Satine scoffed as she looked at the boy out of the corner of her eye, her appraising gaze raking over him, her breathing shuddering softly as she took note of the way her protector's muscles tensed and tightened underneath the loose robes he wore, the garments hanging off him like they were built for a bigger boy, like his Master had selected them specifically to give the boy room to grow into manhood.

"Well..." Satine sniffed, crossing her arms in front of her chest, her hand delicately holding her remaining two flowers despite her rigid posture. "I suppose I will have to make due with that."
Obi-Wan laughed softly as he shook his head, a bright smile on his lips as he stepped beside the girl and offered her his arm.

"Our ship is in the hangar, I need to run maintenance on it. Would you care to come with me?"

Obi-Wan's grin widened when she quickly took his arm and pressed herself as close to him as she was able.

"You can teach me more about how the ship works."

"I will if you teach me Mando'a. I feel like I'm getting rusty."

Satine snorted as she stifled an arrogant laugh. "Obi, you can't be rusty if you were never good to begin with. You have always been garbage at speaking my native tongue."

"Mm, I shall endeavor to watch you more closely while you speak, in that case," Kenobi drawled lazily, and Satine giggled softly, her arms wrapping tightly around Kenobi's offered arm.

"There may be hope for you yet, Obi-Wan," she said as she looked up at the Jedi, the boy smiling softly as he guided her across the courtyard.

"As you say, my Duchess. As you say."

Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan and Satine were half way to the dining hall for dinner when the peace that had been enjoying was brought to a swift and sudden end. As usual, Obi-Wan had sensed it first, a swift and sudden pull in the Force that alerted him to the fact that something was very, very wrong, the Padawan stopping in the middle of the hallway and refusing to budge as he sharpened his focus and delved deeper within the Force. Qui-Gon followed soon after, and grabbing both teenagers by the shoulders, he steered them toward a nearby stairwell and guided them up and up until the exited out upon the fortress walls. Qui-Gon was still for a moment, his sharp eyes darting along the mountain pass and his senses reaching beyond that which he could see. His noble face hardening into an expression of serious focus as he always did when danger approached, he strode to one of the warriors patrolling the ramparts and laid his large hand upon his shoulder.

"Sound the alarm," the Jedi said, his voice low and commanding, and when the Mandalorian started to stammer in argument, Qui-Gon's eyes narrowed with the gravity of the situation. "You're about to find yourselves under attack. Do as I say." That was enough. Nodding swiftly, the soldier ran off, and just as the alarm began to wail, the trio on the walls looked out over the mountains in the snowy valley below and saw Mandalorians. Soldiers and tanks and ships, as far as the eye could see, the armor painted in gold and pale gray, making them simultaneously easy and difficult to see, like mirages in extreme heat, their shapes seen against the pale snow, but their position wavering and hazy.

"Gold and gray," Satine whispered, sinking down behind the wall, her head peeking up just enough to see the army drawing closer. "Clan Wren."

"Clan Wren?" Obi-Wan repeated, looking over to his master from where he crouched beside the Duchess. "I thought they just kept a skeleton force here, I thought they only had enough to guard their fortress, not launch an attack!"

"Apparently," Qui-Gon muttered, "they were wrong." His eyes narrowed as he looked over the snowy field quickly filling with soldiers and machines of war approaching far faster than it had initially seemed. "We need to get out of here. Is the ship ready, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes, Master."
"Go prepare for our departure." The Padawan quickly rose to do as he was told, but Satine quickly shot her arm out and grabbed hold of Obi-Wan's sleeve.

"We can't leave..." she gently pleaded. "These people are my allies, they-

"They are not my mission, Duchess, you are," Qui-Gon quickly interrupted. "We cannot stay here."

"Qui-Gon, that's an army!" Satine snapped, pointing out over the wall. "If we can stay and help, we must do so!"

"For what end, Duchess?" Qui-Gon hissed, just as harshly as she had, his tone shocking the girl into stunned silence. "What would you have us do here? Obi-Wan and I are two, what difference could we make in this conflict? Perhaps we could help Clan Itera kill more of Clan Wren before we all die. How many more deaths will make ours more worth it? Fifty? A hundred? Two hundred?" Qui-Gon interlocked his hands and stretched his arms outward, his fingers cracking under the strain. "I could probably make that happen, if that is your wish."

"I-it isn't!" Satine cried, absolutely horrified. "I don't want more death, I-"

"Death is all that awaits us here if we stay," Qui-Gon said firmly, laying his hand upon the girl's shoulder. "For us and for them. I'm under no illusions that we can hold them back, your people have a history of being some of the most skilled Jedi killers in the galaxy, and Clan Wren holds to the old ways. I will not risk my student in a pointless assault against professional Jedi slayers, and I will not risk you when I fall trying to defend you against an army."

Satine looked up at Obi-Wan, her eyes wide and wet and her throat tight as her hand tightened around the boy's arm. Obi-Wan wouldn't meet her gaze, and part of her was glad that he didn't. She wasn't sure she could take it. "W-what if we reason with them?" Satine squeaked. "What if-

"That is not a risk I am willing to take." He laid a hand on the Duchess' shoulder. "If the Iteras are smart, they will follow us out, alright?" Biting her lip, Satine nodded, and before Qui-Gon could issue his next command, Artus Itera came storming across the ramparts, dressed in his armor and followed by a long line of his warriors.

"The bastards have jammed our communications," Artus growled, snapping his eyepiece down and looking out over the field, a seep snarl in his chest as he sized up his enemy.

"Master, if they're jamming communications to the entire stronghold, it's very possible they have ships in the air that we aren't seeing," Obi-Wan whispered, and the Master nodded.

"I find that likely, yes. It will make our escape a great deal more complicated." He looked down at his student, the boy's eyes averted as he sharply tugged on his braid. Through the Force, he could feel his Padawan's nerves, his anxiety, his...resolve. Obi-Wan was focused, intense, more confident then Qui-Gon had ever seen him. Something had...changed within the Padawan, something...something...

He shook his head. There would be time later to delve into this change.

"Can you fly us out, Obi-Wan?" Qui-Gon asked. "We don't know how many ships they have. There could be hundreds of fighters, command ships, dreadnaughts-"

"I can do it, Master," Obi-Wan said, his voice strong and firm and confident, enough for the frightened Duchess to turn her attention on the boy and look up at him in near adoration.

"Artus Itera!" The voice echoed over the mountains, the attention of all those on the wall drawn
out to the lone figure standing before the army, just out of range of the fortress' cannons, and Artus snarled savagely ans stood up on the wall.

"Ursa Wren, I'm going to kill that bitch..." he hissed, barking a swift command to his soldiers to bring him the loud hailer.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, leaning over toward his student. "Go, ready the ship. Come get us when you have calculated an escape route." With a swift nod, Obi-Wan quickly turned and ran toward the edge of the wall and leapt off the side to fall down into the courtyard below, Satine softly whimpering when her protector let go of her hand and left her side. "You wanted a chance to talk, Satine," Qui-Gon said, drawing her up and holding her against him, the girl disappearing in the heavy folds of his cloak as it fell around her, his lightsaber clutched in his hand. "We may have a chance now while Obi-Wan works."

"Artus Itera!" the woman called again, and the warriors on the wall activated their loud hailer.

"Ursa Wren!" Artus shouted. "Is this your plan? You would attack my fortress? Are you absolutely mad? You may be victorious, but your forces will be annihilated!"

"Don't be foolish, old man," the woman said, her voice light and sinister, even over the distance. "I'm not interested in mutual destruction. I'm here to make a deal."

"I will have no dealings with the scum that murdered my family!" They could hear the woman scoff over the loud hailer.

"I hear you have something I want!" Ursa called, a slight sing-song lit to her voice that set Qui-Gon on edge. "Is the Duchess there with you, or is she hiding like the coward she is?"

"Your business is with me, Wren, do not bring Satine into this!" Artus snarled, and he was answered with a cruel laugh.

"So she is there," she drawled. "My deal, Artus. Hand Satine over to me, and I will withdraw my army and you can continue your existence in this squalor," she said disdainfully.

"My force is bigger than yours, Wren, you cannot beat me at my own fortress!" Artus shouted.

"Then let me change the deal," the woman snapped. "Deliver the Duchess to me and I will send your son home." From the folds of Qui-Gon's robe, Satine looked up at Artus, the helmet hiding his face, but she could see the tension in his body.

"My sons," the man growled, "are dead. All my sons are dead! The creature in your possession is dar'manda, as is any who follow the Death Watch!"

"By what right do you have to call us dar'manda?!" the woman called, her voice harsh and angry. "You, who have abandoned our ways to accept the weakness of the New Mandalorians!" Even from the distance, they could see the dismissive sweep of her hand. "Your clan is done Itera. Today, I finish my work when I destroy you."

"Come show your worth, bitch."

"Ursa Wren!" Satine shouted, squirming out of Qui-Gon's grasp and rushing to place her hands on the wall and hoist herself up, her toes just touching the ground. "You will stop this madness now! We do not need to resort to violence to come to an arrangement!"

"Duchess Satine..." Ursa said softly, bitter and resentful. "Of all the dead of Clan Kryze, how typical is it that their black sheep is the one that lives. Your warlord father, your fierce mother,
your remarkable brother..." She choked slightly, a sound that conveyed the disgust and sickness she felt. "And it is the pacifist that survives. Thank the ancestors for your sister, your family's memory deserves better than being disgraced." Qui-Gon glanced down at the girl beside him and looked her over carefully. He didn't know she had a sister. Perhaps there was a reason that Satine was keeping that so close to her chest. There was great pain in the young Duchess, pain he had assumed was the result of the death of her family, but if Ursa's implication was true, then perhaps there was something worse than death.

"You would understand if you would just listen!" Satine shouted. "Drop your weapons and we can make peace! Nobody has to die today!"

"Oh, I would gladly come in and discuss terms with you, Duchess," Ursa said sweetly. "Come, open your fortress, let me inside."

"She's bluffing, Duchess," Qui-Gon whispered. "She has no intention for peace." The girl glared at her Jedi protector.

"I know that," she hissed, bitter, stinging tears gathering at the corner of her eyes.

"I have to know, Satine," Ursa called again when there had been ample silence between them with no movement from either side. "Did you offer the Death Watch the chance for peace before you made a mess of Zanbar?" She laughed harshly. "Poor, pacifist Satine..." she mockingly cooed. "There are so many we find dead in your wake. Have you finally grown up? Has this war shown you that you're one of us after all?" Ursa laughed in the silence that followed. "Your sister would be proud. I'll have to tell her that we spoke, we have become so close in the past few months. I think your head would make a fine gift for Bo-Katan, and she'd thank me for it. There's nothing like sealing a friendship with the death of an insult on the family name."

"That is enough!" Artus snarled. "This ends today, Wren."

"How right you are..." was the cool, dangerous hiss, and with a crackle, the loud hailer switched off, the tanks and weapons of the invading army filling the air with low rumbles and high whines as they prepared for the attack. Artus swiftly barked commands to his men, the warriors rushing along the walls to man the defenses. In the sky above them, a low rumble became a high whine, drowning out every other sound as starfighters burst out from the clouds like a swarm, swiftly met by ships deployed by the Itera stronghold. The sky filled with streaks of green and red as ion cannons and plasma grenades and blaster fire struck soldiers, vehicles, ships, sending them flying across the landscape dead, crashed, mangled, exploded, the fortress' shields absorbing stray shots like a transparisteel window as plasma splashed against it like streams of water.

"Jedi," Artus snarled as he drew his weapons, watching as soldiers from the Wren army took to the air on jetpacks. "Can you get the Duchess out of here?"

"I can," Qui-Gon said calmly, drawing Satine back to him. "I will. My student is on the way."

"Your student is late."

"He will not fail in this," the Jedi said firmly. "He has yet to fail the Duchess and he will not fail now. Obi-Wan will be here exactly when he needs to be."

"This is why Mandalore doesn't trust the Jedi," Artus growled, his blasters aimed at the soldiers quickly flying toward the walls, his sights set on one in particular that seemed to skillfully evade all the fire that his own forces rained upon the warriors. Clutching Satine close to him, Qui-Gon drew his lightsaber, the glowing green blade acting like a beacon for the enemy warriors, diverting the attention of those who saw it just long enough for the Itera soldiers to shoot them out of the
An explosion from down below caused flames to erupt into the air up the high walls of the fortress, and from the smoke flew a warrior, distinctive golden patterns on her chest plate and her helmet designed after the wolves that prowled the forests of Krownest, the symbol of Clan Wren. The twin weapons in her hands fired rapidly at Artus Itera, the man diving for cover and returning fire when he could. The relentless woman was on him in a moment, much smaller, much faster warrior that made her a much more difficult target to hit, and she swiftly closed in, holstering one of her pistols to favor a close range, wicked blade she produced from her belt, the folded, tempered steel whistling as it was swung through the air with deadly precision.

Any attempt Qui-Gon made to draw closer to aid Artus was disrupted by the storm of blaster fire around them as the enemy soldiers passed through the shields, the fortress safe from fire form the ships above, but now made vulnerable by the soldiers that had breeched the outer lines of their defenses. He swung his lightsaber effortlessly, cutting down the soldiers he could when they got too close, deflecting back shots at all other times as he was slowly pressed back under the suppressing fire,retreating with the Duchess in his protective shield so that he may assume a more defensive position. All the while, he could hear Satine whimper as she sobbed for the man that had taken them in, given them safety and peace, if just for a little while, and hope that it was not the end.

Her eyes never left Artus as he battled with the savage warrior, the fight quickly devolving into a close quarters brawl, the man doing all in his power to avoid the blade and attempt to disarm the wielder, but the woman was far too fast and too practiced to fall prey to such a tactic. For a fraction of a second, Artus managed to put some space between them, enough for him to lock his gaze on her as she charged to close the gap, and planting his hands upon the ground, he kicked up into the air, his armored boot catching the woman in the head, her forward momentum increasing the force with which she was kicked. With a howl of pain and outrage, she was sent flying backwards, the helmet knocked off her head in the impact, revealing the tightly braided black hair and furious brown eyes of Ursa Wren.

She rolled when she struck the ground, quickly righting herself and skidding to a halt in a crouch, her blade held tightly in her hands and watching with concentrated fury as Artus bore down upon her, and in the moment before he was within reach, she pressed off the ground to spin out of the way, lashing out with her blade as the man ran past, failing to stop before the woman got behind him. Tempered steel cut through the soft knee joint of Artus' armor, a strangled gasp torn from the man as blood soaked the back of his legs, scrambling for purchase as he fell before he realized that he could no longer move his feet. As he slammed to the ground, the involuntary twitching of his legs as they bled long smears across the steel ramparts conveyed the hopelessness of the situation. The blade had severed the tendons of his legs, leaving his muscles uselessly slack and unable to move at all.

Satine could barely hear herself screaming over the sounds of war around her, the girl violently struggling against the Jedi that held her as she tried to rush to Artus, Ursa quickly advancing upon the helpless man. She slammed her heel on his leg when she reached him and violently tore the helmet from his head, her armored hand roughly grabbing his dark hair and pulling him up on to his knees. Artus' pale throat exposed, he managed to get one look at Ursa's furious, triumphant face, her weapon raised high above her head for a moment before she brought the blade down, cold steel cutting soft flesh effortlessly as she severed his head from his shoulders.

Satine wasn't certain how she managed to tear herself away from Qui-Gon's grasp, or from which body upon the ground she took the weapon that now rested in her hands, but she knew that when she took aim at Ursa Wren, she was going to kill her. Just as she pulled the trigger, her excellent aim was disrupted by the swift hand grasping her arm as it yanked her off balance, the shot from
the weapon flying high above the intended target as she fell against Qui-Gon Jinn. The Jedi quickly scooped her up into her arms and leapt high into the air right over the wall, the snow and the tanks and the soldiers on the ground below rushing toward them as they fell.

Not a moment later, the ship swooped underneath them, the Jedi falling perfectly into the entry hatch, and Qui-Gon slammed on the airlock controls almost before his feet even hit the ground. The ship swiftly changed directions, Qui-Gon gripping Satine close to him as he held on tightly to one of the doorways as they rocketed upwards, and through the closing entry hatch, Satine could see the fortress below, the bodies falling quickly as the invading army overtook them, and Satine caught one look at Ursa Wren in the midsts of it, watching from the walls of the fortress as Clan Itera died.

"I need you to buckle up!" came the shout from the cockpit, And Qui-Gon didn't waste a moment in picking up the despondent Duchess and carrying her into the cockpit, dropping her into her seat behind Obi-Wan and doing her restraints, finishing just as the ship suddenly dove, the forest below them quickly rushing to meet them, a view Qui-Gon was forced to take in as the sudden dive knocked him off his feet and sent him crashing against the viewport. Just as suddenly, Obi-Wan pulled up on the yoke, evening the ship out and flying low over the forest, the scraping sound of trees hitting the hull sending eerie reverberations through the ship. As they righted, Qui-Gon fell unceremoniously on the control console.

"I will remind you, Padawan," Qui-Gon growled as he scrambled into the copilot's seat and quickly fastened his restraints, "that reckless flying is a chargeable offense in the courts on Coruscant!"

"Hey, it's a good thing we aren't on Coruscant then," Obi-Wan mumbled, his concentration on the view before him. "I doubt Mandalore has such rules." The ship lurched forward when Obi-Wan pulled all the way back on the accelerator, the passengers pressed back in their seats with the force of the swift jolt to top speed, green and white blurs filling the viewport before Obi-Wan pulled back on the yoke, the ship making a sudden change of direction as it rocketed upwards toward a sky gray with clouds then dark with approaching space as they crossed the cloud cover, and then red with flames, the result of their rapid exit from the atmosphere.

"Is this even a little bit safe?!" Qui-Gon asked when the cockpit filled with the high pitched whine of the engines, and the slight twitch of Obi-Wan's eye gave the Master all the answer he needed. "Obi-Wan..."

"Of course it's safe, Master!" he said swiftly, angling the nose of the ship slightly to reduce the strain and slamming on the console to silence the warnings about the weapons lock on their ship from the starfighters that now followed them, "Please, like I would risk the mission! It's a little safe! A little safe!" The Padawan frowned. "Like...two percent safe!"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi..." Qui-Gon growled. "I liked you better when you were insecure!"

"If it helps at all, Master, I'm very insecure about our chances of survival."

"Oh, at least we have that."

"There were three dreadnaughts up here when I came and checked, Master," Obi-Wan said tightly, his hands flying over the console before him. "Three. We had to make our way around the planet to put them behind us if we wanted a chance at getting away, and now..." He flipped on the scanner, revealing three massive dots behind their position with hundreds of specks in the space between. Obi-Wan smiled, a rare, cocky thing he reserved for the times he was excessively pleased with himself, and he pulled back the hyperdrive lever. "Our jump has been calculated, and we're clear."
The ship shuddered as it jumped to hyperspace, the viewport filling with blue and white, and in the silence of their collective relief, Satine silently began to weep.

---

*Entry sixty five.*

*Clan Itera is dead. All of them. I feel it in the very heart of me, and I see it in Qui-Gon's face. He feels it, but he won't say it. He can't. How does one even begin to discuss the massacre of hundreds? Of thousands. Of all my people. What happened on Krownest is happening all over the Mandalore sector every single day. My people are fighting and they are dying and there is nothing I can do. Why would there be. I'm just like them.*

*I nearly killed her. Everything I have ever held dear, every value I have always believed in the very heart of me, betrayed in an instant. I missed, but that doesn't keep the blood from my hands because the intent was there. I am...Mandalorian. As bad as the rest of them. I have never been so disgusted with myself. I will never raise a weapon again. All violence is inexcusable, all of it. Savage and barbaric, and I am exactly like them.*

*All war is intolerable, and we are already lost since we are committed to fighting. We have already lost, as is evident by the mountain of bodies left behind on Krownest. Clan Itera...all of them...and poor Artus, the last of his family, my first ally in this pointless conflict. He gave me peace when there was none. He gave me hope when I had lost it. I have allies. I have family. Not just Bo-Katan, who is lost to me, but in my brother's child. I can scarcely believe it...and I owe it all to Artus Itera. Nu kyr'adyc, shi taab'echaaj'la. Ni cu'y bid Ni ceta, ner burc'ya. Your sacrifice will never be forgotten.*

*We are headed to Vorpa'ya, the home world of Clan Cadera. Obi-Wan has plotted a route that consists of no less than thirty jump points so that we may lose those that are chasing us. I wanted to demand to be brought back home to Kalevala so I can meet my brother's child and the clan that has dedicated themselves to me, in theory. But I know how that ends up. I do not want to endanger the child. To keep it safe, I need to stay far away. It's the only way. My presence is a death mark that I wish on nobody. Perhaps I can convince the Jedi to leave Clan Cadera well enough alone. The war cannot be won if I inadvertently kill all the allies I have fighting for me.*

*I should be dead. What's the point of me if I can't stop a slaughter that is happening right before me? What's the point of my survival if my presence brings death to all those around me?*  

*Obi-Wan has been knocking every few minutes for the past three hours. I suppose I should let him in. He is worried about me, and...well, he has this way of easing my burdens, no matter what they may be. I don't want to be weak in front of him, but...*  

*I can't do this now. Writing doesn't help at all. I miss my father and the guidance he would give me through all my troubles. I miss my mother and her strong convictions, her clear sense of what was right and wrong. I miss my brother and how he'd always take my mind off my troubles, only to return to them hours later when they never seemed so big. I miss my family. They would know what to do. The would help show me the way.*  

*Ka'ra jaon'kov, what do I do...*
OH MY GOD WHAT HAVE I DONE.

Been a little while since I updated, but here it is! And it is infinitely long. Really, these things just get longer and longer...

This chapter has what we in the business know as "The Good Stuff" and I know it's what a lot of you have been waiting for. I took some liberties on this one, especially on the matter of freaking venom-mites, since, you know, when researching them, all I have to go off of is "They live on Draboon!" Really? No shit. So...liberties taken.

Enjoy, my lovelies!

"How hard can it be to kill this bitch?!

The soldier had to duck out of the way to avoid the bottle that flew through the air and shattered on the wall behind him. The others in the room cringed and slowly backed away from the wrathful man on the throne. The last person to fail Tor Vizsla had been shot in the face, and that was for a much less serious offense than what had recently transpired. Chances are, someone was going to die today. Beside the throne stood Pre Vizsla, a look of disgust on his face as he surveyed the soldiers and bounty hunters before them, and at his side was Bo-Katan, frustrated and angry and shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot.

She stopped her fidgeting when the older teenager pulled her against him and nipped at her ear, the girl gasping softly when he moved to mouth at her neck, her hand winding tightly into his pale blond hair, the same shade that so many Mandalorians shared, including her beautiful, eloquent, soulless older sister. Growing up, she had been intelligent, well-spoken, always the beauty that Bo-Katan never was, always the center of attention, despite her frailness, the trait that should have seen her outcast from her family of proud, noble warriors. Instead, she was doted upon by their father, fawned over by their fierce mother, protected by their brother, her weakness nurtured when it should have been reviled. And now, on top of all her natural talents and genetic fortune, it seemed as though Satine was almost supernaturally lucky as well.

It was disgusting.

"You're so tense, Bo..."Pre said, his strong hands kneading at the girl's tight shoulders, and she scowled at him despite leaning back against the tall man. "When this idiocy is over, how about I help drive that tension from you, hmm?"

"That would be perfect," the girl growled, her sharp green eyes focused on the nervous soldiers as Tor Vizsla paced before them, silent and seething and positively furious. "I've been itching to kill some of those New Mandalorian bastards."

"Not the sort of stress relief I had in mind..." Vizsla growled into her ear, his hand laying over the armor that covered her breasts. "But we can go out afterwards, if you're so inclined."

"Pre!" Tor snapped, his furious gaze falling on the teenager and the young Kryze in his grasp, and
he quickly let the girl go when he felt himself being scrutinized. "I will tolerate talk of indulging your passions with your woman when there is something to celebrate."

"Y-yes..." Pre stammered, backing off slightly with his head bowed. "Forgive me, Mand'alor, I just-

"You just nothing," Tor hissed, turning his wrath on the teenager. "You want to impress the girl?" He swept his hand across the air in a broad gesture. "Go out in the city and kill the Cadera leaders. Or better yet, get out there and murder her sister! I would do it myself if I could leave Sundari without losing Mandalore! But I can't." With a snarl of frustration, he dropped into the throne, his hand rubbing his temple to relieve the swiftly oncoming headache. "One little girl..." he growled. "Not even a warrior, a diplomat," he sneered in disgust.

"Mand'alor..." one of the warriors said, stepping meekly forward. "The problem are the Jedi. Satine is safe so long as they-" A sharp, sudden ring filled the air, Tor Vizsla's blaster in his hand before anyone saw him move, and the warrior fell to his knees, a burning hole in his neck from where Vizsla had nonchalantly shot him.

"We are Mandalorian," Vizsla snarled, watching with disgust as the body collapsed upon the floor. "We are the finest Jedi killers in the galaxy, and you dare tell me that the Jedi are a problem?! An aging man and a child! These are the threats to Mandalore?" His sharp eyes darted around the room, daring anyone to step forward and defend the statement, but nobody moved. "How far we have fallen..."

"It's the weakness of the New Mandalorians," Pre growled, his hand tightening on Bo-Katan's shoulder. "We will reclaim our strength."

"Will we?" Tor snarled, glaring at the teenager and letting loose a short, sharp laugh. "I think not, not with warriors like you in our ranks." He scoffed harshly when Pre looked away, his jaw clenched in anger. "Warriors who would put being inside a girl over killing our enemy..."

"If we summoned our finest Jedi killers-"

"You've yet to kill a Jedi," Tor snapped. "Perhaps I should send you out there so you may blood yourself with a Jedi. Prove yourself a man worthy of leadership instead of a man only good for siring children. Which you've yet to do as well." He reached back and grabbed hold of Bo-Katan's wrist and pulled her forward, the girl torn out from Pre's grasp and settling herself on the arm of the throne, Tor's large hand patting her thigh. "You deserve so much better than the dregs of Clan Vizsla, my dear."

"He'll make something of himself," Bo-Katan said quietly. "Send him out to lead. Cadera has been pushing back our boundaries in the city. Have Pre take it back."

"Perhaps I will..." he said, dragging his hand up her leg. "Make him show us he is worthy of you before I take you for myself." A sly smirk spread across the girl's face, and she glanced back at the fuming Pre as she slowly slid her hand along Tor's broad shoulder, her heart beating faster as she watched rage turn to intense jealousy on her young lover's face. "After losing the Ordo alliance and then losing the dear, sweet Duchess on Krownest..." He growled deeply, his hand tightening on Bo-Katan's leg. "By all rights, she should be dead. If the hunters couldn't kill her, the cold certainly should have. Perhaps she is built from stronger stuff."

"Of course she is," Bo-Katan scoffed, earning herself a glare from Tor that she boldly met. "She comes from a strong, powerful line of warriors. Even if she is not one herself, even if she is dar'manda, she is still the blood of Mandalore. Killing her will not be a simple thing."
"So it would seem..." Tor growled, quietly ceding to Bo-Katan on the matter. "I could do with some good news."

"Then I have come to the right place." The voice came from the open doors of the throne room from a teenage woman in gold and gray armor strode in, her helmet tucked under her arm, her long, black hair braided and falling to the middle of her back. The hunters and warriors quickly parted for the bold, confident woman, her personal guard falling in behind her, and she swiftly bowed to Vizsla when she reached the base of the steps, a sly smirk on her face as she winked at the delighted Bo-Katan.

"Ursa Wren," Vizsla quietly acknowledged. "What brings you to Mandalore? Last I heard you were abandoning the fight on Ordo to defend your home on Krownest."

"Old news," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "As it so happens, Krownest no longer needs to defend itself against traitors." She thrust her helmet at one of her guards and snatched a blue and green helmet from another and tossed it up to Vizsla. "Clan Itera is finished."

"Artus Itera is dead?" Tor asked in disbelief, handling the heavy helmet and turning it over, carefully examining it. The young Wren scoffed and took a tied bag from another of her guards and tossed it up to him as well, the man quickly opening it and looking inside to find the severed head of the former Count Itera.

"Clan Itera is dead," Ursa said firmly, Tor looking her over and frowning.

"All of them?"

"To the man," was the growled response. "They reenforced their stronghold when the Duchess arrived, the entire clan and all their warriors were inside when we. Nobody survived. The Countess, all their sons and daughters, and now Artus himself. All dead." She shrugged. "Except for their son that defected to join me, that lovesick fool."

"And except for Satine and her Jedi," Tor growled, and Ursa rolled her eyes.

"Some things can't be helped, and I'd rather have Krownest purged of the Iteras than a dead Duchess. My loyalty, first and foremost, is to my clan." She shrugged. "And we have made a very strong point about what happens to those that aid Duchess Satine. In time, her support will fall, and soon enough, she will have nobody."

"The war won't end if we kill Satine," Bo-Katan drawled, smiling at her friend at the base of the steps. "But it will end when all the New Mandalorians are dead."

"And so long as she is alive, she will continue to draw new allies to herself," Tor snapped. "She may not be a warrior, but she is defeating us by escaping. Each attempt on her life that doesn't end in her death only brings her more support."

"And so you entrusted her execution to bounty hunters?" Ursa said, laughing when the large, angry men glared at her. "Oh, I didn't think Death Watch was so weakened by our civil war. Manned by boys and old men, if this is who you're turning to."

"And what would you do, Ursa, given my situation?" Tor growled, and Ursa shrugged.

"I'd turn to the ladies. And I just so happen to be available, now that all of Krownest is mine."

"I'm free too," Bo-Katan said, swiftly standing and striding down the steps, quickly clasping hands with the young Countess. "It's been too long since I've seen dear Satine. I think a reunion is long past due."
"No, absolutely not!" Pre snapped, quickly striding forward. "You are too valuable, Bo-Katan, what would happen to our position here if the last true Kryze died on some battlefield!"

"You severely underestimate me, Pre, if you believe that of me," Bo-Katan growled. "Besides, Satine is a bleeding heart. She will not have it in her to kill her own sister. But I do."

"You're lucky to have a warrior as fine as Bo-Katan Kryze committed to your Death Watch, Tor," Ursa drawled. "Gives me hope for the future. She'd be a fine commander."

"In time..." he said thoughtfully, flicking his hand in the air. "Go. Find the Duchess. Kill her Jedi, and bring her to me. And if you must kill her..." He shrugged. "It's no great loss. The body will suffice."

"I'm going too!" Pre said, stepping forward, but was stopped by a sharp glare from Tor.

"You will do no such thing. You will stay here and defend the city, as Bo-Katan suggested, and you will learn something of leadership." He growled, his hands tightening on the arms of his throne. "If you are to lead Death Watch one day, you are to be worthy of it. I will not see some soft, bloodless child lead Mandalore's finest warriors." Pre stepped back, clearly angry, but didn't argue again. "Go, girl. Kill Satine and return to me."

Quickly saluting, the girls pulled their helmets on their head and strode out of the throne room to prepare for the hunt.

"Obi-Wan, look out!" The Padawan hissed and pulled the yoke to the side, the ship spiraling out of the way of the flurry of green lines of laser fire from the ships flying in close pursuit behind them. Pushing the yoke forward, the ship suddenly dove, flipping the stomachs of his passengers and he quickly wrenched it sideways again, the flying erratic, but very difficult to follow, which was the plan until the jump could finish being calculated. The bounty hunter ships simply outclassed the ship the Jedi flew.

"You think they'd get tired of this after two weeks of chasing us..." Obi-Wan said through grit teeth, his eyes darting to the navicom and frowning when he saw there was far more time than he had hoped. Just as the ship evened out, he yanked back on the accelerator, the three of them lurching hard against their restraints as the forward thrusters brought them to a swift stop, and six ships shot past them. Obi-Wan quickly reached over and grabbed the forward cannon controls and fired, the rapidly shooting red beams hitting two of the ships' rear engines, causing smoke and flames to rise from the modified armored freighters as they were disabled. Obi-Wan yanked back on the yoke, the ship quickly shooting upwards and flipping around as it dove.

"Or maybe," Satine snapped, "they keep coming after us because you are shooting at their friends like some common criminal! Violence begets violence, Jedi! I thought they taught you that as a supposed peacekeeper!"

"Ha!" the Jedi harshly barked. "Friends, Duchess? No, they are after us because you are worth an insane amount of credits!"

"And I told you to stand down a week ago when they demanded we let them board! We could have reasoned with them!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, should I pull over now?" Obi-Wan drawled with a roll of his eyes. "Satine, the only reason these people understand is credits. You're a walking payroll, Duchess, they don't care about what you have to say!"
"You don't know that!"

"I do because they don't want reason, they want money!"

"Well maybe I should go with them!" the Duchess snapped. "Then all this idiocy can end!"

"Got news for you, Duchess, the war doesn't end when you die, your idiot people will keep fighting it!" Obi-Wan growled. "Only then, they would have no hope for peace!" He wrenched the yoke to the side, sending them leaning into the spin as the ship spiraled to the side, up, down, in loops, all to avoid the new volleys of fire. When he finally righted, the Duchess sitting behind him kicked the back of his seat with as much force as she was able.

"You are flying like an amateur!"

"Do you want to fly?" Obi-Wan snapped, turning in his seat to glare at the woman, his temper finally getting the better of him. "I would be happy to surrender the controls to you!"

"I don't want the controls, I want you to fly better!"

"I am doing the best I can..." Obi-Wan mumbled as he turned back around, his hands tight on the controls as he rapidly accelerated.

"I wonder, Obi-Wan, what's it like to have everything you do never be good enough?" the Duchess growled, and a short, tense laugh from the Padawan saw the ship plummet downwards, flipping and spinning and blazing in twisting, winding patters at top speed through space.

"This good enough for you, Duchess?!" Obi-Wan said through tense laughter, his eyes wild and focused on the streaking green lines across the space in front of them, weaving in an out of them as though they were gates in a swoop race. When he finally righted the ship, Satine was gripping the back of the pilot's seat for dear life, and she shot a nervous, pleading look to the Jedi Master in the copilot's chair.

"Qui-Gon! Tell him to fly better!" Qui-Gon rolled his eyes and did no such thing, instead bringing a bag to his mouth and vomiting into it as he did for the third time that week. The first time they had encountered the bounty hunters on their way to Vorpa'ya to meet with Clan Cadera, the situation had been far more dire than this one, and some clever flying on Obi-Wan's part had seen them to safety, but the evasive acrobatics he preformed saw Qui-Gon embarrassingly empty the contents of his stomach over his end of the command console, and his poor suffering Padawan had spent the next few days cleaning vomit out of the intricate systems and running repairs on the ship's operations. The thoughtful boy had tucked a stack of bags away next to his chair for the next time. And there were many of them.

Satine had been far more difficult than usual since they had watched the slaughter of Clan Itera as they left Krownest. That was saying quite a lot, since Satine was already difficult in the best of circumstances, but now, she was damned near impossible, She and Obi-Wan argued often, but now, it was constantly, their strangely strained relationship becoming something else entirely. Any gentleness on Obi-Wan's part was met with swift and uncompromising harshness, hurt on the Padawan's face plain as day for a few days before he retrained himself to be distant from the girl's moods, which only served to make emotional Satine even worse. They were strained before, but now there was actual tension, and neither teen seemed to know what to do about it, which only made it more tense as their emotions ran high.

And still, Obi-Wan seemed to accept this, angry and upset while they were together, but when Satine stormed off, he settled into a calm, sorrowful calm, his precious Code on his lips as he slipped into his meditations. Conversations with the Padawan showed that Obi-Wan understood
Satine's position, knew why she was as upset as she was, even agreed with much of it, but there was something else there, something he wasn't telling his Master. Something beyond the trauma left by watching a girl her age gleefully behead a man that could have been her father, something far past her visceral aversion to violence of any sort.

But the introverted Padawan had fallen silent once again, his words saved for Satine when he was called on to defend himself from her fury, from her accusations of murderer and soldier, both things he firmly fought her on, but privately agreed with. Obi-Wan strove to be a Jedi, a peacekeeper, a student devoted to the Force and all the lives it touched, and he was here in a war he didn't agree with, forced to end lives he held so precious to him in order to complete his mission. Qui-Gon knew Obi-Wan badly wished to return to the Temple where there was peace, that each life he took weighed heavy upon him, but he also was learning that there were those that would stop at nothing to kill, and for the sake of peace, for the sake of saving as many lives as possible, those people needed to be dealt with. That was the sacrifice of the Jedi, that was their duty as keepers of the peace, and Obi-Wan would do his duty.

While Obi-Wan's struggles were largely internal, Satine's were extremely external, the girl flying between unstoppable rage and sobbing bouts of depression in the span of seconds, her violent mood swings accompanied by destructive behavior and fits of self-loathing. On one particular difficult incident, Satine had gathered the blasters they had on the ship and marched them to the airlock, ready to dump them into space before Obi-Wan stopped her.

"What are you going to do, hit the bounty hunters in the heads with the actual blaster?" Obi-Wan had chided. "That isn't how you use a blaster, Duchess, and I think giving weapons to people that want to kill you is a poor choice. You may not want to shoot them, but they will shoot you." The Duchess had responded by telling Obi-Wan that a murderer could never understand, but she had listened to him and kept the weapons. Qui-Gon found her in her room later welding the settings adjustment, trapping them on the stun setting. She had made threats against the Jedi's lightsabers as well, but those were proving to be much more difficult for the girl to obtain.

And still, there was something else, something deep beneath all the pain and the anger and the bouts of weariness that saw the Duchess wish to turn herself over to the Death Watch just so she could finally have the weight on her shoulders lifted, just so her own death would spare the lives of all those who would have stood by her and protected her. So turbulent and unpredictable were her emotions that Qui-Gon couldn't see what else was eating at her, but he knew it was something, perhaps even something she didn't know was eating at her and pulling her spirit so tight it threatened to break.

The deck of the ship shuddered as they made the jump to lightspeed, and Obi-Wan quickly unbuckled and jumped up from his seat, his hand on his Master's shoulder.

"Are you alright?" the Padawan asked softly, and Qui-Gon nodded slowly, smiling softly at the boy.

"You fly like a maniac, Obi-Wan. A genius maniac, but a maniac none the less." Obi-Wan patted his Master on the back and took the bag from him.

"Fifteen minutes to our destination..." he muttered, shooting a glare at the Duchess before he left the cockpit, the door sliding closed behind him, and Satine furiously undid her restraints, her entire body nearly tying in knots as she threw herself petulantly back in her chair.

"Perhaps it would serve us all well if you did not go out of your way to antagonize our pilot," Qui-Gon said when his stomach settled.

"Perhaps it would serve him well not to spite me by flying like a child!" Satine snapped. "He's
"The bounty hunters have faster, stronger ships, Duchess," Qui-Gon quietly explained. "When the tools are inferior, one must rely on skill. And when that fails as well, he must resort to tricks. Obi-Wan is a fair pilot, but many of these hunters have been flying for longer than he has been alive. Experience and skill will outdo a younger, less seasoned pilot, even if that pilot is aided by the Force." He smiled softly. "But there are very few who can out-think Obi-Wan."

"Yes, well, he only thinks he's intelligent!" the girl snapped at the closed doorway, and Qui-Gon sighed heavily.

"Satine, he isn't even here to goad, and I'm not impressed by your moods."

"Of course not, you're a Jedi, you don't feel anything!" Though Qui-Gon didn't react to the girl's vitriol, Satine immediately regretted having said anything, biting down on her lip when she felt tears well up in her eyes, and she quickly turned away from her protector. "I'm sorry..."

"I understand," Qui-Gon said gently. "We watched something horrible happen. These things stay with a person, and you care more than most." The Jedi closed his eyes, a faint smile on his lips. "You are a gentle soul, Satine. Fierce, to be certain, but also gentle and caring. Your heart beats for your people."

"And now Clan Itera is gone because of me." She gripped her arms and shivered, curling up in her chair and looking so very small, the Jedi frowning when he saw the line of her vertebrae clearly through the tunic she wore. She hadn't been so thin when they left Krownest. The girl must not have been eating. "I led the Wrens there. They came for me." She gasped, her voice shuddering as she took a shaking breath. "They all died because I was there..."

"The conflict seemed a fair bit more personal than that," Qui-Gon gently consoled. "It seemed to be a long standing feud. Did Count Itera not say the very same Wren destroyed the rest of his family? That was before you were in the picture. These are warring clans occupying the same planet. I'm certain the history between them is very long and very violent. They simply seized upon an opportunity."

"Because I was there..." Satine whimpered. "If not for me, I..." Her arms tightened around her as a weak, pitiful sob escaped her throat, and she curled up even smaller. "I should be dead..."

"Satine." She gasped, her wide, wet eyes shooting to the Jedi, the harsh tone startling the sobs away, but it only lasted a moment before she closed her eyes and shook her head, silent tears falling down her cheeks. "Everyone I have ever cared about, or have come to care about is being taken from me, they are all dying..." she whispered. "W-what's going to happen when they come for you and Obi-Wan?! Qui-Gon, I can't...I can't..." She buried her face against her arms, her shoulders shaking with silent tears. "I should be dead...at least then the people I care about would be safe. They would have all been safe if I just did the right thing and gave myself to Vizsla when he took Sundari..." She whimpered softly into her arms, meek and pitiful and by far the weakest he had even seen her. "I would gladly give my life if it meant they could be saved...and now Clan Itera is gone..."

With a sigh, Qui-Gon stood from his seat, a single long stride carrying him the small distance between them, and he scooped the Duchess up in his arms, the girl tensing when he did, but very quickly grabbed his robes and seemed to try and hide herself within his embrace as she freely, quietly cried against his chest. He was shocked at how light she had become. Satine had always been a thin, willowy, wisp of a thing, but months of eating what they were able, when they were able simply wasn't enough for a growing teenage girl. More than that, there was a frailness to her
now that had been absent before, and as he sat back down with the lanky Duchess held to his chest, he thought she may break if he held her too tight. Grief and the trauma of violence on her gentle soul had driven her to the edge, and it seemed that only the slightest push would send her tumbling down into hopelessness.

It hadn't been like this before, and the familiar feeling returned. There was something else, something that had changed within her that he had somehow missed, something that had gone far beyond the constant strain of terror and loss and violence she felt every day. The weight of the lives given for hers was crushing her, and not for the first time, she looked at the accounting and saw the discrepancy, but this time, she saw the massacre, and now, she could no longer find it in her to justify that one life - her life - be worth so many. She was becoming almost eager to pay that due, a part of her craving her own destruction so that no more lives be spent in her name because it wasn't worth it.

She was pushing Obi-Wan away, that much was clear. She was pushing everyone away, going beyond her Jedi protectors and touching the people of Clan Cadera and her other allies as well. It was the only way she knew how to protect these people, and she did it at the expense of herself. It was a sacrifice, an unnecessary one, a damaging one, even, but young Satine was on the edge of breaking and tearing off pieces of herself for the safety of others was all she could think to do to help. Qui-Gon couldn't let it stand, of course. Watching Satine isolate herself from the carefully tended friendship she had with Obi-Wan was damaging not just to her, but to his student and to their mission. Absolute trust was needed if they were going to protect her properly, and in perhaps her own subconscious desire for her own destruction, Satine was very effectively pushing away the people trying to save her.

"All these deaths are for nothing..." Satine whimpered against the Jedi, and Qui-Gon instinctively tightened his arms around her, the feel of her boney arms a reminder of how fragile she was, and he loosened his grip.

"Do you believe your death will stop the violence, Satine?" Qui-Gon asked, and though she said nothing, the quick tension in her back answered the question for her. "It will not. Obi-Wan was correct, your death will yield nothing. The clans will continue to fight and die for control of Mandalore."

"If I am so insignificant, it's wrong that so many should have to die for me!" she snapped, her hands tightening in his robes as new tears fell from her eyes.

"You are not insignificant, your death is," Qui-Gon said, his voice gently but firm, and the Duchess' breath hitched in her chest as she struggled to inhale. "There is no meaning in your death, Satine, but your life holds great significance. Many see you as Mandalore's only chance for peace. That is a thing that a great many people are willing to die for, and a thing many will die to stop."

"I-I am not more valuable than all of those who have died," she whimpered, and Qui-Gon shook his head.

"Not more valuable, no. But as the leader of Mandalore, you bear the weight of all the lives given for you. It would be irresponsible to throw your life away because you cannot shoulder the burden. Do not let their sacrifice be for nothing." He squeezed her slightly when he felt the girl shifting her weight in his arms, his chin resting upon her head. "You will rule Mandalore, Satine. You will see peace. I promise you that."

With a sniffle and a small nod, Satine wrapped her arms around his neck and slowly relaxed as his large hand ran soothingly over her back. It was unfair that such a responsibility fell to such a young girl, unfair that her formative teenage years should be spent in war, a time when she was
struggling enough to discover who she was, let alone having to carry the weight of the lives lost in her name and having to run from the millions that called for her execution. She didn't deserve this. Nobody deserved this...

"You don't need to carry it alone, Satine," the Jedi whispered. "Obi-Wan and I are here to help you, let us-"

"Obi-Wan doesn't know anything," she said, her voice muffled by the robes and not nearly so bitter as she was trying to sound, and through the turmoil of her emotions, Qui-Gon could feel the sharp tug, the pull from within her that he couldn't quite place.

"...Satine, I don't know what he's done to offend you, but pushing him away the way you have been-"

"I-I like him." Qui-Gon choked on his words and almost gagged, quickly regaining his composure when the girl began shaking in his arms. She wasn't just conflicted, she was afraid. He should have seen this coming. Of course two attractive teenagers forced to be together would be drawn to each other. Of course the stress and strain of war would make their emotions run high and sens them grasping for whatever comfort they could find. And of course the two dutiful teenagers, strictly forbidden from this impossible thing, would do as was expected from them and run from their feelings in hopes of stopping it. No wonder things had changed between them.

Really, the only thing surprising about this was that it hadn't happened sooner.

"As..." Qui-Gon frowned, his lips pursed as he considered his phrasing. "More than friendship, I take it?"

"I don't want to, Qui-Gon," Satine whimpered. "I know my duty, and I know his. I understand that my life and his are on different paths, that there is no room for romance for either of us, but I..." She shivered and nestled closer to the Jedi's comforting presence. "I can't help it, he's just...so sweet and gentle, and he's saved my life more times than I can count." She scoffed softly and swallowed hard, laughing bitterly to herself. "I know it's his duty to do such, but...I don't know, it just feels so...so..."

"So right?" Qui-Gon offered, and Satine pulled away from him enough to look at his kind, understanding features and she slowly nodded.

"I can't trust my feelings," Satine said through strained, stressed laughter, sniffing as she held back tears of frustration. "Not after all the mistakes I've made, not after I so badly misjudged Edric, I-" She swallowed hard and looked away from the Jedi, staring instead at the coarse weaving of Qui-Gon's brown cloak. "I know this is just...something inside me that wants...y-you know..."

"Has Obi-Wan reciprocated your feelings?" Qui-Gon asked, and the girl swiftly shook her head.

"No," she said without pause. "No, Obi-Wan is...will be a good Jedi. I am his mission," she whispered, a sudden pain in her chest making her keenly aware of the void within her that longed to be filled with nothing but the smart, sweet, infuriating Padawan Kenobi. "I'm nothing more than that..." She kept quiet, though, about the last time they were close, the moment they shared together on Krownest before her world was turned upside down. How sweet and shy he had been, the flowers he had brought her because they reminded him of her, not just for their beauty, but their resilience, and deep inside her, she knew these was something more, knew that he felt the spark between them. She knew it, yes, but she couldn't trust her wayward emotions. She said nothing because that moment was for her, a private, precious thing she would hold close to her and allow it to fill her with warmth when she needed to feel loved and knew she would never be.
Not by him, at least.

"I don't know what to do, Qui-Gon..." she whimpered, burying her face in the soft robes crossed over his chest when she felt the tears begin to slip down her cheeks once again. She felt weak. She didn't want him to see her like that. Crying was one thing, an expression of her losses, but this meek, quiet sobbing over a boy she knew well in advanced that she could never have made her feel stupid.

"Is this why you have been so difficult with him?" he asked softly, his long fingers running through the silken strands of her hair.

"I suppose..." Satine muttered, picking at the Jedi's robe to give her something else to focus on. "I lose everyone I care about...if I try and keep him at a distance, m-maybe I'll like him less. Maybe he can stay in my life, maybe he won't die." The Duchess swallowed hard and took a few calming breaths. "I don't want them to target him to hurt me. I can't bear the idea of losing him..." She laughed sadly and slowly pushed away from the Jedi. "Gods, you must think me so foolish..."

"Not at all..." Qui-Gon said with a small, understanding smile. "I was young once too. I remember what it was like to be infatuated. The feelings you feel are...natural. We are in a stressful, emotionally difficult situation. It's only natural to turn to someone for comfort and strength to get you through it."

"B-but my duties-"

"And his, yes," the Jedi said with a sigh. "You are both quite dedicated to your responsibilities. It's...admirable." The Duchess smiled shyly, and Qui-Gon reached up to wipe the trails of tears from her cheeks. "Is this something that may get in the way of that?"

"He dreams of becoming a Jedi Knight," Satine said wistfully. "It's all he's ever wanted. He's going to be a Jedi Knight. No, a Jedi Master and I would never get in the way of that."

"His goals," Qui-Gon said. "But what about yours?"

"No, I..." She bit her lip and looked away. "My goals don't matter. I may very well allow myself to love if..." She shook her head. "But his...I won't keep him from his dreams. He's...all that matters..."

"That sentiment is so very Jedi, Duchess," Qui-Gon said softly, though the feeling was not. Poor Satine may have been more infatuated than she knew.

"I-I know you must be worried about your student," Satine said quickly. "Please don't be. He's never been anything but a perfect gentleman, and he's always done his duty, and...a-and..." The Duchess bit her lip in frustration, her hands balling into the fabric of her tunic and wringing it between them. "Obi-Wan is a good Jedi."

"I'm not worried about him, Satine, I'm worried about you," the Jedi stressed. "You are tormented. Look what this is doing to you. You are already suffering because of the war, and your affections for him are making you push him away." She looked away from the Jedi, her lip caught between her teeth to keep it from trembling. "He is your friend, is he not?" Satine slowly nodded, but said nothing. "Please, trust in his abilities to keep himself safe."

"But he doesn't," Satine snapped as she stood and began pacing. "He is terrible at keeping himself safe! How many times has he been shot for me? How many times has he thrown himself before me to act as my shield?!"

"It is his duty, Satine," the Jedi insisted. "You are letting your affection for him alter the way you
see him. Above everything else, our purpose here is your protection."

"Y-yes, I know that, but...ugh!" Satine covered her face with her hands and took a few deep breaths to calm herself, but it wasn't working. "I should be better than this..." she muttered. "I am the Duchess of Mandalore, a woman of Clan Kryze, not some sniffling, lovesick, foolish child!"

Resolved, she nodded to herself and met the Jedi's gaze again, a faint smile on her lips, but it was clearly not genuine. A politician's smile. "This is just...a crush. That's all this is, just some little girl's foolish fantasy. I'll get over it, so...please don't worry about me."

Qui-Gon was still worried. He couldn't help it. Not just because of the obvious, but because it was his job to defend the young Duchess, and she looked so...broken. As a defender, he felt like a failure. A relationship between the Duchess and the Padawan could only end in pain, and he knew it was right to continue to discourage such a thing, but looking at the crestfallen girl now only made him feel like the thing that stood between her and her noble Jedi's loving embrace, a thing he suspected empathetic Obi-Wan would give her without a second thought.

His student's way of dealing with things was far easier. Obi-Wan would retreat to meditate, would tug on his braid, would immerse himself in the Force as he trained. He was a generally anxious young man, but he handled it well, just as a young Jedi should. Satine was...emotional. Highly volatile in her passions, and she handled her pain not at all. Instead, she didn't eat, as evidenced by her body, and she became reckless and argumentative, turning her wrath on the hapless Obi-Wan because she cared so deeply for him. A part of Qui-Gon wondered if Obi-Wan harbored the same feelings for Satine, something beyond the physical attraction he already confessed to. The rest of him didn't want to know.

The ship shuddered as it exited hyperspace, the blue and white streaks snapping back into the glow of stars, and right on cue, the cockpit door hissed open and Obi-Wan purposefully strode in, ignoring the other two and seating himself in the pilot's seat, his face cold and expressionless, the result of his meditations. Satine silently returned to her seat behind the Padawan, her eyes on his hands as they flew over the console, tapping buttons and swiping across displays, and more than once, the girl tried and failed to initiate conversation with the boy, the words dying in her throat before she could utter a single sound.

"The rear thruster is burned out," Obi-Wan said softly. "I tried to repair it, but the energy converter needs to be replaced."

"Well, maybe it wouldn't have happened if you didn't fly so recklessly," Satine scowled, gasping softly and wincing as soon as the reflexive words were said, and the Padawan looked over his shoulder, his calm expression broken by irritation.

"If I wanted your opinion, Duchess, I'd ask for it," Obi-Wan hissed as he turned back to his work, and Qui-Gon looked back at the girl as she shrunk back into her seat, almost as if willing herself to disappear. The Jedi Master groaned and rubbed his temples. Teenagers just made dramatic messes of everything.

"Sounds like we need to set down," Qui-Gon said firmly. "We need to refuel anyway, and our rations are running low, and I am going to take you and Satine out to eat some real food."

"Master, we don't have to, I-"

"You are growing teenagers, Obi-Wan, you need to eat, and you two are far too thin as it is. I won't have my charges waste away under my watch." Obi-Wan stammered for a moment, trying to find an objection, but words were lost on him. "What's the nearest planet?"

"...Draboon, Master," Obi-Wan said quietly, and the Master looked back at Satine.
"Do you know anything about Draboon?" The Duchess shrugged.

"There's not much on Draboon but lapis mines and venom-mites."

"Where there are mines, there are ports. Sounds like our place. Take us there, Obi-Wan." It was a command, and he left no room for debate on the matter. With a reluctant sigh, Obi-Wan punched in the coordinates and grabbed the controls, his previous calm gone completely and replaced with agitation. The Padawan tensed when Satine's delicate hand gently laid on his shoulder, the strong, corded muscle twisting into knots under her touch.

"Obi-Wan..." Satine whispered. "I'm so sorry..." she said in a voice that trembled, and in an instant, all the irritation, all the agitation and bitterness, all the resentment and hard feelings between them disappeared, a small, grateful smile on the Padawan's face as he closed his eyes and laid his hand over hers.

"I understand," Obi-Wan said softly, and with a breath of relief, Satine leaned her head against the back of Kenobi's seat and gently began kneading her long fingers into his shoulder, the tense muscle relaxing instantly. For a moment, the Force pulsed with warmth, a gentle breath of spring wind that cleared the chill of winter and filled the world with life, and for a fleeting instant, to Qui-Gon, it felt like love.

After negotiating for a fair price for the parts Obi-Wan needed, Qui-Gon dragged the two teens into a small, humble diner near the city center of Draboon's primer mining town. The town was filled with gruff and dirty miners, mostly human, though through the crowds, they could see Rodians and Twi'leks, the odd Togruta and a variety of other species, most of them sporting prosthetics or large, noticeable scars and amputations, the results of dangerous work within the mines. For the most part, they walked with their heads down, minding their own business, occasionally glancing up to spout profanities at the newcomers impeding their progress on the way to work. If they noticed who the fugitives were, they neither said anything, nor seemed to care. According to Satine, Draboon was a planet that was mainly governed by trade and commerce, thanks to the valuable veins of high quality lapis that ran deep throughout the ground, a gemstone with absolutely no military value, which made it of little interest to the warrior Mandalorians. As a result, Clan Sharratt, the clan in control of Draboon, were excessively wealthy, but held in low esteem by the other clans. A previous war had diminished the clan so severely that they were still recovering from the devastation, and by clan standards, were still considered small and weak, their enormous wealth used to supply them with mercenary guards to protect them while they rebuilt. It wouldn't be safe, and they were prepared for trouble, but if they kept their heads down, they were confident that they could finish their business quickly and be on their way before the hunters tracked their location.

The diner was small, but comfortable, a screen projecting the holonet news hanging over the counter, the seats filled with miners that quickly scarfed down their lunches before heading back to work, and the trio slid into a booth at the back near a jukebox that cycled through its uploaded songs at random. Obi-Wan pulled his hood back and looked around the room, the disheveled appearance of his tousled, lengthening hair making him easily fit in with the disheveled miners. When Qui-Gon pulled back his hood, Satine nervously followed suit, the decision that three hooded people in the corner of a diner looked extremely suspicious a sensible one, but it made her uneasy anyway. Obi-Wan had been adamant that Satine just had the look of nobility about her, and it was not a thing she could hide, even if she wanted to. Even though it was meant to be a warning to be cautious, Satine found her heart beating faster when he said it.

"The plan," Qui-Gon said after he put in their orders with the teenage waitress, "is to get our
supplies when we finish eating, and we'll be on our way after that."

"Provided things actually go according to plan..." Obi-Wan said with a roll of his eyes. "Because it didn't go that way for us on Krownest."

"We ended up vomiting that meal," Satine said, her eyes wandering the diner cautiously as she drew circles on the table with her finger. She gasped softly when a large, four armed Besalisk lumbered toward their booth, and she tucked herself as closely as she could to Obi-Wan, the Padawan smiling softly and draping an arm around her shoulders to draw her closer. The massive creature in the aisle didn't stop walking, but appraised the group before rolling his eyes with an irritated gruff, turning instead toward the jukebox in the corner and punching in a selection before shuffling back the way he came.

"You'll draw attention to yourself if you're so jumpy..." Obi-Wan whispered, twirling her fine hair around his fingers, the silken strands tied back in a simple ponytail, though the shorter strands that framed her face ruined the plainness they had hoped to achieve.

"Can you blame me?" she hissed in response, slowly scooting away from Obi-Wan and trying to look calm, but the tight muscles in her neck made it clear how tense she was. "Last time we were in a place like this, the city was stormed by bounty hunters and we almost froze to death in the mountains."

"Well..." Qui-Gon said as he leaned back. "At least we won't be freezing to death here. The climate is quite agreeable."

"It's too humid..." Obi-Wan said, shrugging off his cloak and his robe, leaving him in his thin white tunic, his robes looping down by his legs where they folded over his belt. "Look at this, I'm already sticking to my tunic..."

"Good thing you left the armor on the ship, you would have boiled in it," Qui-Gon said, drumming his fingers on the table as he looked at the holonet for a moment, then quickly rose. "While we're waiting, I'm going to go poke around. If there's danger here, I want to know."

"Do you sense anything?" Obi-Wan asked, and the Master arched an eyebrow.

"Do you?"

"N-no, I don't...I don't think so."

"Nor do I, but stay alert. We run into trouble most often when we let our guard down." The Padawan nodded, and Qui-Gon turned to go, but quickly reeled back around and pointed a finger at his student. "...make good choices," he firmly instructed, nodding when he felt satisfied with the instruction, despite the confused look on the Padawan's face, and with that, Qui-Gon left to mingle. After a moment of awkward silence between them, Satine wrinkled her nose.

"I hate this song..." the Duchess muttered, and Obi-Wan strained his ears to listen to the music over the buzz of conversation, catching the staccato melody, an arrangement that invoked boldness and empowerment, something he would have thought Satine would appreciate.

"Is it distasteful to you?" Obi-Wan asked innocently, and he flushed deeply when Satine gave him a look that suggested he was insane. "It sounds like something that would fit you, that is all..." Fury crossed over her face for a moment, and Obi-Wan quickly scooted back, his hands raised before him in a gesture of calm and surrender, and the angry girl bit her lip, her eye boring holes into the uncomfortable Jedi.

"...well?!!"
"W-well what?" Obi-Wan asked, confused, and Satine crossed her arms over her chest.

"Edric asked you if you listen to music. Do you?"

"O-of course," the Padawan said defensively. "Music is very important to the Jedi as an expression of culture. All art is important to us."

"So what sort of music do you listen to." It was a question, but it sounded like an accusation. Satine was clearly still angry, and Obi-Wan didn't know why.

"All kinds..." he said shyly, flushing as he wiggled back to put more distance between them. "Mostly instrumental pieces." She was still frowning, but the Duchess' shoulders relaxed somewhat.

"So...you listen to just the music?" Obi-Wan nodded. "Not the words?" He shook his head, and Satine pointed back to the jukebox. "So what exactly are you hearing?"

"The melody is bold and empowering, I thought..." He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. He swore the nerves were making him sweat, but it may have just been the humidity. "I thought...y-you're strong, and it sounds like strength to me." Slowly, the Duchess grinned, making the Padawan turn an even more fierce shade of red, and he wished he had his helmet with him.

"Sweet Obi-Wan..." Satine said softly, laying her hand on his cheek. "The song is about solus ca'nara pirimmur dala. One time use women." Her smile widened as she leaned in, the Jedi squirming uncomfortably under her gaze. "Taken to bed once and thrown out afterwards."

"O-oh, Force, I am so sorry!" Obi-Wan said, snatching his braid in his hand and frantically twisting it around his fingers. "I-I didn't mean...Satine, I just...I-I don't usually listen to music with words, I thought you were supposed to feel the emotion conveyed in the melody, not-" He stopped when Satine began to laugh, his ears burning as he felt the fierce flush on his face spread down his neck and chest, quietly wishing for a hole he could crawl into and die.

"I imagine the Force is a bit like music, yes?" she asked softly, and the Jedi nodded slowly. "Well, Obi-Wan, in the real world, the lyric is just as important as the melody. The melody may give you the feel of the piece, but the lyric tells you what that feeling is about."

"Like the Living Force and the Cosmic Force, yes?"

"...sure," Satine said slowly. "If you like. Hold on." She climbed over Obi-Wan to get out of the booth and bounded to the jukebox, pressed a few buttons and made her way back. "This is one of my favorites, listen," she said as the music faded out and changed to something else, a much slower, more melodious harmony almost mournful in the rich tones of the tenor instruments, and Obi-Wan closed his eyes listening to the sound carry on the air, the Duchess beside him sweetly humming along, the reverberations felt in his own chest. It felt like sadness, like loss, but there was something distinctly beautiful about it, something in the perfect harmony and melody that spoke to him and filled him with warmth and made his heart beat faster.

"I-is it a Mandalorian song?" he asked softly, and Satine chuckled and shook her head.

"There is nothing beautiful about our music. It's all war chants and rallying cries and celebrations of the defeat of our enemies. This comes out of Coruscant and has been translated into Mando'a by a Mandalorian performer." She smiled broadly. "Who, incidentally, supports New Mandalore."

"You ought to get her to write a song about you..." Obi-Wan drawled, watching the Duchess as she swayed gently with the music. "I'm not sure how this makes me feel. It sounds sad, but it
makes me feel..." He laid a hand on his chest and closed his eyes. "It...aches. But I like it. It's very confusing."

"Well, the song is about love, and love is very complicated," Satine said, her nose in the air like she was the authority on the subject. "It's nothing you stunted Jedi would understand. And for the record, the song is a hopeful one. It isn't sad, the melody is supposed to conflict with the lyric, that's the point."

"It seems very Mando'a..." Obi-Wan said softly. "Perhaps we can work music in to our lessons. There is so much I do not know."

"We do have access to a music broadcast on the ship," Satine said as she scooted closer to the Jedi. "I'll see about working it in to our Mando'a lessons."

"I-I'd like that..." Obi-Wan whispered, unconsciously leaning in toward the Duchess, and he quickly jolted away from her when Qui-Gon slid back into the seat opposite them, a cup of caf in his hands that he drank deeply from.

"Bounty hunters," the Master declared, "are in and out of the port all the time looking for some royal with a bounty."

"Really?" Obi-Wan said, rubbing his neck and keeping his eyes off the Jedi Master and watching as the teenage waitress came out of the kitchen with plates in hand, striding quickly towards them. "Any word on if they're interested in help? We're getting low on credits, and the ship doesn't fly on wishes."

"Seems like they were here a few days ago, but have since left," Qui-Gon said, smiling at the waitress as she laid the food on the table, and frowning when he saw how little the teenagers ordered. "The whole point of this was for you two to eat. Who knows when we're going to get our next real meal." He gently laid his hand on the waitress' arm. "Please, tell my companions that they need to eat."

"You need to eat," the waitress said sweetly, her eyes very noticeably running over Obi-Wan, which Satine was very, very fast to pick up on and express her immediate displeasure with a glare that could slay a rancor. The waitress didn't seem to notice. "Warriors need to eat to keep themselves big and strong." She placed her hands on the table and leaned over, her low cut top giving the Padawan a very close look at her nearly exposed, ample breasts, and he swallowed hard as he averted his eyes, the waitress laughing softly when the boy turned a fierce shade of red.

"You are warriors, aren't you?" she asked. "I overheard you talking just now. Did you come from the war?"

"In a sense," Qui-Gon said, saving his Padawan from the waitress' leering gaze. "We're looking for work, but it seems like the only thing anyone's interested in these days is the execution of some little girl." Qui-Gon shrugged. "The bounty's good, but the competition is too high. Not worth the effort, and I hear she's putting up quite a fight. Seems like a bad investment, and something about hunting a little girl seems..." He paused and shook his head. "Wrong, I guess."

"My father says the same thing," the waitress said, the tray clutched to her chest as she nodded. "He stood with the True Mandalorians in the last war before the faction was destroyed by Death Watch."

"Yeah?" Qui-Gon asked. "Where does he stand now?"

"In the kitchen," she said slyly, pointing over her shoulder with her thumb to the kitchen where a grizzled, grumpy looking Devaronian stood with a skillet in his prosthetic hand. "His injuries keep
him from fighting, and he doesn't believe in any cause for Mandalore but the honorable mercenary, and, you know..." She shrugged. "They're all dead." She waved her hand dismissively. "Doesn't matter anymore anyway. You said you're looking for work?"

"We are," Qui-Gon said and the girl smirked.

"Well, there's always work in the mines, but..." Her gaze drifted over to Obi-Wan again, the boy trying to boldly hold her gaze, but quickly looked away. "I don't think they take pretty boys down there..." A soft whistle from the Jedi Master drew the girl's attention back to him.

"Focus..." Qui-Gon drawled, looking back at his student briefly before turning his attention to the waitress. "My friend here would be very appreciative if you could tell us about any work in the area."

"Oh, would he?" she asked in a low, sultry voice, looking back at the flushing boy for a moment before shrugging and casting her gaze back at Qui-Gon. "You could try going to Clan Sharratt. They're always looking for guards to protect their interests here, and that are very wealthy, so they pay well." With an alluring smile, she looked back at Obi-Wan. "Just be careful if you go, sweet thing. Death Watch has been hanging around trying to get them to fund their war effort."

"Well..." Obi-Wan said, swallowing hard. "Seems like the place for us." A sharp, irritated growl from the kitchen made the waitress grimace, and with a sigh, she took a few steps away from the table.

"I'm off after the dinner rush," she said quickly. "Come see me, it gets so boring around here at night..." With a wink, she sauntered off, and the three immediately huddled around the table, their food pushed to the side and forgotten.

"We need to go," Obi-Wan hissed. "Now."

"How far away is the Sharratt fortress from here?" Qui-Gon asked Satine, and the Duchess shrugged nervously.

"I don't know, I've never been here before," she hissed, her eyes wide and nervous. "Obi-Wan's right, we should leave."

"I'm not so sure," Qui-Gon said softly. "I sense something else here..."

"Well, what have we here..." said a harsh voice, made cold by the vocal modulator of a helmet, and they quickly looked to the door to see six Mandalorian warriors walk into the diner, the stomping of armored boots by the jukebox announcing the arrival of four more through the side door, all of them in the black and blue armor of Death Watch. "Seems the port authorities were right. We've got ourselves a Duchess."

Without wasting a second, Qui-Gon struck on his lightsaber and cut the table's fixed legs, and Obi-Wan flipped the table, pulling it back to wedge it in the corner as they barricaded themselves off from the rest of the diner. Pressing Satine down to crouch under the line of cover and safely behind them, the two Jedi knelt, their lightsabers humming as they peeked over the table, ready to defend their position against the ten warriors in the small, crowded establishment and looking for the swiftest way for them to escape, a task that seemed very difficult without causing casualties, since the miners in the establishment had stubbornly refused to move or abandon their food.

Before the soldiers even had a chance to draw their weapons, an angry growl tore through the air, followed by the sharp, loud snap of a slugthrower rifle being loaded, and a moment later, a cascade of snaps, clicks, and electronic whines followed as every single patron of the diner pulled
pistols, blasters and revolvers from holsters, belts and slings and aimed the weapons at the Death Watch warriors. In the tense silence that followed, Satine very slowly poked her head up to peek out from under Qui-Gon's arm at the standoff.

"There's a sign in the window," the Devaronian owner snarled, stepping around from his place in the kitchen to stand behind the counter, his rifle pointed menacingly at the Death Watch commander. "No Death Watch. I don't serve your kind here! Can't you read?!"

"Got a problem with the Death Watch, friend?" the commander said in a soft, menacing tone. The Devaronian seemed unaffected when he scoffed and sneered at the warrior.

"Sure do." The owned spat on the ground and glared at the soldier disdainfully. "You're bad for business."

"Then let us be good for business," the commander growled. "Give us the Duchess, and we'll be our way. Nobody needs to get hurt."

"Duchess ain't on the menu," the Devaronian snarled, the slugthrower snapping as a slug loaded into the barrel. "Get out." The commander looked around the diner at the Jedi, alert and ready with lightsabers drawn, the Duchess barely visible behind them, close to fifty weapons trained on him and his men in the hands of disgruntled, irritated miners who took it personally that this mess was coming between them and their meal and their limited lunch break. The odds were not in their favor.

"Listen here," the commander announced loudly, his finger pointed toward the Jedi and the girl hiding behind them. "That over there is Duchess Satine Kryze of Mandalore. There is a bounty of twenty thousand credits for her capture, and five thousand for each head of the Jedi scum that protects her." He scoffed softly. "She is dar'manda. It is our responsibility as Mandalorians to rid the galaxy of that bitch."

Not a single miner moved, their unwavering weapons trained on the Death Watch.

"Dar'manda..." the Devaronian growled. "From where I'm standing, that looks like a scared little girl." He raised his rifle to his shoulder and looked through the sight at the Death Watch commander. "We don't want your blood money. Get out."

"Fine," the commander snarled, pointing to his men by the side door. "Kill the Jedi and anyone who gets in your way! Take the Duchess alive!" The Death Watch didn't even get to draw their weapons before the entire diner erupted in gunfire, bullets and beams of plasma flying through the air and piercing through the weaknesses in the warriors' armor, the plasma burning holes and the bullets tearing bloody gashes, and within seconds, all ten Death Watch soldiers lay dead upon the ground.

"Alright, you sorry lot!" the Devaronian called, slamming his still smoking rifle on the counter top. "Break's over. Get the hell back to your shifts." Grumbling and complaining, the miners got out of their seats and stepped over the bodies on the floor, ignoring the Jedi in the corner as they left to return to work. Slowly, as the diner emptied out and the owner came around with a broom and a dustpan, the Jedi deactivated their lightsabers, slowly coming out from behind their cover when the irritated Devaronian began sweeping, his waitress daughter grabbing the dead men by the ankles and dragging them into a pile with roll of her eyes, a bothersome chore that kept her from other work. Clearly, this sort of thing had happened before.

"You," the owner growled when the trio cautiously led the shaking Duchess toward him. "Get out of my diner. You're bad for business."
"Sir..." Satine said in a shaking voice. "T-thank you, I-"

"Don't thank me, girl, I didn't do it for you," the owner growled, spitting on one of the bodies as he swept the floor, frowning when the bristles began smearing blood across the floor. "Girl! Get the mop!" With an irritated groan and a roll of her eyes, the waitress dropped the body she was dragging and disappeared in the back. "I fought for Jaster Mereel in the civil war, for the true Mandalorians, and that bastard Tor Vizsla and his Death Watch killed him." He snatched the mop from the waitress when she brought it to him and began furiously scrubbing the floor with it. "I don't give a kriffing shit for your cause, Duchess, but if the Death Watch wants you dead, you're worth saving."

"Can you help us?" Qui-Gon asked. "If what they said was true, they've been to the dock and probably locked down our ship to prevent our escape. It's likely there are more Death Watch there."

"What part of bad for business don't you understand, Jedi?" the man growled, shaking the mop handle at him. "With a mess like this, I'll have to close for the dinner shift to get the bodies dumped before those assholes come looking for their friends! I might kill men for you, but don't ask me for help." He spat on the ground and immediately mopped it up. "Try the Sharratts. Don't know if they'll help you, but you'll have better luck with them then you will here. There's no love for Death Watch here, but that bounty on your head looks really nice to folks who don't have much. At the very least, those wealthy Sharratt bastards won't be swayed by that."

"Where can we find them?" Qui-Gon asked, and the man rolled his eyes.

"You got a ways to go, Jedi," he said with a smirk on his face. "If you start now, you may get there by the end of the week." Qui-Gon felt the Duchess shiver in his grasp and clutch at him tighter, the tension within her rising to new heights, and he looked over his shoulder at his student to see Obi-Wan kneeling beside the bodies and stripping them of their weapons, strapping blasters to his thighs, clipping them to his belt, and slinging a rifle over his shoulder. He had set several extras on a nearby table for his Master and the Duchess, and when the waitress sidled up to him and began flirtatiously talking with him, he eagerly responded and followed her into the back.

"What direction?" the Master asked, and the Devaronian sighed and wiped his brow.

"Due west. Follow the sun and you'll come to it eventually. They're situated at the foot of a mountain, you can't miss it. You'll be passing through a hell of a lot of mining land and a forest that's more root and rock than trees, but it's not a particularly difficult trek." He shrugged. "Provided you get underground at night. That's when the venom-mites come out, and if you get caught in a swarm, you're gonna die. You see them, you run, find a cave and hide in it and you should be fine." His eyes narrowed when Obi-Wan returned with the waitress, both of their arms filled with packets of dried food and rations, and he gave a small, irritated grunt when the girl teasingly pulled the Padawan's braid. "Hope you're going to pay for that, boy..." His eyes darted to his amorous daughter and he frowned. "Unless you already did..." All eyes fell on Obi-Wan, and he flushed furiously when he realized it.

"She, uh...she wanted to see the Force..." he meekly explained.

"Oh, I bet she did!" the Devaronian snarled, furious eyes snapping to the indignant girl. "So help me, if you exchanged my product so you could see some magic tricks-"

"They aren't magic tricks, Father!" the girl countered. "They're super powers..."

"Alright, I have had enough of you!" he snapped, thrusting the mop at the offended girl. "You three, out now. I'm adding Jedi to my sign out front," he grumbled. "And I'd add Duchesses too if
"Thank you for your help," Qui-Gon said, pushing Satine toward Obi-Wan, and the boy quickly began handing weapons to the protesting Duchess. "Is there anything we can do to repay you?"

"I'll take the little Jedi!" the waitress shouted from behind the counter, and her father quickly reeled on her, barking in harsh Mando'a before returning his attention to the Jedi.

"Give Death Watch hell," the man growled. "I don't have a stake in this war, but if them losing means you guys win, you had better win."

"We will," Qui-Gon said, pressing a bag of credits into the man's hand, and he grinned broadly when he opened it.

"I didn't know Jedi were rich!" he called after the retreating trio. "I changed my mind, I'm not going to add Jedi to the list!"

Obi-Wan ran next to Satine, keeping to the shadows of the large rocks and jagged hills of excavated stone when they could, and sprinting across the open, dusty expanse of the plains when they could, occasionally ducking into one of the hundreds of entries to the mine shafts below when they thought they heard something. As suspected, the port was crawling with Death Watch when they left, and attempting to sneak their way to their ship in the unlikely event that it wasn't locked down was suicidal. The prospect of fighting their way through was an even worse idea. With the city crawling with the enemy, staying was no longer a safe option, but neither was traversing hundreds of miles on foot across land without much cover, so as was their usual, Qui-Gon sent Obi-Wan and Satine out of the city to begin the journey to the fortress of Clan Sharratt while he stayed behind to secretly secure aid or transportation.

The sun was beginning to set over the horizon, the red sky giving way to pitch black as the humidity brought dark storm clouds in, the air charged with electricity and the damp, heavy smell that promised rain, and the two teenagers pressed harder, eager to reach the edge of the forest that lingered in the near distance. As the Devaronian said, it wasn't much as far as forests went, the land mostly cleared for surveying the quality of the mining grounds beneath, but the sparse trees were large and covered in a thick canopy of leaves that seemed almost purple in the light, and they would offer protection from the rain if they couldn't find cave shelter in the rolling hills. The open mines were far behind them, left long ago as the teenagers ran for the better part of the day with only few very short stops in the shelter they found.

They crossed over from the plains of the mining land and into the forest just as the sun dipped below the horizon to the sound of rolling thunder, the ground becoming rough and uneven with the gnarled net of the superficial root system of the massive trees, which slowed their progress considerably. Still, they jogged while they still had enough light to see, and they only stopped under one of the enormous trees when Satine laid her hand on Obi-Wan's arm, the young Duchess panting in ragged, labored breaths.

"Obi, I can't..." she started, devolving into a fit of coughing as her lungs burned, the Jedi hovering over her and fretting. "I can't run anymore, I can't...I-I'm sorry, I-

"Hush, Satine..." Obi-Wan whispered, drawing her close to him and leading the girl to the base of the tree at the junction between two enormous roots and the white trunk, the Duchess heavily favoring her right leg, and concern filled him as he did his best to support her. If she had injured herself, their progress would be significantly slowed. "You did well," he said softly, helping her slide to the ground. "Very well. I didn't believe we could go so fast for so long. You are...impressive."
"Yes, well..." she said, a faint smile in her eyes despite the grimace of pain on her lips as she rubbed at her leg. "Not having any food in our stomachs certainly helped. It's nice not having to vomit like last time."

"That it is." He slid off the rough brown cloak, the fabric tied to function as a pack that slung over his shoulder, and undid it enough to get his hand inside and pull out a ration pack, which he handed to the grateful Duchess, and quickly retied it and returned it to his back.

"Do you think Qui-Gon's alright?" Satine asked quietly as she broke off small pieces of the ration bar to nibble on. "I thought he'd have found us by now."

"You know how these things go..." Obi-Wan muttered, closing his eyes and reaching through his training bond to his Master to find him very much alive and very, very irritated, and the Padawan couldn't help but smile. "He's fine, Satine. He's wet, though, and very agitated. Seems like he got caught in the storm we're going to be subject to."

"Is he close?"

"I..." He paused, breathed deep, and shook his head. "No, I don't think so. He seems...distant. We may be on our own for a little." With a small, weak laugh, Satine curled up against the trunk of the tree.

"It's just like Zanbar. Sometimes he'd be gone for days at a time before we moved."

"Those times weren't so bad, were they?" Obi-Wan asked softly, kneeling beside her. "We got to know each other pretty well in the times he was gone."

"They weren't so good either..." Satine said, her voice low as she winced and drew her knees to her chest. "I dislike being hunted. I dislike all the death and all the killing this war forces me to take part in."

"Y-yes..." Obi-Wan whispered, his finger making circles in the loose dirt. "Yes, of course...I-I'm sorry, that was insensitive..." Satine immediately felt awful, a dull ache beginning in her chest that stood apart form the burning of her lungs from overexertion. She gently nudged the Jedi, and with a sharp gasp, Obi-Wan fell over, surprise melting into a pleased smile that for a moment, almost looked longing as he stared up at her.

"It wasn't so bad," she gently admitted. "I mean, when it wasn't awful. It was always a pleasure getting to teach you, you're a very quick learner."

"Only because my teacher was exquisite," Obi-Wan said with a sigh, his breath hitching when Satine gently laid her hand on his stomach, a sly smirk on her face.

"I said you were quick, Obi-Wan," she lightly teased. "I didn't say you were good. You've much to learn."

"Teach me..." the Padawan whispered, his voice heady and breathless, far huskier than Satine had ever heard, and it pulled at something deep within her, and for just a moment, she saw desire in her protector's eyes, his expression almost entranced as he looked at her, and she could feel the pooling of her own desire deep in her gut. She had tried to push it aside, tried to deny the feelings she had for him, knew it was doomed to fail, but for that moment, in the second she looked into those blue eyes and saw not the cold, removed Jedi, but the desires of a man, she didn't care. And then it was gone, pushed away from his expressive face and into the very pit of him, as he did with all his emotions, and she felt her heart sink as reality returned. Until she saw his
expression, tight and tense and edged with apprehension, as it always was when he reached into
the Force and found something he didn't like. Quickly, the Jedi scrambled to his feet, his lightsaber
unlit in his hands and standing in front of the space where the Duchess sat guarded by high walls
of wood. The cold laughter that peeled through the air beside the thunder confirmed their fears and
set both their nerves on edge.

"Oh, how sweet..." said a thick, malicious voice, a female Death Watch captain stepping toward
them with four men at her side. "Looks like love...a shame it ends today." She indicated with her
hand to advance, the men slowly began creeping forward, blasters in hand whining as they were
charged and devices on their gauntlets humming to readiness, and Satine stood as quickly as she
was able and looked at the devices.

"Obi-Wan, those are vambraces," she whispered, pointing to the devices on the gauntlets. "Those
were designed specifically to combat the abilities of the Jedi. There are Jedi hunters."

"Only the best for you, Duchess..." the woman said sweetly. "Tell me, why would they leave you
with the student when you have a Master to protect you?" Satine didn't answer, and in the silence,
she could hear rain softly begin to patter upon the leaves high above them. "I suppose it doesn't
matter, they'd die either way." She laughed softly. "I hear Tor Vizsla dispatched two of his best to
come and get you. I can't wait to see the look on their faces when they find out I got to you first."

"Obi-Wan..." Satine whimpered, pressing herself close to her Jedi's tense back, the blue lightsaber
in his hand igniting. "Obi-Wan, they're trained to kill Jedi..."

"Right now, they're the least of my concerns..." he muttered, his attention on the Mandalorians
before him. "Whatever you do, don't shoot!"

"What?!" The woman stared at him for a moment before breaking out into a fit of laughter. "Oh,
Duchess, your Jedi is a prize!" She flicked her hand in the air. "Boys, kill the Jedi. Take care not
to harm the Duchess, Vizsla wants her alive. Be cautious, he may just be the student, but he must
be incredibly gifted to be entrusted with her life!"

The Mandalorians quickly jumped into action, Obi-Wan's lightsaber poised and ready when a
grappling line made of yellow energy shot out of one of the vambraces and wrapped around
Kenobi's wrists, his eyes widening in surprise as he was jerked off-balance and pulled away from
Satine, the Duchess screaming for her knight as he was surrounded by the four warriors. He
reached out with the Force to push them away, but his focus was disrupted by another swift jerk
of the line that bound him, and he was hit by a blast from a repulsor from another vambrace, a
technological mimicry of the Jedi's own Force push, and Obi-Wan was knocked off his feet, his
body skidding along the gnarled roots within the ground. He could feel scrapes and cuts and
bruises tear at his skin, even under the protection of his robes, and with a gasp of panic, he quickly
rolled to the side, evading three successive bolts fired from the Mandalorians' weapons. He rolled
again to avoid the next volley and managed to catch the one after that with his lightsaber, but he
was never given the opportunity to get up, the constant firing keeping him pinned to the ground.

The loud, high whine of a powerful blaster firing ripped through the air over the sound of the
steadily heaver rainfall, followed by a loud, piercing scream as one of Obi-Wan's assailants was
shot, the man falling backward and writhing in pain as his body convulsed, the result of a
powerful stunning shot from the enraged Duchess. She aimed the weapon and fired again, but this
time, they were ready for it, their attention on the girl, and the commander rushed forward,
evading the next shot and knocking the rifle out of Satine's hands. The Duchess quickly reached
to grab for the pistol strapped to her thigh, only to have the commander grab the girl by the arm
and throw her to the ground, her armored boot pressed to her back to keep her down.

The brief distraction that Satine provided was enough to give Obi-Wan a chance to push off the
ground and flip in the air, the tug on the grappling line coming too late to pull him back down, but just at the right moment to spin him in the air. Obi-Wan lashed out with his blade in his trapped hands, the saber cutting through the taut line with ease, and grabbed the severed line as he fell with his now free hands. As he touched the ground, he used the momentum from the fall to pull the line back, sending the Mandalorian skidding across the ground to the Jedi’s feet, and without wasting a moment, Obi-Wan tore off his helmet and slammed the hilt of his lightsaber on the back of his skull, the man's body falling instantly limp as he was knocked unconscious.

The gasping cries of his name on Satine's lips reached him, and he stared at the remaining three Mandalorians, his focus intensifying as he saw his beloved Satine, his mission, struggling and in pain under the heel of the cruel commander, dirt and tears streaking her face. When the sound of the rain faded, when her screams became muffled and distant, when he heard the buzzing loud in his ears and the warning pull of the Force in his chest that he had felt before, the lazy, hungry humming in the air becoming slowly closer, slowly more lively as it awakened, disturbed by the commotion below. It grew louder with the inevitability of their descent upon them, and Obi-Wan felt in them an opportunity, and he knew exactly what to do.

Swiftly drawing the blaster strapped to his thigh, Obi-Wan aimed and fired three rapid shots, not at the Mandalorians, but into the canopy above. The moment of shock and disbelief of the warriors was just enough for Obi-Wan to push out with the Force, sending the commander on top of Satine flying back through the air to strike the trunk of the tree. Clutching his hands and pulling back, Obi-Wan pulled the Duchess toward him, his blaster holstered and his lightsaber safe at his hip by the time he snatched Satine out of the air and held her tightly against him, quickly drawing his saber again and deflecting the volley of shots fired by the enraged Mandalorians, and when the bolts had hit the hard armor of their chest plates, knocking them back but not injuring them, Obi-Wan gathered Satine in his arms and ran as fast as he could out from under the cover of the tree, the Mandalorians in pursuit as soon as they regrouped.

Slowly, the pounding of the rain was drowned out by the low, angry buzz, the Mandalorians slowing in their chase of the Jedi and the Duchess to look at their unconscious comrades they were leaving behind. They realized too late the change in sound, and within seconds a black cloud descended upon their unconscious friends, thousands and thousands of buzzing, flying insects the size of fists falling upon them, dark red stingers exposed and stabbing through cloth and skin and puncturing armor. They began to scream as the insects swarmed them, and the others looked on in horror as they began to be swiftly devoured by thousands of the hellish creatures, and the three began to run once again, their legs carrying them as fast as they could go after the Duchess and her Jedi when the thick, angry swarm rose into the air and went after them as well.

The hard, pounding rain slicked the ground and made it difficult to see and hear, though it didn't seem to effect Obi-Wan at all, the Jedi's vision clear as he sat entrenched in the Force to give himself the advantage he needed to save Satine. He could feel the three Mandalorians behind them, the lead they had been given slowly diminishing as the three warriors sprinted across the distance, both in relentless pursuit of their prey and for fear of becoming prey themselves. Plasma shots cut through the rain, sizzling as the water struck them and giving Obi-Wan ample time for his quick reflexes to move himself out of the way.

A scream cut through the air as the swarm caught up to the Mandalorians, one of the warriors flailing and swatting and shooting futilely at the insects as they buzzed around him and landed upon him, the vicious stingers stabbing into him where ever the killer creatures landed. The other two stopped and turned to shoot suppressing fire at the black, carnivorous cloud, but quickly realized it was too late, the venom injected into his blood burning and dissolving through veins and muscles and bones. They abandoned him when he collapsed, the swarm eating him alive before it quickly continued the chase.
"Are those venom-mites?!" Satine asked, the girl peering up to look over her shoulder when another scream sliced through the pounding rain and rolling thunder and the low buzz of the swarm. "Obi-Wan, did you disturb a hive of venom-mites?!"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time..." he panted through grit teeth, holding the Duchess closer and restricting her movements. "I had hoped the rain would slow them down..." He pushed off a root, bounding over the uneven ground, and jumped for a rock, pushing off of it and bouncing between stones and roots and trees to keep himself moving as quickly as possible. The ground was mud-slicked with rain, and the tangled web of superficial roots made moving quickly difficult. When the third and final scream cut through the air, Obi-Wan grit his teeth and ran faster. The Mandalorians were dead, and the swarm of venom-mites would be coming for them next.

"The name is very misleading, actually..." Obi-Wan panted through fast, hard gasps for air. "Mites seem to suggest they'd be small..."

"Obi-Wan..."

"I'm just saying that if you have an insect that should be called Venomous Carnivorous Hell Swarm, don't call them venom-mites." He scoffed as he jumped over a particularly large root, landing on the other side and not losing any speed as he continued to run. "Honestly, what is wrong with Mandalorians..."

"Obi-Wan, we are about to be devoured by insects, and you are bantering?!

"Isn't that the best time for it?" Any response that Satine may have had was cut off when a root caught Obi-Wan's foot and the boy fell hard to the ground, and the Duchess went skidding across the rough, uneven ground, gasping in pain when she felt a sharp rock scrape against her hip and tearing her tunic, and through the rain, she could feel hot blood pouring from a gash in her pale skin. The swarm was upon them a moment later, and panic gripped Obi-Wan as they swarmed closer. Looking at the terrified face of the girl he loved, and feeling pain and guilt grip him when he saw the blood staining her clothes, he reached deep within the Force and begged for the power he needed to save her. He found it, felt the swell of the Force within him surge with power, and he reached up toward the swarm with both hands, fingers splayed, and pushed against everything around them, the venom-mites and the sheets of rain scattered by a fierce, sudden gust of wind as the Force hurled it all back from the Jedi and the Duchess.

It was enough time for Obi-Wan to scramble to his feet and quickly gather Satine in his arms, and once again, the boy was sprinting full speed across the terrain, this time entrenched in the Force to aid his speed and agility, his entire being focused on the life he held tightly to him. Behind him, he could hear the buzz of the swarm, but this time, the sound grew fainter as Obi-Wan's surge of focus allowed him to increase the distance as he outran the predatory insects. He kept close to the hills, his sharp eyes searching for a cave for shelter, the Devaronian's warning about the insects clear in his mind. Run, and head for underground, which was exactly what he planned to do.

He wasn't sure how long he ran, but he knew it must have been miles before he saw the opening in the hillside through the pouring rain, and with a final burst of speed, he rushed toward it, skidding to a halt when his feet touched the dry dirt inside the cave. They stood completely still for a moment, their breaths held as they waited and listened for what seemed like a small eternity, and there was nothing. Just the sound of the falling rain and the occasional roll of thunder. No low, menacing buzz, no sign of the swarm at all. They had lost them.

Obi-Wan gently put Satine down on a smooth rock inside the cave, his hands shaking with worry as he gently tucked a wet, stray lock of hair behind her ear and caressed her cheek as he pulled away. He swiftly took off the sling made out of his cloak and stripped himself of his wet robes, his light tunic soaked and clinging to his thin frame, dark spots marring the fabric where blood had
soaked through from his injuries. He set himself to making a fire, a task he was getting quite skilled at, the snaking vines inside the walls of the cave that were quickly torn down provided fast and easy kindling, the thick, twisting stems proving to burn both slow and very well.

With warmth and ample light, Obi-Wan sifted through the pouches on his belt and removed a small medical kit, suitable for small injuries, but not for the extensive wounds between them. Through the Force, he could feel an incessant pull, a surge of worry and concern through his bond with Qui-Gon, and he quickly reached back, reassuring him that all was well, that for now, they were safe. His fears at ease, the Master sent him silent encouragement in a warm, soft pulse, and Obi-Wan let go of the connection, his attention drawn to his wounded charge. He knelt before Satine, his hand overing her hip hesitantly for a moment before lightly dropping to her thing, his head bowed as he looked away from her.

"I'm sorry..." the Jedi whispered, lightly stroking her thigh, the medical supplies clutched tightly in his other hand. "I'm so sorry..."

"You have nothing to be sorry for..." she whispered. "You saved my life. Again."

"For this..." Obi-Wan said, his shaking hand hovering over the bloody stain on her tunic, and she laughed softly, her heart skipping when he finally looked up at her with worried, wounded eyes filled deep with affectionate desperation.

"I-it doesn't even hurt, Obi," she lied, looking away from the Jedi quickly when she saw the hardened flash in his eyes, the recognition of her dishonesty. His fingers brushed over the wound and he held up the hand with the bacta and bandages.

"May I?" Obi-Wan asked softly, and with a quick nod, Satine pulled the wet garment up to allow him to see the gash on her hip, and with a slight frown, she changed her mind when she shivered in the damp air of the cave and carefully pulled the tunic over her head, leaving her to sit before the blushing boy with her torso nearly completely exposed. It was true that they had seen each other in states of undress before, as their close proximity occasionally demanded it, and Obi-Wan was not always so quick to avert his eyes, unintentionally, of course, while Satine more than once very intentionally allowed her gaze to linger. But there was something different about this. There was something electric in the care of his light touches, his gentle fingers softly caressing her raw, pale skin as he tended the wound, leaving trails of raised goose bumps everywhere he touched.

He kept his eyes focused on his work, not once looking up at the indecent female, though the furious red that trailed down his neck and beneath the line of his tunic showed that he was keenly aware of it, his breath occasionally hitching when the Duchess would shift or move or gasp softly in pain, a quick apology on his lips as those gently fingers slowly pet and soothed the pain away. The gash was deep, and the carefully applied bacta did its work, but the limited medical supplies were hardly sufficient to properly treat it, and while the wound did close, it promised to scar. Satine didn't mind, but Obi-Wan was clearly unhappy about it, the mark a reminder of his failure to keep her from harm like he promised, the guilt plain on his face through his softly whispered apologies.

When he had done all he could, Obi-Wan laid a padded bandage over the treated wound, the sticky adhesive edges clinging to her skin and sealing the injury off to keep dirt and bacteria from entering while it healed. His fingers lightly traced along the edges, making certain it was in place before he allowed his hand to drop away from the girl, his head bowed as he remained kneeling before her, and Satine found herself immediately aching for his touch again. She felt stupid, the foolish whimsies of a little girl allowed to run through her mind when she should have been focused like her protector, but no matter what she did, she couldn't banish the yearning she felt.

"It should be alright now..." Obi-Wan muttered at the ground. "Does it still hurt?"
"Only a little," she said, and the Jedi looked up at her, his entire being warmed when he felt her honesty this time, a soft, beautiful smile on her face as she regarded him, and he couldn't help but smile in return, his eyes shyly averted as his heart began to pound. "What about you, are you injured?"

"Nothing serious," he said, shaking his head. "Nothing we can do anything about anyway, I used up the last of our supplies on you."

"Well, that was short-sighted," Satine hissed, crossing her arms over her chest and looking the Jedi over, only now becoming aware of how much blood soaked into his own tunic. "We should have brought more medical supplies instead of so much food."

"We were in a hurry, and our supplier was a diner. It wasn't like they had a lot of bacta just laying around."

"Well, you ought to be thinking about that the next time we go out," Satine said with a roll of her eyes. "You have a talent for getting injured." A faint, relaxed smile passed over the Jedi's lips as he sighed, the tension in his muscles disappearing. If Satine was joking, she truly was fine.

"As you say, Duchess..."

"...may I see?" she asked, biting on her lip in an attempt to keep the flush from her face, though the burning in her ears was a good sign she had failed. "Y-you're injuries. Just so I may know what you suffered in my defense."

He was still for a moment, simply looking up at her, searching her face for something he couldn't place, and slowly he nodded, looking away from her as he pulled his tunic up over his head, carefully wringing it out to busy his shaking hands, and laid it on the rock beside Satine to dry. The Duchess had grown used to seeing her young protector covered in scrapes and bruises and worse, the boy more often than not using his own body to absorb a ridiculous amount of punishment, but her chest ached every time she saw it, and now was no different. She gasped softly, her hands covering her mouth to hide how upset she was, since she knew how it upset Obi-Wan, though from the way his hands balled tightly around the fabric of his pants, it was almost certain that he had felt her distress. She could almost see his clever mind running in circles of self-deprecation for causing her stress.

She had seen far worse on Obi-Wan before, the most notable after the escape from Ordo that she was certain had nearly claimed his life, even though neither Jedi had said it was something to worry about. But it was still bad, long, oozing scratches running across his ribs and abs and dark bruising running down his body like spilt paint from each one. On his back was a deep, bloody gouge that was every bit as Satine's own wound, if not far worse, and on closer examination, several more marred his sides where he was dragged by the Death Watch soldier. She knelt before him, the boy refusing to look at her and shivering when she gently ran her fingers over the bruising, keeping clear of the bleeding open cuts, frowning when she saw them contaminated with dirt and granulated stone.

"Wait here," she said, running her hand along his jaw line, a shiver running up his back as she touched him, and Satine got up and grabbed his tunic from the stone and walked swiftly to the mouth of the cave and held the cloth out in the torrential rain. When she turned back inside, the Jedi was looking at her with a with a frown on his face, his intense gaze seeming to look right through her, and when she knelt before him again, Obi-Wan took her arm and turned her around, the Duchess looking over her shoulder and shivering when Obi-Wan ran his fingers down her back, the space between her shoulder blades tender when the Jedi touched it.
"You're bruised..." Obi-Wan said morosely, and Satine knocked her hand and quickly turned around, laying the wet cloth on the scratches on his chest.

"It must be from when that woman stepped on me," she muttered, gently dabbing at the wounds on her Jedi and carefully cleaning them until the scratches and gouges glistened pure red and pink, clear from any of the dirt and grime that had tainted them before. They said nothing as she tended to him, the Jedi occasionally wincing when the cloth dug a little too deep, his skin prickling in the places she touched him, and when she had finished, she sat back on her heels and smiled, her eyes stealing a quick glance at his bare torso and appreciating how strong he was beginning to look.

"We have the worst of luck, don't we?" she asked, breaking out into a bright smile when Obi-Wan shyly looked at her.

"Is the luck so bad?" he asked, and the Duchess laughed softly.

"Uh, chased out of another town," she said, counting on her fingers. "Almost killed by Jedi hunters, almost eaten by killer insects, stuck in another cave for the night. And it's raining."

"Maybe so..." Obi-Wan softly agreed. "But if we're going to be enduring all of that..." He shifted from side to side, his eyes cast at the ground as he tugged his braid. "Well...there's nobody I'd rather have at my side than you."

Satine could hear her heart pounding in her ears as she looked at him, her shy, sweet, beautiful Jedi protector, a faint, warm smile on his lips, his eyes respectfully averted, his perfect, toned body marked with scars and wounds he got in defense of her, his braid wrapped tightly around his fingers in that endearing nervous habit of his. His damp hair was plastered to his forehead, the short cut he sported when she had first met him gone, the golden strands grown to an appealing, attractive length long enough to thread her fingers through. Looking at him like this in the light of the fire was enough for her to forget how little she was wearing, and she scooted closer to him, feeling the boy's breath hitch as she laid a delicate hand on his chest.

She thought about her duty to Mandalore, to her suffering people, how they deserved her full attention and dedication, and would until the end of her days. She remembered her promise to Qui-Gon, her assertion that Obi-Wan was a good Jedi, and he was, about how she had told the Master that he had nothing to worry about. She saw the dead of Clan Itera, felt each and every one of their wasted lives weigh heavily upon her, crushing her under the responsibility of seeing the hopes of the dead fulfilled, the monumental task of remaking Mandalore laid out before her, and looking upon it felt like eternity. Her life was not her own, born for the people of Mandalore to serve the people, to see them safely into a new world, and with so many dead clinging to her soul, it took more than she had within her just to stay afloat, her entire being dedicated to her people.

She decided, for once in her life, to not care about any of it and do something for herself. Even if it was just this once, even if she never did a single thing for anything but Mandalore for the rest of her days, even if she threw a wrench into what was a beautiful friendship in her selfishness, she decided it was worth it if she could have just this moment. He heart pounding wildly, she rose to her knees, her weight supported by the hand on Obi-Wan's chest as she leaned in and lightly pressed her lips to his.

It was a chaste kiss, and she could feel Obi-Wan suck in a sharp breath just before their lips touched, his chest still as he held his breath the short time they were connected, and after a moment, Satine pulled away, her face burning in embarrassment and hardly able to believe how bold, how foolish she had been. But she held by it, refusing to look away from the Jedi, committed to facing the consequence of her action because she had no regrets for her first kiss being with her Jedi protector, nor did she regret stealing what she knew was his first as well.
Obi-Wan looked stunned, the boy completely still, his eyes wide and his breath held as he looked at her. Even his heart had seemed to stop beating, and for a moment, Satine had thought she had perhaps broken the poor, repressed Jedi, but still, she refused to look away from the stunned boy, simply waiting for him to do something, anything. In an instant, something seemed to break behind those blue eyes, his carefully crafted walls he hid behind crumbling to dust, allowing passion and desire and longing to shine through with such intensity that Satine could almost not breathe herself. Under her hand, Satine could feel the Jedi's heart suddenly jump, beating so fast it nearly hummed, and a desperate, keening whimper escaped his throat as he leaned in and kissed her, as swift and as chaste as the one she had given him. For just a moment, they looked at each other as their skin turned fierce red, and the next time they leaned in, they met halfway.

The kisses they shared were fast, almost frantic, becoming longer and deeper as they began to relax and as hands slowly began to wander, caressing cheeks and necks and sliding into fine hair damp from the rain. When Obi-Wan's hand lightly brushed Satine's hip and gently settled upon it, a soft moan from the girl saw her climbing into his lap, her legs straddling his hips as his arm snaked around her waist and drew her closer. Lips slowly parted underneath the movements of the other, and while neither teen had any idea what they were doing, the quickly figured out which touches made the other gasp or squirm or moan, and when Satine darted her tongue out between her teeth, the compliant Jedi melted into her and dutifully parted his mouth to allow her access. They only parted occasionally to breathe, coming together again quickly after with a chorus of soft whimpers and moans as they clung together, almost afraid that were they to stop, the moment would be over, and they would return to what they were before, when everything was about the mission, when they were dutiful Duchess and steadfast Jedi.

Eventually they did part, their eyes closed and their foreheads pressed together as they struggled to catch their breath, they hands in hair and holding hips and gently stroking bare skin, the two keenly aware of how little clothing existed between them. Slowly, Satine opened her eyes, worried she would find shame or regret on Obi-Wan's face, only to find the shattered look of desperate, innocent longing, a look she had never seen from anyone. She knew passion and desire and lust, all things every Mandalorian knew well, and that was certainly present within her Jedi, but it was buried under something far more pure and meaningful. She couldn't help but wonder how long Obi-Wan had felt this way, how long he kept this bottled up inside him with the intention of never letting it see light, and if it had been as long as she had kept her own feelings secret.

Satine meant to push away from him, to give herself distance to catch her breath, to allow her heart to slow before it burst, to let the warm churning of desire deep inside her abate, but when she moved to press back on his chest, she found herself slipping her arm around his neck, a whimper in her throat as she kissed him again, deeper and more insistent this time than she had before. Obi-Wan eagerly responded, drawing her closer with a deep moan that reverberated in his chest through the Duchess and sent waves of heat right to the core of her. They quickly lost themselves in each other, surrendering to the feelings between them that had been kept tightly contained for so long, and with the dam broken, there was no stopping the flood they found themselves caught in.

They only patted when each felt the arousal of the other, Obi-Wan through the blazing hot pulse of carnal pleasure through the Force, and Satine through the hard, straining bulge in the Jedi's pants pressing against her. With the return of reality came their inhibitions, their shyness and their forgotten modesty, nervousness overtaking the drive for intimacy that their raging hormones demanded, and Obi-Wan's arm slowly released the hold on her waist, Satine slowly, almost reluctantly sliding off his lap. They quickly turned their backs on each other, each taking deep, slow breaths as they attempted to force their bodies to comply with the demand for calm, and they reached behind each other, quickly finding the other's hand, and gently grabbing on, a comforting, understanding gesture meant to assure the other that they weren't alone.
Slowly, the two teenagers calmed, their ragged breathing slowed to shuddering breaths, their arousal faded to burning, pleasurable memory, though they could still feel the burn of the other’s touch upon their lips and bare skin. Under control once again, their hands tightly clasped together, the Duchess and the Jedi turned to face the other, neither certain of what to say or how to say it, the two teens staring awkwardly at the ground as they slowly realized the importance of the responsibilities resting on them, the weight of what they had done, and the line they had so carelessly crossed.

"Satine..." Obi-Wan started, swallowing hard and his hand tightening around hers. "We-

"I don't care!" the Duchess said firmly, far stronger than she knew she felt, her hand coming to rest on Obi-Wan's cheek and urging the Jedi to meet her gaze. "Come what may, I don't care." She swallowed hard, averted her eyes for a moment before looking back at him. "D-do you?"

"...no..." Obi-Wan whispered breathlessly, a faint, adoring smile on his lips, and together, the two teenagers laid down next to each other by the fire, their fingers interlocking and their foreheads gently pressed together, though they were careful not to allow their bodies to touch, delighted in the warmth of emotions between them but fearful of taking it further. It didn't take long before exhaustion and the warmth of the fire and the shared connectedness between them lulled Obi-Wan and Satine into a deep, restful sleep.

Reflection.

_There has been a change in the Force. I can feel it. Right now, at this very moment, something has changed within my student. I've tried reaching out to him, but he is closed off to me. Sleeping, maybe, but there's something more, something just out of reach that I can't quite..._

_I know exactly what it is, of course. I'd have to be blind not to see it. Obi-Wan must think he is so clever in hiding it, but I can see the deep affection he holds for Satine, and with the Duchess' confession this morning, it was only a matter of time before something like this happened. Really, the moment we set foot on Mandalore, something like this was bound to happen. It had to. As I told the Duchess, this situation is emotionally very difficult, and bonding so closely with someone will lead to this sort of thing. It's only natural that these feelings would develop. Great trust breeds great love, and Obi-Wan and Satine exhibit both for each other, and have for some time. Despite my warnings, despite their responsibilities, despite the knowledge that as soon as this mission was over, they must part...

_Honestly, what was the Council thinking?! Sending an anxious, uncertain, teenage Padawan into a high-stress situation like war to guard a beautiful, scared, lonely girl his age. This is cruel and brainless, even for them. I don't understand. Did they believe that the example of my own love and loss for Tahl would prove to be a sufficient deterrent for my student? Did they think my own brush with the Dark Side would scare Obi-Wan away from these feelings forever? Do they think him so strong and so dedicated that he could resist the sway of love when a beautiful woman laid it at his feet? He is not a droid. My Obi-Wan is a kind, compassionate, empathetic boy who feels deeply for those around him. Furthermore, he is a teenager! What teenager in the history of the Jedi Order has been a perfect, shining example of what a Jedi Knight should be?!_

_Sweet Force, what am I supposed to do? I know what's expected of me. Remind Obi-Wan of his duties to the Order, tell him that he is not to become attached, remind him that such a thing can never be, that he and Satine are on different paths that only intersect now and never will again once we depart. I'm supposed to remind him about the dangers of love, about how its loss can so quickly lead to darkness. I'm supposed to help him master his feelings and release them into the Force, so he can learn to feel them as a transient state of mind, one that visits him briefly and then vanishes in the next moment._
But I remember what it felt like to be in love. I remember how strong Tahl made me, how complete I was in those few, precious moments we knew how much we meant to each other. And even with how it ended, even knowing how far I fell, I cannot find it within myself to regret it, not for a single moment. Even knowing the outcome, I would do it again, were I given the chance. What we had was fleeting and beautiful, a lifetime of friendship that grew into love over time, and no matter how terribly it ended, nothing can take away all the good that came from having known and loved her.

I confess, I am still uneasy about this. I wish to spare Obi-Wan any pain I can, and the outcome of this romance is already predetermined to end with the war. Nothing can change that, and nothing will stop it from hurting, and my Obi-Wan is a gentle soul. I want to protect him when I can, and the best way to protect him now is to make certain he keeps his emotions in check. But then...

Is this not the will of the Force? I know the idiots of the Council sent us here under the assumption that my teenage student would somehow not fall in love with a hot teenage Mandalorian, but now that we are here, could this be the workings of the Force? Could this be a test of his dedication to the Jedi? Could this be a way to expand his horizons, to make him more understanding by experiencing the depth of emotions that those he is meant to protect feel? A Jedi cannot truly be compassionate if they do not understand the feelings that run strong through life itself. Really, distancing ourselves from them may be a fallacy. Our strength must lie not in our ability to remain passionless, but in our ability to feel deeply and let go when the time is right. Perhaps this is the lesson that Obi-Wan is meant to take away from his time here. Perhaps this will be what transforms him from boy to man. Perhaps it isn't war that will shape him, but love.

So help me, though, if I catch the two of them together, that boy is going to hear about it, and I will be looking. If that secretive little shit thinks he can hide things of this importance from me, he has another thing coming. I am, of course, obligated to object to this, since I do object to it, but teenagers will be teenagers, and who am I to get in the way of the will of the Force. Or the will of hormones, as it were. Still, if I find them en flagrante delicto, the Force itself won't be able to save that boy. Dooku wasn't easy on me, and I see no reason why I should be easy on him. The lesson must be taught. If you're going to break the Code, be kriffing smart about it.

I sincerely hope it's not as bad as I fear. Please, Obi-Wan, make good choices.
Alright! Done it! Now, I'm probably going to up the rating on this fic pretty soon. You guys seem to want things to get heated, and I'm starting to write it. And by soon, I mean now. Congratulations you guys, this fic is now M and all bets are off. Yikes. Hooray for adult content! Hooray!

"You lied to me, Obi-Wan."

The silence of the brisk, clear morning was broken by the pleasant, musical Mando'a of Mandalore's Duchess, and the sudden nose broke the Jedi's focus, the teen dropping his lightsaber in surprise and he reflexively reached out to grab it, only for his fingers to pass through the blue plasma blade. With a yelp, he quickly drew his hand back, clutching it to his chest as the hilt clattered to the hard, dusty ground, the weapon hissing off as it fell, and Obi-Wan quickly looked over to the softly laughing Satine as she sauntered over.

The early morning sun broke put over the horizon, filtered through Draboon's distant, massive trees and the persistent dust that hung in the air, making the Duchess' pale hair almost seem to glow as it draped over her shoulder. She wore Obi-Wan's thin white tunic, now stained tan by dust and dirt, the garment cinched at the waist with a length of corded rope, the pants she wore cut at the knee when the full length became both restrictive and far too hot in the blazing heat of the planet's long days. Despite the dirt and the heat and the plainness of her clothing, Satine looked radiant, so unspeakably beautiful that the Padawan had to avert his eyes, as he found he often had to do with the Duchess now that things between them had... changed.

It had been two days since that night in the cave when they had made clear in no uncertain terms that the attraction between them had become something much, much more, something beyond their constant bickering, beyond their casual flirtation, beyond their completely unnecessary Mando'a lessons. Regardless of the circumstances, they found themselves simply wanting to be near each other, and they found any excuse they could to do just that. Flirting and fighting and the mission all made that possible, but after that night, they found themselves unable to hide behind their thinly veiled excuses.

They awoke that morning and said nothing of the night before, quietly shared breakfast and kept their eyes averted, almost afraid that eye contact would force them to confront what had happened the night before, what they had become to each other, that they were more than just Duchess and Jedi, protector and charge, far more than friends. They weren't ready to decide what they were to each other, what it meant for them to be together, what they were sacrificing to be so. It was all too frightening, too uncertain, too much for them to deal with in addition to the fight for their lives they faced daily. So they said nothing, got ready in silence, and were out just as the sun was rising, running across the sparse and dusty forest toward the west, just as they were instructed.

They said little to each other, easily slipping back into their roles of royalty and defender as they spent the day running from cover to cover, stopping only when the sun began to set and they had found proper cover. There was no sign of Qui-Gon, though Obi-Wan could sense his presence, his frustration, his struggle as he fought, keeping to the mines and scouting for information, allies, anything that could be of use as he ran after his apprentice. Though the Master wasn't seen, his
presence could be felt, and Obi-Wan knew that they encountered no resistance, no hunters, no Death Watch because Qui-Gon was drawing attention to himself, allowing the teenagers to cross the land for Clan Sharratt with only the wilderness to impede them.

The evenings found them silent and alone by the fire as they ate the meager berries and nuts they could scavenge, and despite their hesitation and fear and reluctance, each night they found themselves in each other's arms, the Duchess' hands running over the Jedi's sunburned shoulders as they kissed, gentle and careful and beautiful, just like the boy that held her. Like the first time, they steadily grew more and more passionate as they drew closer, soft gasps and desperate moans in their throats spurring them onwards, though their passion was more a carefully stoked flame than the raging blaze of before as they touched and caressed, hands wandering as they hesitantly explored each other. They never got beyond long fingers tracing the strong, lean muscles of the Jedi's stomach, or callused palms stroking the Duchess' thin, curved waist before the gentle scraping of fingernails against sensitive skin or an accidental brush just too low would send them plummeting into maddening arousal and they would be forced to separate, the intensity frightening to the two teens back into their hesitation.

For two days, they went on like this, two days of silence punctuated only by the soft moans and breathless gasps as they drew closer and more curious, throwing caution to the wind in the absence of the Jedi Master, their duty and their responsibilities seeming so far away in the dark of night. Predictably, though no less embarrassingly, Obi-Wan had awoken early that morning, far before the sun began to light the sky in a flushed, panting state, his body heightened with arousal from the dreams that plagued him of bare, exposed pale skin and the moaning of his beautiful Duchess, the vision of her too real, the feel of her beneath him as he thrust within her too vivid. When he was pulled into consciousness by the aching need deep within him, it took a moment for the dazed, aroused boy to understand why Satine lay so far away from him, and it took everything within him to resist the urge to crawl over to her and lean above her as he finished himself off deep inside the girl. With his sense returned, Obi-Wan felt a deep, burning need to purge the lust from his blood as shame and embarrassment asserted themselves, and with as much willpower as he could muster, he left the cave to sink himself into his long overdue studies, his lightsaber in hand as he walked through the katas he was in desperate need of practicing. Even then, the memory of his dreams seemed to haunt him, so real, so visceral were they that he thought they may actually be visions, a thing that both repulsed him and made him yearn to see them fulfilled. He did everything he could to forget the feel of the Duchess around him and before long, the meditative state he found himself in had cleared his body and mind, allowing him to focus on the Force and the blade in his hand.

Which is exactly how Satine found him hours later, and of all the things she could have said to break their two day silence, she said that.

"E-excuse me?" Obi-Wan gasped, clutching his hand and feeling the red welt already forming from the touch of the low powered blade. He finally made eye contact with her, his gaze locking with a crystal clear blue he couldn't look away from, his heart seeping to pound in his throat as she sauntered closer to him, the boy suddenly hyper-aware of his shirtless, sunburned chest and how perfectly his tunic clung to the girl's curves and lines.

It was all terribly unfair.

"You lied to me..." Satine said again, slower this time as she reached out and dragged a long finger lightly down his chest, the feeling of it against his sensitive, sunburned skin making him shiver. "You said that you didn't dance." The single finger became a full hand as she pressed her palm against his heart, a slight, excited smile on her lips when she felt how hard it was beating. "But I've been watching you for a little while now, and your work with a lightsaber is dancing."
"Don't be ridiculous, no it isn't!" Obi-Wan protested, a deep flush on his cheeks that came from more than just the harsh touch of the sun on his fair skin. He broke eye contact with the lovely girl as he knelt down to pick his lightsaber off the ground, his fingers running over the smooth, chrome hilt just to give him something to look at other than the object of his affections. "You should hate everything about it, it's combat practice, it's a sort of moving meditation to bring us closer to the Force so that we might...what, why are you staring at me like that?" he asked cautiously when a sly, triumphant expression lit up the Duchess face, the girl reaching up to run the Padawan's braid through her fingers.

"Your footwork is graceful, your blade work beautiful, instead of music, you listen to the Force to guide your movements..." When the Jedi modestly looked away, Satine cupped his cheek, her thumb running along his jaw line, and with a soft, desperate whimper, Obi-Wan leaned in to her touch. "My sweet Jedi, watching you is like looking at art. Believe what you will, but you are...dancing," she said playfully, tapping his nose. "And I want you to teach me."

Obi-Wan stared at her for a moment, unable to find his voice or any words, hopelessly distracted by the finger twining around his braid, the light brush of her body against his, her sun-flushed cheeks, the breathtaking beauty of her eyes as they caught the morning light. She waited patiently, and eventually Obi-Wan managed to squeak, "You want me to teach you how to use a lightsaber?"

"N-not how to fight!" Satine quickly corrected. "Just...just the motions."

"...for dancing," Obi-Wan slowly drawled, and the girl flushed and nodded, staring at the lightsaber in his hand and very, very slowly took it from him.

"Just...try it again but without the lightsaber and you'll see what I mean," Satine pleaded, the saber hilt clutched tightly in her hands, her eyes wide and bright, and the Jedi didn't stand a chance. With a sigh, he slowly backed away from her and assumed the ready stance, his eyes closed as he centered his focus.

"Just so you know, I feel very foolish," Obi-Wan announced before he took a deep breath and did as the Duchess asked, his movements slow, graceful and precise as he lost himself in the familiar steps, the kata without his blade no different than if ha had it held in his hands, and before long, he fell into smooth, even movements, flowing from one motion to the other with instinctive, practiced steps, his open hand mimicking his lost blade. A soft shuffling beside him drew him out of the moment, his foot mis-stepping slightly, and he hissed in irritation, could feel his chest tighten with the familiar disappointment of his perfectionistic inclination, and when he opened his eyes, he forgot all about his annoyance with himself when he saw Satine beside him, her brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to follow along with the Jedi.

"This is much harder than it looks..." Satine muttered when a wide grin spread across Obi-Wan's face, her eyes cast toward the ground when she felt her cheeks burning under his gaze, and she quickly looked up, her body tensing when she felt the Jedi behind her, his hands gently clasping hers and his chest pressed lightly against her back. It was all over for her when he pressed his lips against her neck, her knees feeling weak as she leaned her weight back against him.

"We're avoiding what keeps happening between us..." Obi-Wan said softly, shivering as he felt the girl move against him. "I know we have our duties, I know we are both forbidden from this but I...can't deny that I have feelings for you."

"What kind of feelings..." Satine reflexively asked, shivering when she felt the boy's uneven breath on her neck.

"I don't know, I've never felt this way before..." Obi-Wan said shyly. "I thought maybe we could
"I'd like that," Satine sighed as she leaned her head back, the Jedi very quickly taking the hint and pressing his lips against hers.

"We can't tell my Master," Obi-Wan whispered as they parted.

"We can't tell anyone," Satine quickly responded. "If the wrong people found out what you meant to me...gods, Obi-Wan, I don't even want to think about what they'd do to you just to hurt me."

"I won't let them..." the Jedi quietly reassured her. "It's alright. This can be our secret."

"Even if nobody ever finds out, this cannot last," Satine whispered. "When this war is over, you and I must part ways." She swallowed hard, forcing back the sudden lump in her throat. "My life will belong to Mandalore, and yours to the Jedi. There's no escaping that."

"...I know." He pulled her closer and breathed deeply, the floral scent of her hair invading his senses, a welcome respite from the humid heat and dust of Draboon's air. "My Master is always going on about trusting your feelings, and my studies of the Force constantly remind me that everything is transient, all things stemming from the Force must one day return to it." He quickly kissed her neck again. "All the more reason to treasure our time together, yes?"

"I was about to say the same thing," Satine said with a bright, easy smile before she paused, her nose wrinkling as a thought crossed her mind. "Well, not exactly the same. Oyacyir guror gar kelir ash'amur nakar'tuur."

"Live like you will die tomorrow," Obi-Wan sighed. "You know, there's something starkly beautiful about your people, Satine."

"I know..." she said grimly, her fingers tightening around the lightsaber despite the comforting touch of the Jedi's hands upon hers. "All the more reason we must end this war. We need to preserve what life we can."

"Yes..." Obi-Wan pressed his lips to the Duchess' neck, laying languid kisses on her soft, pale skin until the tension left her, the girl relaxing against her with a soft, breathless moan, and when he felt her body relax completely, his hands moved over hers and activated the lightsaber, the weapon hissing on and thrumming in the air, her eyes focused on the brilliant blue glow. "I fear I'm not so good a teacher as you," the Jedi said softly, moving her hands to assume the ready position for the most basic of the lightsaber katas. "But I shall do my best. We'll move slowly, try your best to move with me."

"You know," Satine said slyly, looking back at the focused Jedi behind her, "when I imagined myself moving together with you, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind." Grinning as the Jedi seemed to choke on the very air he was breathing, Satine leaned up, kissed the pit of his neck, and slowly began following his motions when he had recovered his senses, allowing him to move her arms and the blade she held in slow, sweeping motions while she shifted her weight and moved his feet as he did. It didn't take her long to learn the movements, the graceful, elegant steps coming easily to her, and before long, Obi-Wan released her, took a step away and preformed the motions beside her, the two teens moving in nearly perfect unison as they walked through the kata.

They quickly became lost in the graceful motions, slowly moving faster as they became more comfortable with both the steps and each other. Obi-Wan watched her, his eyes fixed on the glowing blade, her light, graceful step, the elegant flicks of her wrist, far too practiced, too perfect to be the work of someone unfamiliar with a blade. She was brought up in a warrior culture, was a devastatingly good shot made even more impressive by the accuracy with which she shot only
non-vital points on the body. Of course she had training with other weapons, and Obi-Wan wondered exactly how good she was with a blade. It was unlikely he'd ever find out, but she was beautiful with his lightsaber in his hand, just as she was beautiful in everything she did.

The subtle shift in the Force alerted him to the presence he suddenly felt drawing swiftly closer to them, worn and irritated and on high alert, and Obi-Wan couldn't help but smile, stopping his own motions as he watched Satine continue, the girl lost within herself and the gentle thrum of the blade in her hand, a personal and private thing that he was fortunate enough to be a part of. It took her a moment to realize her partner had stopped and was staring, an adoring look on his face as he followed her steps, and without stopping, she gently smiled at him.

"You see, Obi?" her tone light and playful as she swept the saber in a spiraling circle around her. "Dancing."

"Perhaps when you do it," Obi-Wan said gently. "I fear it isn't quite so artful when I do it, I'm not so sure-footed as you."

"Absolute nonsense, you just don't see yourself."

"Thank the Force for that, I may die of shame."

"Is that why you stopped, my Jedi?" Satine asked, spinning the blade around her hand, the weapon blurring in the air ever so slightly, and Kenobi shook his head.

"No. I sense Qui-Gon. He's on the way."

"Or he's already arrived," the deep, out of breath voice said, and both teens swiftly looked up to the rocky overhang to the entrance of their cave to see Qui-Gon, the Jedi Master bare chested, his robes hanging unceremoniously around his waist, his shoulders sunburned and his entire body covered in dust. He slid off his perch and quickly disappeared into the cave, emerging a moment later with Obi-Wan's canteen, the Jedi swiftly draining the container and wiping his cracked, dry lips. "I miss Zanbar..." Qui-Gon muttered. "At least Zanbar had lots of water."

"Lots of swamp water, Master," Obi-Wan quietly corrected.

"Yes, well, swamp water came from fresh water at some point," the Master said with a roll of his eyes. "And I remember making several camps beside fresh pools and streams." The Jedi wiped the sweat off his forehead, finally taking a look at the two teens, thin and sunburnt and dusty, the Padawan sporting several large gashes and bruises that were in dire need of healing. He laid a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder and despite the boy's wriggling, hovered his palm over the wounds and channeled the Force through him, the red, throbbing wound immediately responding to his touch. "What are you up to?" he asked, indicating with his head to the lightsaber in Satine's hands, and with a gasp, she shut the weapon off.

"Satine showed an interest in learning the footwork involved in wielding a lightsaber," Obi-Wan calmly explained. "Since she has been so generous in instructing me in Mando'a, I thought I'd return the favor." He grabbed Qui-Gon's hand, hissing when the Master's fingers brushed the healing wound in his side, and he pointed to the Duchess. "Our first night we had some trouble with venom-mites and Death Watch. Satine was wounded."

"I am fine," the Duchess insisted. "Your student foolishly wasted all our healing supplies while he was treating it!"

"The wound required more than I had on hand, Master."

"It most certainly did not!"
"Well, it is lovely to see your bickering has endured this trial of ours," Qui-Gon drawled, rolling his eyes and taking his hands off his student. "Let me see the injury, Satine." With a groan and a quick glare toward Obi-Wan, Satine pulled the tunic through the loosely tied rope and showed the Jedi the bandaged wound, Qui-Gon kneeling to look closely at Obi-Wan's handiwork.

"I was beginning to get worried about you, Master," Obi-Wan said as he watched Qui-Gon pass a healing hand over Satine's bandages. "Did you have a lot of trouble?"

"More than I like, and far more than I expected," the Master muttered. "I don't know if Death Watch is working with the Sharratts or not, but they certainly aren't doing anything to get them off the planet." He sighed and stood, patting Satine on the shoulder. "You did a fine job tending to that, Obi-Wan. How were you injured, Duchess?"

Satine thrust her fists on her hips and shot Obi-Wan a pointed look. "He dropped me!"

"I beg your pardon, Duchess, I saved your life!"

"Like some low class brute!" the Duchess said, her nose in the air. "I suppose I can't expect anything more from someone lowborn, but I am royalty!"

"A royal pain in the ass..." Obi-Wan muttered, and with a gasp, Satine threw his lightsaber at him, the Padawan easily catching it, which only served to make the Duchess more angry.

"You brute! You may be used to behaving like an animal, but you can at least try to give me the treatment I deserve!"

"Two days on the run from the Death Watch and I return to this?" Qui-Gon said in disbelief as he rubbed his temples to stave off a quickly growing headache. "Sweet Force, I'd rather deal with the Death Watch!" The moment he said it, the three of them winced, a soft, high-pitched buzz in the air quickly becoming a loud screech as specks in the sky formed into ships that were very obviously racing toward them.

"Speak of the Death Watch and they will appear..." Satine muttered, quickly moving between her protectors as their lightsabers flew to their hands.

"Honestly, Master, you should know better than to say things like that," Obi-Wan said as they crouched down beside one of the trees that made the thinly forested woods, a soft smile touching lips when he felt Satine grasp his arm.

"I am so sick of this..." Qui-Gon growled, his eyes focused on the nearby cave. "Alright, as soon as they pass, we take shelter inside the cave. With any luck, this is just a flyby and they didn't track me here, so-"

"There you are, you Jedi scum!" Qui-Gon hung his head with a heavy sigh, his lightsaber igniting in his hand when five Death Watch soldiers appeared over the mouth of the cave. "Alright, as soon as they pass, we take shelter inside the cave. With any luck, this is just a flyby and they didn't track me here, so-"

"Alright, forget the cave," the Master said between clenched teeth, his hand balling into a fist by his side and pushing back with the Force, sending the five soldiers crashing against the side of the hill just as they began to jump down. "Obi-Wan, take Satine and run! Go!"

The Padawan didn't need to be told twice. Grabbing the Duchess' hand, Obi-Wan took off running as fast as he could, the girl easily keeping pace beside him, the two conditioned from months and months of hard running in harsh climates allowing them to hit full sprint quickly and maintain it. They didn't get far before the ships above swooped in, fast and low as their bellies opened and released soldiers with jetpacks, mercenaries with speeders, and three large, fully
armed tanks, cutting off their escape on all three sides, leaving them only the option to run back from where they came when the Death Watch began lobbing grenades, opting for a weapon the Jedi could not easily deflect.

Lightsaber held out before him, Obi-Wan stood defensively before Satine as he was forced back to Qui-Gon's side, his eyes quickly scoping out the scene before him, looking for a way through the quickly closing defensive line, but there was nothing. Before long, they were surrounded, standing in the middle of a wide ring of Death Watch soldiers, bounty hunters, mercenaries and a dozen ground vehicles, most of which could run them down were they somehow to miraculously escape. Perhaps without the Duchess to protect, the Jedi could have fought their way out, could have jumped the line and managed to run away, but with their decidedly frightened charge, the risk was too great.

They slowly closed in, their weapons primed and ready, but not a single one shooting, each of them waiting for a word or a command to take out the Jedi when the risk to the highly valuable Duchess wasn't as great. The line of soldiers stopped advancing when one jumpy bounty hunter fired his rifle, the kickback on the powerful weapon knocking him off balance just long enough for Obi-Wan to grab the weapon with the Force and pull it out of his hands while Qui-Gon expertly deflected the fired bolt, sending the green energy speeding back to pierce right through the creature's head. The rifle was handed to the Duchess, and before the bounty hunter's body hit the ground, the girl's deft fingers had adjusted the weapon to her specifications and primed it. Slowly, the solders backed up, giving the trio space when they saw their valuable target clearly had considerable skill with weapons, despite her non-violent policy.

One of the massive tanks before them lowered to the ground with a loud hiss, steam escaping through its lower vents as it settled and the hatch opened, two decorated Mandalorian warriors stepping out. The first was a large, intimidating man in Death Watch's black and blue, his helmet crested with a fringe and the short cape hanging off his shoulder denoting his rank. The man that followed was much smaller than the intimidating Death Watch commander, clad in ornate purple and gold armor and wearing no helmet, the man was young, no more than twenty five, his long, pale blond hair in a loose braid that fell over his shoulder, the straight, silken strands the exact shade of Satine's that was so highly prized on Mandalore. Unlike the heavily armed Death Watch commander, this man carried no weapons and was quickly flanked by two bodyguards wearing the same purple and gold he did, though theirs was more practical and less ornate.

"Well I'll be damned..." the young man drawled in a smooth, lazy lit. "If it isn't the Duchess of Mandalore." He laughed almost pleasantly when Satine pointed her weapon right at him, the man hitting the Death Watch commander on the chest. "Seems I owe you money. To think that Duchess Satine Kryze is here. Really, actually here. I thought you were just being paranoid, but damn."

"Perhaps in the future, the fools of your clan will listen when the Death Watch speaks," the commander growled, stepping away from the man and moving forward, motioning for his men to do the same, and nearly thirty warriors stepped forward, weapons raised and ready. "Kill the Jedi, but remember, Vizsla wants the Duchess alive!"

"So much for Clan Sharratt..." Satine said, raising her weapon and looking through the sight, her hands steady on the trigger. "Please, try to kill as few of them as possible."

"You heard the lady," Qui-Gon said, his saber raised and ready. "There are far more than we can handle. Play defensive, Obi-Wan, no heroics."

"Oh please, when have I ever been accused of heroics..." the Padawan said with a roll of his eyes, watching as the Death Watch slowly stepped forward, careful and cautious and keenly aware of how difficult these Jedi were to kill.
"Certainly not when you dropped me..." Satine said pointedly, keeping her eyes focused through her scope, and when she had her shot, she pulled the trigger, the kickback of the rifle slamming hard against her shoulder as the green bolt left the barrel and hit the Death Watch commander right in the head, the concussive shot knocking him unconscious to the ground. That one shot was enough to trigger every other soldier to start firing, sending streaks of red and green through the air as the Death Watch surrounding them shot toward the center. The Jedi quickly dropped low, their bodies shielding the Duchess, and the shots flew over their heads, several of the Death Watch going down after being shot by the soldier opposite them, and without their commander to take charge, it was enough to create chaos.

That brief moment of hesitation and uncertainty was all Qui-Gon needed to grab the Force and pull their legs out from under them, the soldiers quickly collapsing to the ground and giving the Jedi a chance to look for a way to escape. He found...nothing. The circle of tanks and mercenaries hadn't moved, the men taking cover behind large, thick shields, encircling them in an iron wall. It was...odd. The Death Watch was fighting, but they constituted only a fraction of the force. Perhaps it was a tactic, a strategy to keep their targets from escaping in a much more confusing battle. Perhaps they would enter the fray were the Death Watch to fail. Perhaps they simply had faith that the Death Watch could kill a teenager and an old man, but no matter the reason, very few were actually fighting.

He looked back at the teenagers, Obi-Wan standing protectively over Satine, his lightsaber weaving a colored shield around them as Satine crouched low to the ground and rapidly fired at the soldiers, nearly every one of her shots hitting its mark. The system they were inadvertently developing was working terribly well, and Qui-Gon rushed back to the teenagers, tossed his lightsaber to the defensive Obi-Wan, and crouching beside Satine. A flurry of green and blue light surrounded them from the blades in the athletic Padawan's hand, and Qui-Gon focused solely on the Force, grabbing soldiers and pulling them close or pushing them back, the Duchess quickly shooting them with the concussive shots when they were off-balance or on the ground.

Despite the perfect teamwork they developed, it took some time to take the Death Watch down, the group having to go back and deal with unconscious soldiers as they slowly came to, and the occasional bounty hunter that jumped the iron shields to make a go at collecting on the hefty bounty that sat on their heads. None were successful, and by the time the blaster fire stopped and the dust settled, the sun rising in the sky and beating down upon their already burnt and sweat-slicked skin, nearly fifty bodies, both dead and unconscious, lay scattered about the ring formed by the mercenaries. Nobody moved, the thrum of the lightsabers and the hum of the tank's engines filling the air, and when the man in purple and gold armor stepped out of the safety of his tank, the Duchess' rifle was promptly trained on him, her finger hovering over the trigger and waiting for a reason to shoot him.

"Oh!" the man said almost mockingly, his hands lazily slapping his cheeks in a show of surprise. "Oh no, what happened..." he drawled, his voice almost monotone and most certainly laced with sarcasm. "You took out the Death Watch! Oh, dear me, what ever shall I do..." He flicked his braid over his shoulder and pointed to the tank behind him. "Let's just make things easy, shall we, Duchess?" he drawled lazily. "All three of you get in the tank, and we won't kill your Jedi." When none of them moved, the man rolled his eyes. "Perhaps we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I'm Jakal Sharratt, and you will get in my tank so we can take you to my fortress. We have ten more Death Watch there who would love to meet you." A crooked smile touched his lips as he looked at the trio, his bright green eyes glittering mischievously. "Understand?"

Satine's hands tightened around her weapon as she rose, glaring down the sights at the man before her. "You can't collect the bounty on the Jedi if they are alive," she said between clenched teeth. "I'm not an idiot, I know what their deaths are worth and I will not be complicit in leading them to
their execution!"

"Oh, you poor fool..." Jakal said with a shake of his head. "My dear, I am of Clan Sharratt. We are the single wealthiest clan in all of the Mandalore sector, do you really think Vizsla's offer of spare change will sway us to kill their competition?" This time, Satine lowered her weapon slightly, the barrel pointed at the ground but ready to be aimed at a moment's notice.

"I don't understand..." she said softly. "You make it sound like you're my allies, but you say the Death Watch is at your fortress."

"They are..." he said bitterly. "Uninvited guests, if you will. As to an alliance between us, Duchess, I fear that falls to my sister, Katra. She's head of the clan, since our mother was killed." He smiled brightly. "By the Death Watch, as it so happens. She was tighter with our money than my dear sister is."

"Is Death Watch occupying Draboon?" Satine asked softly, concern in her voice as she charged down the rifle, though Obi-Wan did not deactivate the sabers. "Are they trying to force you to fund their war effort, is that it?!"

"As I said, Duchess..." Jakal drawled. "Get in the tank." With a look at her Jedi, Satine watched closely as Qui-Gon silently assessed the man before her, the army surrounding them, the impossibility of the situation were they to decide to become hostile, and feeling the tug of the Force, the Master nodded, his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder as he took back his lightsaber and switched it off, the Padawan nervously following his example. Without another word, Satine, flanked by her Jedi guard, entered the tank, Jakal ordering his men to take the unconscious Death Watch commander captive. Leaving the remainder of the injured and unconscious Death Watch in the care of a particularly hostile group of mercenary soldiers, the man followed the Duchess and the Jedi inside the tank, the hatch hissing closed as he stepped inside.

As soon as the tank shuddered, its repulsors powering on as it was lifted off the ground, Jakal sighed and sat down in one of the restraining seats along the wall, his eyes running over the trio in the seats opposite him, the stern expression on the older Jedi, the nervous unease on the younger as his fingers wound around the braid that hung behind his ear, and the curious look in the Duchess' eyes as she carefully examined every detail of his face and the way he carried himself.

"I apologize, Duchess..." Jakal said tiredly, waving his hand toward the hatch. "For that...mess."

"We could have been killed!" Satine snapped, her tone fierce and commanding, though the man seemed unaffected. "Threatening my Jedi and standing by doing nothing while we are attacked is a good way to foster ill will between us!"

"We remained neutral in the conflict, Duchess," Jakal said lazily, his gaze not once leaving hers. "Given your views, I thought you'd approve."

"If you're trying to insult me."

"I'm not," Jakal said quickly, raising his hands in surrender. "Apologies, Duchess. The truth of the matter is we simply lack the power to take a stand, be it for you or against, and my sister is not one to throw her support behind what she believes to be a lost cause."

"You have an army!" Satine said firmly. "Much greater than the strength of the Death Watch here on Draboon! If they are here against your will, why not oust them!"

"A paid army, Duchess," Jakal calmly explained. "You know as well as I that a mercenary's loyalty can be bought and sold, but at the first sign of real danger, there's a chance they will flee. 
There's only so far money goes when lives are on the line, and while we meet a high price, I've no doubt many of our men would rather live to spend their money than die trying to earn it." He shrugged, a small smile on his lips when he saw the Duchess' eyes widen slightly, her aggressive posture relaxing. "Clan Sharratt is a small clan, and we know what it means to cross the Death Watch. We know what happened to Clan Itera, and they had far greater numbers and were far more fierce than us. We aren't warriors anymore, Duchess," Jakal said, leaning in and his expression serious. "We are businessmen."

"So you yielded to the Death Watch when they arrived?" Satine asked, her tone softer now that she was beginning to understand the situation.

"We have...accepted them among us, yes," Jakal said thoughtfully. "When we heard they were here hunting you, we thought at first they were simply jumping at shadows, or using it as an excuse to station troops here while they petition for us to fund their war effort. But since you are here..." He smirked as he shrugged his shoulders and shrewdly eyed the Duchess and the Jedi. "Well, let's just say that additional opportunities have presented themselves."

"I can't see how this is good business," Satine said stiffly, crossing her arms over her chest as she leaned back in her seat. "By playing both sides, you only serve to make enemies of both."

"And who said I am playing both sides?" Jakal lightly drawled, laughing softly when Satine looked confused. "Duchess, I could very well be delivering a gift to the Death Watch command my sister is entertaining, and it may very well seem like that when I come with you three in my grasp." He quickly held up his hands when the lightsabers flew to the Jedi's hands, and the cabin sounded with the high whine of Satine's rifle priming. "However," he slowly said, "I just watched the three of you take down over thirty warriors of the Death Watch without any outside help at all. Such a thing may make my sister reevaluate where to place our bets. The war effects us all. We can't keep out of it forever, and we are of the mind to choose before the choice is made for us."

"So that's your plan?" Satine carefully ventured. "You mean to have us force the Death Watch off Draboon?"

"What I mean is of little consequence," Jakal drawled. "The decision lies with my sister."

"Sounds like quite a gamble," Satine said coldly. "Not just for you, but for me as well. You know, Clan Itera is gone because they harbored me. Don't think Death Watch won't do the same to you."

"Well, nothing has ever been gained without substantial risk!" Jakal said in his light, carefree tone, which only served to rankle the already tense Duchess. "Though I believe the Death Watch would appear much more threatening had they not been bested by a teenage girl at every turn."

"Does your sister believe that?" Satine asked, and for the first time, the man seemed unsure.

"I honestly don't know," he said quietly. "Katra has been under tight guard since our mother was killed, she and I haven't had the chance to discuss it..."

"There's something I don't understand," Qui-Gon said, drawing the attention of the two Mandalorians. "If they are after your wealth, what is stopping them from killing you and taking it? They have murdered for far less."

"Our funds are only accessible by us, Master Jedi," Jakal explained, his earlier unease gone and replaced with pride. "We are merchants, our wealth isn't kept in some vault in our fortress like so many other clans. We have secure accounts with the Intergalactic Banking Clan. We were to perish, our funds would simply sit untouched in accordance with our contracts."
"Which benefits nobody," Qui-Gon said, nodding. "I understand your situation."

"There really are no winners in this war, are there?" Satine asked bitterly, throwing her rifle on the ground in disgust, the girl's anger so seething and raw it seemed to hang tense in the air around her. Obi-Wan shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his deep connection to the girl causing her emotions to effect him much more keenly, and he shut his eyes and took deep, calming breaths, trying to push his emotions away to allow himself to focus clearly on the trials to come at the Sharratt fortress.

It wasn't working. Ever since their first kiss in the cave, every emotion she had pulled at him, every thought he had inevitably turned back to her, every fiber in his being ached and yearned to draw her close and keep her safe and protected and loved, and now was no different. This was exactly why Qui-Gon had cautioned against becoming too attached, it made it impossible to focus on the task. But then, Satine was his task, his mission, his very purpose for being here, wasn't she?

Even now when he thought of her, when he felt his feelings and attention drawn toward her, he could feel the Force, cool and clear, pulsing deeply inside of him. It was strong, the rush more powerful than anything he had ever felt, the slightest brush of his feelings for her lending him strength and purpose and focus that he had never known before. This wasn't the corrupting obsession he had feared, this was something pure and beautiful, something warm and gentle and all the stronger for it, and despite all the warnings and all his fears, he couldn't begin to imagine how such a thing could be wrong.

But then, that was the danger, wasn't it?

When Obi-Wan opened his eyes, his thoughts filled with nothing but Satine as he felt the Force gather within him, he saw Qui-Gon looking right at him. The Master had felt it as well, and Obi-Wan quickly looked away, could feel his face heating with embarrassment and shame as he tried to push his feelings to the back of his mind and hide behind the walls he had so carefully built, but the swift tug within him made him all too aware that he had been too late. Qui-Gon had sensed something. And while his Master didn't say anything then, Obi-Wan knew he was going to hear about it when they were safe. If they were safe. With any luck, Qui-Gon would simply see a boy focused on the mission instead of consumed by thoughts about the girl that was the mission, but when he thought about it like that...well, the distinction didn't seem too different.

They rode the rest of the way in silence, a tension in the air that seemed to come from everyone but the Jedi Master. Qui-Gon was calm, as always, his eyes closed in a light meditation as he communed with the Force for guidance, feeling its whims and pulls as he floated easily along with wherever the current brought him. But Obi-Wan sensed turmoil from the Mandalorians, which was in turn making him fraught with his own brand of tension. Jakal's posture seemed relaxed and at ease as he leaned back in his chair, but the Padawan could feel the uncertainty and the unease in the younger brother of Clan Sharratt's leader. There was familial longing in him, a pain of separation that Obi-Wan understood as a similar yearning for his peaceful home among his own brothers and sisters in the Jedi Temple. There was a sincerity in the extravagant young man that Obi-Wan did not expect, the boy honestly having no idea what to expect when he returned to his sister's side with Mandalore's most wanted.

Unlike their temporary host and possible captor, Satine felt no confusion, no indecision, no conflict. She felt strong, focused, a woman with a mission who knew exactly what she wanted and possessed the determination to see it through. She was clear and centered, a fierce, beautiful strength within her that she had lacked at the beginning of their time together when she was more emotional and more volatile, the changes in her seeming almost Jedi in the way she carried herself. And yet, at the very heart of her, Obi-Wan felt fear, a primal terror that gripped her heart deeply
and kept it pounding in her chest. She was afraid that her presence would cause a repeat of the tragedy of Clan Itera. She was afraid that her faith would lead her into yet another trap. She was afraid of the fight she knew was coming. But most of all, she was afraid for her two guardians, the Jedi who had so selflessly protected her through all her trials, led into yet another mess because of her own foolishness, her own naivete, her own stupidity, and she hated herself for it. She wasn’t afraid to die, and a part of her welcomed it, but to see her brave defenders, the old, wise Master and the sweet boy she cared so deeply for struck down in her name was more than she could bear.

The whole situation was pulling Obi-Wan thin. He was torn between attempting to calm himself in emulation of his Master, his feelings of pity for the young, lonely Jakal, the deep concern for his Duchess and the need to protect her born out of his love for her, yet another thing he was desperately trying to hide from Qui-Gon. This secrecy didn't sit well with him. These feelings didn't sit well with him, though there was nothing he could do to stop them from sinking deep within him. Despite his efforts to stop it, his affection for beautiful Satine had grown into what it was now, the pure and beautiful strength that he knew the Jedi would forbid him from, the same thing that had pushed Qui-Gon so close to the Dark Side, the thing he knew his Master feared so completely. He couldn't tell him. He couldn't, because even if one day he had to let go of Satine, he would never let go of the feelings he had for her. He didn't want to.

Obi-Wan didn't realize how tense he was until he felt Satine's gentle fingers brush the back of his hand, his braid wrapped so tightly around his fingers that they were turning purple from the lack of circulation. Immediately he could feel himself relax, the tense muscles in his bare shoulders easing under her touch and pushing his worries from his mind. Obi-Wan's eyes quickly looked to the woman at his side and found her looking at him almost expectantly, like he would somehow make everything better, like he had all the answers to her problems. He didn't, of course, but somehow, when her hand brushed his and the warm comfort of the other spread, both of their worries seemed to melt away into nothing, the bond between them strengthening, the tenderness of her caress a promise of things to come.

With a small smile tugging at the edge of his lips, Obi-Wan took her hand in his and held it, their fingers slowly intertwining. They could feel Qui-Gon and Jakal critically watching them, but neither could bring themselves to care. Soon enough, they would be forced to face the world again, and with it, the war and death and betrayal and the horrors of being chased by people willing to slaughter the innocent for credits or for nothing at all. They would take what comfort they could, even if it was little more than a touch in passing. It was enough, and when the time came to face the harsh realities of Mandalore, they would be ready, and they would be stronger for it.

The moment they stepped inside the ornate throne room of Clan Sharratt's fortress, the high whine of priming blasters filled the room as the promised ten Death Watch soldiers aimed their weapons at Satine and her Jedi protectors and the defenseless, carefree Jakal that lead them. Immediately, the two lightsabers hissed on, the blades thrumming in the air as they quickly took defensive positions in front of the two Mandalorian nobles in their care. Very slowly, Jakal draped his arm over Satine's shoulder, protectively drawing her closer as he looked around the room, a small smirk on his face as he watched the woman on the throne look at them with shock, which quickly became confusion, and then unbridled anger.

"Are you quite done yet?" the woman snapped, the show of temper and her commanding presence drawing the attention of every person in the room, her own guards stationed around the perimeter pointing their own weapons inwards toward the hostiles. "I swear, every time someone comes in the door, it's like you lot need to show off who's in charge. Why don't you all just drop your pants and compare the size of your manhoods, hmm? It's the same thing, and at least that has the benefit of amusing me..."
"This isn't a game, my lady," the commander at her side growled, his own rifle aimed at the new arrivals, the man even bigger and more decorated than the commander they had defeated in the field before. "In case you haven't notices, that is Satine Kryze. She belongs to the Death Watch."

"Oh, does she?" the woman asked, the Death Watch commander gasping softly when he felt the end of a blaster pressing between the armored segments of his armored torso, a lopsided grin on the woman's face as she watched him. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks as though the Duchess and the Jedi are in the custody of my brother, which means they belong to me, and you know how badly I take to thieves, my dear." With the same lazy affect of her brother, the woman slid her finger over the trigger, the whine of the weapon as it primed ringing over the thrum of the lightsabers. "Tell me now, is the Death Watch trying to steal my assets when they are so willing to pay bounty hunters for the same merchandise?"

"...no, my lady," the commander growled bitterly, his weapon lowering slightly and his men slowly following suit. "But I don't think the bounty hunters care either way," he said with a deep, malicious chuckle as five heavily armed hunters muscled their way forward. The Jedi tightened their defenses, their sabers raised and ready, but the woman on the throne just rolled her eyes.

"What is the bounty on the Duchess these days?" she asked nobody in particular. "Ten thousand dead, twenty alive?" She shrugged indifferently. "Hunters, I'll give fifty thousand credits to the last man standing among you, but if you kill each other within my halls, the deal is off." For a brief moment, nobody moved, the bounty hunters still and silent as they eyed each other, the Jedi, the tight-jawed Death Watch commander, and the beautiful woman on the throne. Without a word to anyone, they quickly turned and rushed out of the hall, snarling threats and curses at each other as they left, and with the hunters gone, the Jedi slowly relaxed.

"Well..." the woman drawled, looking around the room as the Death Watch lowered their weapons. "It seems as though negotiations for the Duchess can begin."

"The price has already been set," the commander growled, kneeling beside the throne and taking the woman's hands in his, an overly familiar gesture that made Jakal draw in a sharp breath and his shoulders tighten with tension. "Twenty thousand for the Duchess alive and five thousand for each head of her Jedi companions."

"Thirty thousand credits for Mandalore's most valuable commodity?" she said, laughing as she holstered her weapon. "I care nothing for your petty, meager credits when Duchess Satine is mine to do with as I wish."

"I do not belong to anybody!" Satine snapped, pushing her way past the Jedi and tearing her arm away from Jakal. "I will not stand here and listen to you haggle over me as if I am a bantha at the market! I am the ruler of Mandalore, and I will be treated as such!"

"You are the ruler of nothing," the Death Watch commander snarled, but was silenced when the woman raised her hand, her gaze focused on the young Duchess, and Satine looked her in the eyes and refused to look away.

"You are awfully bold for a prisoner," she said evenly, and Jakal quickly stepped forward, his arm draping once again over Satine's shoulders.

"Actually, Katra," the young man drawled, "Satine here is hardly a prisoner. She and her Jedi defeated the thirty Death Watch soldiers that accompanied me on our search for her." The woman's eye widened, and she very quickly looked back to the Duchess, her head held high and proud, the Sharratt's ruler quickly looking at her with renewed interest, and for the first time since they arrived, Satine got a good look at their new hostess. She was beautiful, to be sure, with her brother's same pale blond hair, the royal purple of her armor making her light, lavender eyes
almost seem to glow. Though unlike her easy-going brother, Katra Sharratt had something hard and shrewd to her fine features. Her clan may not have the martial strength of the others, but it was a mistake to assume that Katra was not a warrior.

"Did you truly best the Death Watch soldiers?" she asked almost carefully, and the Duchess gestured back to the Jedi behind her.

"If I did not, my guards would be dead and I would be delivered to you in chains."

"She took the commander as her prisoner," Jakal quickly cut in, and the man beside Katra snarled in fury as he jumped to his feet, his weapon raised once again, but this time pointing at the younger Sharratt.

"You allowed this!" he snapped at Jakal, his eyes quickly shooting to the now dangerously calm woman beside him. "I told you that your brother was traitorous, I told you we should execute him with the rest!"

"Clan Sharratt has no official loyalty to the Death Watch or Clan Vizsla yet, my dear, so stand down." The cold command of her voice, coupled by her soldiers quickly raising their weapons once again made the commander do as he was told, his sharp eyes never once leaving the group that stood before the throne. "Besides, my brother brought the Duchess here. That is exactly what you wanted, is it not? It's not treason simply because your men failed to complete the job."

"If she is not a prisoner-"

"She is," Katra snapped. "My brother may say otherwise, but she is in my fortress and surrounded by my men, which makes her my captive in everything but name." She shrugged nonchalantly, a smirk on her face as she watched the Jedi quickly flank their charge and her brother. "But the circumstances that brought her to me make the negotiations far more interesting..." She waved her hand carelessly in the air, her eyes falling on Jakal and Satine, and while her mannerisms were lazy, her gaze was sharp and piercing. "Brother, tell me of how she came to us a guest. You have soldiers, why not capture her?"

"As I said, Katra," Jakal said, pulling Satine closer and gesturing to the Jedi standing at their side. "The three of them defeated thirty Death Watch warriors and captured the commander. It didn't seem wise to turn our forces on them, especially since the rumors out of Zanbar seem to be far more accurate than the commander has been saying." He scoffed and patted Satine on the back, a light, easy smile on his lips as the Death Watch commander visibly bristled. "I think before we make this deal with Vizsla, we should have a look at the teenage girl that's making fools of them."

"I do so love dangerous assets..." Katra said, leaning back in her throne. "But that is all she is. She has nothing to do business with."

"Except for the captured commander..." Jakal said slyly, motioning for his men, and the soldiers quickly rushed forward, dragging the beaten Death Watch commander before the throne, the man badly bruised and dazed and stripped of his armor, and the mercenaries threw him unceremoniously to the ground. "The Duchess offers him as a sign of good faith in exchange for her safe passage here."

"Does she..." Katra asked, a small, knowing smile on her lips as she looked at the confusion on the Duchess' face and the hard, stoic expressions on her Jedi protectors, their hands on their lightsabers and ready for a fight. "Well, Duchess, I accept your offer. Until our negotiations are concluded, you are welcome in the home of Clan Sharratt."

"This is absurd!" the commander snapped, drawing his blaster once again and pointing it at the
Duchess, gesturing for his men to help the captive man off the ground. "Men, kill the Jedi, seize the Duchess!"

"Is this the strength of the Death Watch?" Katra said with a yawn. "Ten of Mandalore's finest warriors against a little girl, a shirtless boy, and an old man?" She scoffed in disgust, making the commander cringe, though he never dropped his weapon. "No wonder your cause is in need of help, you are hardly even Mandalorian anymore."

"You will hold your tongue!"

"I will do no such thing!" Katra snapped, finally standing from her throne to face the livid commander. "My clan may be small, but we are proud, and I will not obey the commands of thugs that so fear children that they need to vastly outnumber them to feel safe! The Death Watch claims to hold true to the old ways, so prove it. Let this be decided as these matters have always been on Mandalore, in single combat."

"You would have me face a child?!" the commander gasped, and Katra crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"Fool, I'd have you face her Jedi champion. Kill him, and I'll see Satine delivered to the hands of your leader myself, free of charge."

"No!" Satine cried, staring to rush forward until both Obi-Wan and Jakal stopped her, the girl struggling against the men that held her. "No, I won't allow this!"

"But I will," Qui-Gon said, laying a hand on Satine's shoulder as he stepped forward, his eyes searching Jakal's face, the young Mandalorian's green eyes wide and concerned and fearful, his expression lost and on the edge of hopelessness. Slowly, the Master nodded in understanding and stepped forward to stand before the throne, the saber in his hand igniting in a flash of green. "I serve as Satine's champion."

"Qui-Gon, no!" the Duchess shouted, wriggling free of the men that held her and rushing to throw her arms around the man. "We can work this out, Qui-Gon, we can negotiate, we can talk this through!"

"Not so long as the Death Watch is here," he said firmly, prying her arms off him and gently pushing her toward Obi-Wan, the Padawan wrapping his arms protectively around the shaking girl. "Defend her, Obi-Wan," the Master quietly commanded, and the boy nodded, his arms tightening around her as the Duchess slipped her arms behind him and clutched to his sunburned back.

"No matter what happens, she will be safe with me, Master."

"...I know she will be." With a small, reassuring smile to his student, the Jedi Master looked at his opponent as the Death Watch soldiers brought him weapons to choose from, the vambraces at his wrists adjusted and checked and his helmet secured upon his head. He selected a long, bladed staff, swiftly tapping the metal pole upon the ground, and the curved blade crackled with purple electricity, and with a cocky grin, he sauntered forward, the staff spinning around his hand.

"You won't be the first Jedi I've killed," the commander said quietly. "I killed many in the last war. When I kill you, I'm adding your saber to my collection. Hell, when I'm finished with you, I'll kill your little student too. I may even give the Duchess to my men to use to celebrate. I doubt Tor will mind her being a bit broken in when he gets her." He laughed harshly, the weapon held in both hands, his stance loose and relaxed and ready to fight. "I may just give the other Jedi to my men as well before I kill him. He's pretty enough to be taken like a whore."
"Don't get ahead of yourself," Qui-Gon said calmly, his dispassionate demeanor causing anger to flare in his opponent, his lightsaber held before him as he watched the soldiers in the room back up against the walls to give them space, Jakal leading Obi-Wan and Satine to stand beside the throne where Katra once again sat. Breathing deep and blocking himself against the fear raging through the Duchess and the tense, muted anxiety of his Padawan, Qui-Gon turned his gaze to the commander as he paced, the tip of his lightsaber following the man's every predatory move. A slight shift in his weight and a rippling of aggression through the Force alerted the Jedi to his opponent's intentions, and the commander lunged at him, his weapon thrusting toward him as the fight began.

Qui-Gon deftly sidestepped, his lightsaber catching the blade on the staff, the weapons hissing as they clashed, the electricity keeping the saber from cutting through the sharp edge. Twisting the blade, he ran his weapon across the staff's sharp edge to slice at the vulnerable staff, but the Mandalorian spun it in his hands, knocking the lightsaber out of the way and bringing it sweeping across fast and hard around his body. The Jedi spun in toward his opponent, his blade held angled downwards as he allowed the green plasma to catch the staff's metal shaft only to find that his blade merely slid along it, leaving a black line of carbon scoring, but not slicing through as expected. With a hiss of irritation, Qui-Gon ducked under the staff as the Mandalorian used the force of the repelled weapon to swing it around the opposite direction, spinning the blade around his hand and stabbing downwards at the Jedi when it passed over the man's head, the swift motion allowing the sparking electric blade to graze Qui-Gon's side.

The pain was intense, a sharp stinging from the cut he could feel bleeding just along his ribs and his muscles involuntarily contracting under the electric current, the rippling jolts shaking his balance in the Force. Qui-Gon tried to dodge out of the way of the next flurry of stabs and sweeping swings, his lightsaber connecting with each blow at the last moment as he tried to regain his step, but the relentless Mandalorian kept on top of him, pressing his advantage while he had it and forcing Qui-Gon to retreat. When the commander overreached, Qui-Gon seized his opportunity and quickly moved in, his hands planted on the ground as he ducked under the crackling blade on the staff and throwing his legs under him and kicking out at the commander's knee, his heel connecting and causing the joint to snap back, a loud, wet crack echoing through the hall as the soldier pitched forward and fell to the ground.

Howling in pain and rage as his staff clattered uselessly to the ground, the commander drew his blaster from the holster on his hopelessly broken leg and quickly fired at the Jedi, the lightsaber rising to block the barrage only to find the rounds to not be the easily deflected plasma, but slugs fo sharpened steel. Despite his quick reflexes and sharpened senses, Qui-Gon's skin was flecked with drops of molten steel, the Jedi hissing as holes were burned into his flesh. He quickly dodged the next volley by jumping up and flipping over the scattering fire, the man's accuracy suffering for the pain he was in, and at the peak of his flip while he was upside down in the air, Qui-Gon flicked his wrist and threw his lightsaber, the weapon spinning across the distance between them in a green, glowing disc of deadly light, the saber slicing through the commander's arm just above the elbow, the limb dropping to the ground along with the blaster.

Reaching out with the Force, Qui-Gon pulled his weapon back to him, landing with a crouch on the ground and quickly advancing when he saw the badly wounded man aim his vambrace at him, the arm shaking as a pulse of energy fired from the gauntlet, a mimicry of a Force push, and Qui-Gon went skidding backwards, his saber held defensively before him and his low position allowing him to keep his balance. Before the Jedi could rush in, the other commander drew his own weapon and rushed forward, the other Death Watch warriors following suit as they broke from the wall and began firing at the lone Jedi. Forced into a frantic defensive, Qui-Gon's blade flew around him, deflecting the rapidly fired plasma as best as he could, but it was far too much, and bolt after bolt struck the Master in the legs, the arms, the shoulders, the Jedi moving well enough to keep the fire from striking his vitals, but it was not long before he was forced to his
When Obi-Wan's lightsaber hissed to life and the Padawan flew to his Master's rescue, Satine quickly snatched the blaster from Katra's hip and rushed forward, Jakal defensively coming to her side as she began firing on the Death Watch. With the warriors distracted by the two Jedi, Obi-Wan furiously rushing the soldiers, heedless of the wounds he sustained as he severed limbs and Qui-Gon pushing and pulling with the Force, his focus returned with the pressure off of him, the Duchess' perfect accuracy made short work of the warriors. Her shots struck shoulders and legs and arms, causing the Death Watch to drop their weapons or fall to the ground in pain, shots aimed at their protected, helmeted heads sending them sprawling dazed or unconscious to the ground.

When the Death Watch lay groaning upon the ground, Qui-Gon stood over their commander, his lightsaber held to the man's neck as the Sharratt mercenaries all raised their weapons, primed and ready to shoot the Jedi down on Katra's word. Obi-Wan quickly stood by his Master's side, the other commander at his feet, the armor-less man's arms severed at the shoulders and his face pale. The Padawan's was limping, a smoking hole in his leg just below the knee, his bare torso covered in grazing burn wounds, and Qui-Gon lay a hand on the boy's back, partly to reassure the student and partially for his own support.

For a long moment, Katra sat silently on her throne, leaning forward with her hand on her chin as she looked at the mess before her, the Jedi stoic and relaxed, their blades ready and waiting to once again be put to action. Every time one of the wounded on the ground stirred or tried to rise, Satine would quickly shoot them again, and the soldiers would lay still.

"You are fierce, Satine," Katra finally said, standing from her throne and slowly coming to stand before the Duchess. "Like your brother and your father and your mother. It's little wonder you and your guard have been making fools of the Death Watch with the way you fight."

"Katra..." the commander hissed from the ground, his one remaining arm trying to pull himself toward the woman who looked coldly down at him. "Slay these traitors, execute them!"

"Just because you've been in my bed, don't you dare think you can command me, filth," the woman sneered, looking down at her nose at the pitiful man on the ground. "It's bad enough that you lost, but for your men to turn a trial by single combat into an attempted slaughter..." She scoffed as she drew nearer, the Jedi slowly backing away from her, their sabers raised as they flanked the Duchess. "You have forgotten what it means to be Mandalorian. We truly are lost. Perhaps we are in need of a new way."

"This is treason!" the man snapped, his voice tight with bitterness and pain, and Katra harshly laughed as she glared at him.

"Treason against who? I don't remember swearing any loyalty to the Death Watch. And I can't imagine how you thought to gain our favor since I seem to remember you executing my mother..."

"Someone get this garbage cleaned up..." Katra sneered with disgust, gesturing around the hall at the bodies that lay upon the ground, her eyes drifting up to look at the hall's entrance when a bounty hunter came limping in, a huge armored figure over seven feet tall, the creature's armor splattered with blood and covered in dents and scratches and burns. With a low, guttural growl...
that was distinctly not human, the creature tossed a bag at the foot of the throne, Katra poking the bag open with her toe, and at the sight of the heads and helmets inside, she nodded and waved two mercenaries forward.

"See that our friend here is paid fifty thousand credits on his way out," Katra muttered, her eyes roving over the hulking creature as it groaned its thanks, a slight, clever smirk crossing her lips. "I'll pay ten thousand credits for each head you bring me belonging to the bounty hunters after the Duchess Satine. Understand?" The creature wailed its understanding and lumbered after the mercenaries and after that, all that could be hears was the quiet shuffling of the soldiers as they dragged the bodies from the hall.

Satine stood with her arms wrapped tightly around Obi-Wan, her head resting on his chest, her entire body trembling as the adrenaline was flushed from her blood, the girl sniffling as her silent tears ceased as she listened to the slow and steady beat of his heart and the deep, gentle reverberations in his chest as he soothed her. His fingers threaded through her hair, his hand gently brushing her cheek as she clung to him, each touch seeming to brush aside her fears and her worries, the comforting embrace of her young Jedi shielding her from the death that surrounded them. More dead in her name, more injuries to her Jedi protectors, more death and ruin in her wake, all she had so desperately hoped to avoid. She felt disgusted with herself, just as she had when they had fled Krownest, leaving Clan Itera to be extinguished. Death Watch may have been her enemies, but she never wished for their deaths. This was not what she wanted.

"Sister." Katra looked up as Jakal walked up to the throne, the young man uncertain and uneasy as he knelt before his much harsher sibling, a slight, hopeful smile on his lips. "I had hoped you'd be willing to deal with the Duchess.

"She has nothing to offer," Katra muttered, her hand resting against her palm as she watched the young Jedi slowly release the Duchess, though her hand never left his, nor did his hand leave the small of her back. "However, she is still very valuable.

"You cannot possibly aim to profit from her," Jakal said carefully, and the woman sighed heavily. "That is exactly what I intend to do, brother. It is what our clan has always done, we profit, and if there's one thing I understand, it's good business. Duchess Satine." Satine tensed, instinctively moving against Obi-Wan for protection, her eyes snapping up to meet Katra's. "You know what's bad for business?" the woman asked as she leaned in, her eyes narrowing. "War. If Tor Vizsla and his thugs rule Mandalore, it will never end, but you..." She laughed softly when her brother gasped and the Duchess' eyes widened. "A pacifist has no chance of winning this war, but you are fierce, I have seen that much, and there are those willing to fight and die for the future you envision. And that future is very good for business."

"You'll support me?" Satine asked carefully, cautiously taking a step away from the Jedi, and Katra steepled her fingers together as she examined the girl, her pale skin lightly reddened by the sun, her pale bond hair matted with sweat and dust, the oversized tunic she wore plain and unsuited to a woman of her station, and Katra couldn't help bust shake her head and laugh. This girl looked nothing like the mighty highborn that would lead Mandalore into a new age.

"Support comes in many forms," Katra drawled. "I don't suppose you'd consider a marriage pact with my brother."

"Katra!" Jakal admonished, his outrage matching the bewildered expression on Satine's face. "I want no such thing, you know I want no such thing!"

"I-I fear I'm not for sale..." Satine stammered, slowly shrinking back against Obi-Wan, and Katra flashed her a knowing smile, her gaze running over the two teenagers as the Jedi drew a light,
hesitant hand across the Duchess' shoulder. "I've had enough of that these past few months..."

"Ah, that business with the Ordos, yes?" she asked, smirking when the girl seemed to pale. "Yes, we heard all about that, and we've no desire to end up as they did." She waved her hand dismissively. "In any case, Jakal lacks the inclination. He would be more agreeable if he was offered that Jedi of yours, though I suspect he isn't for sale either."

"Katra, honestly..." Jakal said with a roll of his eyes. "Although...

"He most certainly is not," Satine said firmly, drawing up tall as she felt Obi-Wan fidget behind him, the Jedi Master on her other side slowly dropping to his knees, his breathing heavy and his skin sweat-slicked and pale. "Neither of my Jedi are." She laid her hand on Qui-Gon's shoulder. "Please, if you aim to help me, my Jedi need to be healed."

"Of course," Katra said quickly, standing from her throne and quickly moving beside the Duchess, snapping for her guards and they quickly came to assist Qui-Gon to his feet. Looking at the beautiful older woman suspiciously, Satine pursed her lips, her mind racing with all the worst things that could happen, trying to find ways how this could be a trap, how she could be betrayed like she was by the Ordos, how things could go so wrong as they did on Krownest, but each time she reached for something terrible, all she could think of was how tired she was, how nice it was to be safe, how she longed to be alone once again with her Jedi.

"My ship is docked in a mining town," the Duchess said quickly. "We don't have much in it, but I've become somewhat attached to it, and my Jedi is used to piloting it."

"You heard the Duchess," Katra said, pointing toward the guards stationed along the wall. "Go get her ship, bring it back here." Saluting quickly, the soldiers ran off, and Katra motioned for them to follow her, the woman slowly walking out of the hall through a door at the side of the throne, the soldiers carefully helping Qui-Gon along.

"...we're also hungry," Satine ventured, and Katra rolled her eyes, her brother laughing softly beside her.

"Satine, sweetie, you are royalty," Jakal drawled. "Clan Sharratt will treat you as such."

"You are the key to our investment, after all," Katra said quietly. "And if that were not enough, our father was cousins to one of the lesser members of Clan Kryze." She shrugged. "That practically makes us family. We'll set you up with the best during your stay here and tomorrow, we'll contact Clan Cadera so we can finalize our investment."

"What investment?" Satine asked quietly, and the taller woman looked down at her.

"In your war effort, Duchess," she said softly. "As I said, the war is bad for business, and we will fund your cause if it means a quick end to the conflict so we may have our prosperity back. Contrary to how it seems, there are many who desire your peace, and you've shown me today that your cause has an actual chance of winning."

"Failure is not an option," Qui-Gon whispered, limping along as he clung to the soldiers. "We swear to you, we will see her to power."

"Oh, I believe you," Katra said quietly. "Just promise me, Duchess, that you will end the war quickly."

"I...will do what I can," Satine said hesitantly. "I just...I-I don't know how."

"The Caderas have some ideas about that," Jakal said as they stopped outside a large, ornate door.
"Don't you worry about it right now, Duchess. We'll have plenty of time after you're rested."

"Your room, Satine," Katra said, gesturing to the doors. "We'll get your Jedi-"

"No," she said quickly, sudden panic seizing her chest and she quickly grabbed Obi-Wan's hand. "No..." she said again, calmer this time. "My Jedi don't leave me. Ever."

"I understand," Katra said, her voice calm and gentle, the hard edge she had in the presence of the Death Watch gone. "The room's big enough for the three of you, I suppose. There's a couch they can sleep on, I'm sure you can find a way for all of you to be comfortable." She patted one of the soldier's supporting Qui-Gon on the back. "We'll just take this one to the infirmary to-"

"No!"

Again, Katra sighed, her eyes closed as she shook her head. "Very well, we'll summon the medic here." With a wave of her hand, the soldiers pushed the doors open, allowing them to step inside the room, and Satine walked inside and looked around, her jaw slack and her eyes wide as she took in the opulent space, a rounded sitting room with a couch and large, comfortable chairs circling a low, carved table, large windowed doors leading out to a stone balcony overlooking a deep, green valley, a winding river cutting between the steep ravine. Smaller doors led to rooms that branched off the sitting room, bedrooms, most like, just like her own rooms on Kalevala, and again in the palace in Sundari, and Satine felt her heart ache. She missed home, the fear for her life keeping her thoughts on survival as she ran, but now, here where she had the time to catch her breath, she keenly felt the longing for home, and the pain to know it was so far out of her reach.

"No, wait," Satine said quickly when the soldiers started to lay Qui-Gon down on the couch. "He should have the bedroom. He did save my life. He's the reason you are free from the Death Watch, he deserves the best." With a sigh, Katra nodded and pointed to the door leading to the bedroom, the soldiers hoisting the Jedi up again and helping him into the other room, an ornate, regal bedroom with a large bed that made Satine look comfortable just looking at it. They laid Qui-Gon down on the bed, the Jedi groaning as he settled into the pillows and the comfortable blankets, struggling to keep his eyes open as the soldiers were ordered away.

"Anything else, Duchess?" Katra asked, and Satine shook her head, paused for a moment as she bit her lip, and shyly looked to the ground.

"You said you..." she began, her face reddening as she considered her question. "You said you...y-you went to bed with the Death Watch commander."

"So I did," she said casually, a sly smile crossing her face as the fair-skinned Duchess turned fierce red, her eyes wide as she stared at the older woman in disbelief. "Like all things, Duchess, your body is simply another asset to be bought and sold, and I sold mine to ensure the safety of my clan while they lived among us. Loyalty looks like different things to different people, but I have found that to most men, it looks like a willing woman in their beds." She shrugged. "You'll understand one day. Anything else?"

"No, just..." she whimpered, having to stop herself when her throat tightened with emotion. "Thank you..." she whispered, so quietly she didn't think Katra could hear her, but the woman nodded and with a swift smack to her brother's shoulder, the two siblings followed the soldiers, Jakal stopping before he closed the doors.

"We'll be up soon with the medic and something to eat. Just relax." With that, they left, the doors closing behind them, and Satine collapsed on the ground, curled up as she sobbed into her arms. Obi-Wan reached out to her, but quickly stopped, his hands shaking as he tried to decide what to do with the crying girl, with his injured Master, and for a moment, all he could do was pace
between them, pulling on his braid as he fretted until finally, his own legs gave out from under
him, his elevated strength leaving his body as his busy mind filed away his emotions, setting them
to the side as weariness overtook him. With what was left inside him, he crawled over to the
Duchess, draped his arm over her shoulder, and pulled her close, a happy sigh escaping his lips
when she quickly turned in his grasp and laid her head on his chest, her own arms slipping behind
him to absentely stroke at his back. It felt like home, and for the first time in a very long time, the
Force felt clear and still and peaceful, the disturbances of the war and death and fear a far and
distant memory.

"It's nice to have things work out well for once, isn't it..." Qui-Gon said from the bed, his voice
thick and heavy and distant, and with the reminder that they were not alone, Obi-Wan and Satine
sheepishly looked at each other, shy smiles on their faces as they slowly helped each other up, the
two teens leaning on each other as they stood beside the wounded Jedi.

"Master, you know better than to say things like that..." Obi-Wan chided teasingly, Qui-Gon
chuckling softly as he closed his eyes. "You know that's when things go wrong."

"Of course..." Qui-Gon said, sinking into the pillows and sighing. "I'm not in my right mind, I
clearly don't know what I'm saying. And you worry enough for the both of us, my Padawan."

"Someone has to, Master," Obi-Wan said, laying his hand on the Jedi's arm, and Qui-Gon lightly
laid his hand over his student's.

"Are you alright?" he asked, the man barely able to keep his eyes open, and when Obi-Wan
nodded, the Master closed his eyes again. "Good...I'm going to rest, Obi-Wan, you keep watch..."
He lifted his hand and pointed as menacingly at his Padawan as he could manage, but only
managed a limp twitch of his finger. "Make good choices..."

"I always do, Master," Obi-Wan reassured, patting the man's shoulder and pulling the covers over
the Jedi's body as he quickly drifted to sleep. Putting his finger to his lips to call for silence, Obi-
Wan motioned for Satine to follow him, the two teens leaving the room and closing the door
behind them. Back in the sitting room, they slowly shuffled to the couch, their fingers lightly
touching as they walked, almost hesitant to have more contact than that, almost as if they were
afraid of what might happen. They threw themselves on opposite sides of the couch, the soft
cushions giving way as they dropped down upon them with heavy sighs, the two wiggling to lay
themselves comfortably among the pillows, kicking off their boots and allowing their feet to
teasingly brush against the other's legs.

"This doesn't feel real," Satine finally said, trying to keep the smile from spreading across her face,
but the warm feeling in her chest and the pounding of her heart made it impossible.

"Doesn't it?" Obi-Wan asked innocently, sighing as he looked at the girl, his heart skipping every
time she moved her leg against his, the warmth pooling deep in his gut each time she relaxed and
her bright blue eyes lit up. "We were bound to find you allies eventually. Even warriors at some
point must grow weary of war. Perhaps that time is coming now."

"Perhaps..." Satine said slowly, her hands gripping the hem of the tunic she wore. "Do you think
this is a trap?" she asked, fear creeping back into her voice, and Obi-Wan tensed, holding his
breath as he watched the girl begin to tremble. "What if this is like it was with the Ordos, w-what
if..." She sat up quickly and took a deep breath, her hand resting on Obi-Wan's thigh, and the Jedi
did everything in his power to repress the deep, pleasured moan building in his chest when her
fingers began absentely stroking him in her distress, the girl's need for close contact and comfort
expressed in the nervous movements of her grip on his leg. "D-do you sense anything, can you
feel something wrong?"
"Y-yeah..." Obi-Wan said nervously, swallowing hard as he quickly snatched her hand in his before she could do more damage, mentally kicking himself for his tired mind unable to fight the sudden urge of his body as lazy arousal slowly pulsed through his blood, the boy only just managing to keep his traitorous body from reacting to the beautiful girl's touch. "I feel you, Satine, seeing the ghost of your past failures because given the chance to relax, you don't know what else to do but to look for danger."

"B-but-

"And I know this because I am doing the same thing," he reassured, his thumb rubbing the back of her hand. "No, I felt nothing from Katra and Jakal. They are...afraid as well," he said, closing his eyes. "They fear the Death Watch. They fear falling to the same fate as Clan Itera. But most of all, they fear the war. And...they feel hope now where they had none before." He opened his eyes, a slight smile on his lips as he watched the emotions play across the Duchess' face. "I do not believe we have anything to fear from Clan Sharratt, although..." he said with a frown. "Jakal was making eyes at me on our way here..."

"He just doesn't know that you're mine..." Satine slowly drawled, her fingers intertwining with the Jedi's and her eyes darkening with desire as she crawled over him, her free hand on his chest for support as she slowly laid her body over his and captured his lips with her own, quickly deepening the kiss when Obi-Wan moaned deeply. Both teens were exhausted, making the kisses they shared both languid and deep, their inhibitions gone with their alertness, their taxed minds quickly surrendering to the relaxation the flood of pleasure allowed them. Their modesty had prevented them from this before, their tongues sliding against each other and exploring deeper than they had before, but they were simply too tired to care, too drained for shyness and uncertainty to assert itself as it usually did.

Obi-Wan gasped when Satine's leg brushed against the hardening length in his pants, the girl stilling for a moment as she broke the kiss, and the Jedi found himself looking into eyes black with arousal, a thin, bright blue ring surrounding the Duchess' dilated pupil. With her own soft moan, Satine's hips slowly began to roll against his, and Obi-Wan found his hands sliding to grab her thin waist, not to still her, but to move her gently downwards into position, her hips fitting perfectly against his and his engorged member pressed between them. His involuntary gasps and moans as Satine slowly, slowly rolled her hips was enough to bring Obi-Wan out of it, the two teens rushing headlong past the line they had drawn together when one was usually left on the other side to pull the other back.

"Satine..." Obi-Wan gasped between deep, lazy kisses, the boy moaning softly when the Duchess began nipping at his pale neck. "My Master is in the other room, w-we should stop..." he muttered, watching in fascination as Satine sat up to straddle his hips, a deep groan pulled right out of his chest when he felt the burning heat between her legs against him, the arousal in his pants beginning to painfully throb with need. "Satine," he said more urgently when the girl took his hands in hers and laid them upon her breasts, the Jedi gasping and tensing as he felt the soft flesh beneath the thin cloth of his tunic that she wore. "W-we should...oh..." When she removed her hands, his stayed in place upon her, his fingers gentle brushing against her, feeling the small, hard points of her nipples beneath them. The girl planted her hands upon the flat, lean muscle of his chest, her eyes closed and her expression blissful as she rocked her hips back against his, and for just a moment, nothing else mattered.

The moment was over when the Jedi's hands returned to her hips, shaking as they slid under her tunic and began to tug at the waist of her pants, the girl's eyes widening and her breath catching when she realized how far she had pulled her hesitant Jedi, the hard length pressed between her legs throbbing in time with his rapidly beating heart and sending shots of arousal deep into the very center of her being, and she recoiled, afraid of the lust she saw within her that had so very
nearly consumed the both of them. Leaning down and kissing him gently, the boy returning it with a ferocious desperation she hadn't seen in him before, the Duchess slowly slid off his lap, sitting back on her side of the couch and leaving the Jedi to whine pitifully from the sudden loss of the heat above him.

"Y-you're right..." Satine stammered after she found her voice, swallowing hard as she watched her Jedi turn on to his side and grip handfuls of his hair between his fingers. "We need to stop..."

"Temptress..." Obi-Wan hissed between panted breaths, his eyes shut tight when he couldn't bear to look at her flushed face. "Sweet Force, what are you doing to me..."

"The same thing you are doing to me, I suspect..." she said softly, her hands clasped tightly in her lap as she wiggled, the slickness between her legs distracting her from her attempts to calm herself. "I want you, Obi-Wan..." she said, swallowing hard and watching as his eyes shot to her, wild and untamed and so unlike the repressed boy she had met back on Mandalore so many months ago. "I have for such a long time now, I-

"Y-you have?" Obi-Wan asked innocently, the conversation allowing himself to focus on anything but the need deep in his gut. "I wonder if you've wanted me for as long as I've desired you."

"Perhaps," Satine said with a smile. "I just...y-you were right, we need to stop. I'm so sorry, I-

"No, no, don't be..." Obi-Wan said, his pulse finally beginning to slow as his unfulfilled arousal began to fade, though the need was still there. "Someone needed to assert reason, because Force knows I wasn't going to."

"I didn't want to stop," Satine explained, her eyes averted from the Jedi. "Believe me, I need it as badly as you do, but I'm-

"...afraid?" Obi-Wan offered when the Duchess said nothing, and biting down on her lip, Satine quickly nodded, the Jedi chuckling softly and smiling when the girl looked petulantly at him. "Come here, Satine," he quietly commanded, and after a moment's hesitation, the Duchess moved to lay beside her Jedi protector, the young Kenobi wrapping his arms about her and drawing her closer, and despite her initial tension, Satine relaxed quickly against him, her hand running over the length of his braid. "I'm afraid too," he quietly confessed. "As a Jedi, I'm not..." He hissed and shook his head, burying his face in the crook of her neck and inhaling the sweet scent of flowers that Satine always seemed to take with her. "I don't know what this means for my place in the Order."

"I won't hold you back from that, Obi-Wan," Satine said firmly. "I would never. If it gets in the way of your place among the Jedi, I'll step back. I don't want to be the one that killed your dream."

"You never could be, Satine..." Obi-Wan said, frowning slightly as he felt his eyelids grow heavy, the deeply relaxed way the girl was leaning against him indicating that she was similarly exhausted. "How would you say what we are in Mando'a?" the Jedi asked, and Satine shifted slightly, the Jedi smiling as without seeing her face, he could feel her lips purse in thought, her brow knit together as she considered the question.

"Kar'tayli," she finally decided. "It means...I hold you in my heart."

"Kar'tay'li..." Obi-Wan repeated, slowly nodding and planting a lazy kiss to the girl's shoulder. "Yes, I think that's it. It's...beautiful."
"Like us..." Satine said as she nestled against the Jedi.

"Yes..." he agreed, his eyes closing as he drew her closer. "Just like us."

By the time the medic arrived for Qui-Gon, both the Jedi and the Duchess were fast asleep.

Meditation.

Satine. Satine. Satine. Satine. Satine... It doesn't stop, over and over in my mind, just Satine, Satine, Satine, without end. I need this to stop. This is bordering on obsession. It certainly doesn't help that my body's need to be inside her gnaws at me day and night without end, and it certainly isn't helped by the fact I can't get a moment alone to bring myself some damned relief. This would be easier if I had my own room, or a moment alone to "fix the ship." But the ship hasn't been delivered yet, and I promised Qui-Gon I'd watch Satine while he's recovering. And I am watching her, and it's making the problem so, so much worse than it needs to be.

Satine, Satine, Satine... Qui-Gon is expected to make a full recovery, by the way, which is, of course, excellent news. I make a terrible guard, since I didn't even hear the medic come in, though I suppose the Force would have awakened me had there been trouble or ill-intent of any kind. I suppose I just can't get used to the idea that we are safe, which is a...good thing? We aren't truly safe, after all, but here within the walls of Clan Sharratt, it's certainly difficult to see that there's a war, that we're being hunted, that peace is still a very, very long ways away. I will remain vigilant, of course, so Satine and Qui-Gon can rest. It would not do for complacency to dull our senses. We must remain alert if we are to complete our mission, if we are to protect Satine.

Satine, Satine, Satine... Stop it, Obi-Wan, you are better than this! Force help me, Quinlan Vos is not so bad as this! Alright, perhaps I am not quite that bad, but Luminara would certainly be ashamed of me. Certainly the Council would call into question their decision to not throw me out of the Order as they were going to do. I wonder if the Masters on the Council ever felt this way. I wonder if Master Windu ever thought of nothing but sex in his teenage years, or if Master Yoda ever fell in love. I suspect not. One doesn't become a Jedi Master of the High Council by being like the rest of us.

Satine and Qui-Gon are both sleeping now while I keep the watch that I failed to keep earlier, but I won't fail again. They deserve the rest. They need the rest if we are going to continue to run, and if the past months are any indication, we will always be running, at least until the day we end the war and Satine sits the throne of Mandalore. When they wake up, I suspect we'll all have a chance to bathe, and then it's down for dinner, which is the most excellent news I have ever heard. I'm positively famished, I think I might be able to eat three whole bantha's on my own. I know we have had bad luck with eating real meals, and I know I said we need to be ready to run at the first sign of danger, but...Force, I'm just so hungry...

I'm looking forward to getting back on the ship and away from this planet. I do confess I miss the stars, even if the close proximity to my traveling companions quickly drives us mad with the need to get away from each other. There's something surreal about feeling claustrophobic when surrounded by the infinite majesty of space, but I suppose life is made of curiosities and contradictions. It would be a dull place indeed if there existed an explanation for everything. What else would there be to learn? What faster was is there to take the wonder out of the world? The
Force reduces to mathematics and probabilities. Love explained away as a blending of neural impulses and hormones brought on by the need to propagate the species. It makes the world seem so...so...clinical, I suppose. So inhuman. So lifeless.

I used to think that way. I used to see myself as above the emotions that beat in the heart of life itself. I was so...arrogant to believe that I stood above these mortal concerns, so disgusted with myself when I faltered. I tried so hard to purge myself of all desires, of all emotions, but being a Jedi isn't about that. It can't be. To feel is human. Anger and passion and love and joy are all a part of life. It isn't a Jedi's goal to purge themselves of these feelings, they're natural. We just must rise above them when our duty calls to us, place the betterment of others above our own wants and needs and desires so that we may do what is best and good and right. At least, that is what I am beginning to believe.

Or perhaps I'm deluding myself. Perhaps I am merely finding ways to justify how far I have strayed from the Code. There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force...

Force, what have I gotten myself into...

I've learned so much here on Mandalore and from Satine, but am I discovering myself, or becoming lost? I don't think I know anymore. I'm not sure I ever knew.

I must talk with my Master.
Done! I know I said I'd have this up on Friday, but...the time I set aside for writing was taken up by a nap instead. Work kicked my ass this week.

Business keeping note, I'm going to update my profile a few times a week so you guys can have an idea on the progress on the things I'm writing. I've got a bunch of comments this week from you guys this week, and you seemed nervous about me abandoning this or my Sith Obi-Wan series, and I want you all to know that that's never, ever going to happen. The endings of both those fics are extremely clear in my mind, and I absolutely need to get there so I can write it.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this installment! Let me know what you think, your feedback helps shape the story. Most of you seem to want this thing to head fast into explicit territory, and I have no problem writing that, so let me know if that's what you guys are leaning toward. Alright, lovelies! Get to it!

Katra and Jakal Sharratt stared in wide-eyed, slack-jawed disbelief at Jedi Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi and Duchess Satine Kryze as the two teenagers gracelessly shoveled food into their mouths from plates stacked high with an impressive assortment of the richest breads and meats and cheeses credits could buy, much of it imported from out of the war-torn system. They hardly chewed at all before they swallowed and returned to stuff more food into their mouths, the stacked plates quickly being cleaned before they grabbed more food from the spread at the center of the long table, their plates piled high by the time they returned to their seats to begin the process over again.

Many things about the Jedi and their royal charge impressed the last surviving members of the wealthy Clan Sharratt. The Jedi and their peerless combat prowess, aided by the mystical Force, a power that they could not understand. The pacifist Satine, so object to violence but just as skilled and accurate with a blaster as any of the mighty warlords that her clan had ever produced. But their ability to inhale nearly an entire banquet on their own was by far the most impressive thing about the impossibly thin teenagers.

"I don't understand," Jakal muttered to his sister beside him. "Where is all the food going? Look at the size of them, this is impossible."

"The poor dears have been starving, clearly..." Katra said, her eyes on the teenagers as she slowly leaned in toward Qui-Gon, the Master's face in his hands and shaking his head, his previous attempts to get his student and his charge to be civil and remember their manners such failures that he had given up and resigned himself to embarrassment and a future lecture on good breeding. "Master Jedi, have things truly been so terrible out there that our Duchess couldn't eat?"

"More often than not..." Qui-Gon muttered, pushing his own food around on the plate with a fork, the Jedi having nearly finished after eating only a modest amount. "We spent a month on Zanbar eating whatever we could find in the swamps or steal from the Death Watch, and the rest of the time, we have survived on ration bars when we could get them." Qui-Gon sighed heavily when Satine and Obi-Wan both reached to grab handfuls of freshly baked rolls from the trays as they
were brought out from the kitchens. "We've had a few opportunities for real meals, but they're either been interrupted, or they refused to eat much for fear of having to run."

"A difficult thing for growing teenagers," Katra said with an understanding smirk. "When you leave, we'll be certain your ship is stocked with something more than simple rations. Nothing exactly fit for the royal company you keep, but your situation makes that difficult."

"Is the ship here?" Obi-Wan asked, his words muffled and barely audible through a mouthful of food, and he nearly choked when Qui-Gon shot him a warning glare. He swallowed hard, laughing nervously and tugging on his braid as he averted his eyes. "Has our ship been delivered, Lady Sharratt?" he asked again, and the woman chuckled as she leaned forward and tapped her fingers against the table.

"It has, you sweet thing..." Katra said in a low, seductive tone, one that made Obi-Wan flush furiously and Satine choke on the fruit she had just bitten into. "From the way the Duchess was speaking, it sounded as if she wasn't the only one attached to it. We made all haste to retrieve it."

"I-I'm not attached to the ship..." Obi-Wan muttered sheepishly. "Jedi don't really have attachments, we-"

"It will give us something to do while the ladies are speaking to the Caderas," Jakal said, leaning in toward the Jedi across the table from him, and Obi-Wan sat straight up in his chair, his shoulders tightening as he looked between the lackadaisical Qui-Gon and Satine as she finished her plate.

"You and I will go over everything that is discussed," Qui-Gon quietly reassured his student. "We want to leave as soon as possible. The last thing we want is a repeat of what happened on Krownest. I need you to run the checks on the ship. When Obi-Wan's eyes flicked toward Satine, a swift, sharp pull through their connection made the Padawan quickly look at his Master, a faint flush coming to his cheeks when he felt that he had been found out. "Satine will be safe in my care, Obi-Wan."

"I-I know, Master, I just-"

"And here I thought Jedi didn't get attached..." Katra said in her amused, sultry tone, laughing softly when the Padawan cast his eyes down at the table. "Satine, your young defender is perfectly adorable, where ever did you get him?"

"I was assigned to the mission," Qui-Gon quickly cut in, explaining in Satine's place when it was clear that the Duchess was struggling to find the right words. "My student's presence is incidental. The indefinite nature of this mission made it impossible to leave him behind."

"Is that what you would have preferred?" Jakal asked, glancing sidelong at Obi-Wan as the hand grasping the braid tightened. "I've seen him fight, surely he has proven his worth."

"It was never a matter of proving himself," Qui-Gon explained. "Obi-Wan never had anything to prove. War is no place for a teenager. War is no place for anybody, but a young Jedi especially benefits most from an environment where they can study the Force in quiet, peaceful contemplation. The violence and horrors of war only serves to expose him to the darker sides of the Force, and he deserves better than that." The Jedi sighed heavily, the three young Mandalorians looking at him intently, and Obi-Wan staring at the floor, a slight, modest smile on his lips. "That being said, I could not do this without him."

"He is competent enough," Satine finally chimed in, a soft smile crossing her face as she looked at the Padawan beside her, her leg very gently brushing against his under the table, making the Padawan gasp and sit up straight in his seat, his hands quickly moving to his lap and balling into
fists in the hem of his robes. "Even if several of our missteps were his doing."

"M-my doing?!" Obi-Wan gasped, turning in his seat to face the Duchess and gratefully moving his leg away from hers. "I would beg your pardon, Duchess, but none of this would be happening at all if your people weren't completely mental!"

"Mandalore needs guidance, it's true," Satine said, sitting up primly in her seat, her hands folded delicately on the table and her head lifted regally, looking every bit the high born woman she was despite her plain clothing. "But we wouldn't have crashed on Zanbar if not for your arrogance."

"I wouldn't have crashed if you hadn't been-" His breath caught in his throat, his words immediately swallowed when he felt Satine's ankle teasingly slide up and down his leg, a devious glint in the girl's eye that forced Obi-Wan to choke back a wanting moan. His Duchess was becoming bold, and even he could feel the pent up need from the night before burning just beneath his skin. "I-if you hadn't been such a distraction..." he managed to say without his voice shaking too much, though he was certain that his Master could feel the surge of desire before he slammed their connection shut, and he was fairly sure that his Mandalorian hosts, well-versed in the art of passion as all their kind were, could easily interpret his sudden discomfort.

"Are Jedi not trained to be steadfast in the face of distractions?" Satine asked sweetly, and when the Jedi didn't respond, she gently patted his cheek. "You must see how it is your fault."

"Y-yes..." Obi-Wan said breathlessly, a nervous laugh in his throat as he looked at the girl and smiled. "Apologies, Duchess. I'm...still learning."

"If you've had enough of teasing the poor boy, Satine, you and I must get you ready for your meeting with Clan Cadera," Katra said as she pushed herself up from her seat, the Padawan sighing in relief when the Duchess stood as well, her hand brushing along his shoulder as she moved away from the table. "Honestly, Duchess, I hope you're as sweet with that boy in the bedroom as you are hard on him in public."

"Don't be absurd..." Satine said coyly, glancing at the flushing Jedi, his chest rising and falling with his shaking, controlled breaths. "He's a Jedi. Jedi are forbidden from such things."

"Oh, the poor dears..." Katra drawled, running her fingers along Qui-Gon's jaw line when the Master rose to stand beside Satine, the Jedi quickly drawing back to get away from the unwanted contact from the sultry, amused Mandalorian. "Master Jedi, I would be happy to show you what you've been missing while we wait for Satine to bathe. I have a wealth of experience I'm willing to share, I promise you'll find it informative," she said with a wolfish grin, and Qui-Gon calmly walked past her, his hand on Satine's lower back as he gently pushed her toward the door.

"A generous offer, Lady Sharratt, but I fear I must decline," Qui-Gon said evenly, though there was the slightest hint of amusement in his voice.

"Well, I have the walk to the rooms to convince you otherwise," Katra said, grabbing hold of Qui-Gon's arm and walking beside him. "I can assure you, you won't regret it."

"Perhaps not, but I fear you will," Qui-Gon said with soft, easy laughter in his voice. "I'm old enough to be your father."

"Younger still than the man that made me a woman," she said defensively as they strolled out of the dining room. "I was fourteen, you see, and my mother..." Her voice trailed off as she, the Duchess, and the Jedi left, her light and amused tones echoing down the hall, and at the dining table, Jakal sighed heavily and shook his head.
"She's a slut that knows what she wants..." Jakal said, leaning back in his seat and smiling at the flushing Padawan. "Great for business, but terribly embarrassing for a little brother if you have guests over." He gestured at the table. "Eat, Jedi, you're skin and bones, no doubt you're still hungry." Averting his eyes, Obi-Wan reached out and grabbed another roll and stuffed it into his mouth, chewing slowly as he continued to calm himself, the Jedi Code running through his mind. Becoming increasingly aware of the Mandalorian's eyes raking over him, Obi-Wan swallowed the roll and pushed away from the table, a shy smile on his lips and his gaze quickly averting.

"I-I have a great deal of work to do, Lord Sharratt, so-"

"Oh, please, you call me Jakal," the man said, standing up and walking around the table, grinning brightly at the Jedi as he slowly backed up to put some space between them. "Shall we get to work on your ship? Can't imagine what you need done, but I have a project of my own that you might help me with if you have some time waiting for your scans to finish..."

"Like my Master, I have no interest in-"

"This isn't about sex, Jedi!" the Mandalorian said swiftly, a sly smirk on his face as he looked Obi-Wan over. "While I would love to give you a sexual education, you beautiful creature, I'd hate to come between you and the Duchess."

"N-no, she and I...w-we aren't...sweet Force, you Mandalorians are torturous!" Obi-Wan said through clenched teeth as he quickly strode out of the room, Jakal close on his heels.

"Is it true you haven't gone to bed with the Duchess?" Jakal asked excitedly, and the Jedi simply rolled his eyes. "You must be mad, she is beautiful! The Mandalorian ideal of physical beauty. What are you waiting for? It's clear that you and she have something going on..." He frowned as he observed the Jedi's face. "...do you know how to-"

"Yes, thank you, I am human!" Obi-Wan growled. "The Jedi aren't all sexless, and I have a friend that speaks of sex without end, in great detail. I am educated on the subject."

"But your education isn't practical." Jakal laughed heartily when the Jedi flushed and shook his head, and he draped his arm over his shoulder and patted his chest. "Are you nervous about being unable to satisfy her, little Jedi?"

"No!" Obi-Wan gasped, shaking free of the man and staring at him completely appalled. "It isn't like that, she...I-"

"Because pleasuring a woman isn't so simple as pleasing a man." Jakal shrugged. "So I've heard."

"I told you!" Obi-Wan stressed, pulling hard on his braid. "She and I...w-wait, really?" he asked, stuttering over his words as he looked wide-eyed at the grinning Mandalorian, the man casually punching in the code into the console on the wall to open the secured hangar doors.

"Really," Jakal said when the door hissed open, ushering the Jedi through and slowly walking toward the Duchess' ship, Kenobi beside him breathing a small sigh of relief when he saw the vessel. "Us men are easy, a couple quick strokes, something warm to slide in and it's done, but women need extra attention, a skilled hand and practiced thrusts. You need experience to please a woman."

"Quinlan never mentioned anything about that..." the Padawan said under his breath, shutting his eyes tight and shaking his head. "...Satine and I aren't like that," Obi-Wan muttered, his hand running along the hull of the ship. "I am committed to becoming a Jedi Knight, my Code forbids love, and Satine has dedicated her heart and soul to Mandalore, she doesn't have the luxury of
"Noble goals, to be sure," Jakal muttered in disappointment, leaning in closer and searching for what he knew he had seen before, but couldn't seem to find it now. "You are better people than me, that's for certain. I don't think I could ever adhere to some higher purpose if it meant I couldn't take beautiful people to bed with me."

"...but suppose," Obi-Wan said as casually as he was able. "Suppose someone wanted to learn how, b-but only wanted that one girl. H-how would he-"

"Beats the hell out of me, I never learned how to pleasure a woman, I never needed to know," Jakal said dismissively. When he looked at Obi-Wan as the Jedi removed the panels on the engines, he found the teen crestfallen, the look on his face almost hopeless for a moment before it slid into an expressionless mask. "But, if you want my honest, expert opinion, I think this...supposed someone should perhaps go to this girl and practice with her as a way to both get a hands on education and to grow closer. Nobody is going to know how to please her better than she does, after all."

"...shit, that's a great idea..." Obi-Wan mumbled, and for the briefest of moments, he thought of what it would be like for lovely Satine to lay naked upon his bed and help guide the exploration of her body. He swiftly banished the thought when he felt his cheeks burn and the pull of carnal lust pull at the center of his being, but try as he might, the image of pale skin and the sound of soft moans stayed firmly rooted in his mind. "No, no!" Obi-Wan said swiftly. "Force, the thought! I-I don't want to...a-and with her, so help me!"

"Whatever you say, Jedi..." the Mandalorian said with a sly, knowing smile on his lips. Still, the idea was a good one! You're a clever bastard for having thought of it, Jedi," Jakal said as he patted the deeply flushed Obi-Wan on the shoulder. "Now, since you've shown me what a genius you are, you can help me with my project..."

"Y-yes, of course..." Obi-Wan said swiftly, grateful for something to distract him from his rogue thoughts and quickly replacing the engine panel when he saw nothing wrong. "As you said before, I will have plenty of time while I'm running the system checks and calibrations. Follow me, please."

Jakal followed Obi-Wan closely as the Jedi walked up the ship's ramp and into the narrow corridor back into the reactor where the inner workings of the fighter were housed, the Jedi running his hands over the consoles with a satisfied sigh, a slight smile coming to his lips as he stood in the familiar comfort of the ship's mechanics. It was simple here, devoid of any of the complicated emotions and primal urges that had been plaguing him as of late. It was almost meditative to be working on the machines, something that could be fixed with a swift and careful analysis, something that could be assessed with simple troubleshooting, something that worked beautifully when everything was in order. Even with his own conflict and troubles, everything here made it seem somehow manageable.

"What's your project, Jakal?" Obi-Wan asked softly after he had opened up the maintenance panel on the hyperdrive and ran a complete scan. The Mandalorian flashed him a cocky smirk and swaggered over to the complicated instrumentations and perched himself atop one of the consoles.

"Your trip's been hard, yeah?" Jakal asked, pointing at the Jedi and laying a finger on his chest, his absent tunic leaving part of his pale chest exposed underneath the fold of his robes. "You've got bruises and scrapes and more than one scar from blaster fire, and I doubt you picked that up in the Jedi Temple. And, you know, I could see the other Jedi being out there, but I think about you and gentle Satine fighting in this stupid war and running for your lives, and I don't know how you do it."
"It's not like we have a choice..." Obi-Wan said quietly, his arms crossed self-consciously over his chest and pulling his robes tighter to cover himself up. "Believe me, I'd like nothing better for this war to be over. I-I never wanted to even be here. Before I came here, I had to kill a man. One man, on a very dangerous mission. I had no choice in the matter, but it wrecked me." He laughed nervously and ran a hand through his hair. "I kill people almost every day now and it weighs on me, but not like it should."

"It's awful what a person can get used to," Jakal said with a knowing nod. "But worth it for the safety of our Duchess." He laughed softly and held up his hand when the Jedi's jaw tightened, his fingers slowly winding around the braid draped over his shoulder. "Cheap words, I know, since you're the one bearing the burden-"

"No, no, protecting Satine isn't a burden..." Obi-Wan muttered, his hand running absently over the consoles, his eyes fixed on the readouts as the scan progressed.

"Of course it isn't..." Jakal backtracked, drawing closer to the man when he saw the teen's discomfort. "You care for her, that much is obvious. Which is why I thought I might do my part to help!" He waved his hand dismissively in the air when the Jedi shot him a curious look. "You know, beyond bringing you here and supporting your war effort, that falls on my sister. When we swept the ship before we brought it here, we found...armor." He grinned when the Jedi drew back. "Your armor, I assumed, and I thought, what better way to protect the future of Mandalore then by actually protecting her?"

"...you made her armor?" Obi-Wan asked, and the man's grin widened.

"The finest that Clan Sharratt's money can buy, which, I can assure you, is quite a lot," he said proudly, waving for the Jedi to follow him, and after quickly checking the progress of the scan, Obi-Wan followed the man out if the engine room and back into the hallway, the Mandalorian quickly leading the Jedi to the two rooms just outside the cockpit and pressing the button to open the door to Satine's room. Jakal walked inside, motioning for the Jedi to follow when he stayed out in the hallway, but Obi-Wan didn't move. "My Jedi friend, I know you're sweet on the Duchess, but she isn't even here! Come, there's nothing personal in here. I know it's hers, but this isn't intimate, you shy devil. Come on!"

With a deep, shuddering breath, Obi-Wan steeled himself and with a nod, he stepped inside, the room no bigger than the one he and Qui-Gon shared, but it somehow felt bigger. He crept closer to the bed where a dark gray set of folded iron armor lay, and he ran his fingers over the unfinished surface, the metal cool to the touch, and he picked up the chest plate, examining it with a critical eye, imagining it on his slight Duchess' body.

"It's light," he said quietly. "Much lighter than mine."

"You are bigger than she is," Jakal pointed out. "And as I said, the best that our credits can buy. I tool the liberty of sizing her up in the tank on the ride here, but...well, you've had your eyes on her more than I have, I've no doubt you know her measurements exactly."

"You've got a good eyes, it's perfect..." he said absently, laying the chest piece down and letting his fingers linger, brushing along it almost lovingly before he quickly drew his hand away and looked at Jakal almost apologetically. "Listen, I'm...I'm a Jedi, I'm not supposed to...Force help me, if my Master knew just how far gone I am, I-"

"Hey, relax, I understand..." Jakal said, laying a hand on the Jedi's shoulder and squeezing the lean, wiry muscle under his fingers. "It wouldn't be very Mandalorian of me to stand in the way of passion, especially not when it's the only damn thing to take comfort in so long as this stupid war
"...thank you..." Obi-Wan whispered, and the Mandalorian laughed softly when he felt the boy's shoulder trembling.

"Just doing for you what I wish had been done for me, my friend," he said, picking up the helmet from the bed and holding it in his hands. "It's the least I could do for the man protecting Mandalore's future...and Clan Sharratt's financial interests. Now!" he chirped, holding the helmet out to the Jedi. "What say you and I paint our fine Duchess' armor, and I'll tell you all about my teenage years. Make you look like a droid in comparison." He smirked and leaned in closer to the Jedi when Obi-Wan took the helmet and smiled. "Let's just call it part of your education."

"Satine, darling, we have clothing more fitting for a Duchess than that," Katra sneered, pointing at the simple, sky blue tunic she wore, the hems and sleeves trimmed with gold and fastened at her slender waist with a thick, black belt. Fine black leather boots that reached mid-calf covered light tan traveling pants, just loose enough to make movement easy and fluid. Beside the scion of Clan Sharratt, Qui-Gon smiled.

"Why, is there something wrong with it, Katra?" Satine asked, looking at herself critically in the mirror as she brushed out her hair.

"You are royalty, dear, we have apparel that reflects that!" Katra said, striding to the closet and throwing it open, the long, walk-in room lined with ornate, elegant gowns, gossamer shawls, intricate headdresses and enough shoes to outfit an army of party-goers. "No offense intended, but what you have chosen is so...common."

"I'm on the run, Katra, I can barely feed myself, I can hardly afford luxury."

"Yes, but you're not on the run now," Katra said with a roll of her eyes. "Right now, you are shielded under the roof of Clan Sharratt, and you're about to meet with the Caderas who are, might I remind you, your greatest potential ally, and I say potential because they have the army. If they wished it, they could put themselves on the throne of Mandalore and cut you out entirely. You need to look royal to remind them why they must follow you. You are their Duchess, and you must look the part."

"I-I don't know..." Satine said uncertainly, absently running her fingers through her hair and separating it into thick strands as she begun to create an elaborate braid. "Something about that just feels...disingenuous. I'm a Duchess, yes, but I have no clan and no people, not so long as the Death Watch holds Sundari. I think some humility is in order."

"I think you look lovely, Satine," Qui-Gon said, stepping beside his charge and kissing her cheek, and Katra scoffed, her hands on her hips and looking extremely offended.

"Oh, I see, I am not high born enough for you Jedi, is that it?!"

"Lady Sharratt, you had more than enough of my attention while we were waiting for Satine," Qui-Gon said, rubbing his temples and sighing. "Come, we'll be late."

"Follow me, you stick in the mud..." Katra mumbled, gesturing for them to follow and leading them out of the room and into the spacious halls. Qui-Gon gently took Satine's arm, forcing her to walk at his much more relaxed pace, her entire being anxious and trembling with tension, and Qui-Gon touched her consciousness with the Force and found her a turbulent mess of fears and hopes and nerves, the long months of war and running finally culminating in this moment.
"You must relax, Duchess..." Qui-Gon whispered. "You do not wish to look like a frightened child before the people that will help you achieve peace in Mandalore. You are to lead them, that cannot believe you to be-"

"W-what if this is a trap?" she whispered, frantically tugging on the Jedi's arm to make him lean down toward her. "What if they've been working with Death Watch this whole time!"

"Satine, if Clan Cadera is in league with Death Watch, who is left to fight the war against them?" he asked quietly, gently stroking her arm and using the Force to soothe her frazzled nerves, and although ineffective at first, the Duchess slowly began to relax. "I understand that it feels like the Death Watch is everywhere since they are hunting us, but you do have allies, and Clan Sharratt isn't the first to tell us about Clan Cadera."

"I know, I know you're right, I know..." Satine said, clinging tighter to the Jedi's arm. "I'm just...afraid, I guess." She suddenly stopped, her tight grip on Qui-Gon's arm pulling him to a halt as well, and the Duchess silently slipped her arms around his waist and gently embraced him. With a sigh, the Jedi returned the gesture, the thin woman getting lost in his robes.

"It's going to be alright, Duchess," Qui-Gon said quietly. "You are a truly remarkable young woman and Mandalore will follow you. This is just the start of it."

"You think so?" Satine asked, her voice muffled against the Jedi's robes, and she smiled when she felt the reverberated chuckle in his chest.

"I know so," Qui-Gon said, holding the girl out at arm's length and gently brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Trust yourself and trust your feelings. You don't need to pretend, just show them who you are, and they will follow."

"This is why she isn't sleeping with her young, hot Jedi," Katra shouted from the end of the hall, her voice echoing off the walls and making Satine stand stiff and rigid beside the relaxed Jedi. "She's sleeping with you!"

"I-I most certainly am not!" Satine gasped, appalled and disgusted by the very notion.

"Doesn't look that way from where I'm standing!" Katra said, her amusement only growing with the Duchess' discomfort. "I wouldn't have guessed you'd be into older men, Satine!"

"So help me, Katra Sharratt..."

"Hurry up, love birds, we're going to be late!" the woman drawled, pressing her hand to the wall and the door slid open. Stomping her foot in agitation and a pout upon her face, the Duchess strode with purpose behind the woman, and with a sigh, Qui-Gon silently followed.

The room was dimly lit, mercenary soldiers stood along the walls, the holoprojector prepped and ready for the call to Clan Cadera. Standing in the center of the circular room were other Mandalorians in fine purple and gold armor, the others of high birth of Clan Sharratt who had come to get a look at the Duchess. The low buzz of conversation stopped when she entered the room, the armored men and women discreetly pointing at the teenager, and Satine took a deep breath and drew up tall, her gait slow and purposeful as she walked to the center of the room to be within range of the holoprojector.

Qui-Gon stayed close behind her, his hands folded in the sleeves of his robes and keeping a watchful eye on the others in the room, save for the guards, all of them unarmed. He felt them through the Force, all anticipation and excitement and nerves, but he could sense no malicious intent. Closing his eyes briefly, he reached out to Obi-Wan, checking to make sure his student was
safe, and found the Padawan to be not just at ease, but happy, a calm serenity surrounding him as he worked on the ship and passed the time with Jakal Sharratt. That confirmed it for Qui-Gon. If he nervous student wasn’t fretting as he did, there was nothing to worry about.

The holoprojector flickered on, bathing the room in pale blue light, and Satine took a deep breath, her hands clasped together and her thumbs fidgeting, though she was otherwise still. After a moment of interference, the static took shape and slowly cleared, leaving behind a clear image of two Mandalorian warriors, both in black armor accented with white. They were both seasoned soldiers, perhaps thirty from the look of them, the man with dark blond hair ruffled from his helmet, the woman beside him possessing the pale blond hair so valued on Mandalore cropped just above the shoulder. Both the soldiers looked stern, cold, almost cross until they looked at Satine and very slowly, the two drew forward, curiosity quickly becoming disbelief and then elation.

"Duchess Satine..." the woman said softly laughing with relief as she looked the girl over. "I didn't believe them when they told me. I didn't want to believe them, it would be too much to find it wasn't true..."

"Duchess..." the man said, his voice straining with excitement and a bright smile on his face. "I am Torian Cadera, this is Shae Cadera, and we are at your service, Mand'alor."

"I told you..." Katra said, sauntering to Satine's side, and both Cadera's frowned, their arms crossed over their chest. "Satine is here and safe, as I said."

"Your prisoner, I take it?" Shae asked drolly, her foot tapping impatiently against the ground.

"My guest," Katra emphasized, and Torian scoffed with a roll of his eyes.

"For months, we have been trying to secure the aid of Clan Sharratt, only to have you deny us at every turn," Torian said harshly. "We heard Death Watch was vying for your favor as well, and now you contact us with our Duchess in your possession?!" He laughed, cold and hollow. "Tell me, did you contact Death Watch as well? Are we in a bidding war for the leader of Mandalore?! Your own family was murdered, I'd think you'd understand the plight of that poor girl! Has she not suffered enough?!"

"I understand your reluctance to trust me," Katra said softly. "My clan is opportunistic at best, and I am no different from my late mother who, by the way, the Death Watch murdered..." she growled dangerously, clearing her throat and straightening up. "But even still, would you have me lead my entire clan to extinction by resisting Death Watch while we were occupied? Yes, I hated them, but we only stood to lose."

"So what do you want," Shae asked tiredly. "What does Clan Sharratt demand of Clan Cadera so that we might bring Satine home where she belongs?"

"Nothing," Katra drawled with a shrug, smirking when she looked at the surprised and suspicious faces of the Caderas. "Satine isn't a product to be sold, she is an investment. As soon as this meeting is over, she and her Jedi will presumably be heading right to you while I sit at home and I don't end up like the poor Iteras."

"Why..." Shae asked skeptically. "This is a big change for you. Our cause was never good enough for you before."

"Before your chances of winning were no better than any other clan in this conflict," Katra said, and Torian laughed harshly again.
"And it is different now?"

"Oh yes..." Katra said quietly, the two Caderas leaning in slightly as if to hear her better. "She has survived all this time being ruthlessly hunted. You haven't seen what the Duchess can do like I have. You haven't seen her and her Jedi, three people, defeat the Death Watch warriors occupying our fortress. You haven't seen what a good shot she is, as good as her brother and her father ever were, or how powerful her Jedi warriors are. But I have. I have seen it, and she cannot lose."

"I believe you," Shae said, a small smile slowly spreading across her lips, her tense posture relaxing considerably, and she nodded her head toward the leader of Clan Sharratt. "Forgive us for our suspicion, this war has been more awful than you can imagine. Countless deaths, betrayal by ambitious idiots, the extinction of entire clans..."

"We have no unity," Torian said quietly. "Entire families are fracturing, nobody can agree on how to conduct the war or who to support, and just as many young idiots are looking for their own chance to take the throne of Mandalore. Clan Vizsla's hold is not a good one, and the clans have all jumped on the opportunity to show that they are strong enough to rule." He sighed and shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration. "Everyone thinks they're a king."

"Which is why we need to end this war as quickly as possible!" Satine finally said, stepping forward and looking at the people around her with an intensity she hadn't felt in a very long time, her heart pounding in her chest and her blood rushing not with fear as it had so often as of late, but with purpose. "If we allow this to continue, there isn't going to be a Mandalore to rule, which is something all these would-be lords seem to have forgotten!"

"Which is why we turn to you, Duchess," Shae said respectfully, slightly inclining her head. "It's why Clan Cadera has always supported Clan Kryze. Your father was wise and just and strong, he raised warriors in your brother and your sister, but you, he groomed for rule. We have never forgotten that."

"We are up to our asses in ambitious idiots vying for the throne, all of them willing to kill and wage war to come out on top," Torian added. "But this isn't like the wars of old, this is a Clan War, and everyone is out for themselves, and not a single one of these idiots is willing to lay down arms until everyone who opposes them is dead." He paused for a moment, his lips pursed as he thought, and with a slight nod of his head, he took a cautious step forward, as if testing unknown waters. "They believe we need a warlord when we need a diplomat. I see no other way for our people to have peace."

"Yes, exactly!" Satine said, her eyes lighting up with a fire she hadn't felt since before her family was butchered. "This war is...intolerable! It's an affront to life itself! We lost this war the moment the clans committed to fighting each other!"

"Duchess," Shae said, standing taller and her head held proudly high. "We are by no means losing this war. Our allies-"

"We lost because Mandalore has lost!" Satine said sharply, her hand clenching tightly at her side. "We are dying. Our sons and daughters, our mothers and fathers, our sisters and brothers, all of us are children of Mandalore and we are killing each other! If we allow this butchery to continue, there won't be a Mandalore left to defend! We will just be another forgotten people, once great and reduced to nothing by foolishness. Is that to be our legacy?! Fearsome warriors who once brought the galaxy to heel, burned to ashes by our own ambition because we never learned?" She took a deep, shuddering breath, gasping softly as she laid her shaking hand over her chest and felt her pounding heart, and closing her eyes, she fought back the tears she felt stinging her eyes.
"We have to fight, Duchess," Torian said gently, stepping closer to the girl and his hands extended before him as if he made to comfort her. "Our enemies will not stop if we refuse to take up arms, they will just see us as easier targets. I know you idolize the ways of the New Mandalorians, but it just isn't possible."

"So are we to simply keep fighting until there is no one left?!" Satine snapped. "Where does it end, sir?" When the man had no answer, Satine quickly wiped the back of her hand over her eyes and stood up taller. "Our ancient warriors brought war to the galaxy so fierce that the Jedi had to be brought in to stop us, but we never did. And what did it get us? Mandalore and Kalevala devastated, made to be nothing but toxic, inhabitable wastelands, our cities forced to be encased in biodomes just for us to survive! It is madness that the warrior ways that saw to the devastation of our homeland still persist to this day. If we are to survive, if we are to move forward, we must lay down our arms and talk." She scoffed with disgust, taking a step back to bring her closer to Qui-Gon. "It's where all wars end anyway. With its leaders sitting around a table and talking. Why allow more dead to line the road to peace. We have had enough."

"Our enemies don't want to talk, Duchess," Shae said after a moment of silence. "A call for peace talks will be seen as weakness. They will take the opportunity to attack us."

"And if they do, we will defend ourselves," Satine said firmly. "I am against all this violence, but it is unreasonable to ask that we simply allow them to attack us. We will defend ourselves, we will protect our people, and when we do, we will do our best to capture, not kill, our enemies. Right or wrong, these are still my people, whether they like it or not."

"I doubt they will see it that way, Duchess," Shae continued. "They are Mandalorian, they will fight to their last breath, they will not accept peace unless it is on their own terms."

"And you believe them to be more stubborn than me?" Satine asked. "The blood of Mandalore runs in my veins as well as theirs, and I am just as relentless, if not more so, and my Jedi guardians will attest to that."

"I don't believe anyone could ever accuse you of being meek or weak-willed, Satine," Qui-Gon said with a slight smile on his face, his hands folded behind his back as he watched the Duchess draw up proudly.

"Anyone can be reasoned with," Satine said to the two Caderas. "Our enemies included. We are not the only ones who have lost their families, the other clans have suffered grievously as well. Nobody is fighting for the sake of war, we are fighting for our future. The continuation of this war offers only desolation and death. I offer peace and prosperity. There is only one choice. I can make them see it. I know I can."

There was silence in the room, every eye fixed on the young Duchess, the soft scraping of armor filtering through the air over the whir of the holoprojector as the mercenaries and Mandalorians shifted from foot to foot. Qui-Gon could see the Duchess' shoulders shaking, the remnants of the passion that ran through her like blood, the girl trying to calm herself but failing. She was a whirl of emotions, determination and staunch idealism that she had hid deep within her, forged and enforced by the fires of war, her own fire only made brighter by hardship instead of doused as may have happened with a more timid teen.

"I believe you..." Shae said with a deep breath, the tension in her shoulders releasing. "There has been a great deal said about you, Duchess. Not all of it good. You stand opposed to our traditions, but though you may be a pacifist, you are a warrior, just as your brother and father were."

"Our fortress on Vorpa'ya is yours, Duchess," Torian added. "You have been running for far too long. Let us bring you home."
"I-I'll make my way as soon as I can!" Satine said with a bright smile, taking Qui-Gon's hand in hers and tightly squeezing it. "T-thank you. I know you're risking a great deal by putting your faith in me, but I will not disappoint, I swear it."

"I certainly hope not," Katra grumbled as she sauntered up to the hologram of the put-out Shae. "You're an investment opportunity, Satine, and if I had any doubts before, you've convinced me now." She quickly produced a datapad from a holster on her thigh, her finger quickly running along the surface. "Clan Sharratt will do what we can to support you, Duchess. Secretly, of course," she drawled, leaning toward the offended holographic images and smirking at their displeasure. "How is...five hundred thousand credits to start?"

A pleased smirk slid across Katra's face when the two holograms choked, their eyes wide as they gawked wordlessly at the hopelessly smug leader of Clan Sharratt. Even Satine staggered back, leaning against the Jedi for support and her small hand trembling in his. Pulling the stunned girl closer to him, Qui-Gon inched forward, looking between the three people that called themselves Satine's allies.

"That is an extremely generous gesture, Lady Sharratt," the Jedi said, bowing his head toward the now beaming Katra.

"As I said before, Jedi, lapis is extremely valuable, and all we do here on Draboon is mine it," Katra said in her playful, sultry tone as she winked at him. "Now, as I said, I will continue to fund your efforts to end the war in secret, which means I need you and Satine off my world as soon as possible. No doubt I'll be having to field the Death Watch soon enough. They're going to have questions, and it goes without saying that you need to be gone by then." She flicked a hand in the air and gestured to the holographic Caderas. "Lord and Lady Serious here will iron out the details of your journey to Vorpa'ya. I'll get you the clearance codes you need, and you go load up your ship and prepare for your journey."

Before Katra could move, Satine tore herself out of the Jedi's grasp and threw her arms around the stunned Sharratt, the woman gasping and wriggling and shooting a pleading look at the smirking holograms when the young Duchess tightened her grasp around her. "Thank you... Satine whispered, sniffing as tears finally ran down her cheeks. "Thank you...all of you, thank you."

"We can't promise your safety, Duchess," Shae said, drawing up tall. "There is no such thing as safety anymore. But we can promise you the support of us and our allies. You needn't be alone anymore."

"We eagerly await your arrival, Mand'alor," Torian said, bowing slightly, and Satine released Katra, rubbing her eyes quickly before looking at the woman nervously.

"Will you be alright? If Death Watch is coming-"

"Don't you worry about me, Satine," Katra said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I survived the massacre of my family because I am very clever, and I know how to use my wealth as a shield. It will take more than Death Watch to bring about the end of Clan Sharratt. Just hold up your end of the bargain and end the war. This is an investment, after all, not charity."

"I will!" Satine said fervently, tightly grasping the woman's hands in her own. "I swear to you, I will."

"I don't doubt it..." she muttered, handing the Duchess off to the Jedi and wiping her hands on her leg. "Now get out of here. We all have a great deal of work to do."

With a bright smile at the holograms and her benefactor, Satine took Qui-Gon's hand and pulled
him out of the room, the teenager practically floating down the halls as she led the Jedi swiftly through the fortress to ready herself for her journey to safety within Clan Cadera.

Satine grew increasingly more excited as she and Qui-Gon walked toward the ship, the girl clutching the hem of her tunic and wringing it in hands that shook with anticipation. The elation of the meeting hadn't worn off, and from the moment she left the room, she had been crawling out of her skin to tell Obi-Wan of what had happened. By the time she reached the hangar and saw the ship, she could take it not a second longer, and she tore herself from Qui-Gon's side and sprinted toward the extended entry ramp, grinning broadly when she heard her Jedi's clear, light laughter in the corridor.

She found him quickly, the boy sitting cross-legged on the floor in her room, and she nearly rushed inside and threw herself at him, swiftly stumbling to a stop when she observed her surroundings. Her Jedi wasn't alone, instead sitting opposite Jakal Sharratt, a bright, easy smile on his face as he spoke to the other man, an assortment of tools and pieces of Mandalorian armor laid out before them. Obi-Wan looked up, his blue eyes wide and almost nervous for a moment before he quickly jumped to his feet, his fingers quickly winding around his braid as he fidgeted, shy and uncertain as he stared at his equally awkward Duchess. On the floor, Jakal looked between the two, a knowing smirk on his lips and throughly amused.

"I-I'm sorry..." Obi-Wan said quickly when Satine said nothing, his cheeks burning as he remembered where he was. "I-I didn't mean to invade your privacy, Duchess, but Jakal had...w-we were just..." He groaned softly in irritation and tugged hard on his braid, taking a deep breath as he reorganized his thoughts and picked up the helmet from the bed, painted with painstaking care in the blue and white of Clan Kryze, the paint dried and burnished to a brilliant sheen. Holding his breath, he took a step toward Satine and held the helmet out to her. "Jakal had armor crafted for you. T-to protect you. We were painting it."

"You did this for me?" Satine asked quietly, reaching out and gently taking the helmet, a small smile on her face as she looked at the two men, and the girl made a move to enter the room, but hesitated and stayed firmly rooted in the doorway. "Thank you, Jakal. It's...beautiful," she said, looking at the completed chest piece on the bed and the helmet in her hands. "Truly, it is. I've never seen armor so fine."

"I simply paid for it, Duchess," Jakal said with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Your Jedi is the one that made it beautiful. He's a fine artist, if he ever comes to his senses and abandons the Jedi to join Mandalore, he could do well painting and finishing armor." When the Jedi scoffed, his neck and cheeks reddening, Jakal laid his arm over Obi-Wan's shoulders and patted his chest. "It's a marketable skill, Kenobi! Trust me, I'm a Sharratt, we deal in marketable skills, and a good armor artist can make quite a lot of credits!"

"Obi-Wan is on the path to becoming a Jedi Knight, Jakal," Satine said, the slightest hint of pride in her voice. "It's a noble calling for one with his gifts. There isn't a more selfless way to put one's talents to use than in the service of others."

"Ugh, sounds boring!" Jakal said with a roll of his eyes, patting the terribly humbled Jedi on the back. "I suppose we need men like you so men like me can continue not giving a damn, yes?"

"I-I don't know if-"

"Don't answer that, Jedi," Jakal grumbled with a roll of his eyes, his arms crossed over his chest as he took a step back to observe the two teenagers as they shyly, awkwardly stood facing each other, though neither would look at the other.
"It's beautiful work, Obi-Wan," Satine whispered, clutching the helmet tighter. "It was a thoughtful gesture. T-thank you..."

"You deserve nothing less, Duchess..." Obi-Wan said quietly in return, shifting his weight from foot to foot as he struggled to resist the sudden pull he felt toward her, the swift surge of affection that had been sitting heavy inside him for so long. He long just managed to keep his feet rooted to the spot, just as Satine was doing. "How was your meeting with Clan Cadera?" Satine softly gasped, drawing up quickly as though she had suddenly remembered something she had forgotten, and a modest smile crossed her lips.

"I need you to set course for Vorpa'ya," Satine said firmly, though her voice trembled with barely concealed excitement. "Clan Cadera has extended the invitation for us to join them in their home. We're going, of course." She held her head up high, and Obi-Wan carefully ventured a glance at her, his breath catching in his throat when he noticed her for what felt like the first time that day. For a moment, he had almost forgotten how beautiful she was, but seeing her now, bathed and carefully groomed, it stood as an almost painful reminder of how stunning the teenage girl was. She was royalty, after all, and she wore her beauty with the grace of one born into her role. And even still, she was not yet a woman, but even just a few months after having met her, Satine had begun to grow into her body, the beauty that her features promised beginning to shine through as she neared adulthood. The Jedi couldn't help but wonder when that had happened. He certainly hadn't seen it before.

"Of course..." Obi-Wan said absently, quickly clearing his throat and looking shyly at the Duchess' feet. "The meeting went well then?"

"Very well!" Satine chirped, clutching the helmet to her tightly. "They said they will willingly follow me. A-and Katra is going to fund the war, she has already forwarded half a million credits to our cause!"

"A generous offer," Qui-Gon said as he walked down the hall toward them, stopping just outside and standing behind Satine, the Padawan quickly averting his eyes and pulling hard on his braid. "But a conditional one. We need to leave immediately, she is expecting Death Watch to come investigate their missing commanders. We need to be gone before then." When Obi-Wan shot Satine a worried glance, the Duchess awkwardly shrugged.

"She said she'll be fine..." Satine said, trying to sound confident, but the quivering in her voice quickly betrayed her.

"And she will, Duchess," Jakal quickly reassured her. "My sister is very clever, and so far as any of them know, she is the lover of one...both of the commanders stationed here," he said slyly, looking sidelong at the furiously flushing Satine. "The only thing Death Watch doesn't have their hands on is our credits, and they will remain here so long as they think they have a chance for it. As Katra said, war is expensive, and the Death Watch campaign is especially costly since they need to hold Sundari. They need us."

"And I am eternally grateful that your clan supports us," Satine said with a relieved sigh. "I don't want to leave them, but...Qui-Gon is right. We need to go if Katra has a chance of maintaining her ruse."

"Yes, yes, you must leave with all due haste!" Jakal drawled, looking wolfishly at Obi-Wan as he sauntered out of the room and grabbed hold of Qui-Gon's arm, the Jedi Master looking at the other man with confusion written on his face. "But not before we stock up your ship! We promised you real food, I believe, and in the event that something goes wrong on your journey to Vorpa'ya, you should be ready!" He tugged on Qui-Gon's arm, but the Jedi wouldn't budge. "And thank goodness you arrived when you did, Master Jedi!" Jakal chirped. "I need help loading the ship!"
"You couldn't have done this while we were in the meeting?" Qui-Gon asked, arching an eyebrow as he looked at his student as the teen chewed on his lip. Jakal gave his arm another tug.

"Have you seen how scrawny he is!" the Mandalorian asked, his tone shocked and appalled, and he once again pulled at the Jedi. "No, no, he can't lift a crate, I needed you! And we were busy installing a new hyperdrive in this piece of junk!"

"The top of the line, Master," Obi-Wan said meekly when Qui-Gon shot him a questioning look. "We should be a good deal faster now. There won't be many ships we can't outrun."

"And we had armor to paint," Jakal said quickly. "Very busy, you see. Come!" he said, tugging on his arm relentlessly, enough to make Qui-Gon stagger as his balance was disrupted.

"A-alright..." the Master said with a sigh, allowing the enthusiastic Mandalorian to pull him away, "I'll be back soon, Obi-Wan, ready the ship for our departure!" Qui-Gon said, his voice raised so the Padawan could hear him as he was led down the hall. "Make good choices!"

"I-I will, Master!" Obi-Wan called back, the boy sighing heavily as the Jedi disappeared, his hand running through his hair nervously as he looked at the Duchess in the doorway.

The moment Qui-Gon's footsteps could no longer be heard, Obi-Wan laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his neck as he started to say something, and was quickly cut off when Satine strode into the room and threw herself against him, her lips covering his own as she fiercely kissed him, her hand hooked behind his neck preventing him from pulling away. The shock was enough to keep the Jedi from doing anything, his hands instinctively coming to rest on her hips and his stunned mind suddenly flooded by the girl's overwhelming passion slowly returning the gesture, but the moment his senses returned, Obi-Wan tried to back away from the girl, only to find himself hitting the wall in his retreat and leaving him nowhere to go.

"Satine..." he hesitantly started when he managed to draw his head away from her, the struggle to catch his breath made much, much more difficult by the Duchess' wandering hands and the feel of her body pressed flush against his that kept him pinned to the wall. "Satine, we can't, my Master-

"Isn't here..." she said breathlessly, lining slow, languid kissed down his throat and delighting in the soft, tortured groan she pulled out of him when her fingers traced lower and lower on the strong muscles of his abdomen.

"B-but he'll be back soon!" Obi-Wan gasped, his hands swiftly wrapping around her arms with the intention to hold her at bay, but he found he lacked the strength to do so, his muscles tightening as he shivered and he instead drew her closer to him. "W-we can't! You're going to rule now, aren't you? Y-you can't...w-we can't-

"Just shut up, will you? You're ruining everything..." Satine muttered, her hand wrapping around his braid and pulling him down to her level, and the deep, wanting groan in his chest and the struggle on his face as she watched his resistance crumble made her heart race, her own excitement rising and pushing her to press her lips against his again. The Jedi resisted less this time, instead of making attempts to reluctantly pull away now pulled her close and leaned into her touch, easily following her lead as she spurred them onwards.

Swift, light kisses almost frantic in intensity quickly became deeper, more passionate as the teens lost themselves in each other, all sense of time and place leaving them as they touched and stroked each other. All thoughts of Qui-Gon disappeared as the Duchess placed her hands on the Jedi's shoulders and pinned him against the wall, the breathless, moaning boy allowing her passion to
infect him and sweep him away, barely managing to keep a grasp on his senses as he so eagerly allowed the Mandalorian to overcome him. For just a moment, he allowed himself to revel in the feel of her against him, his body relaxing and slowly easing into perfect harmony with the Duchess as he matched each of her movements.

Obi-Wan's conversation with Jakal echoed through his mind when a soft, wanting moan was pulled from his Duchess, the girl moving even closer and rolling her hips suggestively against his, and he couldn't help his mind from conjuring images of Satine and him more passionately engaged, naked and moaning as he thrust within her. The sudden pulse of lust within him and the stirring in the pit of his stomach was enough to shock Obi-Wan out of his haze, a feeling that Satine must have shared because the girl suddenly tensed in his arms and slowly broke the kiss with a reluctant groan, though she didn't draw away from him to allow sanity to reassert itself, instead laying her head on his chest and tightly clinging to him as if he would be gone the moment she let go.

"I wanted to say thank you, Obi," Satine whispered after she had caught her breath, her ear pressed against the Jedi's chest as she listened to the rapid humming of his heart, the rise and fall of his lungs, each and every gasp and soft moan torn from his chest as he tried to calm himself. "If it weren't for you and Qui-Gon, I'd be dead, and what happened today, this alliance, my...allies helping me step into my place...w-well, none of it would have happened if it weren't for you." She smiled up at him when the flushed boy modestly averted his eyes, and Satine gently cupped his cheek, her fingers gently stroking his jaw line as she turned his head to look at her. "All of it is because of you, Obi-Wan Kenobi. I haven't forgotten that. I will never forget that."

"My Master did more than I did..." Obi-Wan muttered modestly, trying to tear his eyes away from the intense, adoring eyes of the Duchess, but he found himself trapped in the clear, bright blue. "A-and it's not like you didn't do anything. You're...amazing. Every time we get into a mess, you continue to impress me with what you can do and the lengths you will go to, not just to escape and survive, but to save the people trying to kill you." The Jedi smiled softly and brushed his fingers through her hair to twirl a stray strand. "It's...beautiful. You'll make a fine ruler for Mandalore."

"I'm glad that Clan Cadera could see what you do, my Jedi," Satine said, softly pressing her lips to Obi-Wan's jaw, and the boy laughed slightly as he drew her closer. "How could they not? You shine so brightly, Satine, even the blind could see it." When the girl nestled against him with a satisfied sigh, her flushed cheek burning the skin of his chest and the contact between them making his heart race with the feel of electricity, Obi-Wan gently hooked his fingers under her chin and tilted her face up, gasping softly as he got lost in the look of longing on her face. "I wish I could have seen you in that meeting. I bet you were magnificent..."

"There will be others," Satine said, her fingers lightly tracing down Obi-Wan's neck and under the cut of his robes, soft, keening gasps torn from the boy when her fingernails gently scraped across his chest. "I have allies now, but the war isn't over yet. You'll be in my service for some time yet, my Obi-Wan," the girl drawled, her voice low and heavy with suggestion as her hands rested on the Jedi's sides and lightly grabbed at his hips, and the hapless Obi-Wan responded with a deep, wanting groan as his resistance crumbled.

"Y-you've been asked to lead," the Jedi stammered, swallowing hard and trying to steel himself against the Duchess' touch and the sparks that existed in the close contact between them. "Your duty, Satine, it begins now."

"Which means we need to take advantage of these moments when we have them," she whispered, pressing closer to the Jedi and eliciting a deep, breathless moan from the boy when her fingers dipped just below the waist of his pants, her own movements hesitant with nerves and her bravado faltering with her inexperience, but desire and the urgency of their limited time kept her hand in
place. She waited for Obi-Wan to say something, anything to make her stop, to remind her they could not do this, that they were a distraction, that their feelings flew in the face of his precious Code, but the Jedi said nothing, only leaned back against the wall, his eyes closed as he surrendered to the blissful sensation of the Duchess’ touch, his chest rapidly rising and falling with his mounting arousal.

Satine felt her own heart beat faster with the building of her own passion, a remnant from the heated blood that ran through her during her imposition to Clan Cadera, and though she knew that Qui-Gon wasn't far away, that they had already spent too much of their very limited time, she found she couldn't look away from her Jedi's face, a thrill running through her as she watched him struggle for control that was quickly slipping away from him. Pressed so closely to him, she could feel the beginnings of his arousal made physical, and instead of the nerves she had felt before each time they grew heated enough for this to happen, she felt curious. Nervous, yes, certainly a bit fearful, but the anxiety she felt wasn't all reluctance, but a fair bit of her own anticipation to go further, her fear less about allowing themselves to fulfil their desires and more about getting caught and being forced to stop.

And she didn't want to stop. They had always broken away before, always given each other the space they needed to calm themselves, to allow the space between them to stifle the arousal that pulsed strong through their bodies. Each time had been more and more difficult to break away, the intense passion between them more and more difficult to quell, and now it seemed as though those flames had never been completely doused, only left to smoulder so that the next time, the stoked flames could grow hotter than before. Now, the tension between them had grown to a near fever-pitch, and Satine knew that neither she nor her stalwart Jedi would be able to stop it for much longer. They needed each other. They wanted each other, and their limited time together made the prospect of waiting unbearable.

It just couldn't be now.

"Obi..." the Duchess started, trying to pull herself away, but the Jedi’s gentle grip on her was insistent and he refused to let go, only pulled her closer and with a deep, desperate moan, he quickly seized her lips with his own, passionate and hungry and deep enough to drown Satine in the passion between them. She quickly took command when she felt the pull within her, her hands placed firmly on his shoulders to pin him against the wall and pressing back hard into him, their soft gasps becoming keening moans as they fed off each other's passion. It was easy for Satine to get lost within Obi-Wan, even easier for her to slide his robes off his shoulders and stroke the heated skin of his chest, her breath hitching when she felt the strong, lean muscle quiver under her touch, and leaning up into him, she let herself go, everything forgotten save for the inevitable conclusion they were swiftly rushing toward.

It only stopped when the Jedi shivered, the moan in his throat becoming a soft, reluctant whimper as his hands tightened on the Duchess hips, pulling away from the kiss with a long, shaking groan. When Satine reached up to stroke his face and bring him back down to meet with her once again, the Jedi turned his face away, his eyes shut tight and his jaw clenched, the hands on her hips straining with such effort that even the lost Satine noticed and slowly pulled away, a concerned look on her face as she closely examined her Jedi's face. When Obi-Wan finally opened his eyes and flashed her a shy, nervous smile, Satine found his clear blue eyes a stormy, thin ring encircling a wide, dark pupil, mad with lust and desire that he only just managed to control, and it was enough to give the Duchess pause, the girl reaching out and gently taking his hand as she took a small step back, the boy sighing in relief as she did.

"M-my Master..." he whispered, casting his eyes at the ground when he felt he could no longer look at the young woman and maintain his composure. "He'll be back soon, I-"
"I understand, Obi-Wan," Satine said gently, smiling when she felt the boy tightly squeeze her hand. "Truly, I do. You said so before, I should have listened. I'm...sorry to have put you through this, I just-"

"Your emotions run high," Obi-Wan softly added when the Duchess faltered. "They always have, it's a part of being Mandalorian. You are a creature of passion, Satine. It's...one of the things I admire most about you." With a soft smile that was equal parts grateful and apologetic, Satine slipped her arms around the Jedi's waist, the boy hissing softly when she laid her head on his chest and listened to the strong beating of his heart.

"I don't know next when we'll be alone, Obi-Wan, but when we are, when we have time, I'd very much like for us to get closer," Satine said, her fingers lazily twirling around his braid. "I-if you'll have me, that is," she added quickly when she felt him tighten in her grasp. "I know it's...breaking your Code. I may be asking too much of you, b-but-" She huffed in frustration and bit down on her lower lip as she thought about how to say everything she felt without scaring her timid Jedi away, but could come up with nothing. "I just...don't know what we are. You aren't my boyfriend, and we certainly aren't lovers, s-so..." She sighed and gently cupped the Jedi's cheek, her thumb running over his lips. "What would you even call a Duchess and a Jedi when we are forbidden from everything we wish we could be?"

"I-I don't know..." Obi-Wan quietly confessed, taking her hand and bringing her palm to his lips. "I know the time we do have is precious, but...there's no reason to rush this. We can take our time and find the answers together." For a long moment, Satine was silent, her lips pressed in a thin line as she looked into her Jedi's eyes and watched the enlarged pupil slowly recede, leaving her to look into clear, vibrant blue once again. Slowly, a relieved smile crossed her face, the tension she felt suddenly eased and her nerves about rushing into the unknown soothed.

"You know, for a boy that is so often making mistakes and saying the wrong things, you certainly know how to say the right things when it matters." Obi-Wan scoffed, and before he had a chance to say anything, Satine stood up on her toes and swiftly kissed his cheek. "You better go prepare yourself for your Master, my Knight. I'd hate for him to put an end to what we have before we could truly begin because your connection with him gave us away."

"With my luck, he already knows..." Obi-Wan groaned with a roll of his eyes, and with a swift, chaste kiss to the Duchess' lips, he walked slowly to step out into the corridor, the girl following him to lean in the doorway, her fingers tracing small patterns on the wall. "I'm...going to take a shower. If you need me-"

"Oh, stars above, Obi-Wan, I can manage myself while you're in the bathroom," Satine teased with a roll of her eyes. "I was going to try the armor on, which I was going to do alone anyway, thank you very much."

"But if you need me-"

"I know where to find you, dear," the Duchess said with a sly smile. "I suppose I should just barge in there while you are bathing were something to happen. Surely you could defend me even without your clothes on. Couldn't you, my Knight?" Satine grinned broadly when the Jedi flushed a deep shade of red, muttered something under his breath, and quickly made his way into the fresher, the door sealing behind him and the muffled sound of running water accompanying the soft hum of the engines. With a quiet, longing sigh, Satine shot one last look at the door her Jedi disappeared behind before she disappeared inside her room, the door closing with a hiss behind her.

Obi-Wan quickly shed his clothing as soon as he had locked himself in the room and turned the water on, and taking a deep breath of the air as it filled with steam, he stepped underneath the
stream of water, wincing slightly as the hot water touched his skin before he became accustomed to the feel of it. Sighing heavily as the hot water did nothing to cool the blood in his veins, he reached out to turn the heat off, but quickly stopped, his hand hovering over the handle and his eyes glancing down the length of his body to where his member stood fully and painfully engorged. Swallowing his desires before had done him no favors, and was partially to blame for his inability to control himself now, the pressing need within him continuously repressed now bucking and aching for release which he had so adamantly denied himself.

He was uncertain how long it would be before he could have another chance to be alone, and in close quarters with watchful Qui-Gon and alluring Satine would do him no favors, and his rogue body wasted no time in reminding him how badly he desired to be intimate with the lovely Duchess. His Master would no doubt notice, which was far more embarrassment than Obi-Wan was willing to endure. Something had to be done, and with Qui-Gon away and Satine sequestered in her quarters, now was as good a time as any. Closing his eyes and quietly blocking himself off from the connection he and his Master shared, Obi-Wan took his hand away from the handle and wrapped it around himself.

Reveling in the feel of the water running through his hair and across his back and shoulders, he leaned his elbow against the wall and rested his head in the bend of his elbow as he slowly began stroking, his already full erection throbbing with each movement of his hand and hardening further in his grasp. For just a moment, Obi-Wan bit down on his lip and tried to stifle his ragged, breathless panting, but quickly stopped when it merely resulted in deep, shaking moans deep in his chest. With a shuddering sigh, he let himself go, relaxing and surrendering to the feeling of euphoric tension that rushed within him as he slowly pleasured himself, his mind filling with Satine as he imagined her naked and gripped in the throes of sexual euphoria.

Through the rushing of the water in his ears, he could almost hear her moaning his name in his ear, could almost see her laid out before him though his eyes remained closed. His shoulders shook as they heaved with each heavy breath, his throat occasionally tightening with a moan or a whimper as his thumb circled the sleek, sensitive head, his hand tightening with each pulse of pleasure torn from him, his stroking becoming quicker as he felt the building tension begin to reach its peak. It was more intense than the times he had done this in the past, his desires given focus lending him more pleasure than he knew what to do with, his imagination running wild with vivid images instead of the vague ones of before. Where before he had always felt tremendous shame for his body's weakness and his own submission to his baser needs, now he quietly embraced the feeling, reveling in the warmth spreading within him, embracing the feel of the Force as it's warm breeze turned hot with the passion he fed it.

Unable to hold off any longer, Obi-Wan bit down on his lip to keep himself from moaning Satine's name as orgasm crashed down upon him in a wave, his stroking slowing as his hips rolled with each pulse of pleasure tearing through him as his ejaculate splattered the wall. He moaned softly as he continued stroking his throbbing erection as it slowly began to subside, riding out the euphoric tide for as long as he could before he felt his hand slicked with semen that lazily pulsed out of the tip. When his breathing slowed and his pounding heart eased back into a calm, even beat, he opened his eyes and stared tiredly at the wall before him, the traces of his orgasm running in thick, white ropes down the wall.

For a long moment, he just stared, his shaking legs protesting any movement and the rest of him simply too tired in his satiation to consider anything other than falling asleep under the warm, running water. He stated still until his legs stopped shaking and the water had washed the evidence of his arousal down the drain, the shower wall clean as though he hadn't been there, as if nothing at all had happened. With a satisfied groan as he pushed away from the wall, Obi-Wan shut the water out and quietly got out to towel himself off, the Code running through his mind as he attempted to center himself in preparation to face his Master.
When Obi-Wan emerged from the fresher fully dressed and at home in his skin once again, he made his way to the cockpit where Satine and Qui-Gon were discussing strategy over a map as they waited for him to join them. The moment he stepped in the room, Qui-Gon sent the Padawan a look and sharply tugged on the connection between them, and Obi-Wan winced and quickly averted his eyes, the swift rebuke a clear warning that the Master was watching him. Clearing his throat, Obi-Wan sat in the pilot's seat, careful to avoid Satine's stare as he passed before her and swallowing hard when she laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Qui-Gon thinks we should take the long way to Vorpa'ya," Satine said, clearly displeased with the notion. "He thinks bounty hunters and Death Watch are watching and that we risk leading them into Cadera territory were they to get a lock on our jump coordinates. I think it won't matter, since Clan Cadera is well defended, and were we to arrive with enemies on our tail, they would be chased out of the system by our allies the moment we came out of hyperspace in their territory. Besides, everyone knows where the Caderas operate out of. It's not a secret where they make their home."

"None the less, we must exercise caution," Qui-Gon said calmly. "We must not rely on our allies, lest we become complacent. This is a matter where making a good choice, and we know all about making good choices, don't we, Obi-Wan?" the Master asked sharply, shooting an inquisitive, piercing look at his young student, and Obi-Wan calmly met his gaze.

"We do, Master," Obi-Wan said softly, looking back at the Duchess seated behind him. "I'm sorry, Satine. Qui-Gon's right. Safe is not always convenient, but we must do everything in our power to remain safe." The Duchess stared at him for a long moment in silence, her eyes wide with surprise, a feeling that was echoed in the Jedi Master, and while Obi-Wan wasn't looking at Qui-Gon, he could feel the man's sudden confusion reach through the Force to grasp for understanding.

"I'm sorry, what?" Satine snapped, standing from her seat and glaring at the other teenager. "Have you forgotten who is in charge here, Obi-Wan? I am royalty, and as of today, I have an army at my back supporting my claim to the throne of Mandalore!"

"I beg your pardon, Duchess Satine, but I was under the impression that the Jedi were called here to see to your safety," Obi-Wan said calmly, his face expressionless as the Duchess became more furious. "From my point of view, this appears to be a matter of your safety, and safety dictates we go the long way. Avoiding the hyperspace lanes will make us terribly difficult to find."

"Being out there away from my allies leaves me vulnerable!" Satine argued, and Obi-Wan scoffed and rolled his eyes.

"Last I checked, we are your allies, Satine," Obi-Wan said, turning away from the cross girl and punching in coordinates into the navicomputer as he plotted their route, one that avoided the hyperspace lanes and the common routes through the Mandalore territories. "If Master Qui-Gon says we should take the long way because he has a bad feeling about the direct path, you would be a fool not to listen. Need I remind you about Clan Ordo?"

"Oh, you are awful!" Satine snapped, stomping her foot on the ground and defiantly crossing her arms. "Fine! Have it your way, you stubborn, foolish boy!" she said, grabbing his braid and sharply tugging it, causing Obi-Wan to hiss and pain and grab hold of the arm of his seat to keep himself from falling out of it.

"Children, enough..." Qui-Gon said tiredly, rubbing his temples as he leaned back and looked between the two quarreling teens. "Honestly, should this bickering keep up, you may as well marry each other."
"What, _me_ marry him?!!" Satine asked incredulously, laughing harshly after letting her eyes rake over the young Jedi. "I'll have you know, I'd rather marry _Edric Ordo_ than ever, _ever_ even consider such a vile thing with that...that _Jedi_!" Her hands planted firmly on her hips, Satine drew up tall and looked down her nose at the unaffected Padawan. "At least Edric Ordo is tall and strong and _handsome_, not some scrawny little child like _you_!"

Obi-Wan whistled softly, a sly smirk coming to his face that made Satine draw back slightly. "My, all that and a traitor to boot," Kenobi drawled, his grin widening when Satine's jaw clenched tight and her cheeks stained light pink. "You better marry him before he slips away from you, Duchess, though I don't think he'll be going anywhere very quickly, since I broke his legs..."

"Well, _maybe I will_!" the Duchess snapped. "We could sit together and _bond_ over how _awful_ you are, Obi-Wan Kenobi!" With that, she stormed out of the cockpit, the door hissing behind her as it closed, and the two Jedi breathed a sigh of relief in the silence that followed, only to quickly sit bolt upright in their seats when the door slid open once again and Satine poked her head in through the doorway. "And I _don't_ like your stupid braid either!" she shouted, disappearing as suddenly as she had reappeared. For a long moment, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon sat in silence, holding their breaths in anticipation of her reappearing, and only relaxed when they felt the girl's presence slowly begin to calm back in her place in the ship.

"Tranquility," Qui-Gon mumbled softly, "is _not_ something that girl has _ever_ been accused of."

"She is still young, Master," Obi-Wan said quietly, his fingers flying over the console as he ran the ship's pre-flight checks. "In time, she will learn."

"That she will..." Qui-Gon said, looking at his student and reaching out to him through the Force, and Obi-Wan sighed and grabbed the controls, firing the engines as he lifted the ship off the ground and quietly let his Master in. "Did you make good choices, Obi-Wan?" he asked, looking for some sort of reaction out of his student, but getting nothing out of the guarded boy.

"I always do, Master, you know that..." Obi-Wan muttered, pulling the controls back when he received clearance to leave the hangar, and the ship shot up into the sky, a gradual angle as the ship sliced through the atmosphere toward space.

"Really," Qui-Gon drawled, lightly tugging on the boy's braid, and Obi-Wan swiftly snatched it away, running it nervously through his fingers and his eyes downcast with what felt like shame to the Jedi Master. "Because I felt _something_ in the Force, my Padawan, and I thought maybe you and Satine-"

"I-I was alone, Master," Obi-Wan quickly interrupted, a furious red spreading across his cheeks as he pulled back on the accelerator, the smooth, even pace of before vanishing when it lurched forward with the sudden burst of speed made only faster when they tore out of Draboon's atmosphere and used the planet's gravity to sling them out into open space.

"Alone," Qui-Gon repeated skeptically, and the Padawan nodded.

"Alone. I-in the shower. U-understand?" For a moment, Qui-Gon continued to search his student, and with a gasp, he sat back in his seat, a knowing smirk on his lips.

"Ah...yes, I understand."

"There are just _so many_ attractive Mandalorians, Master, it isn't fair! No wonder the Jedi historically fight these ruffians, their very presence is _torture_!"

"I can't say I envy teenagers and their hormones..." Qui-Gon said softly, looking over at his
student as the boy tried to busy himself with checking and rechecking all the ship's systems now that they were out in space. There was more to this, and Qui-Gon knew it. Obi-Wan was clearly hiding something, something that was eating at the very core of him, and while he had promised himself he would leave well enough alone, he found it difficult to allow the Padawan that kind of space. "Obi-Wan..." Qui-Gon began slowly. "If all this is about Satine-"

"It isn't, Master," the boy quickly interrupted, and Qui-Gon frowned, the swift reply more than a confirmation for what the Master had feared.

"...I understand I haven't been the easiest Master, Obi-Wan," he began. "What you saw in me when Tahl died, I...fear I may have tarnished the way you see certain emotions that are both natural and expected for people, especially those as empathetic as you." It was subtle, so much so that Qui-Gon could barely see it, but the Padawan's hand tightened around the yoke, his eyes staring intently at the stars that filled the viewport. "If you ever have any need to talk about the things you're going through...w-well, I have been through it as well, even if I never did handle it in the best of ways, and I am always available to you."

"I-I'm not..." Obi-Wan began, but quickly trailed off when he glanced at his Master and found him to be both melancholy and understanding, like he saw right through him and knew exactly what his Padawan was going through. "...I will, Master," Obi-Wan whispered, his hand running through his ever-lengthening hair. "Thank you."

"Never forget, Obi-Wan, I am here to guide you," Qui-Gon said, his hand resting on the boy's arm. "If you never had any doubt or struggle, you would have no use for me." He chuckled softly and shook his head, reclining in his seat as he closed his eyes. "Remember, my Padawan, no matter what it is you get yourself into, I was a hundred times worse than you ever could be."

"...did you ever fall in love?" Obi-Wan whimpered, and Qui-Gon sat up and turned toward the tense boy.

"Is that the problem?" Qui-Gon asked, and before the Padawan could answer, the door hissed open once again, both Jedi looking to the back of the cockpit at the Duchess, her eyes cast at the ground and quietly rocking on her feet.

"Obi-Wan?" she began tentatively, taking a small, shuffling step forward when the boy quickly looked up at her. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean...I-I said some things that I..." She stopped and shook her head. "My behavior was unbecoming of one of my station. You deserve better than what I-"

"It's alright..." Obi-Wan said quietly, his hand raised to silence her, an easy smile on his lips as he looked at the fidgeting girl. "I understand you are eager to be reunited with your people so you can return home. But you won't be going home if you die because we take foolish risks."

"Yes, you're right, of course you're right..." Satine muttered, reaching out and gently laying her hand upon the Padawan's shoulder, her fingers stroking the heavy fabric of his robe. "I know I have said it before, but I will try to be more agreeable in the future." With a soft, shy smile, Satine's fingers very lightly touched his neck as she drew her hand back, the small look and the Padawan's slight shiver failing to pass Qui-Gon's notice. "Thank you for keeping me safe," she whispered, slowly taking her hand away and turning to leave the cockpit. "Goodnight, my Jedi protectors."

"G-goodnight, Duchess..." Obi-Wan stammered, swallowing hard to push back the stirring within him, awakening despite the attention to himself earlier. With a quick smile at the men in the cockpit, Satine left once again, and Qui-Gon turned his attention back to his Padawan.

"So...anything you want to tell me, Obi-Wan?"
"N-no..." Kenobi whispered, his eyes focused on the closed door behind him. "Nothing worth discussion, Master." With a slow, understanding nod, Qui-Gon leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes to rest, leaving Obi-Wan to pilot them through space, his hand gingerly touching his shoulder where Satine's hand had been only a moment before, the warmth still spreading through him like she was right there beside him.

Entry one hundred seventeen.

After months of running, after months of being relentlessly hunted, after all this time of being alone and isolated from my people, I have finally found my allies in Clan Cadera and my silent benefactors in Clan Sharratt. I can scarcely believe it. I confess, after the deaths of my mother and father and brother, after my sister left me for Death Watch and condemned me to die with the rest of my family, I was beginning to lose hope. It is so easy to doubt myself when nobody stands for me, save for the Jedi, and they are the historic enemies of Mandalore. I suppose that's part of the problem. When I have the throne back, that will be the first thing to change. We cannot expect to maintain peace if we villainize the peacekeepers.

For a long time, I thought maybe what I wanted for Mandalore was an impossibility. Every clan I came in contact with wanted me dead, those that did not were slaughtered, and I began to think that there was nobody left who supported the New Mandalorian vision for our future. Supporting me simply became too dangerous, and that was made none more apparent than when Clan Wren executed Clan Itera. I still have nightmares about that. It haunts me. All this violence, all this death, and for nothing at all but more of the same. I can't understand how my people don't see this. We are trapped in a cycle of glory and revenge, and it will never stop until we stop glorifying all this bloody violence.

But we found them. Though they may be warriors, there are those left in Mandalore who still believe in peace, those who have grown weary of all the bloodshed, those who are tired of losing family and friends to pointless violence. I can scarce believe it. There is something for me to be fighting for, something other than my own life, and I cannot begin to describe how rewarding that is. I was made for this, groomed to rule, and while I was always scared and uncertain when I was younger and studying on Coruscant, I have never been more certain of my path than I am now. I will lead Mandalore to a new dawn and a new way. We will be peaceful and prosperous, and we will thrive as we work to foster a new image of the Mandalorians.

Of course, now that I can actually see an end to this war, there has been a limit placed on this...romance I have with Obi-Wan. It was always there, I suppose. He was always going to leave me, but before it seemed like that day would never come. We would run until we could no longer, until a misstep ended in my death, and that would be that. But now, the war will thankfully end, and he will leave me to become the Jedi Knight he was always meant to be. I'd be lying if I said this wasn't bittersweet, and maybe that makes me selfish, but I hate that it must end. It must, this war has to end, and I suppose losing him is the sacrifice I must make. It can be no other way.

I'd have thought this would make pulling him into bed with me easier. I've thought of nothing else for months, and now with our time increasingly precious, I thought it would be an easy thing to get the most out of him. It's not such a big thing to go from...whatever it is we are to lovers, but I find myself even more frightened than before, perhaps because the prospect is drawing closer and closer each time we touch. Even his legendary Jedi resistance is wearing increasingly thin, even I can see that. He wants me, I can see it in him, I can feel it every time we touch, I can hear it in the way his heart beats and in the way he moans when he struggles for control. I want him to lose it. I so badly want him to take the matter in his hands and make me his, but I know he will not. My Jedi is too careful, too cautious, too nervous to do anything I do not ask of him.
But I don't want to ask. I'm...afraid, I suppose. Stars, what sort of Mandalorian am I?

I wonder if Bo-Katan was afraid when she was first made a woman, or if she simply grabbed hold of her passions and rushed without thinking into it. Maybe she had no choice. Maybe she was seduced the way I was nearly seduced by Edric Ordo. I certainly hope not. I hope she had a choice. I hope it was easy for her. But more than anything, I wish I could ask her. I miss her dearly, and while I try not to think of her, I still do. We were friends once. We were close once, though we were always so different. If I could have helped her, if I could have seen that things went differently, if I could have somehow managed to keep her from her Vizsla lover, maybe we would have been fighting on the same side. Maybe she wouldn't condemn me as dar'manda with the rest of the people that slaughtered our family. Maybe if I hadn't failed her, I-

No, stop it, don't do this to yourself, you can't do this to yourself again, Satine. Bo made her choice, just as I have made mine.

Clan Cadera is a large clan. I remember some of them in Sundari when I was young. My brother's friends, Rimark and Tanik, the twins Randor and Randun, Bo's sparring partner Warr'an, beautiful Tayn, who I used to follow like a shadow. I wonder if any of them are still alive. I wonder if they'd remember me. Regardless, there are sure to be girls my age there. Maybe I can ask them about how to please a man. At the very least, they may be able to help ease my fears about going to bed with someone. My Jedi is timid, I don't want to frighten him away from the passion he works so hard to hide.

Stars, I feel like an idiot, pining over a boy when there is a war going on that I am expected to end. My duty is stressful enough without having to worry about being pleasing to a boy who isn't allowed to love.

It sounds even more stupid now that I have written it down. Honestly, what in blazes is wrong with me? I'm not ready to rule. I'd pray for more time, but each day that passes means more dead. It seems like no matter what I do, I will never be ready for it, though I suppose time is a luxury that I have never had. In times like these, I'd turn to my family, but they are all gone. Who do I have left to turn to?

Gods above, I want to go home.
Moving Forward

Chapter Notes

OH MY GOD.

So this would have been up HOURS ago, but a thunderstorm knocked out my power and I was unable to update. I was going to be seriously upset that the weather was going to make a liar out of me, but it came back just in time! So here you are! A lot happening in this one, sort of setting the stage going forward and next chapter...well, I'm thinking you're all going to love it. I had an awesome idea for it, so awesome that I'll be working on the next chapter while I'm working on From Flames, I Soar.

Oh, also, since I asked and you responded, most of you seem to be fine with me going forward with writing this thing however the hell I want, and as such, I'm going to continue keeping this thing with more mature content. Now, I'm never, EVER going to venture into smut territory, but I am going to get fairly descriptive, though I will be keeping it fairly tasteful. This is a story that, at the heart of it, is about sexual discovery and love, and sex is a very important part of romantic love at any age, even if it's in its absence. I feel like I'd be doing the story a disservice by passing it over, and by leaving important developments out, I feel it will compromise the overall feel. I can't justify keeping it out. You guys are just going to have to trust me. I'll keep it tasteful, don't you worry.

That's it! Updated! Enjoy, my lovelies!

"I'm telling you, it was awful!" Katra Sharratt snapped from her throne, her hand gesturing dramatically in the air at the scoring on the walls and the floor from the plasma burns of blasters and the cooling cuts left by dragging lightsabers. Her eyes narrowed angrily at the two soldiers in the center of the room, their arms crossed over their chest and looking profoundly irritated to have walked into the Countess' ire. Beside her, her leaned against the throne, the younger man looking just as petulant as the two women she was addressing. "And I really liked that commander too!"

Katra continued when the girls said nothing. "If he was half as good a warrior as he was a lover, maybe he wouldn't have been killed by an old man and a prepubescent boy!"

"Uh, the student isn't a child, Katra," Jakal said with a roll of his eyes. "He's a teenager. A smart, strong, gorgeous teenager..."

"Whatever..." the woman scoffed, leaning back on her throne and crossing her leg over her knee. "The point is, my Death Watch guard is dead. All of them. So you tell me, ladies, why should my clan support Tor Vizsla when his soldiers are beaten by an man old enough to be my grandfather, a boy whose balls have barely dropped, and a pacifist."

"What clan?" Ursa Wren sneered, a look of disdain upon her face as her gaze drifted around the room at the guards that stood along the walls. "None of these soldiers are your clan. Your clan isn't big enough or strong enough to even defend itself!"

"Oh, I very much disagree with that," Katra drawled, reaching into a pouch on her belt and holding something in her hand, and with a sly smirk, began flipping a golden coin over her fingers. "There are millions in my clan, and while my army may not be of Clan Sharratt, they still
wear my colors." She flicked the coin at the two woman, but neither moved to catch it, instead allowing it to land with a heavy, chiming ring upon the opulent marble floor. "Little good an army did for Clan Ordo, Clan Itera or Clan Kryze, and yet even without a large clan of my own, I'm still here."

"A lot of good that wealth did for your parents," Ursa said with a cruel smirk on her face, watching as Jakal's jaw tightened with anger, his hand swiftly moving to the blaster on his hip, but his sister reached out and stopped him, her face impassive as it had been before. "We all know where the real strength of Mandalore lies. My clan destroyed the Iteras because we are more fierce. The Vizslas conquered Sundari because Clan Kryze's scion is weak."

"And yet, that same little girl made fools of you on Zanbar and destroyed your very impressive garrison here," Katra retorted, returning the cruel, amused smirk when a vicious sneer spread across Ursa's face. "And now to replace them, Tor sends me two flat chested adolescents?" She laughed lightly, taking her hand off her brother's arm when she felt him relax. "Doesn't exactly instill my confidence in the Death Watch if this is the best he has to offer."

"We aren't here on behalf of Tor Vizsla," Bo-Katan said softly, the calm in her voice tight with the strain of controlling her explosive temper. "We're here for my sister." There was a brief moment of silence as Katra stared down the until now silent teenager, her eyes running over her every feature, and slowly, her jaw went slack.

"I'll be damned..." Katra muttered, leaning forward in her chair and looking closer. "You're Bo-Katan Kryze. Stars, I never would have pegged you as a relation to the Duchess."

"Yes, yes, we all know I pale next to perfect, beautiful Satine!" Bo-Katan snapped, spitting the words as if they tasted vile and bitter. "I am sick of hearing about it! How our proud family could have ever flaunted that weak, pathetic child, I will never understand. It's no wonder they were only fit for slaughter when they would weaken our noble clan with that filth!" Before anybody could even see her move, Bo-Katan had drawn her twin blasters and had them aimed at the last two members of Clan Sharratt, the high whine of the primed charges ringing in the air followed by the swift cascade of the surrounding guards raising their own weapons. The younger Kryze was unphased, her hands steady and her fingers on the triggers. "My sister may be a weak, pathetic waste of life, but I am a warrior," Bo-Katan growled, the corner of her mouth curling up into a sneer as she looked at the woman on the throne, a blaster in her own hands pointed casually at the aggressive Kryze. "Now, she was here, you've seen her, and I'm willing to wager you know where she went. Tell me."

"Or what?" Katra calmly asked, her voice smooth and unwavering. "You'll kill me? My soldiers would shoot you and your little friend dead before you even had a chance to pull that trigger. Sure, maybe you'll kill me and my brother, but little good that does you if you're dead as well. Actually..." Katra whistled loudly, all the soldiers in the room looking toward her, and a single man stepped forward, a captain from the look of his armor. "Commander, should I be killed by this bitch or any other of her Death Watch friends, see that the entirety of my fortune goes to her sister's stake in the war."

"As you say, Countess," the man said, swiftly leaving the room, and Katra grinned when Bo-Katan's jaw tightened with anger and reluctantly holstered her blasters.

"As I said before," Katra drawled, gesturing for her guards to lower their weapons when the two teenagers stared petulantly at the ground, their shoulders tight with anger from the humiliation of their defeat. "I would rather armor myself in gold than surround myself with soldiers."

"But you do surround yourself with soldiers," Ursa spat, glaring up at the smug woman on the throne. "You have an army, a formidable one. Paid, perhaps, loyal to gold, not you, but you have
them none the less. Certainly they could have captured the Duchess, they could have supported our men that we had stationed here."

"They could have, yes..." Katra quietly agreed. "But when they saw what those Jedi could do and what a terribly good shot dear Satine is, they decided that fighting them was not in their best interests." She shrugged, grinning when Bo-Katan's bright green eyes shot up to glare at her, filled with rage and hate and a hurt that the Countess of Clan Sharratt didn't quite understand. "A vast fortune is worth nothing if you're not alive to spend it. Convincing my men to give up their lives simply wasn't possible, so I made due."

"Cowards!" Bo-Katan hissed, her entire being shaking in her fury. She felt helpless, and she hated it.

"Maybe so, but at least we're alive," Katra said, leaning in toward the frustrated teenagers and flashing them a wide grin. "I suppose if the warriors keep killing each other, before long, all that will be left are those committed to peace. Seems your sister's already won."

"We shall see about that," Bo-Katan hissed. "The Duchess. Where did she go?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Katra said with a yawn, leaning back on the throne and resuming her relaxed posture. "And even if I did, I certainly wouldn't tell you. Information is a valuable thing, little Kryze, and only the fool gives it away for nothing. And...I believe you've offered me nothing at all."

"But she and her Jedi were here," Ursa growled. "You are a traitor to the Death Watch!"

"I was never with the Death Watch, how can I be a traitor?" Katra asked the angry girl lazily. "And need I remind you, I housed your soldiers here even after they slaughtered my family. Hell, I took several of them to bed with me. It's not my fault their weakness saw them to their deaths."

"Oh, but you two are warriors of Mandalore!" Jakal said, his tone slightly admonishing when the anger and frustration in the two girls continued to rise. "You should scorn them for their weakness! They earned the deaths they had by shaming the Death Watch when they were slain by Jedi."

"Are we done here, ladies?" Katra said softly, a slight smile on her lips when the two girls said nothing. "In that case, please send my regards to Tor and let him know I eagerly await the replacements for the soldiers that were killed. I do so love entertaining the Death Watch..." With a flick of her wrist, her guards stepped forward toward the two teenagers. "Please see our guests safely to their ship."

Bo-Katan and Ursa didn't wait for the guards to come close, instead quickly turning and storming out of the throne room and into the hall, the armed escort following behind them as they made their way to the hangar. "What now, Bo?" Ursa whispered. "We were counting on Clan Sharratt to give us what we need."

"We should have known better than to rely on an opportunistic coward..." Bo-Katan growled through grit teeth. "I wonder how much information they sold to our enemies."

"We should eradicate this clan, they're a stain upon Mandalore."

"I would agree had the cowards not armed themselves with gold," Bo-Katan spat bitterly. "If the New Mandalorians acquired even a fraction of the wealth of Clan Sharratt, it could be very bad for us. We are fractured enough as it is, the last thing we need is those bastards obtaining the wealth to continue to fund their war effort. It's the only reason Vizsla continues to play nice with the
"After we win the war, we should make a note to return here and repay them for their cowardice," Ursa said, looking over her shoulder at the mercenary soldiers behind them. "Without the Sharratts to pay them, the mercenary army will scatter and eventually return to serve us."

"I suspect you're right about that. No mercenary ever profited from the peace Satine wants. They won't have any other choice." With a groan, Bo-Katan stretched her arms over her head, yawning as she slowed her pace through the halls toward the hangar. "It means nothing to us, in any case. All that matters now is finding Satine, and if I know her, then I know exactly where she may be headed."

"I suspect she will seek out the Caderas at some point," Ursa said, and Bo-Katan agreed with a swift nod.

"She will, but that is beyond us. We'll contact Vizsla and have him send his best assassins that way, maybe they can take her by surprise when she and her Jedi feel safe. I don't think she will stay for long, in any case, not after the ruin you brought to Itera. No, Satine is a sentimental idiot, and one way or another, she will find her way home."

"To Sundari?"

"No..." Bo-Katan said softly, her gaze drifting to look at her friend. "To Kalevala."

Long, elegant fingers entwined in Obi-Wan's hair, grown now far past the acceptable length for a Padawan, the locks bleached golden by the sun with the slightest hints of red in the right lighting. He shivered when the light stroking drifted down his neck to brush his shoulders and coming to rest on the wiry muscles of his back, the surprisingly strong grip digging into his shoulder blades as lips far too hot and much too sweet kissed at his chest and neck. With a needy, almost tortured groan, his arms shaking as he held the bulk of his weight off the thin girl beneath him, Obi-Wan closed his eyes and rocked his hips forward, earning himself a pleasured gasp from his lover as he pushed deeper inside her.

The pace was slow and even, as gentle as he could be given how long he had waited for this, for how good it felt to have her wrapped tightly around him, for how sweet her soft moans were to his addled senses. Every inch of his body was on fire, the knot deep within his being he kept hidden away for so long unwinding and flooding his senses with euphoria that came from being so close to her. It was madness, and when her lips touched his, Obi-Wan was lost, and happily so, the moans between them escalating into pleasured cries as the pace increased, each successive thrust driving him deeper inside her.

It was everything he had ever wanted, everything he had been dreaming of for months, and with the feel of her moving beneath him, the mounting pressure began to build, his body heating as his heart pounded harder, and shutting his eyes tight, Obi-Wan bit down on his lip, trying to hold off to make it last longer. It was all over for him when he felt her tighten around him, a shivering moan torn from deep within her chest as she pulled him close and breathlessly gasped his name in his ear. His body tensing with the final efforts of his passion, Obi-Wan let himself go and allowed himself to fall deep into the cascade of pleasure that pulsed through him, light exploding behind his eyes as he surrendered to the feel of nothing but her.

With a strangled gasp, Obi-Wan shot up in his bed, slamming his head on the low-hanging ceiling of the top bunk, and with a groan of pain, he fell back, his head falling on the pillow as he tightly grasped his forehead. Doing what he could to calm his rapid breathing and slow his pounding heart, Obi-Wan slowly returned to a state of calm, the dull pounding in his head making him
wince as he very, very carefully sat up, frowning at the support he slammed his head on. He could still feel Satine's burning touch upon him, the ghost of her fingers through his hair, the sound of her voice ringing in his ears, and he groaned loudly when he looked beside him to find his bed empty. A dream, like last night and the night before, Gritting his teeth, he lifted up the sheets and looked beneath, his face burning with utter humiliation when he saw the evidence of his aroused imagination staining his pants and felt it smeared on his skin.

"Aw, shit."

"This is the third night in a row, my Padawan," Qui-Gon's deep voice drawled from beneath him, and swallowing hard, Obi-Wan slowly peered over the edge of the bunk and looked down at his Master, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the floor as he meditated. "I was wondering if I should wake you before your carrying on woke the whole ship, but..." He looked up at his fiercely red student as he peeked over the edge, slowly sinking down as if he wished he could disappear. "Well, it seems you woke yourself. Very fortuitous, as I wasn't certain how much longer it would be before things got too awkward."

"Oh, Force help me..." Obi-Wan groaned, burying his face in his hands when he found he couldn't stand the thought of even looking at his Master. "You didn't think to wake me up to save us both from this humiliation?!"

"Mark my word, Obi-Wan, I did try," Qui-Gon said, rising to his feet and throwing up the teenager a new pair of pants. "You wouldn't wake, so I thought you needed the sleep. You've been restless for a while now, and I can endure your teenage complications if it would aid your mental health."

"And you couldn't just leave?!" Obi-Wan asked, his voice high and tight and frantic as he quickly shed his pants and slipped into the clean pair, and he tore the sheets of the bed and tossed them to the ground before he climbed down the ladder to stare awkwardly at the ground.

"And leave you alone to deal with this?" Qui-Gon asked innocently. "Never. You wouldn't confess to it anyway unless you were caught red-handed, and you have been very closed off to me as of late." When the Padawan didn't respond, Qui-Gon sighed and placed a hand on the shaking boy's shoulder. "I'm here to help you, Obi-Wan. There are some things a person isn't meant to deal with on their own, and this is one of them. You are tortured, I can feel it. Please, let me help you."

"It's just biology, Master..." Obi-Wan muttered under his breath, refusing to meet his Master's eyes. "You know well what adolescence does to a man, and being in close proximity to..." Obi-Wan bit down on his lip, his ears burning as he felt his face turn a deeper shade of red. "Her passion is infectious, that's all. I can feel it even when she isn't near. It's..." With a growl of frustration, Obi-Wan picked up the bundled sheets and opened the door into the dimly lit hallway, the ship in low power for the night. "She's very beautiful, that's all it is. What man doesn't dream of being with a beautiful woman..."

"Obi-Wan." The Padawan stopped when his Master called to him, but didn't turn to face him, and feeling the Master's presence reach out to him, he quickly shied away, his defenses shutting tightly around him to hide his turbulent emotions. "Nobody ever expected you to be perfect. And to expect you to remain the very image of Jedi detachment on a mission like this..." Carefully, Obi-Wan looked over his shoulder to see his Master's hand balled into a fist by his side, his jaw tight and his brow furrowed with anger. "The Council has done you a great disservice, my student. How they could expect a teenager to come to a place like this, to go through what you have and not feel love for her..." With a heavy sigh, Qui-Gon looked up, his eyes sad and sympathetic, and Obi-Wan felt his breath catch in his throat. "I do understand, Obi-Wan. If you need guidance, or need to talk, or anything...I am here for you."
"I'm not in love with her, Master..." Obi-Wan whispered, once again averting his eyes. "It's a passing infatuation, nothing more..." It was a lie, and they both knew it, but Qui-Gon let the matter go. There was little sense in pressing it when the quiet, conservative boy was already uncomfortable. He had said his piece, and the offer was out. When Obi-Wan needed him, Qui-Gon knew his student would go to him.

Obi-Wan stood in the hallway, hardly breathing as not to disrupt the still silence of the ship, his ears straining to listen for any sign of movement behind Satine's door. He wasn't sure how long he stood there, but he didn't hear anything at all. Most likely, the girl was asleep, as she should be at this hour. With a heavy sigh, Obi-Wan trudged down the hallway and entered the bathroom, and he stripped out of his clothes to wash both himself and his sheets in the shower.

They had been in space nearly a week, and Obi-Wan was finally starting to come unglued. One week of covert touches, of fingers lightly touching hands and shoulders and legs, of finding quiet corners of the ship to steal swift, passionate kisses before the Jedi Master found them mere seconds later. Everywhere they went, Qui-Gon seemed to be, and there was barely a moment alone where Satine and Obi-Wan could drop all pretenses and give in to the ever-growing need they felt to be together. And now, after a week of slowly mounting tension and no chance to release it, Obi-Wan's repressed teenage brain had struck back with a vengeance to seek relief in the only time the boy's guard was lowered.

He didn't even want to feel this way. He loved Satine, yes, and it manifested in a gentle desire to shield her, though he knew full well that the feisty Mandalorian was more than capable of defending herself. However, unlike before when close quarters led to arguments and antagonistic flirting and quietly stolen moments to sit and talk and shyly touch away from the eyes of his Master, Draboon had changed everything. There was a physical aspect to their relationship that was absent before, a growing lust within the both of them that grew stronger with each passing day, and while Obi-Wan accepted his feelings for lovely Satine, he did not accept this frankly unacceptable primal side. He was better than this. He was more than some mindless beast slaved to his urges, he was a Jedi, measured and controlled and master of his emotions.

With a heavy sigh, he looked at the sheets in his hands as soap and water ran over them, and he knew that not to be the case.

Everything had been different since that kiss in the cave. Since then, all he had wanted was to feel her body against his, to be as close to her as two people could be. He knew it was wrong, but he couldn't help it, and despite his attempts to meditate, to focus and center himself, to seal these feelings deep within him where they could be quietly ignored and forgotten, each time, the tug of desire sent him spiraling out of control. Being back in the close quarters of the ship had only made it worse, forced him to slip by her in the narrow halls, to sit close together when they ate, to feel her presence always close, always hovering around him and driving him absolutely mad. After all, she felt it too, and her feelings only served to feed Obi-Wan's love for her.

He knew what Qui-Gon would say. The Master would support him, would guide him through the meditation necessary to bring himself back under control, and he would quietly urge him to release his feelings, to let his love for her go so that he may no longer be ruled by it. Attachments led to the Dark Side. Love led to the Dark Side, a thing Obi-Wan had seen first hand, and he knew he should avoid it, but...it felt good, gave him strength when he thought he had none, gave him sanctuary in a galaxy gone mad with death and blood and war and violence. He wanted to keep this for as long as he could, until his path as a Jedi tore it from him, until this mission was over and his life no longer belonged to Satine Kryze. But until then, he was all hers, every part of him, as much as she wanted.

The lust was another matter entirely. The lust was...unseemly, both embarrassing and highly
inappropriate, not just a stain against all his training in control as a Jedi Padawan, but an insult to
the girl he was meant to protect. She was a Duchess, Mandalorian royalty, the last hope for a
dying people. She deserved more than to be leered at like some common girl. She was above
inspiring the animalistic desire of the out of control hormonal rage of a scrawny, repressed
teenager. She deserved to be loved and adored, not just by one person, but by all the people she
ruled over. Satine Kryze was, in a word, unattainable, a pure, perfect woman made to be
something more by putting her out of the reach of the rest of the mortals so she could become
hope for her people. It wasn't entirely unlike Obi-Wan's own path to becoming a Jedi Knight, an
entire Order dedicated to ruling their emotions and living without love or possessions or
attachment in order to do what must be done in the service of the greater good.

When looked at like that, it was little wonder that the two of them drew together and found
comfort in each other.

When the last of the soap had washed out of the sheets and the steady stream of hot water had
eased the last of the pent-up tension out of his shoulders, Obi-Wan turned off the faucet and
wring the excess water out of the sheets and hung them up to dry. He stepped out of the shower
and grabbed a towel and when he was dry enough, he slid into his clean pair of pants and grabbed
a hand towel for his hair, draping it over his neck and running his fingers through the wet, blond
mess. When the war was over, he was certain that the Jedi would make him cut it back down to
regulation length, but he was enjoying it while he had it. He couldn't imagine having long hair
before, but now that it had grown out, he quietly decided that when he became a Knight and it
was allowed, he was going to grow it out. The thought was vain, perhaps, but Obi-Wan had
always been meticulous, and that extended to his personal grooming as well. He never had vices
before, but since coming here to Mandalore, his list was growing. First lust, and now vanity, and
Obi-Wan shied away from what could be next, what he found himself to be capable of.

With a heavy sigh, he stepped out into the hallway and padded down the corridor to his room, his
hand extended to touch the button to the door but stopping just short of it. He closed his eyes,
breathed deep and touched the Force, felt for his Master and found him deep in meditation, and
immediately felt the tension return to his shoulders as shame filled him again. He couldn't face his
Master, not yet, not after what had just happened. He always prided himself on being a model
Padawan, on never causing problems for his Master like Quinlan did with his, especially with his
rocky start, he couldn't look bad to the Council, lest they revoke their decision to allow him to
train. Without the Jedi, he wasn't sure what he would be. He needed to be better than what he had
been as of late.

Sending a quick apology through his Force bond with Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan allowed his hand to fall
to his side and he shuffled down the hall to the cockpit, the Jedi Code on his lips as he focused on
cleansing his mind of his dreams of Satine, still fresh and rampaging within him. With a groan of
irritation with himself, he dropped into the pilot's seat, his hand running over his face before he
looked at the displays before him. It had been a mistake to travel all the way to Vorpa'ya in
sublight space. True, off the navigation lanes, they hadn't run into a single bounty hunter or enemy
ship, but Obi-Wan was going stir-crazy. Close quarters with a beautiful, passionate, alluring
female he was positively crazy about wasn't doing good things for his mental health.

He was so focused in his own meditations, his attention turned inwards that he didn't notice the
soft, light steps entering the cockpit until he felt the gentle brush on his bare shoulder. Sucking in a
sharp breath, he quickly looked up to see Satine, a slight smile on her lips and dark circles around
her tired eyes, through she still managed to look at the half naked boy appreciatively as she took a
seat in the co-pilot's chair. Obi-Wan quickly looked away, the lazy hunger in her eyes stoking his
own passions that he only just managed to get a handle on, and her disheveled appearance, her
tousled hair and the oversized shirt that fell mid-thigh on her bare legs left very little to the
imagination and weren't exactly helping things.
"Can't sleep, Duchess?" Obi-Wan asked, shyly looking at her out of the corner of his eye as he pretended to busy himself with the monitors on the console before him, and the girl shook her head.

"Restless. Nervous, I guess," she said softly, her cheek resting on her hand as she looked her Jedi over. "Anxious to get to my allies on Vorpa'ya. I heard you shuffling around, and I'd rather have company than be alone with my thoughts." Her smile widened when she caught his gaze, and Obi-Wan lacked the strength to look away. "What about you?"

"You know..." the Jedi said, gesturing with his hand in the air as he searched for a convenient lie, but couldn't find one. "Dreams," he squeaked, and Satine chuckled softly.

"Dreams?" Satine asked sweetly. "Or are they visions, my sweet Jedi?"

*Force, I hope so.* "N-no, nothing like that," Obi-Wan muttered, trying to swallow but his throat was suddenly dry and raw. All of his previous promises of resolve had just flown out the window. She was beautiful and alluring and Force, *he wanted her*. "I-I just get like you, you know," he explained with a nervous laugh. "Restless. A week cooped up in this ship is a long time to be out in the open in uncharted space. So much can go wrong. I am anxious for safety. You were right, we should have taken the risk of discovery and flown directly there."

"I don't know about that," Satine drawled lightly. "I've appreciated the chance to rest. We've been running for so long, I've almost forgotten what it's like, and when we arrive, I will be called to my duty, there will be no time for anything but the needs of my people." When the Jedi turned his face away from her, she reached out and gently grabbed hold of his braid and ran it through her fingers, frowning when she found the strand to be loose and unkept, but quickly repressed a delighted smile when she saw the crossing pattern to be the one that she had made so long ago.

"Look at this, it's a mess..." the Duchess softly chided, smiling when she watched his pale skin flush red and the strong muscles in his neck quiver. "May I?"

Obi-Wan looked quickly over to her, his eyes searching her face for a moment before he bowed his head and clasped his hands in front of him to hide that they were shaking. "Be my guest." No longer containing the smile on her lips when her heart began to beat faster, Satine quickly removed the tie and set to the easy work of unraveling the braid.

"How long do you suppose it will be before we arrive?" the Duchess asked, smoothing out the damp strand and moving her fingers through his hair to gather what moisture she could to make the work easier.

"I'm uncertain..." Obi-Wan muttered, his gaze drifting to stare out the forward viewport at the black of space and the stars that shone brightly in the distance. "It's easy to forget how big space is. All our technology, the hyperspace lanes, the charted flight corridors...they all make this galaxy feel so very small..." He sat in silence for a moment, lost in his thoughts and in the pleasured, tingling sensation in his chest when he felt the girl pull his hair tight as she began to braid the long strand of loose hair. "Were I to venture a guess, I'd say a day or two," Obi-Wan said, swallowing hard ad darting his gaze away from her when he chanced a glance at her and found a curious, indiscernible look in her light blue eyes.

"I've been thinking, Obi-Wan..." Satine ventured carefully, pretending to focus on her work but instead allowing her eyes to rove over the Jedi's body, taking in every mark, every scar, the sharp curve of every muscle, and she felt her desire for him pool in the very pit of her, just as it had done for days when she was left alone, her thoughts always wandering to her beautiful protector.

"Maybe we shouldn't stay so long with Clan Cadera," she muttered, looking up to meet her Jedi's stunned, curious glance when she felt his eyes finally upon her.
"This is what you wanted, is it not?" Obi-Wan asked quietly, lightly brushing Satine's hand as she carefully continued to braid his hair. "Clan Cadera can offer you safety like you can have nowhere else."

"I believed us to be safe with Clan Itera," Satine whispered, her eyes closing as she took deep, shuddering breaths, and Obi-Wan could feel her being fill with pain.

"Satine, Clan Cadera is one of the largest united clans in all of Mandalore, if you're safe anywhere-"

"No!" Satine snapped, so harsh that she shocked herself, and she looked wide-eyed at her protector, her hands shaking as she held the braided strand, her fingers so unsteady she couldn't continue. The Jedi slowly covered her hands with his own, the feeling instantly comforting, and slowly, Satine began to relax in her understanding protector's grasp. "Nowhere is safe, Obi," Satine quietly said. "Cadera may be a large clan, but its not as big as you think. Maybe once, but with the war..." She stopped and shook her head, sniffing softly as she pushed back tears. "Even the large clans are small now, Obi-Wan. We are fractured and broken, and with ambitious clans, the Death Watch, and bounty hunters after me, no place is truly safe."

"You think staying with your allies will draw your enemies?" Obi-Wan asked, and the Duchess offered a quick nod, her lip caught between her teeth as she quickly finished the braid and tied it off, allowing the tight, neat strand to run between her fingers.

"I think staying in one place is asking for trouble, and I will not be responsible for giving my enemies the motivation to attack Clan Cadera when they otherwise would exercise caution and stay away." With an almost nervous smile, she held the braid in her hands and showed it to the Jedi. "Do you like it?"

"Beautiful..." Kenobi whispered, leaning over and swiftly kissing the girl on the cheek, and together, both teens swiftly looked to the cockpit door, tense and nervous and hardly daring to breathe. After a moment of still, tension-filled silence, both Jedi and Duchess exhaled, laughing softly as they sat back in their chairs, though their fingers remained teasingly touching.

"You'd think Qui-Gon would have arrived by now," Satine said, smiling easily when the Jedi took a moment to admire the new braid she had crafted for him. "He has a rather nasty habit of showing up the moment you and I get closer. It's like he can feel we're up to no good. Like he knows."

"It's very likely he does..." Obi-Wan said, his chin resting on his palm and sighing in satisfaction as he looked at the Duchess. "He's probably trying to catch us in the act, I haven't exactly been...forthcoming with him about you and I since we left Draboon. It's not customary for a Padawan to keep secrets from their Master, and I'm certain he knows I'm hiding something..."

"Can we tell him?" she asked, her fingers gently intertwining with his and sighing happily when he took her hand in his.

"I don't know..." the Jedi muttered. "He means well, he does, but this...I think he would understand, and I think he would take steps to make certain we could not continue. It's not malicious, it's what he thinks is best." Obi-Wan squeezeSatine's hand when the girl's gaze drifted away from him. "He cares about us, my Duchess. He wants to spare us the pain he suffered."

"Yes, I understand. He's like your father, yes? It's his job to parent you and guide you away from the things the Jedi don't allow." Looking up at him with a devious look in her eye, Satine reached out and stroked Obi-Wan's cheek, a sly grin slowly spreading across her lips as her fingers ran
down the Jedi’s neck to rest on his strong, bare chest. "And it is our job to make certain that we are smart enough not to get caught. Sneaking around over-protective parents is what teenagers are supposed to do."

"Mm, Jedi are supposed to be better than this..." Obi-Wan muttered, gently tugging on Satine's hand, and with an excited smile, the girl rose to her feet and followed the Jedi’s gentle pulling right into his lap, her hand resting behind his neck as she leaned in and pressed slow, sweet kisses to his lips. She was met with a deep, pleased sigh as Obi-Wan relaxed into her touch, his own hand drifting down her side and resting on her hip.

"I can't think of a Jedi more perfect than you, my dear Obi-Wan..." Satine whispered, her hand slowly moving down his body and lightly touching the scars that marred his pale skin, each of them earned in protection of her. She frowned, her nose wrinkling as she did, and she placed a quick kiss to the tip of Obi-Wan's nose. "My noble protector, how you have suffered for me..."

"My honor, Duchess."

"I think," Satine said lightly, her fingers tracing the scar on his shoulder from the first shot he had taken for her, "that even with your ridiculous perfectionism, your anxiety, your strict adherence to your cruel, cold Code-

"I happen to like my Code, Satine..."

"-your insufferable shyness, your obsessive focus, the ease with which you disconnect from your emotions."

She shifted, her knees sliding on either side of his hips as she straddled him, the Jedi shifting self-consciously beneath her and looking at her hand on his chest. "You're too thin, too lanky, too much a boy and not enough a man."

She could feel his heart beat faster under her hand, felt his breath hitch as he quickly retreated behind his carefully crafted walls, and she stroked his chin and gently urged him to look up at her, his blue eyes widening when he saw barely restrained desire. "And you are all I ever wanted..."

"You have terrible taste in men, my Satine..." Obi-Wan muttered, pulling the Duchess closer and closing his eyes as she leaned down and captured his lips, slow and deep, more emotional than arousing, and Obi-Wan could feel himself unconsciously reaching out with the Force and entwining himself with her, the bond between them deepening with each passing moment. He felt connected, her emotions mingling seamlessly with his own to the point where he couldn't separate which came from him and which came from the desperate, lonely girl in his grasp.

Connection and empathy and understanding that all lives were one, all bound through the Force, all this was a vital part of what it meant to be a Jedi, to be one with the Living Force as his Master always said, and here with Satine, he felt it. If this brought him closer to the Force, closer to the Code, how could this be wrong? There is no emotion, there is peace, but in his love for Satine, he felt peace and serenity, all the things he wasn't supposed to feel when he embraced his emotions. There would be pain when he left her, sadness and hurt deeper than he cared to admit, but he would endure it. All things were fleeting, all things must end, and a Jedi let go, understood that nothing truly belonged to him, and in the end, all must return to the Force.

For the briefest moment, there was a flicker of something within him that suggested that maybe, just maybe, it didn't have to end. That he didn't want it to end.

"My Master's coming..." Obi-Wan muttered, kissing her one last time before she slid off his lap, her hand lingering on the scar on his side just a moment too long, and she settled back in her chair, the desire written plain on her face as she looked at him.

"We need to find more time to be alone, Obi," Satine lazily drawled, her eyes raking over him as
he leaned over and began checking the ship's systems. "We'll never be able to get closer with your Master hovering over us."

"We won't have a chance to be alone with Clan Cadera around us either, and I somehow don't think they'll take too kindly to their Duchess messing around with a Jedi..." Obi-Wan muttered casually, leaning back in his seat and running his fingers over his newly done braid, far better than he could have done himself. A Padawan braid was a symbol of his ties to the Jedi Order, but somehow, by allowing her to do it, it tied him to her as well. It was much more intimate than Obi-Wan had realized, but now that he thought of it, he wouldn't have it any other way. It felt appropriate, considering how Satine had so gracefully made her way into his heart, once only occupied by the Jedi Order.

"Well, you're making my case for leaving Vorpa'ya much stronger," Satine said with a sigh, not even looking away from Obi-Wan as the cockpit door slid open and Qui-Gon stepped quickly into the room, his accusatory glance fading quickly when he saw the teenagers were doing nothing untoward.

"I think you're getting ahead of yourself, Duchess..." Obi-Wan said smoothly, his hands moving over the console and instrumentations before him. "It's unwise to make plans before we see the situation with Clan Cadera and discuss our options with their leaders. Keeping an open mind will help us to clearly see all options before us and allow us to choose the best course of action, which may not always be the one you want."

"I'm beginning to really dislike your damned Jedi perspective..." Satine mumbled. Her arms crossed over her chest as she slunk down in her chair, earning a slight smile from the Padawan, which in turn earned him an admonishing look and a swift tug on his braid from his Master.

"Everything alright?" Qui-Gon asked suspiciously, eyeing the two teens and searching for something he knew was there but could not find. "It's very early, what are you two up to?"

"We were discussing the plan going forward, Master," Obi-Wan said, turning away from the console to look at the Jedi. "The Duchess doesn't believe that we should stay long on Vorpa'ya. She thinks remaining stationary will attract her more cautious enemies, despite the military presence surrounding her."

"I'm inclined to agree..." Qui-Gon said softly when a frustrated frown touched the Duchess' face. "As a general rule, it is easier to launch a successful attack when your enemy doesn't move. It's part of the reason Clan Wren was able to destroy Clan Itera despite their advantage of defending themselves from a mountain fortress."

"That is exactly what I was saying!" Satine agreed with a sigh of relief, earning an almost frantic look from the Padawan.

"With all due respect, Master, we haven't exactly been safe on the move either," Obi-Wan said with as much command as he could muster. "Everywhere we go, the Death Watch and bounty hunters seem to follow, they always find us."

"They haven't found us out here," Satine said smugly. "We've been on the move since we left from Draboon, and we haven't seen a single one!"

"Yet," Obi-Wan snapped, turning his attention to the Master that made the decisions. "I just don't believe it's wise to grow too attached to the idea of continuing to run before we have seen what it is like on Vorpa'ya. It may be that the Duchess could do the most good among her allies. She is supposed to be a symbol for her people, and she cannot be that while we are running."
"I don't need to be that among people that already support me!" Satine countered. "My people are strong and brave and proud, Obi-Wan. They will never respect me as a leader to them if I spent this war hiding behind the walls of a fortress!"

"And they will respect you more if you were running instead?" Obi-Wan scoffed. "With all due respect, Duchess, taking solace behind your ally's lines makes you look like you sit in a position of strength, but running makes you look like a coward."

"I am not a coward!" Satine shouted, rising from her chair and bearing down on the Padawan, his eyes wide with surprise at her sudden outburst. "You think you know my people, Obi-Wan Kenobi, but you know nothing! I've wasted my time teaching you anything at all, you are just as stubborn and hopeless as you were when you first came to Mandalore!" Her hand clenched and rose slightly as she took a step toward him, and Obi-Wan swiftly rose his hands, ready to defend himself from any sudden move to strike him when he felt her anger peak. "Maybe you're right, Obi-Wan, maybe I need to be a symbol for my people instead of running," the girl hissed, a tense, forced smile on her lips making her seem more dangerous than she ever had. "Maybe I should be out making allies of the clans that don't support me!"

"W-what?!" Obi-Wan gasped, staring up at the angry girl in utter disbelief. "You want to go to the clans that don't support you?! Satine, that's absolute madness!"

"Is it? You're the one I said I should be a symbol for my people, and what good is a symbol to those that already believe in me?" She planted her hands on her hips, her eyes lighting up as she thought on the idea and liked it better with every passing second. "I cannot take Sundari without allies!"

"You have allies!"

"And it isn't enough!" Satine bit back. "Clan Cadera cannot hold Sundari if the majority of the clans are fighting for their own right to rule! What's the point of taking Sundari if I will only be thrown out again when the toll of defending the capital diminishes Clan Cadera? Sitting on the throne of Sundari won't end the war, only uniting my people will do that, and I can't do that if I sit on a throne that every idiot in the sector believes it should be theirs!"

"You want to go out and make alliances?" Qui-Gon asked quietly, and Satine curtly nodded, drawing up taller as her confidence increased.

"It's the only way to end the war, and so long as I keep moving, my enemies will chase me. It could give my allies the distraction they need to achieve victory in their own battles, keeping enemy attention divided can only help my cause."

"At the very least, it's worth considering and discussing with the leaders of Clan Cadera," Qui-Gon said with a sigh, earning him a shocked, betrayed look from his Padawan. "Oh, what! You're the one who told her to keep an open mind and consider all her options, Obi-Wan! Good advice that you should be heeding as well."

"W-where would you even begin?!" Obi-Wan asked desperately, and Satine turned her nose almost arrogantly up in the air.

"I have some ideas about that..." she said in a haughty tone. "Even the most stubborn warrior will grow weary of the continual losses of this war, and there have been many. There is only so much pain and destruction a man can take before they break, and everyone has lost family in this stupid fight." She shrugged, trying to maintain her confidence, but Obi-Wan could see her lip tremble in the moment before she bit down on it. "Besides, Artus Itera led me to believe that I may still have family on Kalevala. We can begin there."
"Wait, what?!" Obi-Wan gasped, gaping at the Duchess for a moment as he tried to gather his thoughts, and finding nothing, he grasped for clarification. "I thought you were the last of Clan Kryze, you have family other than your mother and your father?" For just a moment, Satine seemed just as speechless as Obi-Wan had been a moment ago, Qui-Gon standing silently to the side and watching her carefully, trying to discern why she had been hiding this information, but more than that, why the young Duchess had failed to mention the sister that he had heard mentioned on Draboon. Obi-Wan didn't know, he hadn't been there, and the longer the Master looked at the girl, the more he believed it to be deliberate, that the existence of this sister was a greater source of pain for the girl then it would have been if she truly had nobody left.

"M-my brother had a lover at the time of his death," she finally managed to stammer. "Artus Itera believes that she was pregnant with his child."

"A baby?" Obi-Wan said, far louder than intended, and he laughed tensely, his hand running through his still damp hair. "You have a niece or nephew?!"

"Or will very soon," she whispered. "It was all a little vague, but apparently it isn't a secret among my allies. He said the Caderas knew, and if they know..." She sighed heavily and shook her head. "Honestly, if one clan knows, it's likely the rest do as well. For all I know, the child, the mother, and the clan they belong to may all be dead by now, but Clan Rodarch are fierce. It's hard to imagine them being extinguished without a substantial fight."

"Don't you want to leave Clan Cadera quickly to protect them?" Qui-Gon calmly asked, drawing the nervous attention of the teens to him. "You attract hunters and put those close to you in danger. Wouldn't going to this child just lead your enemies to the last family you have?"

"Y-yes, but...Qui-Gon, I..." Satine sighed and hung her head, her lip trembling as she bit down on it and unwanted tears slipping down her face. "You're right...I know you're right. I'm sorry, it was a stupid, sentimental idea..."

"At the very least, we can ask the Caderas what they think," Qui-Gon quickly interjected, watching closely as his fretting Padawan grew increasingly distressed with Satine's emotional upheaval, his hand pulling frantically at his braid until he could take it no more and quietly took her hand, a soft, reassuring smile on his lips as he gave it a gentle squeeze. "How long before we arrive in Vorpa'ya, Obi-Wan?"

"A day at most," the Padawan said softly, his eyes never leaving the visibly upset Duchess. "Less if I stay here and pilot the ship the rest of the way. I can give her some extra speed."

"See to it," Qui-Gon commanded, his arm wrapping around Satine's shoulders and gently leading her to the door. "It's still very early. I'm going to see that Satine gets some rest. See us safely to our destination, Obi-Wan."

"I will, Master," the Padawan said, sighing wistfully as his Master left with the Duchess he was so worried for, and he quietly turned to do as he was commanded.

Vorpa'ya was a jungle, hot and lush and humid, far unlike what they had been expecting. Together, Obi-Wan, Satine and Qui-Gon had endured swamps and bitter cold and arid plains, harsh, uncompromising climates that left them chilled to the bone or burned from the sun. Between all that and the toxic, inhabitable wastes of Mandalore, Obi-Wan was beginning to believe that the entire sector was a war-torn mess, its planets as harsh and extreme as its people. But then there was Vorpa'ya, temperate and tropical, bright vibrant greens from rainforests and stunning blues from the oceans that crashed against blinding white sand. It was beautiful, more beautiful than any planet embroiled in the hell of war had the right to be.
The Caderas were quick to let their ship through their blockade of their planet and gave them an escort to bring them down to their base, a large, sprawling fortress on a jungle cliff overlooking the ocean. Most of the mighty clan was off-world fighting their enemies throughout the sector, but those present all showed up to see their Duchess arrive, the warriors young and old gathered in the hangar or looking down from overhangs and balconies as the teenager left her ship flanked by her two Jedi guardians. The Cadera clan leaders, Shae and Torian were waiting for them, their black and white armor flawless and shined to perfection, the two bowing deeply when the girl approached.

"It's good to finally meet you face to face, Duchess Satine," Shae said, smiling softly as she righted herself and watched as the teenage girl fidgeted, struggling with the desire to embrace them in a fit of emotion and keep her composure as the leader she was meant to be. Emotion won out in the end, and with a bright smile, Satine threw herself against Lady Cadera, squeezing her as tightly as her thin arms would allow.

"Thank you so much..." Satine muttered, her voice shaking with elation as she released Shae and threw her arms around the suddenly awkward Torian, his stern maturity shed to reveal a battle-hardened warrior uncertain and confounded with what to do in the presence of a woman. "You don't know what it's like to know I'm not alone..."

"We can certain guess, Duchess..." Torian said as he finally managed to wriggle out of the clingy girl's grasp. "You don't need to worry about a thing, Duchess. You're safe with us."

"About that..." Satine said, almost nervous at first, but quickly drawing up when she found her confidence. "Everywhere I go, I am followed by people trying to hunt me, I want-"

"You certainly get to business quickly, don't you?" Shae asked, slight laughter in her voice as the confidence was drained from the teenager, leaving her to fidget awkwardly. "I appreciate that, Duchess, but I ask that you hold off until we are safe from prying ears. I have no delusions about our situation, and we are well aware that your past victories have forced your enemies to become clever and creative in their hunt for you." With a sigh of relief, the Duchess nodded, and the two Caderas finally turned their attention to the stoic, vigilant Jedi at her side.

"We grow more and more impressed with you with each passing day, Jedi," Torian said, standing at his full height and frowning when he found that Qui-Gon still stood a full head taller than him. "For you to survive so long against the enemies of Mandalore is no small thing, but for you to fight and win against so many is miraculous."

"I assure you, it was not nearly so impressive as you seem to believe, Lord Cadera," Qui-Gon said modestly as he stepped forward and clasped Torian's hand when the Mandalorian grabbed for it. "There was not so much fighting as there was running."

"I very much disagree," Shae said, stepping beside her counterpart and looking over the two Jedi with a critical eye. "Word travels quickly in Mandalore space, Master Jedi. One tale after another recounts how entire battles have been won by a single man, or how mighty armies have been humiliated by the escape of the Duchess and her guardians. The Death Watch and Clan Wren have both been humiliated by your survival. It's weakened them considerably by making other clans bold enough to attack them."

"It was no mistake to ask for your assistance, Master Jedi," Torian added. "Perhaps our warriors may learn something from you during your stay here."

"I do not believe there is anything we could teach your people about conducting warfare," Qui-Gon quietly dismissed. "From what we have seen, the Mandalorians are formidable enough, but
should we have the time, I am certain we may train beside your warriors. Perhaps we may learn something from you. The Duchess seems to believe that we lack a fundamental understanding of your people that I am eager to rectify," Qui-Gon said slyly, looking at the impassive, expressionless Obi-Wan out of the corner of his eye as he tried to gauge the obvious jab, and while the boy showed nothing, he could feel the hurt that the Duchess' words the day before had inflicted upon him, followed by the self-doubt and insecurities that nearly constantly plagued him.

"Which is exactly what I wish to address," Satine quickly interjected. "And I am eager to hear your opinions, so if we may...

"Of course," Torian said quickly. "Follow us, Duchess."

"Obi-Wan, stay here and mind the ship," Qui-Gon softly commanded, feeling the twinge of disappointment within his student for being left behind yet again, but the Padawan bowed anyway, his face showing nothing. "Get a feel for our new allies, if you can, and keep yourself in tune with the Force. I don't want to be blind sided by our enemies like we were on Krownest just because we feel safe here."

"As you say, Master." The Padawan turned and left without another word, the Duchess quietly watching him as he walked away, and she gasped when Qui-Gon gently nudged her, bringing her out of her thoughts. She flashed the Master a shy smile, muttered a soft apology, and she quickly followed the Caderas, her head bowed to avoid the curious stares of the Mandalorians that had come to get a look at her.

It only took a few moments before a soft brush at her elbow made the Duchess jump, a surprised gasp in her throat as she quickly turned around to look at the Jedi Master. Her hand laying over her rapidly beating heart, she took a few deep breaths and slowed to match Qui-Gon's languid pace, falling behind the Caderas as they continued to lead the way, and after quickly checking to make sure the girl was alright, they turned away from the pair, allowing them the distance to speak just out of earshot.

"I wanted to ask you something, Satine," Qui-Gon whispered, leaning down toward the girl to keep their conversation between them. "Why are you concealing information about your family?"

"I'm sorry..." Satine said with a sigh, running her hand through her hair and looking apologetically at the Jedi. "I just...didn't want to put my hopes in that. If you knew, I thought maybe we'd go there in search of allies, and after what happened on Krownest, I just knew I couldn't go without risking my brother's child. I don't want to have their deaths on my conscience as well, so...I tried to put it out of my mind." Satine unconsciously grabbed for Qui-Gon's arm, her fingers tightly grasping the robe he wore. "By now, they may be dead anyway. I don't know if I could handle the grief of thinking otherwise only to find they are already gone."

"I understand, Duchess..." Qui-Gon said kindly, gently patting her hand and keeping his eyes on the curious warriors they passed, a warm breeze blowing through the courtyard they walked across and gently swaying the tall, tropical trees that lined the palatial pathways. "However, please bear in mind that if something is troubling you, Obi-Wan and I are here to help ease your burdens. This is the sort of thing we may have helped you with. Often times, we can help find a solution or a new way to look at something if only trust us enough to help."

"It's not that I don't trust you, Qui-Gon, I do!" Satine gasped, finding herself suddenly filling with guilt. "I just...I am already a large enough burden to you and Obi-Wan, I know my defense has not been easy, and you both have suffered a great deal to me. I don't want to cause more trouble."

"Your defense would be easier if you were more open, Duchess," Qui-Gon whispered, drawing the girl closer when the gazes of a pair of older teenagers they passed lingered just a little too long.
"The greater the trust you have in us, the better we will work together as a team. I know it may not seem like it, but you are a large part in your own defense. It is easier for us to defend you if your trust in us is absolute. You place your life in our hands. Your feelings would be just as safe with us."

"Yes, I..." she began, but quickly trailed off when she felt a tight lump form in her throat. She quickly stopped, tugging on the Jedi's hand to get him to stop as well, and when he leaned closer to her to hear her, Satine rose up on her toes and lightly kissed his cheek. "Thank you..." the Duchess said in almost a whimper. "You...can't possibly know what that means to me..."

"I think I have an idea," Qui-Gon said with a light, easy smile, gently pulling her along to continue following the Caderas, who had stopped to wait for them at the end of the open courtyard before the doors of one of the large buildings of the fortress. I was young once as well, and all of us at some point believe that our trials can be understood by nobody. It isn't so." With a heavy, relaxed sigh, Satine grasped Qui-Gon's arm tighter and leaned her head against him, a contented silence falling over them for a short moment. "...but that wasn't the family I was talking about," Qui-Gon whispered, and Satine's hands tightened, her breath held as she felt a sudden chill run up her spine.

"I-I have no other family..." Satine muttered robotically, her eyes cast at the ground to avoid the hard gaze of the Jedi, and she winced when Qui-Gon drew her closer.

"I suspected it before, but the Caderas mentioned it in the meeting we had on Draboon," Qui-Gon said, his voice even and measured, devoid of the hurt or the sternness that Satine had expected, which was almost worse. "You have a sister." Sating couldn't help but tense, her hands shaking as a soft whimper escaped her throat. "...why didn't you tell us?" Qui-Gon asked, genuinely confused. "This is something we need to know."

"I don't have a sister!" Satine hissed, her eyes narrowed in anger to cover the pain she felt in her chest, but the sympathetic look on the Jedi's face was enough for her to know that she didn't fool him, and if that wasn't enough, hot tears trickled down her face. "Not anymore, I..." She couldn't say anything else, the pain in her chest almost overwhelming, and Qui-Gon quietly pulled her into a tight embrace, the girl resting her head on his strong chest and clinging to the soft fabric of his robes, breathing deep the smell of fresh, crisp linen.

"Duchess?" the soft, concerned voice of Torian Cadera said, and Satine glanced back to see the man hovering over them, Shae a little ways behind him and waiting outside an open door and looking no less concerned. Satine found she didn't have it in her to move, only to silently cling to her Jedi protector, her face buried in his robe and committed to pretending that there was nothing else in the world. "Are you alright?"

"Everything's fine," Qui-Gon said quietly, gripping the girl tighter and stroking her pale blond hair. "If you would just give us a moment..." Torian looked at the Duchess, a frown on his face as he waited for the girl to confirm that this is what she wanted, but she remained silent, only moving to cling tighter to the Jedi.

"Of course..." Torian said, bowing slightly as he turned and left the pair, motioning for Shae to enter the room she stood before, and after talking for a moment, both Caderas entered the room, leaving Satine and Qui-Gon alone in the hallway.

For a long while, they were silent, Satine absorbing herself in the strong beat of Qui-Gon's heart, the steady rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, the gently stroking of his fingers through her hair and the feel of peace that slowly spread through her, a comfort and ease that was so unlike the strong emotions that she felt with Obi-Wan. It was no less close, no less emotional, but here, it was serene, almost parental, a thing she hadn't felt since her mother and father were executed, a
thing she didn't know how much she missed until now. It was overwhelming, and before she knew it, she wrapped her arms tightly around the Jedi and silently began to cry.

For a long while, they were silent, Qui-Gon gently wrapping the thin girl in his cloak and hiding her from the curious view of the prying Mandalorians as they passed by. He could feel her torment in the Force like a black, cold storm around her, filled with pain and betrayal and confusion, a heartache that overshadowed even the brutal deaths of her parents and brother. That she understood. But what happened with her unnamed sister, her secret, shameful sibling was beyond her understanding, and it made it hurt all the more because of it.

"My sister," Satine said after a long while, the tears still running silently down her face. "She's with the Death Watch. I don't know why," she added quickly when she felt Qui-Gon inhale deeply and hold it. "I don't know why she would willingly fight with the people that murdered our family. I don't know what I did to offend her beyond wanting peace for Mandalore. I don't know why she is committed to killing me as well." She sniffled and quickly wiped her tears away on Qui-Gon's robe and took a few deep breaths to make certain she could, the feeling of calm washing over her and making her feel assured once again. "...don't tell Obi-Wan. Please."

"I won't," Qui-Gon promised, his voice edged with confusion. "It is not my story to tell. But...may I ask why? I was under the impression that you and he were very close..."

"We are," Satine said, oblivious to the suggestion in the Jedi's voice. "Obi-Wan is very dear to me, but this..." She fixed her eyes on the ground and took a small step away from Qui-Gon, her hands absently wringing the hem of her tunic to hide how bad she was shaking. "It's a very real possibility that the Death Watch will send my sister after me, and should that happen...I don't want Obi-Wan to hesitate because she is of my blood. Obi-Wan will stay his hand. Bo-Katan will not. I don't want my sentiment to be what kills him..."

"You believe she would kill you?"

"I know she would..." Satine whimpered.

"...it seems I was mistaken," Qui-Gon said gently, laying his hand on her back and gently nudging her toward the door. "You don't have a sister after all."

"I would if I could..." the Duchess said with a sad smile on her face. "We were friends once. Perhaps we may be yet again once this war is over..."

"For your sake, I certainly hope so, Duchess." With a grateful smile and a squeeze of the Jedi's hand, Satine allowed Qui-Gon to lead her down the remainder of the hall and into the room, the air within crisp and cool, a stark contrast to the hot, humid air that filled the open halls. The room they stepped into was a dining room, the high, fortified marble walls ending in elegant, arched ceilings, the table inside made of intricately carved, dark red wood upon which lay a large, varied spread of tropical fruits, sweet breads, and exotic meats, all made from ingredients local to the temperate world. The Caderas stood inside, quietly whispering to each other until the Jedi and the Duchess entered, the two quickly striding toward the pair with concern written on their faces.

"Is everything alright, Duchess?" Shae asked, her eyes running over the girl and quickly taking note of the red flush to her skin and the subtle hint of tears shed running down her face. Satine flashed her a faint, easy smile and nodded, her eyes drifting to the spread on the table and her stomach growling with sudden pangs of hunger. A week in space living on ration bars and nutrition paste had left the girl craving real food more than she had realized.

"All is well," Satine quietly reassured, her lips pursed for a moment before she nodded and looked almost nervously between the two Caderas, the look in her eyes wounded enough to make the two
take a desperate step closer, ready to help the girl. "We were...discussing Bo-Katan, and before you say anything," she said firmly, her tone harsh and commanding as the hurt within her turned to steel, "no, there is nothing about it I wish to discuss further, and I will hear no further mention of my sister to anyone. Is that understood?"

"As you wish, Duchess..." Torian said, nodding in understanding and pulling out a chair for the teenager, the man chuckling softly when the girl quickly seated herself, her hands tightly gripping the edge of the table as she eagerly waited for permission to attack the food on the table. When the two Caderas had seated themselves at the table, Satine had stacked a plate as high as she could with as much food as possible and was trying in vain to delicately chew the large mouthful of bread she had bitten off. Satine became significantly less voracious when a door on the opposite side of the room opened and six other Mandalorians entered, each wearing different colored armor representative of the different clans they came from.

Swallowing hard and discretely pushing her plate in front of Qui-Gon, Satine slowly rose to her feet, her eyes running over the men and women that entered and respectfully stood behind their assigned seats, bowing respectfully and keeping their eyes on the teenager as they gossiped in hushed whispers. Yellow and black, Clan Kelborn. Black and purple, Clan Sornell. Green and gold, Clan Lok. White and purple, Clan Deshra. Red and white, Clan Jendri. All of them she recognized, both as allies as her father and as old rivals of her clan. She didn't need to ask how a previously hostile clan like Jendri found their way to be her allies. The war had torn families apart on ideological lines, just another tragedy of this brutal conflict.

"I'll get right to it," Shae said, gesturing to the suddenly terribly nervous teenager. "We have with us today Duchess Satine Kryze, and with her, we will finally find peace for our people." They exploded in swift, excited talk, some speaking directly to the overwhelmed teen, others to each other, and Satine found herself creeping closer to Qui-Gon, the feel of him at her side calming her somewhat as she looked around at the Mandalorian nobility and silently sat when Shae gestured for them to. "Satine, these are the leaders of the clans belonging to your alliance. The Kelborn twins, Karin and Eskol, Ralia Lok, Tanik Jendri, Krey Deshra and Sedyn Sornell."

"It's...a pleasure to meet you all," Satine squeaked, her voice wavering before she cleared it and stood up tall. "It pleases me that you have managed to keep your lives. Such a thing has not been easy in this war." She gasped slightly, her eyes widening when Qui-Gon gently nudged her, and she bowed. "I thank you for having the vision to support peace for Mandalore. I know it has been no easy thing to ask of our people, but if we are to finally achieve peace and prosperity, we must abandon our old ways and seek something new."

"We all stand in agreement or we wouldn't be here, Duchess," Karin Kelborn said, the others muttering their agreement, and Satine silently sat back down in her seat, suddenly at a loss for words.

"Now, we have discussed our alliance with Clan Sharratt back when the deal was made," Torian added, remaining standing beside Shae so they could better run the meeting. "Once again, we have the Duchess to thank for that, and I believe we have gone over the preliminary plans for peace that the Duchess discussed with us last week. Does anyone have any idea how to go about doing that?"

"I-I do," Satine said quietly, keenly aware of the eyes on her, and steeling herself, she cleared her throat and stood once again. "I have an idea of how to do it," she said, stronger this time, emboldened when she saw she had their undivided attention. "Our people are becoming weary of this war. We are dying, and even the most stubborn among us knows it. Even a great warrior mourns the loss of their family, and we have all lost those dear to us." The gathered Mandalorians nodded solemnly, quietly muttering in agreement.
"You suggest we simply go speak to the other clan leaders and plead our case?" Shae asked tentatively, uncertainty in her voice that Torian's demeanor echoed. "I'm afraid that may be difficult. Old alliances and resentment run strong through Mandalore, which is part of the reason this war has been so bloody. We can't just appeal to the other clans, or our alliance would be greater than it is. Remember, Duchess, it took you to bring Clan Sharratt to us, and they don't even like your opposition."

"I'm not suggesting you go," Satine said firmly, drawing up as tall as she was able. "I'm suggesting I go."

"You, Duchess?" Torian asked, his jaw slack and completely stunned. "But you just got here! And it's not exactly safe for you out there right now!"

"It's not safe for me anywhere," Satine snapped. "I'm being hunted, and I will continue to be hunted until this war is over, and mark my word, they will follow me here, and there's not a thing that any of you can do to stop it." Satine stopped to take a deep breath, calming herself before she felt it would be too late to do so, and she felt her racing heart begin to slow. "I have discussed this with my Jedi guard. Keeping stationary will only make me an easier target. Allow me to go out and secure my alliances for myself. My people will be following me, so I should be the one to present to them my vision for Mandalore."

"And you have agreed to this madness?!") Sedyn Sornell asked Qui-Gon in disbelief, earning himself a scoff from Tanik Jendri.

"And why shouldn't she?" Tanik growled. "The Duchess survived the Death Watch on their base of operations, this is no meek, timid Core World slut, she is Mando'a. A warrior. Let her bring her people to her by showing them what she is made of. No sane among us will follow a leader crafted from a soft metal like gold, let them see she is iron."

"We should not be so quick to embrace this," Shae said when the people around the table began fervently agreeing with Tanik. "Duchess Satine is not replaceable. If we lose her, we will lose our chance for peace. We all agree on that."

"Maybe so, but she's proving herself to be very hard to kill," Eskol Kelborn drawled, his eyes drifting to the Jedi at the Duchess' side. "If she wasn't, we wouldn't have the financial support of Clan Sharratt. Katra Sharratt is a stingy bitch, she wouldn't throw an investment that large at a cause she didn't believe would succeed."

"We could support her as she travels," Torian groaned. "With a substantial military presence to protect her-"

"My Jedi are all the protection I need," Satine said, her voice strong and unwavering. "A large presence would only make it easier to find me, and the Jedi are committed to saving lives. Were you to send warriors with me, they may be distracted in their purpose and be killed in their attempt to protect your soldiers, and there is no Mandalorian alive that I would feel safer with than my Jedi." She laid her hand on Qui-Gon's arm and gently patted it. "Just the three of us. Save your soldiers for the battles you must fight and allow my Jedi to focus, and I guarantee you, no harm will come to me."

"You have too much faith in the Jedi..." Krey Deshra growled, and Satine shot him a vicious look. "And you don't have enough."

"I say we allow this," Eskol Kelborn said. "The Jedi are clearly worth every credit we paid for them, allow them to continue to do what they have been. If it's not broke, don't fix it."
"We aren't paid, Lord Kelborn," Qui-Gon said quietly, and Eskol looked at him wide eyed.

"You aren't?!" Qui-Gon slowly shook his head. "Well, let's continue to take advantage of these fools then!"

"All of this bears further discussion," Shae said, drawing the attention of the room back to her. "For now, we can all agree that we need to expand the alliance, and without any other ideas, I say we start with Clan Ordo."

"I krriffing hate Ordos..." Tanik Jendri growled, crossing his arms over his red and white armored chest, and Shae looked out of the corner of her eye to see Satine pale considerably.

"Nobody likes the Ordos, but they are a large force once in alliance with us, and given their conflict with Clan Wren and their Death Watch allies, this is as good a place as any to start."

"Right, we can't send the Duchess back there," Ralia Lok said quietly. "Not after what those ambitious idiots did."

"And why not?" Satine said, her voice cold and commanding and more distant from her emotions than she expected, which only sparked her confidence. "I know there's a great deal of bad blood between their clan and many of yours, but that just makes me the best candidate to bring them into our alliance and accept the peace we are offering."

"They betrayed your clan, Duchess," Tanik snapped, not angry at her, but at the Ordos in question. "Long have they stood as allies to Clan Kryze, only to betray you by reaching for their own ambitions. They have made themselves the enemies of Clan Kryze!"

"They cannot be the enemies of Clan Kryze because Clan Kryze is dead!" Satine snapped, her temper quickly rising, bringing to the surface all the pain of her family's loss, and the show of passion made those gathered recoil, all their opinions quickly abandoned in the face of the Duchess' fire. "I am the only one left, and while Edric and Veela Ordo have shown themselves to be selfish, stupid children, I do not consider Clan Ordo my enemy. They are my people, my subjects, and like so many, this war has brought out the worst in them. I will visit them to give them a chance to right their wrong against me." She shrugged, subtly drawing closer to Qui-Gon. "When last I was there, they were only in charge because their father was out fighting the Wrens. If he's still alive, perhaps he will prove to be more reasonable than his stupid, impulsive children."

"No Ordo is a good Ordo," Tanik said between clenched teeth. "For children to turn out so awful as Edric and Veela means either the parent is weak, or just as bad as the children. You're wasting your time. They will not be receptive."

"We shall see," Satine said slyly. "When I last left Clan Ordo, my Jedi had hopelessly shattered Edric's arm, and I shot Veela in both her legs. I think they may be more amicable than before."

"Well, so much for the peace-loving Jedi..." Shae muttered, looking Qui-Gon over appreciatively. "You did that?"

"No," Qui-Gon said, a faint smile on his lips as he slowly shook his head. "My student did."

"What, the child?!" Torian gasped, and he laughed softly when Qui-Gon quietly confirmed it, Satine standing taller as she swelled with pride. "I'll be damned."

"I don't know why you're surprised," Sedyn muttered bitterly. "The Jedi have always been brutal when it comes to our people. Let us not forget that they're the reason that Mandalore is a toxic wasteland."
"And they are now the reason that we will be able to finally achieve peace!" Satine snapped, so harsh and cold and angry that everyone at the table drew back and nervously looked at the furious girl. "Without them, I would be dead, and I won't have another word said against them! Do I make myself absolutely clear?!"

"Perfectly, Duchess," Shae quickly said, standing in for the rest of them, and immediately, Satine lowered her guard, Qui-Gon's hand on her shoulder as she slowly sat down in her seat. "All of this bears continued discussion, which I am certain we shall continue to do over the next few days. I believe we have enough to think about for now, unless anyone has anything pressing to add."

"I do..." Satine ventured quietly, her hand timidly raising into the air, and for a moment, she said nothing, shifting in her seat and biting her lip as though she couldn't decide whether she should say anything or not. With a reassuring squeeze from the Jedi, she took a deep breath and looked out over the table, ignoring the trembling in her hands and the growling in her stomach as she pointedly didn't look at the food on the table. She was hungry. "I heard...my brother fathered a child before he died."

"On a Rodarch girl, yes..." Shae said quietly, the tension in the room quickly rising, which did not go unnoticed by Satine. "You wish to seek them out. I cannot recommend it. Not only are the Rodarchs historic allies of Clan Vizsla, but all attempts to reach them by any clan have ended in violence, and Clan Rodarch always comes out on top."

"I know the loss of your home world hurts, Duchess, and I know you must wish to reclaim it, but nobody has been able to take Kalevala from Clan Rodarch," Torian cautioned. "They are too fierce, and too deeply rooted there. Expelling them would take time and men that we cannot spare right now, and sending you would be terribly foolish. I believe their conquest of your home says enough about their intentions toward you."

"Or they simply wish to give my brother's child a piece of what he is owed by being born of Klan Kryze," Satine offered, far stronger than before, her sudden yearning for even a piece of the family she lost giving her the conviction that she previously lacked. "Whatever it is we plan to do going forward, I want to return home. I want to meet with Clan Rodarch, I want to see my brother's child, I want to meet the mother. I-if they still both live."

"They do..." Shae quietly confirmed. "Clan Rodarch will not leave Kalevala, the have no ambitions outside of holding the planet and protecting their own. It's made them very dangerous, as if they weren't dangerous enough before...but it has also made them fairly safe. Nobody wants to expend the resources it would take to properly fight them."

"I don't want to fight, I want to talk," Satine stressed, her narrowed, focused eyes carefully observing the men and women at the table. "I am going to Kalevala. Work it into the plans."

"I promise we will discuss it further, Duchess..." Torian said with a sigh. "But not today. For now, I believe we should be celebrating the return of our Duchess."

Anything Satine was going to say was drowned out by the loud cries of agreement from the warriors at the table, the meeting quickly devolving into easy, friendly chatter as they got up and quickly moved to talk with each other and greet both the Duchess and the Jedi in a much more friendly, less formal way than they had before. Strong hands clasped the Jedi's, offering thanks and praise and asking for a demonstration of his skills with the mystical Force. Satine was swiftly and uncompromisingly embraced, tight and familial as they offered their condolences for her family and delivered greetings from their families that she had known when she was growing up in Sundari.

For now, business was over, and Satine was contented to settle down and reclaim her plate,
happily eating her fill as she listened to the warriors reminisce. It felt like home, and one day, when she had brought peace to Mandalore, it would always feel like this.

Reflection.

It's a strange thing watching my charges grow up. I'm not certain I can truly get used to it. It doesn't seem so long ago that we first came to Mandalore. My young, shy student and I, assigned to protect stubborn Satine, a dangerous thing that I was half certain we would fail, but now, with each day that passes, it seems more and more likely that we are on the road for success. It is hard to see this mission as anything other than a great success when I look and see how the children I guarded have become fine young adults. The only thing I can't figure out is when it happened.

My shy and awkward Obi-Wan, always so pensive, so insecure, so trapped inside his own head that he fails to notice what is right before him, has suddenly begun to walk the path of adulthood. He is stronger now, not just physically, not just in his strength with the Force, but in spirit. He was always so closed, so reclusive, and while I know that little shit is hiding a fair bit from me, he has nearly left his shell behind, accepts his emotions even as he struggles with them, embraces his tremendous capacity for compassion, has become less and less removed and far more involved in the world and the people around him as he emerges from his mind and grows comfortable in his own skin. It's a beautiful thing to see. He's going to be a fine Jedi and an even greater man.

And Satine...I can't even begin to say what a pleasure it has been to see her step into her role as the leader of a peaceful Mandalore. She is young still, and yet she holds her own against the leaders of other clans who should, by all rights, wield more influence than a teenage girl. Perhaps they are as swept away as I am. She is forceful and strong, her passions tempered and focused, so unlike the wild, messy blaze she had been before, and it makes her commanding. I look at her standing before them, and it is clear to see that she has been born for this. I cannot imagine her doing anything else than ruling over a people, and the fierce Mandalorians are as good a match as any I have ever seen. She is more than a match for their warrior spirit. She is a warrior herself, after all, in her own way.

They are growing as well. I have forgotten how much nearly half a year is to a developing teenager. I don't know when my thin, gaunt teens changed, but I looked at them standing beside each other the other day and only just then noticed how they have filled out. Yes, they are still thin and lanky for their size, but they are quickly developing and shedding their childhood bodies. It's so easy to see now how strong Obi-Wan will be, or how stunningly beautiful the young Duchess will become after they have left their teenage years behind them. I just don't understand when this happened. I see them every single day, one would think I'd notice that Satine's sharper edges have begun to round out, or that Obi-Wan's very quick growth has been tempered by broadening shoulders. I swear, it wasn't so very long ago when I first took him to be my student. He was just a child then. Where has all that time gone?

I wonder if this is what it's like to be a parent. It certainly feels that way.

I'm not the only one who's noticed, of course. They've noticed each other, and the attraction between them grows with each step they take toward adulthood, even if they don't notice it themselves. It would be completely insane to expect them to be completely blind to each other, and their very turbulent start has come a very long way. They still fight, yes, nearly every time they are together, but Satine and Obi-Wan have come to care for each other extremely deeply, despite all the obstacles that they know lay before them, despite their terribly different upbringing and their complete opposite approach to nearly everything. They are as different as people could be, and they have found a way not just to come to accept this about each other, but to take their differences and allow that to help each other grow. And that is the most beautiful thing about their journey into adulthood.
They know it must end. They know that there is no future for them where they can be together and still walk the paths they are on, and that has never been more obvious now that Satine has stepped into her role here with the clans of her supporters. I don't believe they have forgotten this, but I know how easy it is to be blinded the powerful emotions that I know exist between them. I was young once as well, and I was certainly no stranger to these things. It nearly led me to ruin, but Obi-Wan has always been more careful, more cautious, more far-sighted than I have been. He may lack experience, but my student has always been wise far beyond his years. I spend a great deal worrying about him, but it seems very likely that Obi-Wan will stay off the dark road I nearly traveled, and even I cannot deny how good Satine has been for him. It's almost enough to simply turn the other way and allow whatever it is that is happening between them to grow. Almost.

I'll continue to keep that sneaky little shit in line, and if I manage to find him and his little paramour together, he's going to be in for a lecture on tact and a reminder that he is in training to be an upstanding Jedi, not...well, Quinlan Vos. He knows very well the path that may be traveled for engaging in such a thing, how very easy it is for ideals to be compromised when such strong emotions are involved. He saw it in me, and I'd think that would be enough, but...well, the Force is a mysterious thing. If it has led him here, it's not my place to say otherwise. Still, nobody said I couldn't give him hell for it, and so help me, I will.

If I could ever catch that slippery little ass.

If there's even anything to catch...

I'm thinking too hard. I need a nap.

Obi-Wan and Satine...they are becoming such fine adults. If helping raise them into the adults I believe they will become is all I do in this life, I've done well. They're going to help shape this galaxy. I can feel it.
Alright kids, here it is. Your longest chapter yet, maybe the longest one in the entire fic. Sorry it took a while, I've been sick, and this baby has been fighting back in some places, and I wanted to get it just right for you. You lovelies better appreciate it, because here it is. Since we got some payoff here, give me a little bit to update this baby again, I have some planning to do. Next week or the week after, I suppose. Now that school's back in session, I'll have more time to write, so updates should be faster.

Let me know what you think, kids! I do know this is more a pet project than anything, but still, I like to know what you guys think, what you guys want, blah blah. That's the shit that keeps me going!

"Well, hey there, beautiful..."

It wasn't the voice Obi-Wan wanted to hear, and he almost decided to ignore the speaker entirely in favor of continuing his service of the ship, but he could feel the resolve of the men behind them, sensed their stubborn refusal to move, and knew they wouldn't simply leave. After three days on Vorpa'ya, there was only so much work he could do on the engines before anything he did became redundant, so with a heavy sigh, he withdrew his hands from the open engine panel and turned to face the group of young men, all in Mandalorian armor of varying colors, all tall and strong, the speaker standing before the other four with his hand on his hip and a sultry, interested, though almost mocking smirk on his face. It wasn't mean-spirited, Obi-Wan felt, it was merely arrogance, the same bravado he had come to expect from Mandalore's young warriors.

"Can I help you?" Obi-Wan asked, wiping sweat from his forehead as he turned to face the group. It was hot, the air thick and humid, and though it was still early, it was nearly unbearable, just as it had been every day since they landed. Working near the ship's engines wasn't helping things either, and Obi-Wan was forced to work bare-chested just to keep even reasonably cool, though the humid air clung to him and made him slicked with sweat even before he had gone running that morning. He could feel the eyes of the boys raking over him, and he might have been self-conscious if it weren't so damn hot, but as it was, he couldn't find it within himself to care.

"I think you can, actually," the boy said, an almost wolfish grin on his face as he looked back at his suddenly excited friends. "I'm Novin Cadera, and my friends and I couldn't help but seeing you around..."

"That's because I have been around..." Obi-Wan droned, wiping his arm across his forehead yet again when he felt sweat trickling toward his eyes. Three days, and he had barely seen Qui-Gon and Satine at all. He had caught glimpses of them from a distance, the Master standing vigil over his Duchess, the girl relaxed and easy and laughing as she spoke to her people, her friends, her allies, her many, many suitors. She came alive here. Gone was the frightened girl on the run, replaced by the woman that she would grow to become, and it was achingly beautiful to the young Padawan, though it made it clear that she was far, far out of his league, completely unattainable by him or anyone else. Satine was a wild spirit, beautiful and dangerous as flames, and to try catch and keep a woman like that was asking to be burned.
Without his Master to give him orders and without Satine to protect, Obi-Wan had an abundance of free time, and he spent it meditating, running, drilling with his saber and wishing it was forty degrees cooler. He spent a fair deal of time on the ship as well, but only so much was left to be done, leaving him with lots of time for the intensive training that was attracting this kind of attention. Obi-Wan was content enough to be alone, his solitary, shy nature taking over in the presence of so many people, so much passion, so much aggression, all uncontrolled fire like Satine had been like when he first met her. He was beginning to regret engaging these boys, wishing that he had instead ignored him like he had initially wanted. He had the willpower to wait them out, and his last engagement with Mandalorian warriors in a group like this...hadn't gone well. His body still bore the scars from Edric Ordo. He would not soon forget that.

"Oooh, I like this Jedi!" Novin said, laughing as he stepped closer and putting his hands up before him when Obi-Wan took a nervous step back. "Easy there, little guy, we aren't going to hurt you!"

"Kaysh chaabar'mhi," one of the other men said in accented Mando'a, a guttural, grating thing as harsh as the people that spoke it, so unlike Satine's own melodic lit, and Obi-Wan couldn't help the twitch of irritation at the edge of his lips. His father always said that the Jedi were cowards. "Ner buir ratiin sirbur ibac Jetiise cuyir hut'uun." My father always said that the Jedi were cowards.

"Ner buir sirbur'te jetiise ganar naye copikla," another one scoffed, and Obi-Wan glared at him, looking past the group's leader as he quietly hushed his outspoken friend. My father says the Jedi don't have any desires. "Vaabir gar mirdir kaysh cuyir haat'a jag? Ni mirdir ogir cuyir naas chur beskar'gam." Do you think he's even a man? I bet he doesn't have anything between his legs.

"I am not afraid of you," Obi-Wan snapped, his patience worn down by the heat and the unwanted company, and the Mandalorians quickly recoiled, shock and shame written on their faces. "Please, allow me to clear up your misconceptions. The Jedi do have desires, we are simply better at controlling them, and I am more of a man than you, since I don't hide behind a language barrier like some child."

"You understand Mando'a?" Novin asked, leaning in toward the Jedi and carefully looking him over, examining him with great interest, and despite the scrutiny, Obi-Wan found it within himself to stay standing tall despite his inclination to shrink away. When the Jedi didn't answer, only returned a hard stare directed at the cowed and offended friends, Novin laughed, a bright smile cracking his face and he ran a hand across his golden blond hair. "Do you speak it as well?"

"Ni vaabir," Obi-Wan said, the grin on the Mandalorian's face widening further at the soft, accented drawl to the Jedi's perfectly spoken Mando'a. "Bic cuyir linibar par'ner aka, bal ni'ganar te'jatne hibirar ret'yc par'te bora." It was necessary for the mission, and I had the best possible teacher for the task.

"I don't think anyone can doubt the quality of your teacher, Jedi, your Mando'a is flawless." Novin gestured to Obi-Wan's bare torso, his extended finger lingering toward the places where dark, deep scars were carved out of the pale flesh. "Those are scars from blaster fire," he said, his voice lowering in pitch as if he were sharing a secret. "Did you get them in defense of our Duchess?"

"I-I did..." Obi-Wan stuttered, suddenly feeling increasingly self-conscious when he looked down and noticed just how many old wounds his body bore, but Novin only seemed satisfied, a cocky smirk spreading across his face as he leaned back toward his friends.

"My father says the Jedi are fools for wearing robes and not armor into battle," the man drawled. "He says only the stupid and the soulless go into battle in their bed clothes." He grinned when Obi-Wan's eyes narrowed, the Jedi standing defiantly. "But I think that maybe the Jedi don't wear armor because they're just braver than most." He extended his hand out toward the Jedi, and
Kenobi looked at it cautiously. "What's your name, Jedi?"

"...Obi-Wan Kenobi," he said, hesitantly taking the Mandalorian's hand, and as soon as he did, Novin tightly clasped it between his own, shaking vigorously in his excitement.

"Word is Edric Ordo and his posse gave you hell, and you broke his arm for the trouble. That so?"

"That's...one way of looking at it, I suppose..." Obi-Wan muttered, his eyes quickly darting to the group as they began to excitedly chatter.

"No wonder you looked so afraid of us!" Novin said, laughing heartily as he clapped the hapless Jedi on the shoulder. "Having to deal with that traitor Edric Ordo and his thugs must have left you wary of our warriors in groups! Worry not, Obi-Wan, you're among friends here!" Novin flashed the tense, uneasy Jedi a smile and draped his arm around his shoulders, leading the reluctant Jedi away from the ship, the other four following dutifully behind them. "We've seen you training these past few days, and I have to say, I'm impressed. Let us train with you, we want to test our strength against one of the legendary Jedi Knights."

"I'm not a Knight, not yet..." Obi-Wan grumbled, but the other boy was not deterred, and now that he stood close to the Mandalorian, he didn't appear to be more than a year or two older. He was young, too young for battle, Obi-Wan thought, but Satine's were a people that were bled early for combat.

"All the more reason for the practice!" Novin chirped, a good natured smile on his face as he led Obi-Wan toward an open air training ring in one of the many courtyards, only sparsely occupied by other Mandalorian warriors who were testing their skills against each other with staves and sticks and practice swords. "I fear that Mandalore as of late is not conducive to the training I am certain you need. I'm sure you have been lacking for...friendly sparring partners," Novin said with a sly grin, patting the Jedi on the chest and pointing to the scar on his shoulder, one of the first wounds of many he had taken for Satine. "No lack for enemies though, yes?"

"I am certainly not lacking in people who actually want to kill me, no..."

"Well, my father always says that experience is the best teacher!" Novin stated proudly, his chest puffed up and his head held high. "Still, a warrior will not survive the battle if they are slack in their training, and we are perfect for you." The boy grinned as he picked up a staff from a weapon rack, his brow furrowed in concentration as he measured the weight of it in his hand, and nodding curtly, he spun the stick around in his grip, the narrowed tip landing in the fine, compacted sand of the training arena. "You are fighting Mandalorians. We are Mandalorian warriors. By training with us, you may come to learn your enemy as well."

"...that is actually a fair point," Obi-Wan conceded, easily catching a staff out of the air when Novin tossed him another taken from the rack. "I warn you, I am not terribly proficient at fighting, it isn't something I like to do," Obi-Wan said softly, the staff spinning rapidly in his grip as he acclimated himself to the size and the weight, his focus narrowing as he touched the Force to calm his nerves and tuning out the excited whispers of Novin's friends. "I fear I may cast the skills of a Jedi in a rather poor light. If you want to test yourself against a Jedi, you're better off seeking out my Master."

"Mm, I haven't seen your Master training tirelessly alone beside his ship for days now," Novin gently chided. "No, Obi-Wan, I'm far, far more interested in testing myself against you. You've fought against the Death Watch, you've stood against the enemies of Mandalore and lived. That is no small thing."

"Master Qui-Gon does most of the fighting. I just run and hide with the Duchess."
"Modesty," Novin scoffed, his grip tightening around the staff and eying the Jedi as he slowly began to circle his opponent. "You won't fool me, Jedi. Your actions speak far louder than your words."

"You haven't seen my actions," Obi-Wan said with a smirk, the weapon held loosely in his own grip as he watched Novin's careful, predatory step, the way his weight shifted, the feel of the Force around him as it pulsed with excited anticipation, stilling for a moment as the man's state changed, shifting from observation to the moment before action.

"I'm about to..." the Mandalorian growled, the words hanging between them for just a moment before the Mandalorian exploded into action, sprinting toward the Jedi and bringing the staff heavy down toward him, only to have the Jedi deftly step out of the way, his own weapon slicing through the sand to catch his opponent's legs, tripping him up and sending the man tumbling to the ground to lay shocked in the sand, looking up at the clear blue sky and the Jedi that swept him.

"S-sorry..." Obi-Wan muttered, dropping his staff and quickly moving to help Novin up, grasping the man's hands and pulling him to his feet before he could object.

"All you Jedi move like that?" Novin grumbled, scratching the back of his neck and looking down at the discarded weapons, a slight flush on his cheeks that came more from embarrassment than from the heat.

"Only when our opponents aren't ready for it," Obi-Wan said with a small smile, his hand extended and calling the two staved to him, the weapons snapping to his palm and handing one of the weapons to Novin, the embarrassment quickly forgotten with the demonstration of a power he had never seen before, his friends equally interested, the other teen's blunder completely forgotten, as was the intent. "Come, you aren't warmed up. We'll stretch first, run through some drills, and then spar."

"...well, you heard the man," Novin quickly barked to his friends, the teenagers all jumping when they were addressed. "Grab a weapon, you lazy bastards, we have a training regimen to complete!" The young warrior's blunder completely forgotten, the Mandalorians quickly rushed to do Novin's bidding, and before long, the teenagers were running through a series of drills together led by Obi-Wan and Novin, the two switching off between basic Jedi and Mandalorian practice routines, the warriors quickly catching on to the foreign steps. Before long, they were all relaxed and ready, talking among each other and shedding their armor as the sun climbed higher in the sky. With their staves in hand, Obi-Wan and Novin stepped back into the ring.

Without a word to each other, Novin rushed forward, and Kenobi stepped out of the way like before, his staff moving to sweep at him yet again, but the Mandalorian had learned from last time and moved his leg out of the way, striking up at te Jedi as he evaded, and Obi-Wan blocked the strike with the center of his staff, the ends flipping around to strike at his opponent. The Mandalorian was ready for him this time, and with perfect timing that came from years and years of training, Novin met each of Obi-Wan's strikes with hits of his own. They aimed low and high with sweeping hits or swift jabs, the sticks spinning expertly in hands that had drilled endlessly with weapons since their youth, and Obi-Wan quickly recognized the Mandalorian to be a superior fighter, his technique nearly flawless, his each strike precise, and all done without the Force to use to his advantage as the Jedi did.

Occasionally, the slightest mistake would see one of them struck by the other, knocked to the ground, or disarmed, and after a moment to regroup to talk about the error and laugh about it, they would begin again. When they grew bored of the weapons they used, when the sparring between them had grown stale or the flow between them became too smooth and easy, making it impossible to land strikes against each other, they would switch weapons. The short staff, the kali
stick, the training sword, hand to hand, blasters, each weapon provided a new chance for them to test themselves, the slightly altered step and style adjusted for the new weapon just unfamiliar enough to keep the sparring new and fresh and challenging.

So focused were the two boys that they didn't notice how slick with sweat the climbing sun and the tropical humidity was making them, how welts and bruises peppered their flushed skin from where their slipped guards or wrong steps led to the other striking them, how the impressive sparring of two skilled warriors was beginning to draw a crowd, a hundred eyes staring at them from under the shade of the roofed, open-air breeze way that surrounded the courtyard. Around them, other warriors had gathered to train as well, but it was half-hearted at best, their attention diverted to keep an eye on the Jedi and the young scion of Clan Cadera.

The two teens only stopped when Kenobi's practice sword sliced across Novin's stomach at the same time the Mandalorian's struck him right between the ribs, and laughing as they wiped the sweat from their brows, they stuck the swords into the sand and moved to the edge of the ring to take a break for water and to catch their breaths, the need made more pressing when they realized how hot it had become since they began. Obi-Wan gratefully accepted a damp cloth from one of Novin's friends, the Mandalorian boy chatting amicably about the Jedi's technique as Obi-Wan poured water over his head, the cool stream running over his bare shoulders. He flicked his braid over his shoulder and sighed in contentment as he closed his eyes and breathed deeply, his slowing heart jumping when he realized how many people were gathered around the courtyard, all eyes on him and his sparring companion.

"I think all the attention you're attracting is going to be good for me too," Novin said, his arm draping over the Jedi's shoulders and pointing up toward a balcony where several very finely dressed women stood watching them, and he flashed them a quick, charming smile before he turned to lead the Jedi once again into the training ring. "Mind you, I don't have any trouble with the ladies, but this is more attention than even I'm used to..."

"I suppose that's what happens when you're spending time with a curiosity..." Obi-Wan muttered, feeling his face burn with embarrassment.

"Oh, please," Novin scoffed with a roll of his eyes, his gaze drifting up to another balcony where others were gathered to watch, and he waved to a small group of particularly attractive teenage girls, "You are a damn fine warrior and very easy on the eyes. They're looking because they want you, Jedi." Novin laughed easily, patting the boy on the chest as he released him and indicated toward the balcony with his chin. "So, who's to your liking?"

"I-I don't want any of them..." Obi-Wan muttered, a bit too quickly, a bit too reflexive, and immediately, Novin's friends began laughing.

"See?" one of them said, a smug, almost triumphant look on his face, "No passion. Just like my father said. I bet he's never even been with a girl!"

"Don't get cocky just because you've gotten some poor idiot to let you take her to bed, Kassor. Your first time was last week." The other boys devolved into laughter, the embarrassed youth's face red and jaw clenched, "Is that so, Obi-Wan? Have you never been with a woman?"

"I-I was almost with Veela Ordo," the Jedi said defensively, stuttering over his own tongue, and the other boys muttered softly in what felt like comradery.

"Yeah, who hasn't been with that slut?" one of the boys asked, and Obi-Wan cast his eyes to the ground once again.

"Apparently, our Jedi friend hasn't," Novin said softly, sympathetically, and immediately, Obi-
Wan felt that he could trust the Mandalorian. "Almost been with isn’t the same as been with. She not your type?"

"N-not exactly..." The Jedi’s discomfort was obvious, not helped by the laughing, gossiping group, and with a few harsh words to his friends, Novin sent them off to continue training, leaving himself alone in the middle of the sparring ring with Obi-Wan. Picking up the swords from where they had left them in the sand, Novin walked close to the other teen and handed him the weapon. "I didn't know the subject was uncomfortable for you," he whispered, earning himself a shy, grateful smile from Obi-Wan. "You Jedi are just so different from us. I confess I don't know much about your kind apart from the myths and rumors spread by the warriors that fought against you in the last war."

"It's not uncomfortable," Obi-Wan said, the nervousness in his voice gone as he took the weapon from the Mandalorian. "I've never been with a woman, not like that. The Jedi Order forbids us from falling in love, so..." Obi-Wan sighed heavily, his tongue suddenly tied, and he ran a hand through his sweat-slicked hair, his eyes drifting briefly to the crowd of onlookers before looking at Novin, feeling sympathy and understanding from the boy, so different from the likes of his warrior friends or the brutish Edric Ordo. He could trust him, at least with this. "Look, I...don't know how to please a woman, and I don't want to make a fool of myself if I...I-if we ever-"

"Stars above, you sound like a man in love," Novin drawled, lightly teasing as he leaned in toward the teenager, the smirk on his lips becoming a wide grin when the Jedi's silence and the bright red flush that seemed to spread all over his body confirmed it. "Well, who's the lucky girl?" Silence still, but this time a tense one, uncomfortable as the Jedi's toe dug into the compacted sand, and the smirk dropped off Novin's face, his eyes widening with understanding. "Oh...oh..."

Obi-Wan was silent, his eyes fixed on the ground and never leaving, not when he heard the Mandalorian softly curse, pace back and forth, draw closer, move away to yell at his sparring friends and critique their form and technique. The Jedi only moved when he felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, and he looked up to see Novin looking at him, no anger or fury on the Mandalorian's face, as he expected, but that same cocky, amused smirk that he had worn the entire afternoon, something behind his deep green eyes almost brimming with gentle understanding.

"Does anyone else know?" the Mandalorian asked, and Obi-Wan couldn't help but scoff. "I thought I kept it a closely guarded secret, but it seems everywhere I go, you Mandalorians see it. It's like you have the Force in matters of love or something..."

"We are more perceptive than most when it comes to matters of the heart..." Novin said softly, lightly tapping the Jedi's arm with the broad side of his practice sword. "Speaking of the Force, you've been holding out on me, boy. All this time, all these hours of training, and not once have you used this...Force of yours."

"How do you know?" Obi-Wan asked with a slight, devious smirk on his lips. "Would you even be able to tell if I was?"

"...well, were you?"

"You're a better fighter than me, Novin," Obi-Wan whispered, the Mandalorian drawing closer to hear the soft-spoken teen. "You were raised to be a warrior, you have the temperament and the boldness I lack to excel at combat. The only reason I can even keep up is because the Force is my ally." He unconsciously touched the lightsaber on his hip, his eyes closing as he felt the Force, calm and warm and comforting. "The Force flows through me, influences my every movement, effects me even when I don't ask it to. It makes me stronger, faster, pushes my limits just past the boundaries of the possible. I can see things before they happen, I can feel your intentions, predict
"...but you didn't even throw me across the yard or anything!" Novin complained, and the Jedi groaned and rolled his eyes. "I'm sorry, but I thought the Force was...you know...woosh!" the Mandalorian said as he threw his hands into the air. "Magic powers! Wind from nowhere! The sun plunged into darkness, the seas rising in a torrent! Fire raining from the sky!"

"I'm...not sure the Force can do any of that...Novin, where are you getting your information?"

"I don't know, stories and legends passed down from the Mandalorian Wars. Look, that doesn't matter!" Novin said quickly, his hands tightly grabbing hold of the Jedi's shoulders, almost frantic for a moment before he lightened his grip and brushed the sand from Obi-Wan's pale skin. "What matters is that when we win this war, and we will win this war, then my people will not have cause to fight the Jedi anymore." He rubbed the back of his neck, a nervous, almost uncomfortable laugh in his throat. "This could be my only chance to test myself against a Jedi, like our ancestors did for thousands and thousands of years."

"I'm not certain your Duchess would approve..." Obi-Wan muttered, turning the lightsaber over in his hands. "You must know how she loathes violence, and she despises your people's violent past. I can't imagine she'd like it if she knew you were taking such pride in fighting as your ancestors did."

"Look around you, Obi-Wan!" Novin said, his hand on the teenager's shoulder and gesturing to the people watching from the balconies and breeze ways. "These people came to see the might of a Jedi! Show them what they want, show them what the Jedi are made of!"

"Alright, see, that seems a lot like boasting and arrogance, and my Master wouldn't like that." Obi-Wan chuckled and shook his head, peering up at the Mandalorian with a modest smile on his face. "I wouldn't like that. A Jedi is supposed to be humble, and I may not be the best Jedi, or even a good one, but...I-I try to follow the Code." His hand clenched around his lightsaber, his arm trembling and his eyes squeezed shut. With a sigh, Novin laid his hand upon the trembling Jedi's shoulder.

"It's just training, buddy, alright?" he whispered. "You and me and nothing else, nobody else here matters, alright? I take it you need to practice with the weapons you actually use, so have at it. You, me, my blaster, your laser sword, and anything else we can come up with."

"...alright," Obi-Wan said, taking a few deep breaths, finally looking at the Mandalorian and striking on his lightsaber, the blade bursting to life in a flash of blue, the Mandalorian looking at it in awe for a moment before a sly grin crossed his face, drawing his twin blasters and adjusting the setting to the lowest level.

"Between bouts, Obi-Wan," Novin drawled, a cocky swagger to his step as he slowly backed away, "I'll teach you how to pleasure a woman."

"Y-you'd do that for me?" Obi-Wan gasped, a deep flush coming to his cheeks, and the Mandalorian laughed, his arms spread wide as he took his place on his side of the ring.

"Our Duchess deserves the best, Jedi. Come now. Best not to disappoint her."

"I hear, Ressa," the tall, brown haired beauty said, "that before the war, you tasted Jakal Sharratt."

"Oh, please," Ressa said with a roll of her eyes, crossing one of her long legs over the other. "The
only one I know of that has tasted Jakal Sharratt is your older brother." The small salon erupted with feminine laughter, the group of girls gathered sitting in a circle as they talked and gossiped and among them, Satine sat with her hands folded tightly in her lap, her ears burning with embarrassment at the brashness of the other girls, mostly teenagers, some younger, but mostly older, all of them battle hardened, all of them old friends with sexual pleasure as was expected from their warriors.

It was what she wanted. In place of her missing sister, her slaughtered family, her dead friends, Satine wanted other girls to speak to, girls her age to share their experiences with men so she may be more comfortable, so she could be brave enough to push past her fear and anxiety so she could go further with her timid Jedi. If it was only that, it would be no trouble, but her Obi-Wan was shy and uncertain, bound to a Code that forbid exactly what they wanted from each other, and she didn't want to scare him away. Any sign of fear or uncertainty and her gentleman Jedi would come to his senses and refuse to cross the line they were forbidden to cross. She had to learn, and this was how.

She wasn't prepared for how...explicit her new friends were.

"You know, we can leave at any time..." Qui-Gon muttered next to her, the man rolling his eyes when another peal of laughter rippled through the room. "This is hardly the place for someone of your breeding, Duchess, these women are crass..."

"And they are still my people, Qui-Gon..." Satine said through clenched teeth. "And furthermore, I want to be here. This is a part of being Mandalorian, part of the passion of our culture, and a part that I wish to embrace, thank you very much." With a soft, frustrated groan, the Jedi slunk down farther in his chair, but said nothing more, his arms crossed over his chest as he looked with disgust and boredom at the other woman, several of who were leering at him. With a small, grateful smile, Satine put her hand on Qui-Gon's arm and gently squeezed, suddenly sorry that her protector was forced to endure the throng of lustful women.

"And you, Duchess?" one of the women asked, leaning in like she was waiting on the answer of some great secret, and Satine sat up straight, her posture rigid. "You're popular enough with the men here, and you spent months on the run with your Jedi...protectors," she drawled, her eyes raking over the grumbling Qui-Gon. "Maybe not this Jedi, but the young one is kriffing hot."

"I wouldn't mind having a piece of him," one of the others purred to the eager agreement of the others.

"I wouldn't mind having a piece of this one," another one said, her eyelids lowered seductively as she looked at the Master and licked her lips, the Jedi evenly meeting her gaze with cold disinterest that did nothing to dissuade her as he had hoped.

"So what is it like to taste a Jedi, Duchess?" the one called Ressa asked, a sly smirk on her lips, and Satine could feel Qui-Gon bristle beside her. "Does their gift with the Force gift them in other ways?"

"The Jedi are forbidden from such things," Qui-Gon said swiftly, his voice tight with tension, and Satine shot him a quick glare.

"So he's available?" one of the teens asked excitedly, the same question echoed by the other
women in the circle, and Satine flushed, stammered over her words as she felt her heart beat faster with the sudden fear that any one of these beautiful women, so much more experienced than her, could easily coax her shy Jedi protector into their arms.

"W-well, no, he's not allowed!" Satine said almost frantically. "And he's dedicated to my protection, he has no time." The door to the room suddenly flew open, a hard breathing girl no more then twelve years old wearing the black and white of Clan Cadera standing in the doorway, panting as she struggled to catch her breath.

"Ressa," the girl gasped through deep lungfuls of air, "our brother is in the central courtyard sparring with the Jedi. He has a laser sword and magic powers and it's amazing! Like one of the stories, you have to come see!" She bounced excitedly on the balls of her feet, and with a groan, Qui-Gon rose when the Duchess did, the girl suddenly nervous with the prospect of Obi-Wan hurt the way he was on Ordo. "He has battle scars, sister, he's not wearing a shirt, you can see all of them!"

"Well, not all of them," Qui-Gon scoffed with a roll of his eyes, the snide comment going unnoticed when the entire group of women swiftly rose from their seats and rushed out the door, running after their young messenger toward the courtroom. Before Qui-Gon could stop her, Satine bolted from the room after them, leaving the Jedi to gruff and grumble as he jogged after his charge down the open walkways.

The rapid sound of showering sparks, thrumming plasma and crackling electricity filled the air and grew louder and louder as they approached the courtyard, and after pushing past the throng of spectators, Qui-Gon and Satine stepped out into the clearing to see Obi-Wan Kenobi, his blue saber in hand as he clashed with Novin Cadera, the Mandalorian wielding an electrostaff in his skilled hands. The weapons clashed rapidly, sparks flying and showering the fine sand of the training ring as blue plasma struck purple electricity, the two men focused as they danced around each other, the occasional extension of Obi-Wan's hand sending the Mandalorian skidding backwards as an invisible force pushed him, the activation of Novin's vambraces producing a glowing plasma grappling line that forced the Jedi to retreat as he evaded it.

The combat was fast and athletic, almost a thing of beauty as the blazing saber left trails of soft blue light in its wake, the purple sparking electricity of the electrostaff leaving charges of static arching through the thick, humid air, their every step flawless, their movements precise, each dodge just enough to evade, but not enough to leave an opening. It was a thing of beauty, one that held the spectators in rapt attention of the two teens as they clashed, their focus intense like they were the only people in the world, their young bodies almost tireless as they danced around each other. The staff spun and swept, always in twisting motion, always seeming to redirect the Jedi's saber with swift, fluid motion, the saber stabbing and slashing as it made to slip past the Mandalorian's guard.

It was only when Novin spun, the momentum carrying his staff enough for him to draw his blaster, that Obi-Wan disengaged, the saber grasped in both hands as he switched stances to effortlessly deflect the blaster bolts, the red plasma charges bouncing off the blue blade and striking the sand behind Novin as he ran. When the charges were expended, the Mandalorian grasped his vambrace and fired the repulsor, the shock wave a technological mimicry of the Jedi's Force push, and Obi-Wan met the force with a blast of his own, his hand extended and splayed as he slammed the Force against the imitation. The result was an almost violent explosion of colliding energy that threw sand into the air and knocked both Jedi and Mandalorian backwards, Novin quickly rolling to leap quickly to his feet, the Jedi flipping in the air and righting himself before he even landed. The moment their feet were once again on the ground, both boys rushed forwards to clash again in a magnificent flurry of sparks and light, the hiss of clashing plasma filling the courtyard.
And that was when Satine had enough. "What is the meaning of this?!" the Duchess sharply demanded, striding into the training ring, and with a gasp, his eyes widening as his focus was redirected to the object of his affections, Obi-Wan dropped to one knee, Novin's staff swinging just over his head, the saber planted in the ground and the plasma hissing as the fine sand that touched the blade melted and hardened into glass-like, black stone as it was pushed away from the weapon. Cursing under his breath, Novin quickly did likewise, the staff's current switched off and laying across his knee, his eyes drifting to the cowed Jedi at his side as the teen fumbled with shaking fingers to turn off his own saber. For just a moment, Obi-Wan ventured a look at his Duchess, his heart aching and yearning for the girl he hadn't seen in days, only to quickly avert his eyes once again when he found her to be furious.

"Duchess!" Novin said, light and easy, attempting to diffuse the tension the girl's anger was causing. "Have you come to watch your protector and I train?"

"Oh, is that what this is?" she asked almost bitterly, her eyes flicking up to look at the enormous crowd gathered. "Forgive me, but I didn't realize that training was a spectator sport."

"I told you..." Obi-Wan hissed under his breath, Novin quickly looking at the young Jedi before rising to his feet to stand before Satine.

"Duchess, most of us have never seen a Jedi before," Novin quietly explained. "And after hearing about his actions on Zanbar against the Death Watch and his, quite frankly, miraculous defense of you, the opportunity to see what he could do was too much to pass up."

"My Jedi," she whispered between clenched teeth, "is not here for your amusement, Novin Cadera! Look at this!" she snapped, gesturing to the gathered crowd. "This is reminiscent of our ancient gladiatorial arenas, this is blood sport!" She raised her hand for silence when Novin began to protest, and the teen fell silent, slowly sinking back to his knees beside the heartbroken Jedi. "Even if nobody was hurt, even if this wasn't your intention, even if this was just training, this fascination with fighting and combat and violence is why we are in this bloody war to begin with! How am I supposed to change Mandalore when my own allies cling to the violence of our past?!

"It's...a fair point, Duchess..." Novin sighed. "I will take care to remember that in the future, but right now, we are fighting a war. If we are to win, we must train to sharpen our skills, or our enemies, who I assure you are constantly practicing, will destroy us."

"I am not object to training!" Satine snapped, her temper only rising further. "I object to the spectacle you two have made of your childish challenge! Obi-Wan!" The Jedi's eyes snapped up to Satine, nervous and hopeful and for just a moment, his heart beat faster, his entire being filled with contentment and excitement at seeing her again. "I expect my people to need to be corrected like children in order to change their ways because what I ask of them is so foreign to everything they have ever known, but you...you should know better."

"I...apologize, Satine..." Obi-Wan said in a low, hoarse whimper, his voice wavering as he struggled to bury his emotions and his gaze flicking to the saber held tightly in his hands, unable to look at her. Satine felt immediately guilty, her chest aching as she watched her beautiful Jedi retreat back into himself, behind the walls she had worked so hard to break. She mentally kicked herself for being so harsh with them, her passion overriding her sense when a cool head would have done more to help make her point. She sighed, her hands clasped before her and her fingers fiddling as she tried to hide her guilt and her remorse, fearing it would come across as weakness to her people. She needed to stand by what she had said, lest she look fickle to those who supported her.

"The last person that wished to test my Jedi was Edric Ordo, and that brute nearly killed him,"
Satine said, more gently than before. "I understand it's not the same, but he is...important to me and too often have I seen him wounded for my sake..." she whispered, stepping closer and running her fingers lightly over the scar on Obi-Wan's shoulder, and the Jedi shivered., his eyes shut tightly and his bottom lip caught between his teeth.

"Noted, Duchess," Novin said loudly, enough for his voice to carry over the courtyard, his eyes locking with his older sister in the crowd and gesturing for her support. "In the future, we shall take care to make certain that your soldiers are training instead of gawking like a bunch of children."

"Pick up a weapon or get out of my courtyard!" Ressa commanded as she pushed her way forward, snatching the electrostaff from her brother's hand and looking down at Obi-Wan, and immediately, the spectators began moving, some coming forward with sparring partners to train as well, others leaving to go about their business. She lightly tapped Obi-Wan with the end of the staff, the startled boy almost jumping as he gasped and looked up at the stunningly beautiful woman. "Shall we?" she asked, her voice low and almost seductive. "I'd like to have a taste of you as well, you beautiful thing..."

"W-what?!" Satine gasped, looking between the warrior as she shed her fine silk tunic, exposing her bare midriff, her slender waist, the tanned skin over a taut, strong stomach, and the shocked, wide-eyed Jedi Padawan. "N-no, Ressa, this isn't what I meant, h-he isn't-

"He is a warrior, Duchess, dedicated to serving you, which means he must keep up his training so that he may continue to serve you well," the Mandalorian drawled, spinning the staff in her hand and accustoming herself to the weight. "And I can't let my brother be the only one to train with your little protector, the spiteful brat would lord it over me forever."

"I would not..." Novin grumbled, his arms crossed over his chest and glaring at the older woman. "You most certainly would," Ressa said sweetly, a sardonic smile on her face that made her brother fume. "Duchess, we have taken care of the spectators, which was your primary concern, yes?" Satine sputtered for a moment, trying to find the words or the reasons why she couldn't allow this, the pull of jealousy struggling for a way to keep the smart and beautiful Ressa Cadera from her Obi-Wan, but even she couldn't find a way to justify keeping her protector from the training he needed to keep him sharp. With a heavy sigh, Satine nodded her head, and the older girl grinned and tapped her staff against the Jedi's shoulder.

"Come, boy. You're going to show me your lightsaber, yes?" Biting down hard on his lip, Obi-Wan tore his gaze from her and stared at the ground, his face furiously flushed as he held out his weapon to the laughing girl. "Oh, you sweet thing, we'll make a man of you yet, I promise."

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said softly when Ressa sauntered away to the other side of the training ring, her tagalong group of girls following closely behind her and making eyes at the young Jedi. Obi-Wan quickly turned to face his master, his gaze flicking up for only a moment before he looked back at the ground, unwilling to bear the frustration of the Duchess at his Master's side.

"M-Master..."

"Are you having fun?" Holding his breath, Obi-Wan chanced a look up at Qui-Gon and found the Jedi amused and contented, and he felt himself relax considerably, the emotional turmoil of the Duchess quickly forgotten in the presence of his Master's calm.

"Yes, Master," he said quietly, a slight smile touching his lips. "It's not the same as it was back home, but...training with Novin Cadera is a bit like training with Quinlan." He sighed wistfully, the slight pain in his chest more bittersweet than painful. "I...miss him. I miss home, and I miss
"Peace, Obi-Wan, I know," Qui-Gon said softly, drawing the Duchess closer to him when he felt the girl tremble, her jealousy quickly forgotten in the face of the sudden longing for her own home and the family she had lost. "One day, this war will be over and we'll have the peace we deserve. We'll all see home again."

"Y-yes..." the Padawan muttered, the warmth he felt within him tempered when he looked at Satine, the reminder that when they achieved peace, their time together would be over. It was bittersweet, made him ache, and while he couldn't bring himself to hope that peace would keep its distance for a little while longer, he couldn't help but imagine what it would be like if he and Satine could stay together.

"There's a social event tonight," Qui-Gon continued, "You are, of course, more than welcome to attend. I'm certain minding the ship all day gets tiresome."

"I-is it safe?" Obi-Wan asked, and his attention quickly shot to Satine when the young Duchess scoffed.

"Of course it's safe, Obi-Wan, don't be foolish," Satine dismissed, harsher than she intended, and when the Jedi looked away, his jaw clenched tightly as he fought back the desire to snap back and begin one of their all too frequent arguments, she sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "I am requesting your presence, Obi-Wan. I will be safer with both Jedi present."

"A-as you wish..." Obi-Wan muttered, his breath unconsciously held as his heart began to pound with excitement.

"Just make certain you clean yourself up before you attend," Satine said, her nose wrinkling as she looked the flushed and sweating boy over. "Honestly, Obi-Wan, you look like a peasant."

"Well, we can't all be royalty, Highness," the Padawan shot back, and before the Duchess' temper could get the better of her and the two began fighting in sight of hundreds of people, Qui-Gon grabbed the girl's arm and began to pull her away.

"Well, we have a fair bit that must be done before tonight," the Master said swiftly, shooting warning glares to both his teenage charges. "Take care in your training, Obi-Wan. It won't do to have you returned to me bruised and beaten."

"I'll do my best to perform in a way that you would be proud of, Master."

"You always do," Qui-Gon said softly, and without another word, he pulled Satine away from the sparring ring to attend to their duties, though the Duchess couldn't help herself from looking over her shoulder at Obi-Wan, her eyes raking over the strong, lean muscles of his back, and she silently wished she could have spent more time in his company.

Obi-Wan did not enjoy social gatherings. He was a simple man, a solitary man, and while he would never consider himself a loaner, he was quiet, would rather spend his time in meditation or contemplation than be surrounded by people and noise. He has always been anxious and insecure, and large groups only made the introverted boy uncomfortable. The Jedi as a whole were not solitary creatures, but all the same, they were not exactly ones that threw parties or social events, their own gatherings leaning more toward the quiet and the civilized, much to the chagrin of Kenobi's wild friend Quinlan Vos, but for himself and many others, the calm nature of their gatherings were somewhat comforting, even though Obi-Wan always found them a touch stressful.
Even still, he always liked to blend in, keep himself out of the center of attention, which he found both uncomfortable and stressful, a place he felt better suited to those more boastful than him. It was a thing that spoke to him of arrogance and pride, something that the Jedi eschewed, which was just as well, since Obi-Wan never cared for attention or accolades, would rather go quietly through life as an observer of the beautiful things around him, watching the Force at work through all that lived. As such, if he was forced to endure social functions, as was occasionally expected of him in the line of duty, he tried to keep out of the center of things and attract as little attention to himself as possible. It only made him anxious and nervous, made him long for the peace and quiet of his solitude where he could meditate and feel the calm, comforting embrace of the Force.

The Mandalorians were having none of it.

The moment Obi-Wan arrived at the event that evening, he was surrounded by sensual, flirtatious women and young, excitable men boasting of his exploits in the training ring that day, each telling only becoming more and more outrageous, and before long, the Jedi didn't even recognize himself in the tales they told. More alcohol than he had even seen in his life was thrust at him, urging him to drink his fill and prove himself to be a man, none of which he accepted, though his quiet, polite refusals did nothing to get the Mandalorians to stop. They were a people that believed that if a person was old enough to fight, they were old enough to drink and old enough to take another to bed, and so far as Kenobi could tell, those three things were all they spoke of.

Everywhere he went, he was faced with women trying to pull him into secluded corners to become intimate with him, promises of what they would do to him that became more and more explicit as the evening went on, touching that wouldn't be welcome in any situation. His every attempt to escape only found him cornered with slender, beautiful bodies pressed against him that he frantically tried to peel away, every corner he turned saw him run into another group of men that eagerly pulled him within their ranks to talk about his imaginary exploits. All he wanted to do was find Satine, and every attempt found him growing more and more anxious in the haze of lowered inhibitions and lust, passions unchained and unrestricted, the Force itself feeling hazy and strange to him, enough to suffocate the anxious, introverted boy until even hiding behind his walls didn't feel safe.

In his desperation, Obi-Wan quietly used a soft, gently push of the Force on his admirers, just enough to turn their attention elsewhere for a moment, and slowly, he began to make his way to the edge of the massive room. When he was certain he was not being watched, he slipped past a closed door, shutting it quickly behind him, leaving him in the dark and breathing deeply in relief when the noise muffled, the thick smell of alcohol and desire abated. With a soft groan as he ran his hands over his face, Obi-Wan quietly shuffled through the hall, passing serving staff as they refilled glasses and worked behind the scenes to keep the party supplied. For the most part, they ignored him, enough for the worn Jedi to find his way to a stairwell that took him to the second floor, and he slowly pushed a door open, peeked beyond, and sighed in relief when he saw it led to a balcony overlooking the room where the party was held.

Obi-Wan quietly stepped out on to the balcony and shut the door behind him, carefully peering over the edge and sighing in relief when he found that his position afforded him a perfect vantage point of the entire party, though he would be very difficult to see from below. Taking a deep breath, the Jedi leaned against the wall, finally allowing his heart to beat slower as his anxiety was pushed to the back of his mind, a low him rather than the deafening buzz it had been before. It was where he was most comfortable, one of the group but never truly part of it, an observer, distant and removed, granting him a perspective impossible to achieve while actively involved. There was no peace here, no calm among the Mandalorians, but there was life, brilliant and blinding as it burned like a thousand stars. It was truly a thing of beauty, one that Obi-Wan had come to appreciate in his time here, one of the comforts he could take when he was surrounded by so much death. Even in the face of violence, the Mandalorian spirit was never diminished, their
fires never burning low, only brighter in the face of adversity.

The Jedi had always said that passion clouded judgement, got in the way of what needed to be done, more often than not led people down the wrong path, but the Jedi never told him that passion could be admirable and beautiful, a flame in the dark, lovely and wild and warm in the cold face of death. They never told him that such passion could sweep away his heart and hold it in her tender, lovely, gentle hands. They never told him how good it felt to hold it close, safe and secret and deep within him, his own small flame to carefully tend behind his passionless walls of ice, enough to light his way and keep him warm at night thinking of nothing but her...

"Obi-Wan."

"Oh, holy shit!" Obi-Wan cried, quickly reeling around and backing up into the railing and nearly toppling over, his hand swiftly reaching out to grab hold of the banister to keep himself from falling. He nearly jumped again, every muscle in his body tensing when he felt something touch his shoulder, soft and sweet and concerned, and his already rapidly beating heart seemed to beat even faster. He laughed nervously, his hand wrapping around his braid as he looked into light blue eyes he knew all too well.

"Satine..." he gasped, a smile coming to his lips as his breath slowed, his momentary panic abating, and with a smile of her own, the Duchess reached up and stroked his cheek.

"I hear there was a Jedi in the yard today that fought and slew a mythosaur after he bested all of Clan Cadera's finest warriors..." the Duchess drawled, and Obi-Wan rolled his eyes and groaned. "I'd very much like to meet this man. To do all your people are saying he's done in one afternoon!" Obi-Wan whistled, the Duchess laughing softly and smiling at the Jedi in a way that made his heart ache. "And all this while being invisible. To think, I was in the yard the entire day and didn't see a thing." The small smile on her lips broke into a wide grin, and Obi-Wan felt himself flush with desire for her, the need to be with her stronger than he had felt in days.

"I feel it has been forever since we have last been alone together..." she whispered, drawing closer and her breath catching in her throat when Obi-Wan placed her hand on his heart and covered it with his own. "I've missed you these past few days."

"I admit, it has been odd not having you to watch over..." the Jedi muttered, and Satine softly laughed, taking her hands from Obi-Wan and leaning on the wall beside him, her fingers twirling around his braid and allowing the fine strand to slide over her palm.

"I'm not the only one that has been missing you. I'm certain Qui-Gon has had enough of following me around," she said, straightening the folds on the Jedi's robes and stroking his chest. "All the meetings, all the social events with the girls my age, and I do believe he is fed up with teenage girls forever," she said, leaning her head against Obi-Wan's chest and breathing deeply, the crisp, clean smell of fresh linen and the soft fragrance of spice flooding her senses. "They won't leave him alone. He's turning down women who wish to bed him every hour of the day. At least."

"I am certain he loves that," Obi-Wan softly chuckled, reaching up to touch the elegant braid Satine had done her hair in, but quickly withdrew his hand, afraid to ruin the intricate work. "Honestly, for a people that has been enemies of the Jedi for most of their history, your people are certainly keen on taking us to bed," he said, running his hand through his hair and watching nervously as he felt jealousy and desire spike through the Duchess.

"You're...something new," Satine said after a moment. "That alone is enough for my people to want to bed you, you're exotic, and it gives them something to talk about." She scoffed softly, her gaze drifting out over the room at the people down below. "Honestly, that alone is enough for
"I'm no warrior, Satine," the Jedi said softly, but a cold, steely glare from the Duchess quickly silenced him.

"You are, Obi-Wan. You fight for peace, which is an amusing contradiction, but still, you fight."

"...I fight for you, Satine..." Obi-Wan whispered, crossing his arms over his chest and moving away from her, his back pressed against the opposite wall as he leaned against it, the few feet between them seeming so much larger for the ache in their chests. "I never wanted to fight, I'm no good at it, but I do because it was asked of me, because you needed protection." He sighed heavily, his eyes cast at the ground to avoid looking at the woman. "I do it for you...for the Mandalore you envision, so one day, your people won't have to fight."

"...I know," Satine sighed, carefully pushing off the wall and tentatively approaching the anxious, nervous Jedi, her fingers lightly brushing against his, testing if the contact was welcome, and when Obi-Wan shuddered, a desperate whimper torn from his throat, she smiled and stepped closer, her fingers intertwining with his. "It wasn't an accusation, Obi. Despite my beliefs, I know what is required to win this war, and while I won't engage in violence myself, I understand that in order to put our violent past behind us, we must fight for it. Do you think me completely unreasonable?"

"Well..." Obi-Wan squeaked, gazing up at the ceiling as he thought and doing all he could to keep the amused smile off his face when he knew the girl was pouting. "Not completely, but it is admittedly difficult to tell sometimes..."

"You're a terrible little shit, just like your Master says!"

"...wait, what?! Qui-Gon doesn't say that about me!" Obi-Wan gasped, completely aghast at the very notion, and he was met only with a small, devious smirk from the Duchess, the girl pressing her body against his and letting her long fingers lightly trace their way down his chest.

"He does say so," she drawled teasingly, standing on her toes and leaning up to bring her face close to his. "All the time." Satine kissed the tip of Obi-Wan's nose and watched as the boy flushed, felt his heart jump, the rise and fall of his chest quicken, the bright blue of his eyes fill with longing that made her feel like she was the only thing he saw. "I...was a bit harsh with you this afternoon," she whispered, tearing her eyes from his and absently stroking his sides, his ribs easily felt, even through the thick fabric of his robes. "I've had to be nothing but hard and commanding with my people these past few days. They do not respond to anything less, they view it as weakness."

"Being hard is not the same as strength, Satine," Obi-Wan said slowly and carefully, brushing her cheek with the back of his hand, and he smiled when she leaned into his touch. "A metal so hard that it does not bend will break. That isn't strength, that's weakness."

"Jedi saying?" Satine asked, her eyebrow arched, and Obi-Wan smiled gently.

"Paraphrased, but yes."

"I think my people would disagree, but...I like it," she said softly, absentely running Obi-Wan's braid through her fingers. "I'm still learning how to rule my people, but I will keep that in mind." She pressed her lips to the Jedi's throat and Obi-Wan gasped, his hands moving quickly to pull her closer and closing his eyes when desire for her rushed through his blood. "I am sorry, Obi-Wan. About this afternoon, I really am. I dislike violence, but...watching you is a thing of beauty."
"That is largely because of Novin Cadera..." Obi-Wan muttered, flushing modestly and looking away from the woman pressed against him. "He is talented enough to make even an amateur look good."

"I'm not the only one that thinks so, Obi," Satine said slowly, pulling away from the Jedi slightly so she could get a better look at him. "Basically every girl I see is talking about you, and I know you were working with Ressa Cadera for some time..." She eyed him suspiciously, nervous to ask further, but she had to know, the jealousy she felt for the eldest child of Clan Cadera still burning deep within her. "She is...very beautiful, and she made no secret of her desire to extend your sparring session into her bedroom..." Obi-Wan stared at her for a moment completely confused before his face turned beat red, his hand instinctively going to pull on his braid in his sudden state of high anxiety.

"You think I...w-with her?!!" Obi-Wan gasped, flustered and tongue-tied and barely able to wrap his head around the notion.

"...w-well, did you?" the Duchess asked when the Jedi said nothing else. "If not her, with another girl. You could, you could have any of them. There isn't a girl on this planet that wouldn't give themselves to you in a second!"

"...w-what about you?" Obi-Wan stammered, his eyes wide and pleading as he looked at her, and Satine couldn't keep her heart from pounding so hard she was certain the Jedi could hear it.

"Don't be silly..." she whispered, so soft she could barely hear herself. "You know very well that I have no fascination with warriors like my people do..."

"...I-I didn't take anyone to bed with me," Obi-Wan said quietly, his fingers lightly tracing Satine's jaw and gently hooking under her chin. "Did you?" he asked, the girl's eyes widening with shock as she drew back and looked at him with disbelief. "You've been very busy these past few days, and you have had many suitors, and most of them are undeniably handsome."

"How dare you!" she gasped, almost disgusted with the question. "You've no right to ask me something like that!"

"W-what? You asked me first!"

"But I am a lady, and a noble no less!" the Duchess said, raising her head proudly. "Such a question is highly inappropriate!"

"For anyone other than a Mandalorian," Obi-Wan drawled, his arms crossing over his chest. "All you people are about is violence and sex! Sometimes at the same time!" He huffed, his hand running through his hair before his shoulders slumped, and with a heavy sigh, he looked at the Duchess with eyes that seemed almost wounded to her. Unable to look at her without his mind racing with images of her and other men naked and deep within her, Obi-Wan took to quietly examining the party beneath them, the large, untouched chairs on the balcony with them, the small table pressed up against the wall with a flute of wine upon it. "Where did you leave my Master?" he asked softly, changing the topic away from the distinctly uncomfortable one of before.

"I...slipped away when he was busy fending off another group of his admirers," Satine muttered, watching the Jedi as he walked to the other wall and silently picked her glass from off the table and returned it to her, her fingers delicately grasping the thin stem.

"That wasn't very responsible..." Obi-Wan chided, and Satine rolled her eyes. "What if something happened to you while you were out of our sight?"
"I have every confidence that were I to be in trouble, you would come to my rescue," she explained with a smirk as she pat the Jedi’s cheek. "In any case, attacking me in a place like this while I am surrounded by thousands who are watching me would be profoundly idiotic."

"Maybe so..." Obi-Wan muttered, looking back out at the party down below. "Why did you come up here, Satine?" he asked gently, looking at her out f the corner of his eye as she leaned over the railing, the wine swirling in her glass. For a moment, she didn't answer, a silent, almost bitter laugh in her chest for a moment before she sighed, her gaze shifting to the dark red liquid in her glass.

"I thought to be alone..." she muttered, her voice soft and distant, her eyes closed as she took deep, even breaths. "For months, since this war began, I have never been truly alone, not for a moment. I...thought I might escape, if not for a moment..." She laughed softly, a shy and uncertain thing that made Obi-Wan's heart skip a beat and something within him tug with sympathy and understanding. "Yourself?"

"Crowds make me uncomfortable," he said with an easy shrug, and Satine laughed, shook her head as she smiled at him, a soft and genuine thing that he hadn't known he was missing until just now. "Have you been drinking much?" he asked, pointing to her glass, and the girl flushed, embarrassed for a moment before she put the glass back on the table.

"None at all," she muttered, her finger gently twirling her intricate braid. "I learned my lesson with Edric Ordo. I too easily lose myself, and this would be an easy crowd for me to do something I would regret." The Duchess chuckled softly when she saw the skeptical Jedi look over at the full glass on the table. "It's easier to carry the glass around, or they don't stop offering."

"...oh, that's clever, I didn't think of that..."

"Of course you didn't, you're far too honest," Satine said, grinning when a deep flush spread across the Jedi's face, his fingers twirling around his braid, and before she could stop herself, she placed her hand on his shoulder and pressed him against the wall, her other hand dragging a soft, tortured moan out of him as she stroked his leg. "I didn't take anyone to bed with me, Obi," she breathlessly confessed. "How could I? There's...something between us, I don't want anyone else..."

Before Obi-Wan knew what he was doing, he had cupped Satine's face in his hands, his thumbs running over her high cheek bones and tracing the deep, red flush upon them before he pressed his lips to hers, moaning as he deepened it, more hungry for her than he had ever been. Perhaps it was their time apart that made him long for her all the more, or the atmosphere in the air, thick and heavy with the passion of the Mandalorians, or simply that she had been so perfect, so beautiful coming into her own, assuming the role she was always meant for. Or it was simpler than that. Simply being near her, the knowledge that she wanted him as much as he wanted her was enough to drive him mad, to make him so willing to allow pleasure and desire to pool deep inside him, a perfect reflection of what he felt in her.

They both allowed themselves to let go, parting only for breath as the kisses shared between them became deeper, consuming, hungry as they devoured each other. Wandering hands and needy touches that urged the other closer and closer to the line they had drawn roved over each other's body, exploring in a way that they hadn't before, and Obi-Wan could feel himself quickly react to the Duchess' touch, suddenly a seductive, promising one where before it had been timid and nervous. She was pushing further and faster than either of them ever had, want and desire and need and jealousy and so, so many other emotions making her careless and blind to where they were, but her passion only made Obi-Wan focused, anxious and insecure as he so often became when faced with overwhelming feelings he didn't know what to do with. As always, reason asserted itself withing one of them to the frustration of the other, and delicately kissing her cheek,
Obi-Wan pulled away from the Duchess, his hands on her shoulders holding the desperately moaning, frustrated girl at arm's length.

"You were kind enough to stop me last time we were about to do something very foolish..." Obi-Wan said softly, a gentle, almost sad smile on his face as his fingers stroked at the aroused girl's neck. "Allow me to return the favor."

"This isn't foolish, it is right," Satine whimpered, almost whined as she wriggled in his grasp, her gaze following his when he looked away, and she froze when she saw the people below her, as if she had suddenly remembered where she was, and that they were very, very much not alone.

"I do agree with that..." Obi-Wan whispered, leaning his forehead against hers and running his fingers down her long, slender neck, the calming influence of the Force upon him, and under his touch, he could feel the girl tremble, fighting everything in her being that was making her reckless and maddeningly needy for the touch of her Jedi, and slowly, she relaxed, her shoulders slumped, and Obi-Wan pulled her into a gentle, protective embrace.

"You are infuriating, you know that?" she muttered gratefully against his chest, sighing in satisfaction when she heard a deep, easy chuckle reverberate through him.

"No less than you are to me, I assure you, you are a constant source of anxiety and agitation." He kissed the top of her head, his hands slowly petting her back, delighting in the smooth, warm feel of her skin beneath the exposed back of the dress she wore. "You know that the moment we become close, Qui-Gon appears out of nowhere trying to catch us. I'd have for this to end simply because we were careless, and since you gave him the slip, I think he may be looking harder than usual."

"He must know by now..." Satine muttered petulantly, her fingers entwining with Obi-Wan's braid and tugging on the strand to bring him down closer to her, the Jedi gasping softly as she lay a gentle, chaste kiss upon his lips.

"Honestly, I would be surprised if he didn't know. It seems everyone I speak to can see right through me to the feelings I keep for you." Obi-Wan scoffed softly in mock irritation as he rolled his eyes, a faint smile on his lips when Satine laughed softly against him, her hands gently smoothing out his robes as she placed a kiss to the pit of his neck. "And I thought I did such a good job of holding them close and secret..."

"My people are uniquely gifted when it comes to matters of passion," Satine muttered, watching the emotions play across her Jedi's handsome face as he sighed, relaxing under the feel of her touch. "Everybody already knows, would it be so bad if Qui-Gon found out? As you said, he must already know, or at the very least, he suspects, or he wouldn't be trying so hard to catch is. What do you suppose he'd do if he knew?"

"If he knew?" Obi-Wan repeated thoughtfully. "If he knew because he caught us?" The Duchess nodded, and with a heavy sigh, he leaned his head back against the wall, his eyes staring at the junction of the wall and the ceiling as he considered the question, his hand absently stroking down the length of the Duchess' arm. "...I don't know. I suspect he'd make us stop." Obi-Wan gently took her hand and brought her fingertips to his lips. "Remind me of my commitment to the Jedi, your duty to your people, the path these feelings may set me upon..."

"Any one of those things may as well be a thousand reasons we shouldn't be together..." Satine murmured bitterly, a pout on her face even as Obi-Wan drew her closer and leaned down, his forehead pressed to hers as he slowly traced his finger down the length of her spine.

"All reasons for another time, not for now, not for this moment..." Obi-Wan whispered, a soft sigh
on his lips as he felt Satine's heart beating in time with his own, and he closed his eyes, reveled in the feel of her against him and the pulse of emotion that rushed through her that mirrored the flow of the Force within his own being. "All those things will one day come between us, when I leave this place to become a Jedi Knight, when you take your throne to rule over your people. When this war is over, our time together will be at an end." He could feel her body tense against his, the hand in his hair balling into a fist, and he didn't need to look at her to know the pain that lay in her eyes, because he felt it as well. "But we are together now, and I...I don't want to go through my whole life wishing I had made the most of our precious time together. You have...brought me, Satine. Feeling these things with you have helped me grow, and I will carry the memory of it with me for the rest of my life. The weight of regret for turning away from this isn't one I want to bear."

"Even though it will be painful to lose it?"

"Even then," the Jedi whispered, barely audible as he stroked Satine's cheek, a gentle smile on his lips that spoke both of the delight of the things he felt now and the ache of what it would be when it was gone. "Nothing lasts forever, Satine. All things in this life come and go, and it is our privilege to enjoy and experience the things the Force brings into our lives...but it isn't ours to hold on to. When it is time, we must let go. It doesn't make it any less meaningful because it was brief, it is still beautiful while it is here."

"Is that what you Jedi believe?" Satine asked, and Obi-Wan slowly nodded.

"W-well...it's what we strive to believe, in any case. I'm still learning, but...y-yes. That's what I believe."

"...it's beautiful. I-I suppose." The Duchess scoffed and rolled her eyes. "For a bunch of passionless, pseudo-warrior peacekeepers, in any case."

"Mm, my Duchess is too kind..."

"So...keep this a secret from Qui-Gon," Satine said with a sly smile. "To keep our moment for as long as we can."

"It's for the best, for our sake as well as his. Although..." the Jedi mused, leaning back against the wall and thoughtfully stroking his chin. "He's been saying some things to me as of late that have led me to believe his opinion on the matter may be changing. Attachments lead to the Dark Side, he knows this from first-hand experience, and yet..." Obi-Wan hissed in frustration and shook his head. "I don't know. Master Tahl's death is still fresh to him, I can feel it. I don't know what may have made his opinion change, I don't know how it could, but I do feel the shift within him..."

"You just don't like lying to your Master..." Satine gently teased, lightly poking the Jedi in the chest, and a faint smile tugged on the edge of Obi-Wan's lips, his gaze drifting to the party below where a fight had broken out between two very drunk men.

"You're right, I don't...but it's not really lying if we just don't tell him, right? That's just...helping guide his point of view!"

"This is why he calls you a little shit..."

"He does not call me a little shit!"

The door to their balcony nook swung open, and both teens looked quickly to see the panicked, wide eyes of Novin Cadera soften with immediate relief, the thin press of his mouth breaking into a wide smile as he looked upon the pair. He swiftly strode toward them before he stopped, his eyes narrowing as he looked them over, and the soft smile became a devious grin, a mischievous
light shining in his eyes with understanding. Slowly, Obi-Wan and Satine moved away from each other, the Mandalorian's scrutiny making them both flush deeply despite themselves.

"The other Jedi was worried about you, Duchess," Novin drawled, his hand on a hip as he glanced between the pair. "Though...I suppose I should have known you'd sneak away to be with your lover. You should have said something. I'd have covered for you. The rendezvous is a sacred thing."

"He is not my lover!" Satine said, outraged and pointing toward Obi-Wan. "He is my protector!"

"Right..." Novin drawled, winking at Satine. "Protector."

"The protector of her honor, at the moment," Obi-Wan said, stepping forward and drawing the warrior's attention. "You've seen my Master. Where is he?"

"Down there looking for her," Novin said, pointing toward Satine. "I suspect he'd have found her by now, but he's having a very hard time shaking his company." He shrugged. "I'd be helping him more than I am, but...I'm pretty bitter about him taking all the female attention. At least you have the good sense to hide yourself away."

"I'm certain my Master would rather be anywhere else," Obi-Wan said with a faint smile, closing his eyes and reaching out for Qui-Gon, only to find the Jedi's walls high and guarded, the connection between them tense and taut with frustration, the flow of the Force reaching only one way. "I'd rather be anywhere else. It was my understanding that we wouldn't be staying here long, Duchess..." he said, looking back at Satine, and with a frustrated huff, the young noble crossed her arms over her chest.

"The meetings have gone on longer than I anticipated. My people are stubborn, and this war is complicated. There is a great deal to discuss." Satine sighed, her hands clasped tightly before her, the sudden tension in her posture making Obi-Wan draw closer to her, beginning to reach out to her to help ease her fears, only to stop himself when he looked to the Cadera in the room. "I'm afraid we may be here for a little while yet."

"...I'm sorry, Duchess," Obi-Wan whispered. "I know you wished to leave quickly."

"What for?" Novin scoffed, leaning against the wall and looking down at the people below. "You are safe here, Duchess. We are not the Iteras vying for control over Krownest with the kriffing Wrens." He lifted his head arrogantly, a cocky smirk on his face. "We are Clan Cadera, the strongest of the clans of Mandalore. There is no safer place in all of Mandalore space than behind the walls of our fortress. Your enemies would be fools to attack you here. You are safe here with us."

The attack happened in the cover of darkness just before the sunrise. The bounty hunters breached the walls of the fortress before the alarms could sound, their ships slipping past the Cadera blockade as their forces above the planet engaged Death Watch forces that materialized out of hyperspace and ventured too close to their territory. Within minutes, the entire fortress was armed and ready, the warriors fiercely fighting against the infiltrating force and the Death Watch that managed to break past the ships that defended the planet. It was a suicide mission, and everyone knew it, which only made the enemy soldiers more dangerous, but it was the rogue element of the bounty hunters that set the Caderas on edge. They were well armed and difficult to detect, laying in wait and using the battle to make their way closer and closer to their target and the substantial payday that awaited them were they successful.

Obi-Wan was awake when the attack began, meditating in the silence of the ship, grateful for the
chance to be alone after the anxiety of the party. He stayed with Satine after they reunited with a very frustrated Qui-Gon, and the three had stayed together for the remainder of the evening. Obi-Wan walked with his Master and the Duchess to their rooms after they had enough of the noise and the desire of a hundred drunken Mandalorians, and after bidding them goodnight, the Padawan returned to his duty of watching the ship. He felt the shift in the Force during his meditation and was unable to shake the nagging in the back of his mind, and with his anxiety refusing to let him go, Obi-Wan rose and dressed, securing his saber to his belt as he left the ship to patrol for the trouble he sensed.

It didn't take him long to find it.

Not a minute after he stepped into the humid chill of the early morning air, the shadows surged with movement as the bounty hunters attacked, immediately killing the shocked patrols and rushing to their next point of cover before moving on and attacking again. Obi-Wan crouched low beside one of the many tropical plants that lined the walkways, keeping out of sight of the hunters, knowing the attention would only see him quickly slain. Moments later, the alarms sounded, the night air lighting up with the flash of explosions and cannon fire low in the atmosphere, the low rumble of ships as they approached filled the air along with the cries and screams and shouts of the swiftly mobilizing Cadera forces. The Jedi made his decision, and instead of joining the fight, he ran, keeping low to the shadows beside the high walls of the fortress as he sprinted toward the central tower where Satine and Qui-Gon slept. She was the mission. She was the priority.

By the time he reached the tower, the fortress was on lock down, the warriors from all the clans dedicated to serving Satine keeping a tight watch around the building where their Duchess was kept. The fighting was a ways away from his present location, the enemy ships that flew in close shot down by the powerful cannons on the fortress walls, but the confusion the bounty hunters presented was keeping the soldiers on edge. The last thing Obi-Wan wanted to do was attract attention, and trying to get past the lock down or the warriors that stood guard over the Duchess didn't seem wise. He would likely get shot were he to approach, and producing his lightsaber would only draw bounty hunters to Satine's location, and Obi-Wan knew that for as many were out fighting with the Mandalorians, there were just as many still in hiding, waiting for their opportunity to strike.

Obi-Wan kept low as he circled the tower, looking up at the shielded windows and the harsh, angular aesthetic of the Mandalorian architecture, ducking into the shadows when groups of soldiers ran by or the tight guard passed by on their patrol. He stopped when he saw the balcony on the third floor, its glass doors now covered with thick durasteel shielding, and knew that to be the room that Satine called hers. When the guard passed, when the soldiers turned away, Obi-Wan ran forward, his speed augmented with the Force, and he jumped, his fingers reaching for and grasping the ledge of the second floor window. Planting his feet on the wall, his teeth clenched tightly with effort, the Jedi took a sharp breath and threw himself upwards, his feet landing on the window ledge, and when he had his footing, he jumped again, this time reaching for the balcony and quickly pulling himself up.

Obi-Wan pounded on the shielding for a moment before he stepped back, closed his eyes and slowed his breathing and he reached his hands out, his palms pressed together, and touching the Force, he slowly moved his hands apart, his arms shaking with effort as he tried to pry the shielding open. It was too much, too hard, too heavy, the feat far beyond his abilities, and with a cry of frustration, he let go, his chest burning from the effort and from the sharply exhaled breath he didn't know he was holding. Undaunted, he tried again, and this time, the shielding shook, the durasteel screeching as if fought against the locking mechanisms as the warm, calm feeling of his Master's presence filled the Padawan, Qui-Gon lending him strength and helping him to open the shielding. Before long, the gap was big enough for Obi-Wan to leap through the open widow beyond, and the young Jedi took a running start to jump through, rolling on the other end to break
his fall as the shielding slammed closed.

Before he even got up, Satine threw her arms around the Jedi, the girl sniffling softly into his robes as she clung tightly to him, he tight, clinging grasp joined a moment later by a gently embrace from Qui-Gon, the Jedi Master drawing the two close to him, the teenagers nearly disappearing in the sea of the towering Jedi's cloak. For a moment that felt like forever, they stayed like that, the Padawan and the Duchess, warm and safe in the protective embrace of the Jedi Master, calm washing over them as their hearts slowed and their breathing evened, forgetting the world as the focused only on this.

"We should have left," Satine muttered as she wiggled away and returned to her nervous pacing. "I'm so sorry, I should have been more forceful. Stars, you'd think I'd learn! After Krownest, I should have known that nowhere is safe!"

"You did know, Satine, you're the one that wanted to leave, if you'll remember..." Qui-Gon said softly as he looked his Padawan over and straightened out his robes when he was saw the boy was fine. "How bad is it out there?"

"...it's hard to say," Obi-Wan said, his eyes drifting to the shielded windows. "There are Death Watch ships in the air, but they get shot down if they get too close. There's fighting, but not near here, not yet. The bounty hunters are the ones we need to worry about."

"How many?"

"...I don't know. Quite a few. This attack was...very well planned."

"As it should be, they had days to plan it..." Qui-Gon muttered, his eyes on Satine as she paced and fretted, and a second later, Obi-Wan jumped to his feet, his lightsaber flying to his hand and igniting as he ran to stand before the door, defensively guarding Satine from whatever lay beyond. Qui-Gon felt what his student did a moment later, and just as the Master stood at his student's side, the Duchess clinging tightly to the Master, the locks hissed, the durasteel shielding sliding off the door leading to the inside of the fortress. The door slid open, and Ressa and Novin Cadera rushed in, the man quickly closing and sealing the door behind them. Neither Jedi moved, their sabers held in their hands as they guarded the Duchess.

"Breaking the lock down, Caderas?" Qui-Gon asked flatly, his eyes drifting between them as he felt them through the Force. "I should warn you, the last time we were in a situation like this, another sibling pair betrayed Satine. I didn't kill Edric and Veela Ordo then, but I will not hesitate to kill you now."

"Let's just save you the trouble then and just not betray you," Ressa softly hissed. "I don't think our father would appreciate knowing that we broke the lock down, and he's really not going to like what we're going to do next."

"Our fortress is well defended," Novin said quickly. "We're going to win this fight and everyone knows it. This is the heart of our fortress, and you're going to be safe here."

"But it won't be long before every single one of our enemies knows where you are," Ressa said, taking a step toward the two Jedi, neither one of them moving or lowering their weapons, but the woman wasn't afraid. "You'll probably be safe with us." She sighed heavily, her armored hand running through her hair messy from the helmet she held under her arm. "But you will definitely be safe with your Jedi."

"I've seen what you can do, Kenobi," Novin said, stepping forward and extending his hand to the Padawan, and Obi-Wan allowed his eyes to drift curiously between the man's face and the offered
hand. "You survived on Zanbar for a month surrounded by the Death Watch. You survived in the woods of Krownest, which is about the worst place in all of kriffing Mandalore. You survived venom-mites on Draboon, and all the while, you kept our Duchess safe." He stepped aside and gestured to the door. "Go. Get her out of here. A stationary target is an easy one to hit. Do what you do best, and I know you'll keep Satine safe."

"Just don't tell our parents..." Ressa growled through clenched teeth. "They're certain our defenses are enough, but we're not so sure. But you, on the run? Those are results we can't argue with."

Obi-Wan and Satine both looked up at Qui-Gon, and when the Master sighed, Obi-Wan switched off his saber and tightly grasped Novin's hand.

"She'll be safe with me," he softly promised, and the Mandalorian flashed him a cocky grin.

"I know it. That's why we're here."

"I'm staying here," Qui-Gon said firmly, his attention turning to his Padawan and the Duchess. "They see a Jedi running around and it is certain to draw their attention. If I can keep them looking here, it can give you a chance to get away undetected. Go to ground, keep hidden. I will come for you when it's safe."

"Master, I can't-"

"You can and you will, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said firmly, his hand resting on the boy's shoulder. "Remember. Sometimes our rules get in the way of our mission. No matter what, you will defend the Duchess."

"...I will, Master," Obi-Wan whispered, the conviction strong in his voice. "I promise."

"There's a passage in the basement under this building that leads out past the walls," Ressa said as Novin slammed his fist on the console on the wall, the doors sliding open with a soft hiss. "I'll take you there."

Obi-Wan and Satine said nothing, only quickly shoved their pockets with some fruit from a bowl on the table, bid Qui-Gon a swift goodbye and good luck, and they followed the woman out, keeping close behind her as she put her helmet back on and ran swiftly through the halls, ducking into side rooms and smaller corridors to avoid guards and remain unseen, the point of their escape defeated entirely were anyone to know that the Duchess wasn't present.

It didn't take long for them to make their way down the winding halls and past large, spacious rooms, usually bright and open to the air and the soft, tropical breeze that were now cold and dark and closed, the heavy steel shielding over the windows and doors making it feel more like a prison than a tropical fortress. Despite the numerous groups of patrolling guards, Ressa had little difficulty leading the two teens past them, a product of a rambunctious childhood and young teenage years filled with secret rendezvous. They only stopped when Ressa led them into a dark corridor, the air thick and musty and the iron walls covered in dust and the dull sheen of metal worn with age and disrepair.

"I used to use this passageway all the time when I was younger," Ressa said softly, her voice seeming even softer in the thick air of the dark room, her hand upon the wall as she almost affectionately ran her fingers down it. "It leads out to the jungle just outside the walls of the fortress. It hasn't been used in a very long time, Clan Cadera never runs from a fight." She laughed softly, brushing the dust off her fingers and smiling at the younger teenagers. "It was just me using it, really. I wasn't the easiest child, and I only became worse when I discovered all the things you could do with boys. These passages saw a lot of me on my way into the cover of the jungle." She sighed, her eyes fixed down the dark of the corridor, the draft from deep within cold and damp.

"There is a network of caves within the jungle formed by subterranean rivers that lead out to the ocean. I can't think of a better place to hide."
"Will you be alright?" Satine asked, stepping closer to the other girl, and she chuckled softly, a cocky smirk on her face.

"I'm a Cadera, Duchess. It'll take more than a few bounty hunters and some Death Watch filth to take me down." She gently nudged Satine toward Obi-Wan. "I expect you to be equally difficult to kill. Give them hell, kids. I'll see you when you return." Smiling at the Cadera, her lip trembling slightly, Satine threw her arms around the warrior and tightly embraced her, the strong, stoic Ressa suddenly uncertain what to do, fidgeting in the grasp of the grateful teenager. As soon as she managed to extract herself from the Duchess' grasp, Ressa flashed the pair a quick, almost shy smile, pressed one of her blasters into Satine's hands, and rushed through the door, leaving Satine and Obi-Wan alone in the dark when the tunnel was sealed behind her.

Striking on his lightsaber to light the way, Obi-Wan grabbed hold of the Duchess' hand and ran down the hall, Satine following easily at his side, the two falling into step as if they moved as one, so used to the other from months and months of close living, of training together, of learning side by side. The tunnel was longer than Obi-Wan had expected, the draft through the thick, humid air confusing his senses and making him feel as though their exit was much closer than it actually was. He only knew they were nearing the outside air when he could see the faint light of the coming dawn lighting the tunnel around them. Switching off his saber to make certain they stayed as unseen as possible from hunters who may have been on the lookout for Jedi weapons, Obi-Wan ran faster, pulling Satine along with him as they rushed for the wilderness of Vorpa'ya.

They emerged among the thick underbrush of the lush, tropical jungle, the air already becoming hot and sticky with the rising sun, the wilderness filled with the calls of birds and the cries of the hundred of species, the fortress nowhere to be seen through the thick groves of trees that populated the jungle. There was no discernable path, no easy way through the thick underbrush, no attempt to tame the wilderness of the planet, and the journey wouldn't be an easy one. Keeping low and climbing through bushes and tall grasses and thick, winding vines, Obi-Wan carefully picked his way through the mess of vegetation, Satine creeping slowly behind him. It was slow going until the Jedi managed to find a small, winding trail cut by the wildlife, a set path the fauna must have used regularly enough that the flora yielded to the beasts. Once the trail was found, the two teens made their way through the forest at a much faster pace, though the two still kept low for fear of detection.

Their swift trek through the jungle was stopped suddenly when Obi-Wan felt the Force shift, the calm suddenly disturbed, and without warning, he grabbed Satine and dove with her off the path and into the thick, green underbrush, the spot that they had been on only a moment before exploding in a thick plume of vegetation and dirt, a hole in the path from where a blaster bolt had struck the ground. The Jedi's lightsaber was activated a moment later to rapidly deflect the next few shots fired from a particularly nasty, modified blaster rifle in the hands of their hunter, a red scaled Trandoshan that slowly stalked into sight from the obscuring vines and growth of the jungle.

A series of reptilian growls, clicks and hisses came from the hunter's throat, his mouth parted slightly to reveal long lines of sharp, needlepoint teeth, never stopping his rapid fire on the pair even as the deflected bolts struck the ground near him or hit his armored chest, the impact bouncing harmlessly off him and doing nothing to stop his advance. What Satine drew her own blaster, using her Jedi's body as cover to lean out from behind him and shoot, the Trandoshan hesitated, but only to change his step and his focus. Crouching lower to make himself a smaller target and his slitted eyes never leaving the Duchess' blaster. From then on, a slight turn of his shoulder, the smallest movement of his head allowed him to narrowly avoid the Mandalorian's shots.

When the hunter's blaster was out of charges, he rapidly switched to another one, a slower firing
one that struck with much greater impact, every shot sending the Jedi off balance with each powerful blast he deflected. For fear of other bounty hunters in the area, Obi-Wan told Satine to stay closer, the feel of them in the Force buzzing in his mind, not close enough to see them now, but close enough that they could be on them in moments were they to catch wise of what was happening. When the Trandoshan brought his gauntleted wrist up, the flash of a comlink embedded in the armor, fear gripped the Jedi, the image of a dozen hunters converging upon their location flashing through his mind. His focus sharpened, calm settling over him as he deflected another shot, his feet digging furrows from the ground from the impact, and he saw his opportunity.

Seizing the moment, Obi-Wan reached out, grabbed hold of the Force, and with a swift, hard clenching of his hand, a screeching howl of pain ripped through the air as the comlink sparked, the armor on the hunter's scaly forearm snapping down as it was crushed, sharp, jagged pieces of shattered metal slicing into his arm and sending sprays of thick, green blood splattering to the ground. Even in the thick jungle, the noise seemed to carry for miles, and Obi-Wan pushed Satine forward, urging her to run to get away from the creature, his own escape quickly ended when another shot from the powerful blaster skinned the top of his shoulder. The Jedi scrambled on the ground to rise to his feet, turning quickly only to find the Trandoshan not only recovered enough, but now furiously charging them, faster than a creature that size had any right to be.

The blaster had been discarded in favor of a long, wicked knife, the steel of the blade flashing in the light of the morning sun, and within seconds, the Trandoshan was bearing down upon the Jedi, the knife in hand slicing downwards just as Obi-Wan rose his lightsaber. The Jedi was off-balance, his arm shaking from the pain of the burning flesh on his shoulder, and his opponent was fast, the knife slashing down across the outside edge of Obi-Wan's arms, the knife cutting down to the bone, and Obi-Wan uttered a sharp cry of pain as blood splattered the ground and his opponent. The next slash was faster, a swift cut upwards that Obi-Wan only just managed to turn away from to keep the strike from being fatal, the tip of the knife cutting through his tunic and robes and the pale skin just under his arm, the sharp steel striking a line across the boy's ribs.

Pain erupted through Obi-Wan's chest and nearly sent him to the ground, heedless of the sound of Satine screaming behind him, the feral snarl of the triumphant predator loud and piercing above him, and when the knife slashed down once again, Obi-Wan turned into it, his arm thrusting above his head to strike the hunter's arm, blocking the knife from it's downward motion and he thrust his lightsaber forward. Slitted yellow eyes widened shock as he stared into the face of the frightened, bleeding Jedi, his blue lightsaber buried to the hilt in the Trandoshan's chest, the hissing blade extending out his back between the shoulder blades. The knife dropped to the ground, the low, throaty reptilian hisses and clicks dying in his chest as his muscles grew slack, the hunter slumping forward with a groan.

With a gasp of horror, Obi-Wan held the Trandoshan up, barely able to breathe as he watched the life leave the hunter's eyes, the yellow glow of his eyes fading, becoming dull and muted and sightless as he died. Switching off the saber, Obi-Wan caught the creature as he fell forward and gently lowered him to the ground, his hands shaking as they hovered above the reptile's chest as if somehow trying to find a way to save him or fix the damage he had done, heedless of the amount of his own blood that was splattering upon the hunter's armor from the deep gashes in his arms.

He gasped softly when a gentle, shaking hand touched his shoulder and he quickly turned around to meet the wide, frightened eyes of his Duchess, his cut robes hanging off his thin form, the soft beige fabric soaking through with dark, red blood. The fear in the girl's eyes was enough to motivate Obi-Wan back into action, and after quickly running his hand over the Trandoshan's face to close the dull, sightless eyes, he grabbed Satine's hand and found her shaking just as badly as he was. He started to leave the scene, pulling at the girl, but found her frozen to the spot, nerves and fear immobilizing her just as he had been only a moment ago.
"Come on..." he whispered, gently kissing her fingertips. "There are others nearby, I can feel them, we have to go..."

"Y-you killed him..." she whispered, her voice trembling and her breathing fast before she caught both his hands in hers. "Oh no, you're bleeding, you're hurt..."

"I'm fine..." Obi-Wan said, firm and calm, his fingers lightly brushing her cheek and leaving blood smeared on her pale skin. "Focus, Satine, we need to go. Now." It was enough, and with a quick nod from the Duchess, they were off, the Jedi in the lead, his bloody hand tightly clasped around Satine's, leading her at a full sprint through the jungle, heedless of the vines and vegetation that struck him as they went. They kept low, but moved fast, Obi-Wan igniting his saber to slash at the jungle flora when it became too thick for easy passage, and before long, he felt the Force pull at him, heard the soft echo of running water, and the two teens pushed their way through a thick curtain of ropy vines covering an enormous tree, the space within hollowed and spacious, a cold draft coming from a hole in the ground covered by roots.

Pulling the gnarled roots aside, Obi-Wan and Satine slid into the hole, the Jedi catching the Duchess as she fell in after them, the teenagers ankle deep in the cool, running water of a subterranean river, the space around them dark and spacious, a cave that went deeper than this cavern, judging by the echo of the running water. Keeping Satine cradled tightly in his arms, the girl clinging tightly to his neck, Obi-Wan waded through the water until his feet touched the slick stone of the river's edge, and he began jogging deeper into the caves, feeling his way with the Force as much as his eyes.

He wasn't sure how long he ran, how deep he went, the darkness disorienting, but he continued on, ignoring the dull throbbing in his arms from the deep, bleeding cuts. He slowly began following a warm current in the air, a humid, tropical draft he thought may be coming from outside, a welcome feel in the dark, chilly damp air of the cave he ran through. He only stopped running when he found the source of the warmth, not the outside of Vorpa'ya's tropical beaches like he thought, but a large cavern, a steaming pool of a natural hot spring heating the dark stones and bioluminescent algae growing on the walls and stones and ceiling in blues and greens and purples, making the entire area feel like space, surrounded by the warm comfort of the stars. It was beautiful, the Jedi staring awestruck at his surroundings, and he put the Duchess down when she gasped, muttering in soft Mando'a as she looked around.

Breathing deeply, Obi-Wan sunk to his knees, his eyes closed and his breathing deep and even as he reached out to the Force to feel for life, for his Master, for the hunters that tracked them. He heard Satine sit before him, and smiled gently when he felt her take his hands started to wipe the blood away with the edge of her tunic.

"Are we safe?" she whispered, her eyes drifting around the beautiful cavern, the light inside bright enough to see her Jedi's face, the soft edge of his lips as he smiled, the blue of his eyes almost glowing as he opened them and looked at her face.

"I don't know..." he said, shifting to make himself more comfortable. "I need a moment, just give me a moment...."

"My poor Obi-Wan..." the Duchess muttered, lifting his hands up and looking at the bleeding cuts on his arms, her eyes drifting to the long, spreading bloodstain on his robes, the blistering flesh from the graze of the plasma bolt, and Satine slowly began taking the Jedi's robe off, the boy helping to shrug it from his shoulders when he understood what she meant to do. "You're always getting hurt for me..."

"It's always been my duty and my pleasure to do so," he said, his smile faltering when he pulled his tunic off, hissing when the dried blood pulled at his skin. "I'm sorry, Satine...I-I didn't mean to
"He didn't leave you much of a choice..." Satine whispered, taking the light linen of his tunic and began tearing it into strips. "It's a tragedy it came to that, but you did what you could. I cannot fault you for protecting yourself, my fearless knight..."

"...but I was afraid," he muttered, looking at his arms when Satine got up and walked quickly to the hot spring, shed her own cloak and dunked it in the water. "I dislike taking life, and up close like that, it's..." He shivered, his hands tightly grasping his knees as he shut his eyes tight against the sudden chill. "It isn't like shooting down ships, this is...personal. I can feel their life fade from the Force, I see it happen. It's no easier for me than the first time I was forced to kill."

"Nor should it be," the Duchess whispered, sinking to her knees before him once again and using her soaked cloak to clean the blood from the wounds on his arm and the cut on his side, the even slice opening and closing with each breath he took and exposing the pale flash of bone beneath. It was deeper than either of them had realized. "You aren't a killer, Obi. I know you would have let him live if it was possible."

"If we can stay hidden, perhaps we can avoid killing the others," the Jedi hissed when the wet cloth touched the gashes in his arms. "Don't get too comfortable, be ready to run at a moment's notice. I'm going to try and feel them out."

"Can I treat your injuries while you do, or is it a distraction?" Satine asked, and Obi-Wan smiled almost shyly at her, the girl's heart fluttering as he did so.

"It should be fine," Obi-Wan said softly, sitting up straight and laying his arms across his knees, the outside edge facing up to give her the best look at the bleeding cuts. "Thank you..."

"It is always my pleasure to do what I can for you, my knight," Satine said, her hand stroking Obi-Wan's cheek, and with a small, yearning smile, the Jedi leaned into her touch, closed his eyes, and slipped into his meditations. Satine set to work, moving slowly despite the urgency the blood invoked in her as to not disturb his focus, wrapping his arms as gently as she could to move him as little as possible. He didn't seem to notice, and if he did, he made no indication of it. For as present as Obi-Wan was, Satine may as well have been alone, his chest hardly even moving to indicate that he was breathing at all. More than once, Satine laid her hand over his heart just to make sure it was still beating and his injuries hadn't claimed his life while he meditated.

As soon as she had finished wrapping his arms and examining her handiwork to make certain it was good enough, Satine moved to work on his side, swiftly tearing more strips from the Jedi's hopelessly ruined tunic and wiping the area down before she set to work. She moved Obi-Wan's arm from his lap to rest over her shoulder to keep it out of the way while she worked, and she wrapped the long strips over the wound, her hands brushing against his strong body and her head resting against his chest as she reached around him.

When she was satisfied with her work, checking to make sure that none of her wrappings were loose or too tight or bleeding through, she moved to kneel behind him, her fingers gingerly touching the burn on the boy's shoulder. There was little to be done about that, but Obi-Wan had yet to move, so she took it upon herself to treat that one too, lightly dabbing at the blistering skin to clear away the dirt and sweat and grime. She got up for a moment to dip one of the strips into the water, and airing it out as she slowly returned to the Jedi, she folded the fabric into a small pad to drape across his shoulder, covering the burn with what she hoped would be something soothing to the sensitive skin.

Satine wasn't sure how long she waited for Obi-Wan to move, but so long as the Jedi was still and peaceful, she felt safe, though she still checked on him occasionally to make certain he was still
alive. Hunger pangs eventually motivated her to take some of the fruit from the pockets in Obi-Wan's robe and her cloak and bite into the soft, sweet flesh of a red skinned sphere while she peeled a blue citrus fruit for Obi-Wan when he decided to return from his meditations. After exploring the cave and its beautiful, glowing flora and dipping her feet into the hot spring and reveling in the feel of relaxation, Satine returned to the Jedi's side when the fatigue from the strenuous run through the jungle finally caught up to her, the adrenaline finally leaving her blood. She dropped his robes beside him, arranged them to be as comfortable as possible, and sat beside him, lay her head in his lap, and reached up behind him to stroke his back, the feel of the relaxed, strong muscles filling the pit of her stomach with warmth.

The intention was to sleep, to allow the stress of the day to leave her as she drifted away under the protection of her Jedi, but she found herself unable to look away from the man now that he was so close. She reached up and lightly ran her fingers over the cut of his jaw, down his neck, over the scars on his chest, outlining the strong, defined muscles of his stomach, and despite herself, the warmth of comfort and safety she felt before quickly became one of desire, hot and insistent and made only worse by the months of unfulfilled need. She had learned a great deal from Ressa and the other girls over the past few days, and all of it was at the forefront of her mind now. Above her, the smooth, slow, even breathing of the Jedi hitched, grew deep and ragged for just a moment, and Satine shot up, her hands flying to his face to stroke his cheeks, fear and panic filling her and driving her previous fatigue and lazy arousal away.

"Hush, Satine..." Obi-Wan whispered, his eyes closed and a smile on his face as he reached up to run his fingers through her pale, blond hair. "It's alright. We're safe."

"They're gone?" she asked, smiling when the Jedi opened lazy, tired eyes.

"No, not gone, but...frustrated. They lost the trail, predators and scavengers have compromised it."

With a soft, satisfied sigh, Obi-Wan pulled the Duchess back down into his lap, his fingers combing through her hair and a quiet moan was pulled out of his throat when the girl pressed a kiss to his stomach. "At least for now, we are safe."

"Is Qui-Gon alright?" she whispered, her hands reaching up to slide into Obi-Wan's hair, and the Jedi closed his eyes, trying to repress the soft, wanting groan she pulled out of him, though he was only partially successful.

"He is closed to me, so he is likely still fighting, but yes, he is alive." Swallowing hard and trying to calm his rapidly breathing heart, his eyes drifted down the length of the Duchess' body, his fingers tentatively running down her neck and arms, the affectionate touches drawing soft, pleased gasps from the girl. "How long have we been here?"

"I don't know, it's hard to say without being able to see the sun..." she muttered, placing another kiss on the Jedi's stomach, the lean muscle tensing under her touch and the boy unable to repress the soft moan in his chest. "It can't have been too long..."

"Adrenaline makes the passage of time seem slower. Time passes quickly in battle, even if we don't notice it..." Obi-Wan muttered, trying to be dry, factual, trying to keep himself focused on the mission, on the danger that surrounded them, on his duty, but he was instead drawn to the moment, the feel of Satine's hands on the back of his neck and the invitation as the Duchess pulled him down, the Jedi leaning over her and moaning softly when his lips pressed against hers. Her desire for him burst like a flash of light through the Force, sending shocks of pleasure deep through him and creating cracks and fissures in the thin veneer of his control. His nervousness banished by need, his drifting hand slipped under her tunic and ran up the flat, taut plane of her stomach, and when Satine began squirming, soft, sweet moans drawn from the girl as she deepened the kiss, the Jedi slipped his hand higher, coming to rest on the soft, silken fabric of her undergarments as he stroked her breasts.
Satine only endured it for a moment, long enough for her to moan desperately, for her arousal to rise enough to make the space between her legs slick with desire, for her nipples to harden into small points under the Jedi’s touch. She sat up quickly, Obi-Wan looking at her with a confused, almost wounded expression for a moment before the Duchess straddled his lap, her hands quickly grabbing the hem of her tunic and pulling it over her head and dropping it into the pile of Obi-Wan’s robes. Without wasting another moment, she grabbed the stunned Jedi’s hands and placed them on her breasts once again before she slid her fingers through his hair and kissed him, deep and passionate, and Obi-Wan eagerly met her desire with his own.

She only broke away after the both of them were a panting mess of desperate moans and wanting touches, the Jedi’s hands drifting to her hips and the hardened length in his pants pressing against her enough to make her stop, much to the boy’s displeasure. Her sudden nervousness quickly fled before her curiosity, her eyes roving over his body and watching his chest rapidly rise and fall, the cascading contractions of the lean muscles of his stomach, the growing bulge between his legs. The past few days of listening to her friends in Clan Cadera had chased away a great deal of her shyness, and instead of backing away as she knew she should have done, she leaned in instead, her fingers petting at his stomach as teasingly grabbed the waist of his pants.

"You know, the girls talk about you a lot, Obi-Wan..." she said breathlessly, a sly, devious smirk on her lips as she watched the Jedi’s eyes flutter shut as he groaned, his hands gripping her waist harder and pulling her closer against him. "About all the things they’d like to do to you."

"I don't want anything they could possibly-" Obi-Wan froze, his breath caught in his throat, his eyes wide and his heart seeming to freeze in his chest when the Duchess slipped her hand beneath the waist of his pants, her delicate fingers hesitating for a moment before she wrapped them around his length, the sensitive flesh hardening under her touch.

"It made me start thinking," Satine whispered, leaning up to nibble on his ear as she slowly began stroking him, "of all the things I want to do to you, and being here with you, right now...I can't think of a single reason why we haven't done this sooner."

It was all Obi-Wan needed to break. Satine watched as the blue in his eyes seemed to shatter into bright, beautiful shards of broken crystal, and with a desperate moan that came from deep in his chest, he captured her lips again, deeper than before, an urgency within him that had never been present before this moment. The hands on her hips hooked into the waist of her pants, tugging at them for a moment before he slipped his fingers between her legs, gently thumbing at the slick, sensitive folds and urged to continue by a sharp gasp of pleasure and wanting moans as she began to roll her hips, her hand tightening around his length as the last of her reservations left her.

"I want you..." Obi-Wan growled, swiftly bending to kiss and nip at the girl's slender neck, one hand supporting her back as he lowered her to the makeshift bed of cloaks and robes and tunics, and Satine responded only by wiggling out of her pants, kicking them off with her boots and propping herself up on her elbows as she watched the Jedi do the same.

"I want you..." the Duchess echoed, breathless as she parted her legs when the Jedi crawled over her, moaning and arching her hips up when Obi-Wan pressed long, languid kisses to the flat of her stomach.

"You don't understand..." he muttered between kisses as he worked his way up her body, stopping only when he got to her covered breasts and slid his hands underneath her to undo the clasp. "My entire life, I have been on the path the Force set out for me. Become a Jedi Knight, serve the people of the galaxy, bring peace where there is war and harmony where there is strife. It wasn't something I wanted, just something I know I must do..." He moaned softly when he pressed the straps down her arms and removed the garment, exposing her breasts to the warm air,
a deep flush on her face as she watched the Jedi become enraptured. "But, Oh, Satine...this is the first thing I have ever truly wanted, you are the only thing I have ever wanted..."

"If that's what you want, I am all yours, Obi..." Satine moaned softly, her hands running over Obi-Wan’s shoulders as he crawled upwards, his hands planted by the side of her head, and she slowly raked her fingers across his body, down his sides, carefully avoiding his wrapped injury as her touch drifted down to the sharp crest of his hips. Faltering for just a moment as she swallowed the last of her nerves, she pulled off the Jedi's briefs, the boy sighing with desperate satisfaction as his arousal was freed from the confines of his undergarments. Moaning as he kissed at the Duchess' lips, her neck, her chest, his fingers traced down her body to her hip and slowly removed the last article of clothing between them, the girl wriggling as they were removed so she could kick them off.

"Satine..." Obi-Wan gasped, sitting back and looking at the exposed woman, not so hungry as he was awestruck, his light, exploring touch drifting over the smooth, pale skin. "You are beautiful..." The Jedi closed his eyes, calming his ragged, erratic breathing when the Duchess grabbed hold of his arousal, her fingers lightly stroking along the length. "I-I hope I can please you. I tried to educate myself on the matter, b-but I fear I am a poor student, you have always said so."

"Y-you learned to please a woman?" she asked, her hand stopping as she looked at the man with wide-eyed surprise.

"I tried," he drawled, his breath hitching when the woman began stroking again. "I thought...perhaps you might teach me better."

"Well, you don't get more Mandalorian than this..." Satine said, her voice low and husky and seductive, and Obi-Wan shivered, his soft gasps becoming deep moans when the girl's hand on his hip drew him forward, the tip of his arousal rubbing against the slick heat of the Duchess.

"A-are you ready?" Obi-Wan whispered, his breathing fast and deep as he lowered himself on top of her, supporting most of his weight on his elbows as he pressed their foreheads together.

She started to answer but found her breath stuck in her chest, and swallowing hard, she nodded in lieu of words, With a deep, shuddering breath, both teenagers gasped as Obi-Wan pressed inside her, slowly sinking his full length inside the moaning girl and groaning in satisfaction when their bodies pressed against each other.

He wasn't certain how long he stayed still, how long he sat deep inside her without moving, delighting instead in the almost torturous pleasure that lit the Force, the feel of her tight around him, the taste of her as they kissed, the smell of Mandalorian lilies in her silken hair, the sound of her moans drifting through his ears, his every sense filled with nothing but her. He didn't start moving until she did, the soft urging of her rolling hips enough to jolt him into action, and with a deep, desperate gasp of pleasure, Obi-Wan drew nearly his full length out of her, only to slowly sink back inside, the both of them moaning wildly as he thrust within her

Again and again, he thrust deep inside her, setting a slow, gentle pace as they moved together, their names on each other's lips as they lost themselves in the feel of the other, the culmination of months of fighting and teasing and flirting and irresistible attraction finally coming to an end as they joined. Soft moans and pleasured gasps filled the air around them, the soft glow of the cave flora casting soft light on pale, flushed skin, and for just a moment, Obi-Wan couldn't tell where he ended and Satine began, their presence in the Force blending and intertwining and moving together as they did. She was beautiful like this, her muscles relaxed, her expression blissful, her eyes stained with the touch of lust and want and sated need even as the tension inside her continued to grow and knot deep within her.
They picked up the pace together, moving faster as they could feel the other's need grow, the building tension reaching a fever pitch and begging to be released, their breath fast, ragged gasps as they kissed and clutched at each other, the Jedi thrusting inside the Duchess with her name on his lips. It didn't take long for the increased speed to send Obi-Wan to the edge, teetering on the peak and reveling in the exhilaration of walking on such a thin ledge. With all the control that training under the Jedi had blessed him with, Kenobi held on to the feeling, refusing to go tumbling into the abyss below when standing at the top of the world felt so good. He came undone when Satine clenched around him, her legs wrapping around his hips and her arms clinging tightly to his back as she brought him tumbling down with her.

Orgasm washed over them in a wave of pleasure and satisfaction unlike anything either of them had experienced on their own, the Jedi buried deep within Satine as the muscles in his stomach rolled and clenched in a wave as he spilt inside the moaning girl. He didn't move for a long time, stayed buried to the hilt inside her long after their climax had passed and lazy satisfaction filled them. They didn't untangle themselves, stayed tightly grasped in each other's arms long after it was over, pressing soft kisses to each other's lips and muttering words of affection to each other in Mando'a, the Jedi repeating the words the Duchess said, his accent thick in his post-coital haze, though the aristocratic lit seemed to please Satine. Obi-Wan didn't know how long they lay like that, but he was certain it didn't take long before both he and his lover were pulled together into a deep, restful sleep.

Meditation.

There is no emotion, there is peace, there is no passion, there is serenity, there is no emotion, there is peace, there is no passion, there is serenity, there is no emotion, there is peace, there is no passion, there is serenity...

But I find peace in my emotions, I find serenity in my love for her...

I've broken the Code. Absolutely, hopelessly broken the core values of everything I believe in, everything I have ever known I will become, and I...

I can't bring myself to care.

I can't do this. Not now. Not tonight. There will be other times to reflect on what I have lost to become Satine's lover. But not now.

Now there is only her. My mission. My Duchess.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!