**Intertwine**

by norcumi

**Summary**

Padmé survives Mustafar. She and Obi-Wan strike out on their own with the twins, accumulating a far bigger family of clones, Jedi, and assorted troublemakers. Even in the shadow of the Empire, they manage to forge something new.

**Notes**

This could not have been accomplished without much kind input from Flamethrower, particularly relating to the Skiratas and their shenanigans. She has given full approval/blessing/whathaveyou for my using it here, though at least 90% of that was all her. THANK YOU!!!!! *FLAIL HUGS* Many other small elements, such as emphasis of gold for vengeance and the cloth armor of awesomeness is ALL hers, and used with all thanks and permission.

This was also written with much input, commentary, and support from Dogmatix and MoreCivilizedAge, both of whom are also awesome and generous with their time and patience with my random side smut (what became something weirder and more expansive).
Obi-Wan takes them as far away from Mustafar as he can, both of them so wounded in mind that it’s a miracle of the Force they can manage that much sanity. Between his Force healing skills – minor, but at least existent – and Bail’s swift intervention, Padmé is able to hold both her children and decide their collective fates.

She and Obi-Wan take the children, her small shuttle, and they run. Master Yoda retreats to Dagobah, while Bail goes back to fight as he best can, laying down deeper roots of the Rebellion. Obi-Wan and Padmé, in the meantime, have the future of the Jedi to see to.

Part of it is that Padmé is so damned tired. Tired of hiding, tired of lying, tired of keeping her temper silent while the universe collapses around them. She waits almost a week, then spends several hours making her displeasure known with regards to Obi-Wan’s well intentioned but incredibly, unbelievably stupid actions on Mustafar. Yes, Anakin was mad. Throwing oil onto those flames was nigh unforgivable.

She forgives the idiot anyways. She understands. They both lost someone they love to the Darkness. They spend long days and long nights trying to figure if he was seduced, or tricked, or if it was somehow his actual choice, but they cannot conclude anything.

Within a few months, the sad remnants of Torrent find them. Padmé never quite expected so much relief – nor so much grief – upon seeing those familiar, identical faces, now all marked with identical suture scars upon the temple.

The clones come with a much larger shuttle, and the one Padmé and Obi-Wan have been using becomes an away ship tucked into the hanger. Luke and Leia are adopted as part of the 501 with a speed and deep-rooted affection Padmé finds almost disconcerting, until Obi-Wan points out the lack of childhood the clones had. With that, Padmé finds an even greater appreciation for these men who have lost so much, when they had so little to begin with, and so very few of them are bitter about what they never had an opportunity to experience.

It helps to have that many eager hands willing to take on infant care, too.

They pick up stragglers from the 501, and deserters from the 212 and other companies. A grim Wolffe and several slightly mad ARCs join their crew, and the first time Padmé stumbles over a gruff, protective Boil pretending he is absolutely not holding hands to reassure the young Twi’lek with him she beams for hours.

Obi-Wan is both over the nearest moon and unutterably distraught when they find Cody trying to literally drink himself to death, and the whole crew works their collective ass off to give those two as much time and space to work through the many, many issues they have.

This also gives Padmé time to get used to the clones and a culture they have that she somehow didn’t expect to encounter. The first few times she stumbled across a pile of clones sprawled over each other like kittens, she went beet red and just about-faced as quickly as possible. Yes, she could see they were dressed. That didn’t make it any less intimate.

Rex was the one to finally pull her aside and explain how they all grow up a little touch starved (it doesn’t take Padmé long to figure that means very, not a little). It’s apparently not intimate that way, though the careful wording makes it clear that it can be, and sometimes it is.

Not only does that make sense to her, it means the first time she’s in one of the lounge areas reading, and several brothers end up sprawled around the sofa she’s on and each other, she’s actually comfortable enough to just shift to a more relaxed position against the arm of the chair,
legs up and providing a backrest for Kix (she later admits to Rex it was adorable how the medic blushed before making a subtle, questioning gesture, followed by a relieved look upon getting the all clear).

It also means that the times when she or Rex are looking for enough company to chase away the silence, while still seeking something more private, they end up sitting together in his or her quarters. It’s somewhere in the latter half of the first year when they are shoulder to shoulder on Rex’s sofa, and Padmé first realizes Rex has spent the last while subtly watching her, not his datapad.

He might be subtle, but she had to learn to watch everything as first Queen, then Senator. Rex’s expression is soft, fond. There’s a gentleness to his face she’s only seen when he’s around the twins, and Padmé is surprised to realize that sends a bolt of heat through her. It’s not like she’s unused to being stared at. She has, however, spent several months trying to get a grieving head and heart around the fact that her husband tried to kill her.

Also, young twins.

Padmé realizes a moment too late she must have tensed some in surprise. Since they’re in contact from shoulder to knee, of course Rex notices. She certainly can feel him tense before he makes a casual move a few centimeters away.

Padmé really didn’t have much patience for this sort of bullshit before the Republic fell. She has been raising two rambunctious, Force sensitive children since then, no matter how much help there is. To all the Sith hells with beating around the bush. She remembers quite clearly what trying to be kind got her with Clovis.

So she sets her datapad aside, turning to face Rex. He’s got his professional soldier face on, trying for polite, inquisitive, and unreadable.

Padmé can still see the combination of guilt and almost hidden interest in his eyes. “What’s going on?” she asks, voice level.

Not good enough. Rex straightens a smidge more. “I’m not sure –”

“Rex. No games.” She doesn’t need this sort of strife. She crosses her arms and glares at him. “Please. What’s going on.” Even while being civil she’s a bit sharp, but they have talked about so much and he knows how she feels about secrets.

For a moment that stretches out to forever, Rex just looks at her, neutral as the most expressionless droid. Then he sighs and looks away, too many emotions crossing his face too quickly until he swipes a hand over it. He doesn’t look back at her, which isn’t a good sign. When he finally speaks, it’s soft, awkward. “If it took a brother more than a week to see General Skywalker was completely gone over you, then you knew he wasn’t 501st material. General could be subtle sometimes, but – he looked at you like you personally hung all the stars in the galaxy.”

She has to work hard to swallow without letting tears form. She knows the look Rex means.

Dear sweet Force gods. When Rex looks at her a moment later, Padmé almost can’t breathe. It’s not the same expression, and she cannot be thankful enough for that. Yet Anakin had so often looked at her as if she were something precious that needed to be tucked away, kept safe in a bubble.

In that moment, Rex has let down every guard he has probably ever had, and he looks at her as if he is quite comfortable in the notion that she can, will, and perhaps has made certain that he will
always be safe, no bubble ever needed.

“I know how he feels,” Rex says, as if it were somehow simple.

She doesn’t mean to kiss him in response. That kind of just happens. The fact that Rex kisses back, that he can’t quite keep down a quiet groan of pleasure, well. When Padmé finally pulls back, she’s gone from sitting next to him to kneeling close, pressed flush against Rex’s side. She suspects the only reason he’s still seated is the death grip he’s got on the arm of the sofa. Rex opens his eyes, and the look he gives her means she’s now certain.

“You’re married,” he points out, matter of fact even as his voice is hoarser than normal.

Padmé settles back a bit further, the moment ebbing as she manages a tiny, wry grin. It’s more sad than bitter, and that’s progress. “Anakin Skywalker and Padmé Amidala have both been declared dead. And who said I was interested in marriage, anyways?”

Rex starts to relax a little too, his grip loosening on the furniture. He’s still looking at her with that open affection that is warming and a touch bewildering, given how well that sort of thing’s gone for her in the past. “I’m a little relieved, to be honest. What, then?”

She smiles. “Friends. Benefits. Whatever combination or speed you want.”

Padmé doesn’t realize she’s perhaps in a bit too deep until she and Rex actually do more than enthusiastic cuddling. It takes over a month, nearly two, and a week after the twins’ first birthday Cody and Obi-Wan have claimed the children for the night. Between the knowing looks Obi-Wan can manage, and the put-upon facade Cody has perfected, the two masquerade as the adoring grandparents far too well. Cody’s wry aside that it’s not like either of them are interested in that bump and grind nonsense doesn’t help that impression. Padmé’s quite certain that if Cody wasn’t carrying Luke, Rex would have physically tossed his brother through most of the ship.

Obi-Wan was smart enough to escape with Leia before then.

Rex grumbles about it for a bit, until they’re actually partway through their meal. It’s nothing special, just standard rations in Rex’s room instead of shared in the galley, but they’ve been trying to treat it casually as an opportunity for...other things.

That apparently means about five minutes after their food is gone, they are again on the sofa, only this time Padmé is making actual progress on Rex’s clothes. A lot of brothers retain at least pieces of their armor, but given how noticeable that is, Padmé has been waging a quiet war to get them civilian gear. The near fanaticism the clones have for armor and the ability to carry a small personal armory keeps running up against the practicalities of blending in and relying on less obvious forms of protection, especially a new cloth weave. Padmé covets that with the fierceness of a woman who has spent too much of her life in overly elaborate clothing with too little functionality, while the clones share an equal lust for genuine beskar’gam. The compromises they’ve made wobbles on the precarious line between hilarious and tragic.

Rex, at least, has gone with more subtle forms of armor around the ship. He already began the evening in his minimalist blues, as he insists on calling them, and it’s a joy to peel them away.

They spend awhile learning each others’ scars, seeking out new ways to feel each other as each brush of rough tissue is trailed by a murmur, the name of a battlefield or date or youthful clumsiness around new weaponry.

Padmé is grinning as she slides her fingers along Rex’s hip, across a shallow but long and jagged
scar (“Outer Rim Sieges, first month, who the kriff knows where”). His head is back, shoulders bunching up a bit as his breath shivers out of him. That turns into a sharp gasp as she finally wraps her hands around his cock. Rex’s eyes snap open, and he’s staring at her with that strange little expression of soft wonder again. So she gives him her flirtiest smirk as she starts to jack him off, stepping closer to the sofa to nuzzle against him. A few discreet nudges of her shoulders against his arms as Rex tries to caress back make her intent clear, and Padmé relishes the look on his face. Awe, delight, wonder with a touch of ‘what did I do right enough to earn this?’

It’s the last one that makes her a bit more determined than usual to give her best. A nice, slow handjob, where he gets whatever kind of view he wants, but she’s the one doing the touching. Part of it is the spectacle, part of it is the ability to tease and see what he reacts to. The largest part is that it means she remains in control, the only one doing the touching, because some days Mustafar still looms in her mind and she can feel hands that don’t exist wrapping around her throat.

It’s worth it, the way Rex comes hard, moaning without giving a single damn who might hear through the walls. It’s worth it, the way he looks at her, like she just negotiated her way out of a major war and fought off a dozen Seps single handed, all for him. The softness and wonder stays on his face as she helps him clean up, finally allows more of the touching and sensation again. It’s clear that the way she makes the aftercare a part of that, exploring further and different approaches to caresses and pleasure, leaves Rex bemused and fascinated.

The Naboo might have damned antiquated notions about marriage and family roles, but their sex education, at least, was never lacking.

She is reminded that the clones were made to learn, and adapt – and while she has never forgotten that Rex is one of the best, it is one thing to know, and another to experience. At some point what they’re doing morphs into Rex working his way down her body, starting well beneath the collarbones. He traces down along her scars, murmuring their source as she told him. It feels like he’s memorizing the shape of her, mapping out the history she’s only now shared with him that he somehow retains. She’s seated – sprawled, really – on the sofa by the time he moves across a divot on her thigh (“vibroblade assassination attempt, Naboo, year before the war started”). He slides between her knees, settling low and nuzzling further between her thighs, and the contrast of the soft bristle of his hair and the hint of stubble on his face makes her gasp. Padmé’s trying to bite back a needy whine as he slides fingers inside her, moving closer to add his tongue to the mix. Gods, it’s been too long, and she’s reaching up to play with her breasts, to get more sensation, because if she doesn’t she’s going to either thrust or writhe for it and then Rex’s life is going to get interesting.

It’s pretty clear Rex doesn’t have much actual experience, but again, the learning curve clones have is incredible. It isn’t long before the struggle against thrusting is becoming moot, but before matters get that far Rex curls his free arm around her leg. His fingertips play against her hip for a moment like she did to him, then his palm presses flat. Gods bless the man, something to push against. He keeps her hip mostly pinned so the increasing movement from her comes from a predictable direction, and that balance between freedom and direction help rush her to orgasm.

When Padmé is able to lift her head, he’s still cuddled up with her leg, smiling at her without a hint of the smugness she could so easily imagine many lovers having. Oh, it’s pleased, but more as if he’s delighted with her experience than his performance. “More?”

“Oh gods yes!”

She can feel Rex’s smile as he leans back down, just tongue now for something slower, more teasing. He keeps both her hips pinned this time, though at some point Padmé decides that instead of clenching the cushions because she wants to tease herself as well – keeping this about just the
one building sensation – she slides her hands across the fabric to settle over his. Rex moves his grip so their fingers lace together, and he doesn’t seem to mind what is probably a bruising hold when she comes again, this time keening her pleasure loud enough that it’s possible the entire corridor knows they’re finally up to things.

She doesn’t really care either, nor for the third time he gets her off.

Rex only lets go of her hands when he gently pulls away, and she manages a small smile and a headshake as he reaches for one of the cleaner washcloths. Yes, she’s a mess, but that would require moving and even more stimulation and she’s not ready for that yet. Rex has a smile for her, an actual open, comfortable smile as he goes from the floor to the end of the sofa. He’s hard again, but he copies her headshake as she starts to reach out for him when he settles across from her.

He’s staring at her, as he strokes off fast and efficient, smile going tired and affectionate as they slowly shift closer to help each other clean up. They manage to stumble to the bed without too much trouble, though in the series of firsts sleeping together naked is yet another new note.

Padmé realizes she might be in a bit too deep when she wakes up later. The cabin is dark, and she can’t see the chrono from where she is, but she can feel Rex’s steady breathing from behind her. He’s been clinging since they curled up underneath the blankets, and it’s not quite what she expected from his perpetual, polite distance when they’re in public. She doesn’t mind at all. It’s a nice feeling, and they fit well together.

Since they’re that close, it must have been movement from him that woke her. Trying to decipher that wakes her up more, so she can just barely make out Rex whispering. His head is bowed, hair brushing against hers as words puff faintly against her shoulderblade.

“Cyar’ika,” he says, and it’s clear it is not meant to be heard by her. “Ner’cabur.” His voice goes gentler, and she can hear determination coiling around the Mando’a. “N’kelir cabuor gar.”

Padmé’s eyes are wide, but she maintains steady breathing she can feel him matching, until the deep breaths even out more, sleep overtaking him.

She has heard cyar’ika before. Cody and Obi-Wan sometimes toss around the endearment when they think no one’s around, which means the entire crew has heard them calling each other “sweetheart.”

“Cabur,” guardian. Some of the clones promise to be that to the twins, while others playfully inform the children that they will protect them. “Cabuor.”

“Darling,” he had called her. “My guardian,” if she understood the Mando’a right.

Rex had also declared he would protect her.

Padmé chews over that in the length of time before she finally falls asleep again. Neither of them say anything about it; the next day, or ever.

Padmé is only surprised that it takes several more months before a major explosion between them. It happens in private, at least. Rex has taken over primary role as her sparring partner and close combat teacher. They’re having a fun little free spar, and then all Padmé can feel is her air getting cut off. It’s not by much, and the arm around her throat is a practice hold, not a genuine threat.

She breaks Rex’s arm anyways, then throws him halfway across the room before she can realize
that she is breathing, she can breathe just fine, there’s no lava despite the sulfur and heat smell burning in her nose, her lungs and eyes and –

Padmé thinks she growls something about how he shouldn’t do that before storming out of the rec room to her quarters. She’s still curled in a corner near the door when Obi-Wan uses the door chime, but at least she’s not crying anymore.

Gods bless Jedi and the Force. He stays a precise distance away, coaxing her into her kitchen with hot tea and the one voice that she knows was not, will not turn like Anakin. Yes, Obi-Wan is an idiot, but setting off Anakin’s madness is very different from suffering from it.

They’re also old friends, and taking the time to chew through gossip from around the ship helps, how Wolffe’s latest idea of expanding to several other shuttles (as compared to a few bold whispers that if they could get their hands on a small capital ship, they might be able to crew it). The notion that their little group of refugee Jedi and deserter clones and assorted friends, mixed with a healthy dose of Imperial victims, could make up a small fleet is boggling.

Then Obi-Wan gives her a look; patient and sympathetic and implacable. “What happened?”

“...a choke hold. Not a serious one, but...” She shakes her head, looking away. She starts crying again, even as she rolls her eyes a little because she feels she really ought to have better control over her body and its foolish reactions. Obi-Wan is absurdly tentative in folding her into a hug, but at least he can tell from the way she clings to him that it’s a good thing. When she’s calm again, they just talk more, as the good friends they have become. It ranges from the innocuous like Cody’s endearing, infuriating little habits that drive Obi-Wan up a wall (and thankfully he makes no comparisons to her relationship with Rex). It travels to the serious, such as the fate of their little community, and how Obi-Wan has been considering approaching the True Mandalorians and petitioning them for actual status as a clan (one of the major reasons he hasn’t is because he knows he’s going to get picked as new clan head – apparently the Manda’lor has a sense of humor and some kind of history with Obi-Wan? – and he doesn’t want that).

Obi-Wan only leaves when she’s calm, and she has some time to make that a little less tenuous. Padmé isn’t surprised that a bit later, the door chime rings again, and Rex is waiting on the other side. He’s a cautious distance from the threshold, and his arm’s in a sling with a bacta pack tucked in.

Before Padmé can muster up a genuine apology through the lingering flashback and trauma, Rex meets her eyes and asks “Are you all right?”

He’s level, not anxious or worried. It throws her for a loop. “What? Yes. I mean, where did that come from?”

The look he gives her is weird in that it’s considerate, not judging. “You never wear close collars to your tops, though I think you used to. Any time someone comes near your shoulders you pause a moment to make sure you don’t tense up.” Only now does Rex hesitate. He doesn’t quite shrug as he looks at her straight on. “And Sith like Force chokes.”

It’s a minute tell, the twitch of Rex’s fingers towards the blasters he always wears.

It’s enough. “Ventress?” Padmé asks softly, wincing at Rex’s brittle, humorless smile.

“I don’t like being interrogated a meter off the ground.” The not-really-a-smile widens briefly into something more like an actual shadow of a grin. “Or Jedi tossing me around, but that was just sometimes part of the job.”
She shouldn’t feel nostalgic for that sort of thing, but her life has never been normal. Padmé steps back, letting Rex in.

Rex resumes their sparring almost like nothing happened. At first, Padmé is relieved. No need for more painful explanations, no overcautious handholding, just...life as she has gotten used to it.

Except there is one difference. Rex doesn’t go anywhere near something that could seem even remotely like a blow or hold near the throat. It takes her a few weeks to realize this, and then she gives him a deliberate opening that she’s pretty sure looks a hundred percent natural.

He doesn’t take it.

Padmé steps back, glaring pure fire at him because if she takes a shot right then she’s not going to be able to pull anything and she doesn’t actually want to hurt the krieffing idiot. Probably. “Cut that shit out,” she snaps instead. Dammit, no, her hands are curled into fists, but she is quite tired of this. “No one I’m actually fighting is going to politely ignore a serious weak spot and go easy on me! I’m not made of glass!”

Rex had moved out of a fighting stance a little after she did. He goes from watching her with a patient, neutral expression to visibly pausing. He squints at her. “Glass,” he repeats, a hilarious expression of disbelief on his face like he’s about to ask her to say again because the coms can not be working right.

Well, it would be hilarious if she were a hair less angry. “Going to shatter at the first glancing blow.”

The disbelief grows into almost offended bewilderment. “The only glass you’re like is Christophsian glass.”

Her fury mutes down to a surprised simmer. “That’s actually crystal, not glass.”

“Exactly. What idiot thinks you need that much protection?” She’s not sure what expression she has, but it must be telling because grief and apologetic regret replace the bewilderment. “Oh.”

It stops the conversation in its tracks, but it also means Rex stops holding back. He still advertises his movements near her head and neck for months, but Padmé has to admit she prefers him without broken limbs.

Sleeping together increasingly often means that Padmé discovers Rex has frequent nightmares. She’s surprised and disconcerted the first time she wakes up to find him rigid beside her instead of wrapped around her like a clone shaped blanket. He does all right when woken up from those, though she is always careful to make her status as ally and friend clear.

The other nightmares are worse. They’re quieter, subtle in how they leave him still but not rigid, terrifying in how it’s difficult to wake him from them. Rex always rouses with a near silent inhale that reminds Padmé of a scream, and from the way he immediately scans the room he expects battle.

On finding nothing but Padmé and increasingly often the twins in their crib, he always sags back with a near sob of relief. Most of the time he doesn’t even make the effort to talk it out, instead gruffly escaping to she’s not sure where for the longest time.

It’s a night when she’s had nightmares of her own, and he was sharper than usual when running, that she decides to take advantage of it being a night where Jesse and Kix have the kids. Padmé
grabs her blaster and a large number of spare ammo cartridges before heading down to the area designated as the armory. The cobbled together shooting range is usually occupied at all hours, but it’s a rule that you leave alone those who are shooting their issues out.

Rex is the only one there, haggard and grim and looking like he’s been going through ammo as fast as he can and he’s still trying to push the limits of what a human – even a clone – can do. His shoulders hunch the moment Padmé enters the area, though that doesn’t affect his aim any.

By the time she’s worn herself out making targets smoking detritus, Rex has moved on to beating the crap out of a practice dummy. She’s not feeling particularly better, but Rex is taking to the poor thing like the droid personally shot him.

He stops without warning or cool-down, going from a combination kick and punch to just slumping, staggering to brace himself against the droid’s shoulder. He misses, staggering further, before going down almost in slow motion to his knees. There’s nothing poetic or pretty about it as he slouches back, every line to him dispirited and broken as he ends up on his ass, elbows braced on knees and head in hands.

Padmé breaks out of her surprised stillness as she realizes Rex has a hand clenched tight in his short hair. It’s right above the scar on his temple from where the control chip was removed. She’s a bit cautious as she finally approaches him, crouching down to kneel nearby.

He doesn’t look at her for the longest time. Rex finally inhales, slumping further as the deep breath whooshes out. He lets go of his hair at the same time.

“The chips. They used to – when we had them, I never understood why it was different for us. The 501. I used to think it was good luck, that we never had nightmares about General Skywalker.” He gives a bark of bitter, exhausted laughter. “But it still happened. Working with the 212, time around any of the Councilors, and within twenty-six hours it’d be the nightmares. Sometimes it was just generic ‘target in Jedi robes.’” Rex falls silent. Padmé moves closer, still on her knees next to him so that she can drape an arm around his shoulders. Rex leans into it, head ducking down as sorrow and grief pass over his face.

He finally sighs, staring away at nothing as he wrestles to speak and fighting inertia to get the words to come. When he finally succeeds, his voice is broken, soft. “I still have them. Kix says we all do. Our minds, they’re used to having the damn nightmares, and so even without the chips we’re set up to – to find murdering our Jedi to be normal. I – I can never tell if it’s real or not. And they’re different now. Not more like dreams, but the targets. Jedi. Brothers. Sometimes just armor, the whole damn 501.”

The silence stretches out, delicate and awful. Padmé Amidala is nobody’s fool. “Me.”

Rex winces, acknowledgement even without the shame flitting through the grief. He’s not a humble man. It’s a hell of a gutpuch for her to see. “Sometimes I’m back at the Temple, and – and the creche.” He twists enough to give her a desperate look. “Would you have sent them to the creche? The twins?”

Padmé has to look away in thoughtful silence, mostly to steady herself. She never talked with Anakin about that. She had intentionally not talked with Anakin about that. She’d had months to realize what a mess they were in, and she had still not been able to decide what to do about the child. The easiest thing would be to foster them for adoption, with a friend who knew how to keep their mouth shut. One of her former handmaidens, perhaps. A part of her had ached for the opportunity to let Anakin see their child regularly as an initiate in the creche, learning to harness whatever abilities they were going to inherit from the Chosen One.
So much of her had wanted what was at the time the impossible. And here she is, raising two children with a huge family that doesn’t give the slightest damn about how that might ‘impact’ her political career.

No Anakin, though. No Republic.

It bothers her so much, some days, that she can’t decide if this is really worse. It should be easy to know that, right?

“No.” The decision finally slips free, almost without her realizing she’s made it. She bows her head, tucking her chin down to nuzzle against him. “I think I would have been fighting to keep everything. It might have been stupid, but…” She shrugs a little, starting to run a hand over his hair.

He curls up closer, looking like he barely has a choice between screaming or crying so he’s gone with crying. Rex clings back with a near bruising hold, and his voice is soft, desperate. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

They both know what he really means, and why they’re both afraid to hear it. “I know. Shoot to stun or incapacitate, not kill.” It’s the only advice she has, the hope that if he ever gets truly lost in memory or nightmare or conditioning, whatever the hells it is, he can have enough reason to know to stun first, sort it out later.

“If…worse comes to worse, will you stop me?”

Padmé Amidala has been in politics her entire life. By the time she was fourteen, she was a queen fighting a war for her planet. She had killed, she had nearly died, and she had personally sent beings to their deaths.

It is not easy, but it is simple to lean forward and place a gentle kiss on the scar from the chip. Even Padmé isn’t quite sure what it is. A vow, perhaps. Reassurance, maybe, or benediction.

“Yes.”

When they finally make it back to her quarters, they spend the night clinging to each other.

When they expand from three shuttles to four, Obi-Wan finally petitions for status as a Mandalorian clan. Their handful of ships end up at Mandalore’s moon to meet with Bo-Katan Kryze, the woman who claims the title of Manda’lor.

Padme hadn’t known Satine had a sister. She can see the similarity in how the two snipe, though Bo-Katan doesn’t have the subtlety that Satine did. Padmé likes her, though.

Bo-Katan plays a few rounds of polite political dancing, then tosses that aside for what she’s really after. It’s pretty straightforward, and astonishingly brash.

Join the Kryze clan. They get to make it their own house, with a political vote and everything. Even former Jedi would be welcome, and as a part of the Kryze clan, they help her retake Mandalore.

Obi-Wan wrangles for hours. Retake Mandalore? As one of the Jedi generals most experienced at that sort of thing, he can point out the very, very many ways that is lunacy.

Bo-Katan doesn’t even try very long to pretend that isn’t what she was after in the first place. She does, however, twist the knife just a little in that she insists Obi-Wan take lead of the group.

With the help of the brand new House Kebii'tra, it only takes about a year to claim Concordia as an actual free planet.

They keep one of the confiscated cruisers, which makes Wolffe viciously happy, while the shuttles are retained for all sorts of purposes.

The Imperial bounty for any of them grows larger.

The twins grow up, vibrant and just the first of the younglings around. They have countless sibs in rescued padawans and initiates, then children of clones and the House’s other adoptees. Numa is their bossy older sister that Leia worships, and later Jek and Shaeeah slot into place as Luke’s troublemaking role models.

The Force is taught as it once was: a way of life for all, not abilities only the few gifted can access. A few brothers take up lightsabers just for the novelty, as most Jedi make sure to arm with blasters as well.

It takes a damn long time, but there is beskar’gam for all, though it is well supplemented with Padmé’s cherished cloth armor that truly works just as well.

She’s not sure who starts it, but within five years, all their buckets (or brimmed hats) sport the same painted design of a slash on the right temple.

For some, it is in 501 blue. Others, 212 yellow, or 104th gray.

For most, it is gold.

Leia takes to the lightsaber and blaster with the glee that makes even her clone relatives nod in proud approval. Luke tends to stick more to use of the Force, playing juggling games for the entertainment of younglings or levitating things for the older folks.

When they are fighting together, they make a beautifully unified front that even Obi-Wan admits to Padmé and Rex passes what Generals Skywalker and Kenobi could manage.

When they are fighting with each other, their squabbles tend to include explosions. Given Luke’s obsession with piloting and the new X-Wings they pick up, that can get...messy. Leia can be sneaky and knows the value of revenge served very cold, which means things can get very messy.

Padmé eventually notices that among the many, many trainers that are happy to spend time with the younglings – any and all of the younglings – Rex is not among them. He sometimes sits in on the twins’ lessons, but the only person he ever trains with – teaches – is Padmé.

When she realizes this, she makes sure to schedule their next session in a private room. She can’t quite decide which is more entertaining: getting Rex’s workout clothes off of him, or strategically removing her own. Either way, eroding the man’s vaunted discipline one delicious centimeter at a time means she has got to try this again. The way his eyes shine as they fuck on the workout mats, the feel of his teeth grazing along her ear, the roll and thrust of their hips as if they’re still trying to toss each other across the room –
Oh, yes, she’s got to do this again.

Leia decides fancy hair styles are the neatest thing ever and she wants her mother to help make, and help model, all of them. Padmé enjoys it, for all that the nostalgia for the days of pretending to be handmaiden to her doubles hurts. With the eventual help of Jesse and Cut, she can even manage the more elaborate get ups.

She is somewhat relieved that Luke remains indifferent to that. Padmé doesn’t think she could handle two younglings being quite so fascinated by complex hairstyling.

Luke’s passion seems to be piloting, instead. She doesn’t say anything, though she does ask the most experienced pilots they have to help teach him.

When she finds out that Rex has already talked to at least half of them, she can’t stop smiling, even though she needs to find some privacy afterwards.

It’s not acceptable to cry with worry over her children, or her entire eccentric, extended family – not in public, at least.

Padmé and Obi-Wan sit the twins down over the years, to talk to them about their father. They cover the good and the bad, the heroism and his Fall. When Leia first hears of the connection between Anakin and Vader, she is wide-eyed in denial.

Luke simply nods, slow and solemn, like it’s just a confirmation of something he knew.

Shortly after the twins’ eleventh birthday, Rex sets up a quiet little meal for just him and Padmé. It’s a nice evening, the two of them comfortable cuddling with a holodrama. Between dinner and the holo, though, Rex almost casually passes a box to her.

It’s a hair ornament, meant to lie close so she can still wear it if she’s wearing her bucket. It has little dangles of Christophsian glass (leftover from making lightsaber crystals, maybe?) and blue metal chains, several of them ending in sets of interlocking Jaig eyes. He has no explanation, just blushing and shrugging as he helps her secure it. He is smiling the whole rest of the evening, that tender fond look Padmé has gotten used to having in her life.

Leia demands her own the next day. Rex is gentle and patient as he talks her through how to make her own – who to talk to and what extra chores she might need to do to earn the parts.

Padmé has no idea where Rex learned about the Naboo common marriage laws, though when she checks the dates she is fairly certain that it is indeed ten years since matters between them became more...united in the longer term.

She spends a day considering the nuances of a choice, then a day later adds a japor carving to the ornament, attaching it with the jerba leather cord.

When Rex sees it, he stares a long moment before – after a quick glance for permission – reaching out to touch the ornament with light fingers. His voice is hoarse as he declares, “I like it,” and his smile is genuine, even if a bit weepy. Padmé is glad and touched that he remembers them talking of it, long ago. Reminders of What Had Been.

Luke and Jek start competing with each other on some of the strangest fronts. Padmé puts it down
to younger-sibling-eagerness and Luke’s tendency to take a lack of talent on his part as a challenge from the universe he needs to meet. When the two start asking for lessons with some of the local healers, it begins by looking like a passing whim.

By the time Padmé finds the two of them hanging upside down from various outcroppings in the obstacle course, both using med kits to patch up the prosthetic limbs the healers use to practice on, she has to admit this has gone beyond whim.

She doesn’t ask what they’re doing – they’re obviously hanging off a ledge and a “tree branch” and patching up practice legs. She blinks at them for a moment, then shrugs. “You do realize that if you somehow need to do field medicine, those limbs would be attached to the rest of a being?”

Luke rolls his eyes. “Yeah, but you try getting someone to pretend to have crash landed somewhere uncomfortable, and then hold the spare arm or leg.”

Jek makes an agreeing cranky noise, tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth while his lekku dangle down almost to the floor. Neither of them stop their work for the conversation.

She has to grant the point.

Years pass, and life gets stranger. Padmé and Obi-Wan watch as their friends and family age impossibly fast. Cody goes steel gray and stiff with arthritis, while Rex’s blond pales into white. The twins get older, bigger, and Numa develops into a rambunctious young woman who spends far too much time chewing her bottom lip while studying an oblivious Boil – he’s another brother whose hair has gone white, but he also picked up a receding hairline somehow that he pretends to ignore.

When it’s finally clear that the clones seem to be aging faster than double time, Obi-Wan finally calls an all hands meeting, and not a month later the entire little fleet is parked in space near a Kaminoan outpost. They strike an agreement with an eager – crazy – Kaminoan who abandoned her people because the whole mad species thought her eye color meant she needed to be culled.

Padmé worries at first that might mean the Kaminoan will use the opportunity to harm the clones. Kei Druu promises that she can find a way to return the aging process to what it should normally be, though she can do nothing about what has already happened. There’s a bunch of handwaving about how the stresses of growing older far faster than any human should have led to all sorts of nasty side effects that should be reduced, or at least benefit from the treatment, but Padmé can never get a clear answer from the Kaminoan as to what that specifically means.

Ahsoka pops up from time to time, sober in ways she never was when she was younger. It is not the Jedi serenity that comes with age, but burdens of grief and responsibilities she should not have to carry, yet she shoulders them anyways. Padmé wishes she could do something to help her friend, but the fall of the Order and the Republic hit the Togruta hard.

She at least seems to benefit from long talks with Obi-Wan and other Jedi, and when a squad of clones assign themselves to her, Padmé can see the difference. Ahsoka leaves tense and grumbling. The next time she comes back, there is more humor, more life in her eyes.

Luke and Leia personally take a shine to a smuggler the Kebii’tra use regularly. A very amused Padmé never hears them actively trying to encourage the hiring of Han Solo and Chewbacca when the opportunity arises, but they become regular faces.
The clan members liaising with Kei Druu come back from one of the delivery missions she’s
given them to find she’s dead. The two former Jedi comm in looking shellshocked, more
distraught than any Jedi Padmé can recall seeing. Any Kebii'tra in the right sector of space swarm
to the outpost. The few inhabitants are all dead, every last droid destroyed. Whoever it was, they
were efficient, and brutal, and fast. The liaison team was away for less than a week, hurrying in no
small part because Kei Druu was gleeful that the latest chemical cocktail she’d cooked up was it.
Just a bit more testing, and the contract would be complete. The clones would have their cure.

The implications are terrifying. If this was the Empire, they would leave their mark everywhere,
declare to all and sundry the futility of trying to escape their grasp, the fate the Emperor laid upon
them. The Alliance wouldn’t bother. Bounty hunters would take some of the very valuable
equipment, as would scavengers.

A furious, tightly controlled Obi-Wan sets their best slicers on seeing if they can recover any of
the security feed. Former Jedi prowl the compound, searching for the faintest impression of
anything in the Force.

Between the clone slicer Dump and Quinlan Vos’ psychometry, they find just enough evidence to
track down the interlopers.

House Kebii'tra tackles its second war.

It’s all very formal and Mandalorian. Obi-Wan, as head of the group, leads the way off the shuttle.
Padmé is spending more of her time watching Cody than their surroundings, because he’s moving
smoother than he should be. Either he’s having a really, really good day with the arthritis, or he’s
so hopped up on various medications he doesn’t give a damn.

Knowing Cody, she’s certain it’s the latter, and she doesn’t like any of the implications. He’s at
Obi-Wan’s heels, body language aggressive and protective in a way that didn’t show up much in
the war. Rex either doesn’t know what’s going on, or doesn’t want to tell her, but either way his
eyes are locked on their leaders too.

A slew of Mandalorians exit the compound in front of them, an armored but unhelmeted man in
the front. His hair is pale gray verging on white, and his armor is sand gold. Obi-Wan bows to him
– shallow, a bare formality. “Kal Skirata,” he drawls, and Padmé tries not to tense. That tone is
never a good thing to hear from Obi-Wan.

“Kenobi,” Skirata snaps back. There’s not even the pretense of civility to him. “This is Mandalore.
Not Concordia, not the Republic. Go find some other planet to befoul.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that. A geneticist we contracted was murdered, and her data stolen. Given
the number of clones in your clan, I thought it might be of interest to you and yours that the stolen
data was a cure for the accelerated aging they suffer from.”

There it is. The slightest moves towards readiness amongst the Skirata members, for all that it’s a
graceful enough avoidance of any accusation. Obi-Wan sounds almost sincere in his hopes for an
alliance against the fiend who took such precious information.

Skirata sneers instead. “We do just fine on our own, Jedi.” He spits the title like a curse, and he
glares fire at Obi-Wan. “And nice try on bribing us to your cause. It’s good to see you finally rose
above all the trickery and double-dealing you pulled in the war.”

Obi-Wan has just as fierce a look back. “No bribery. I’ll swear to you on whatever you’d like, our
intent was, and has always been, to release this information to any and all who might want it – once we know it is indeed a cure, and safe. It would not do at all to claim there was a way to halt the accelerated aging, and bring it back in line with human norms, if it did not actually do so.”

There’s a little more uncomfortable shifting amongst the Skiratas, and Padmé is fairly certain she has the mental lines drawn of who was comfortable with the theft, and who felt guilt.

“You really expect me to believe that? From a *Jedi*, no less? Take your lies elsewhere, Kenobi, and I won’t make that request again!”

The facade of genteel pleasantness drops away from Obi-Wan, leaving a glacial stare. “Kal Skirata, as head of one House to another –”

“*Clan* head, not House! And Clan Kryze has no say here on Mandalore! They’re too busy cowering away on Concordia to be assed to do anything about their *home*.”

“You are also the head of your House and either way I have a right to challenge you, for you have stolen from me!”

Skirata laughs, loud and scornful. “You’re challenging me? Two old men, a *Jedi* and an old bounty hunter with a busted ankle? Oh, this is bound to be a fascinating –”

“No.” Cody steps forward, snarl barely contained by a tooth-baring smile.

Padmé can just barely hear Rex next to her groaning. “Vod, no.” The words are murmured, and it’s likely she’s the only one to make it out.

This leaves her even less thrilled with the situation.

“You and me, Kal Skirata. *Cuy’val Dar*.” The title has just as much scorn attached to it as did Skirata’s ‘Jedi.’ “I’ll fight you, in Kenobi’s stead. No Force tricks, just two old Mando’ade.”

Skirata snorts in disdain. “You were never worth the name.”

Cody tilts his head, a funny nod that is almost as much a cant to the right so his scar shows clear. “Enough for my House and Clan, and that’s all that matters. Either way. Chance to finish what you started? And you get to deny any charges of theft or wrongdoing against us? You really mean you’ll pass that by, or has age finally caught up with you?”

Skirata almost doesn’t go for it. Then Cody stands a little straighter, a slightly more manic grin on his face, and it has to be the scar.

‘Finish what he started.’ Gods, Padmé is going to have so many words for more than a few idiots when they get back. Obi-Wan had to know, with that serene an expression.

Skirata raises a hand, waving it in a small circle, and his clan spreads out to make a ring around him and Cody. Kebii’tra does the same, intermingling their members until their uneven numbers are as close to alternating as possible.

*Mandalorian* culture prepares to make betrayal as costly as possible.

The fight seems even enough to Padmé. Kal Skirata draws a three-sided knife and goes after Cody with a fierce grin. Cody’s got a vibroblade that Padmé recalls was an anniversary gift from Obi-Wan a few years back – good quality. Taunts only come from the spectators, and the vast majority of those from the Skiratas. Padmé notes those who are silent, who watch the trial with the terse body-language of guilt-plagued dissenters.
She only realizes something is wrong when Cody staggers as if all his pain medication has worn off all at once. She’s seen it a time or two when he is stubborn, and refused to go near anything on the basis of – who knows what drives that man, really. He almost recovers, then slips in a way she knows he should not, would not. Kal Skirata lunges to take him out, end the battle.

There’s the flash and sound of a lightsaber igniting, the death cry of someone across the circle. The Skirata clan reacts, but Obi-Wan’s people came planning for trouble.

Honorable opponents would not take a medical cure and refuse to spread that knowledge. Anyone good enough to get that data in the first place would see that Kei Druu’s contract included that details of the cure would be spread, but her identity would not. The only reason to steal the cure would be to deny it to others. The potential benefits, while unethical, are significant.

The Skirata to Padmé’s left is one of the quiet ones, who backs away, hands at shoulder height. The one on the right finds Padmé’s vibroblade shoved into that fantastic little juncture between the plates of the body armor and the pauldrons. Padmé calibrated the weapon to best cut through the typical material used for Mando undersuits, and while it’s not a vibration setting good for bone as well, it works quite well on everything else she drives it into.

When the dust settles, a furious looking Cody is snarling near the corpse of Kal Skirata. Cody has some new scars – bastard really did try to leave a lot on the face – while Kal Skirata has that three-sided knife deep in his throat.

Obi-Wan glares around the crowd, lightsaber still ready. There’s a corpse almost bisected at his feet, and Padmé wonders at the viciousness. Obi-Wan usually reserves that for spectacularly nasty types.

“While I commend your acceptance of Force users into your ranks,” Obi-Wan snarls, “I cannot condone the cheating in an attempt to kill my spouse.”

Ah. Yes, that would merit it.

They leave with their data – the Skirata clan gets a copy to go along with the bodies to deal with – and a small handful of former Skiratas who shed their armor and walk empty-handed to the visiting shuttle.

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Rex is one of the first to volunteer for Kei Druu’s treatment. He shrugs and passes it off as one of the responsibilities of leadership; if he’s not willing to do it, how could he possibly clear it for anyone else?

Padmé sees the way Rex watches Cody and worries. She knows the grief in his eyes on occasion as he watches the twins spar.

They both have less nightmares, but she still wakes up sometimes to feel Rex holding her incredibly close, breath just on the edge of ragged as her hair gets damp.

She knows at least some of the many, many reasons Rex volunteers, and leadership is but one of them.

Padmé can only watch as Rex and the other volunteers officially begin the treatment. They grumble and complain about aches that disappear after a day or so, but nothing more. No one is quite sure what signs there will be that it’s working, and Kei Druu was infuriatingly vague in her
notes regarding everything beyond “and then it works.”

Padmé can feel worry coil further and further in her stomach as a week passes, then a month. She and Rex both work hard to distract each other, everything from stupid holos to extensive sparring to copious amounts of sex.

It’s when trying to start another round of the latter that Padmé is stunned. They were sparring, but as often happens in the last few months it’s turned sexual. They’re both still clothed. She has Rex pinned face down on the mat, and even as he’s chuckling and trying to squirm out of her hold Padmé is nuzzling along his ear, whispering all sorts of interesting notions.

She stops mid-word, not believing her eyes. Rex tugs his arm free but goes still as soon as he realizes the escape was due to something other than intent. In the meantime, since she no longer needs to keep holding him in place, she reaches up towards his hair. He still keeps it bristle short, though it’s pure white now –

Except it’s not. There’s the hint of pepper-shot gray at the roots, the oddly dark color Rex’s hair turned as it went from blond to white.

Padmé rolls off of him, hand over her mouth and rather stunned to find she’s weeping. He curls around her, demanding an explanation, and she’s not entirely sure how she gets the words out. The tense worry slowly uncoils, leaving her wrung out and clinging to Rex who’s shaking more than she is.

She somehow wasn’t quite able to believe that in this mad lifestyle they lead, always on the move, always on the run from the ever growing, ever Darker Empire, that they could steal back a bit of light. And here the evidence is, right in front of her, holding her, and all Padmé can do is sob in exhausted relief and cling to Rex.

Shortly after the twins’ twentieth birthday, Padmé’s old friend Bail Organa is forced to watch his planet be destroyed, rather than surrender critical intelligence on the Rebellion. When Padmé breaks into his cell, Rex and Cody standing careful guard behind her, Bail looks almost broken. He musters a brief, heart-rent smile when he sees the gold “scar” mark on her bucket, and later he falls apart on her, depending on the clan’s little ship to get them to safety. It is hard for her, holding the man as he weeps for an entire planet as well as its people. She wants revenge, she wants blood, and most of all she wants Obi-Wan to live.

He almost dies in their escape. He and the twins take the primary point for sabotage, going for the tractor beams. The rest of their clan spread out, many swapping their beskar’gam for stormtrooper gear to plant explosives and assorted nasty gifts around the whole hellish weapon.

Vader stops Obi-Wan and the twins on their return to the shuttle. Obi-Wan sends the twins back to the hanger to secure their escape, and though Padmé never gets any solid proof, she suspects he begged them to not fight their father.

Since the stormtroopers are doing a damned efficient job at making the twins’ lives difficult by the time Padmé and the rescue team show up, he maybe wasn’t trying to suicide by Fallen student.

Padmé arrives in time to see Obi-Wan miss a block, only to be disarmed in the most classic style favored by the Jedi Order. He reels back from Vader, who prepares to cut down the Jedi.

She screams. There might be words within the sound of fury, but mostly it is just denial. She wasn’t conscious to see them dueling on Mustafar, though Obi-Wan confessed what had happened. She cannot stand to see Vader cut down Obi-Wan. It is wrong, it verges upon obscene,
and Padmé refuses to accept a reality wherein Anakin Skywalker murders Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Cody is a stream of heartbroken curses over the com channel, Rex is firing at any stormtroopers who don’t move like brothers in disguise, and Vader is whirling to stare at her.

Padmé fires at him, not caring that his lightsaber is more than sufficient to block any shots.

She’s counting on it, really. It provides plenty of cover for Cody to run in and grab Obi-Wan. With over half the remaining stormtroopers going from providing easily reflected cover fire (for the twins to bounce into actual enemies) and instead taking out their stunned “squad members,” they have their retreat covered.

Vader reaches out for her, and Padmé bites back a scream of terrified rage. But this time there is no clamp settling on her throat. There is no phantom pressure around her neck, there is no hoisting her off her feet.

It is only later, after Leia has physically pulled her back to their escape shuttle, that Padmé understands the body language. It was longing, something that seemed to be near desperation. Despite all the horrors of an op gone rather bad, Padmé finds it gives her some small measure of hope.

Padmé is there when Anakin passes into the Force. His whole family is. Luke makes sure of it.

Padmé didn’t realize that Vader only recognized one child aboard the Death Star as his. It explains why Leia has had quite so much bounty hunter attention on her lately, but as often happens, Luke let his flamboyant twin take the spotlight while he got to work undetected.

Of course Vader would want to interrogate one of the Mandalorians that was with Padmé and her daughter.

Of course he would recognize his own son, when face to face in a closed interrogation cell. Padmé suspects that only Luke thought that his father would listen to him, that Anakin Skywalker’s desperate clinging to his loved ones could overcome years of Darkness.

Luke was right. He sends out a desperate telepathic call as he takes a stolen TIE fighter screaming down to Endor. All that time spent puttering around with healing means he is able to somehow pilot, keep his father alive, and contact Leia at the same time.

She makes sure they’re there when he lands.

Anakin’s eyes keep flitting up to the stars, and every time Padmé can see it brings him a measure of peace. The trees, and grass, and the light breezes – it must be so foreign, after two decades in that suit. She kneels beside him, and his forearm rests across her leg. Obi-Wan holds that hand in his own prosthetic pair, a gentle grip between two old friends, finally able to be together again. Cody braces Obi-Wan from behind, while Rex is at Padme’s shoulder. Ahsoka is a little awkward between them, stretching out to rest her hand over Obi-Wan’s.

Luke holds Anakin’s other hand, while Leia hangs back awkwardly – she is clinging to Solo’s hand, leaning into her brother’s shoulder and watching Anakin warily. The fact that it is wary, and not hostile, seems to be enough for him.

Obi-Wan murmurs things to Anakin, too low for Padmé to hear, while Luke does the same from the other side.

All Padmé can see is Anakin smiling at her, his eyes flicking from her, to Rex, and then the hair
ornament she so often wears for luck. It is a gentle smile, pleased and happy for her.

She’s not strong in the Force like her husband, nor her children. Yet Padmé is certain she can feel Anakin’s peace, the joy as he closes his eyes.

They stand together at a pyre, the strange core of an even stranger family. Padmé has Rex behind her, his shoulder nudging lightly forward against hers. Luke and Leia are close, cuddled together, Han behind them with arms around their shoulders. Obi-Wan and Cody are arm in arm, heads tilted to rest together, while Ahsoka remains close to Obi-Wan’s shoulder. Chewbacca stands back to keep a wary eye on the forest.

For all the grief, for all that she hates to have to let Anakin go, Padmé can’t keep a tiny smile from her face as the pyre burns. The smoke curls upwards, the distant sounds of celebration wafting along up to the stars. It reminds Padmé of another pyre, on Naboo several lifetimes ago.

This time, it feels less like struggling forward through the dark, and more like hope.

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