

# Star Wars Episode II: Split Horizons

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Published at Smashwords

## Introduction

Star Wars: Split Horizons is the sequel to my first e-book, Star Wars: Awakening. If you haven't read Awakening, I strongly recommend doing so as the sequel may not make a lot of sense to you otherwise.

In Awakening, I made great effort to make references both to The Phantom Menace and to the Original Trilogy. I made connections with Owen and Beru that I felt were lacking in the Prequel Trilogy. The book took you to familiar places such as Alderaan while using familiar characters such as Darth Maul.

Split Horizons is truly an original work that builds on Awakening. I will take Anakin, Padme, Obi-Wan, and Khian on my journey into the vast unknown. Love blossoms, conflicts erupt, the casualty list climbs, and by the end of the book you'll see what Anakin's ambition really is...

...and just how far he's going to go to fulfill that ambition.

## Acknowledgments

This novel would not be where it is today without the love and support of my family, especially my brother, "Old Ben Kenobi", who has a habit of putting up with my never-ending nagging about this novel. In addition, I have received support from so many readers of my first novel on Facebook and at various book signings including the Star Wars Underworld and the Star Wars Talk Show along with Mark Cristobal, who is literally on the other side of the planet.

They have proven the old adage that anyone, anywhere, at any time can truly make a difference. All they have to do is put in the effort and never let their dream die.

You can see more about the novels, and the author, including images, art, teasers, announcements, and more at [www.facebook.com/DaveGremillion](http://www.facebook.com/DaveGremillion). Enjoy!

## Prologue

Drip.

Drip.

A single sound was all he could hear.

It was the sound of water splashing to the floor some feet away. The darkness that engulfed him made it impossible to see *where* the water was, but he could *feel* where it was.

Drip.

A lone spotlight shot to life, momentarily blinding him. Ethan tried to raise both his hands to shield his adjusting eyes to the light, but found he was restrained. His arms were pinned tight against his sides. As he looked down, he saw no shackles on his wrists. No magnetic grapplers were holding him down, yet he could only move his head. He struggled as a sense of claustrophobia set in.

His eyes darted toward source of the drip. The single leak was adding to a small puddle on the floor. The Jedi Council Chamber was supposed to be immaculate in every detail. It seemed oddly reassuring to see this small flaw in an otherwise perfect room.

Drip.

Given this momentous occasion, he expected to see the Jedi Council Chamber decked out in all of its glory. Instead, only the water greeted his eyes. Even in the dark, he knew exactly where each of his ten accusers was.

"You're so scared of me that you can't even let me scratch my nose?" he shouted into the darkness.

"His aura is incredible. Even with us holding him like this, he is able to reach out with the Force and find us. This is such a waste of talent," a voice said from the darkness.

"Lights," a deep voice commanded.

Additional spotlights began to shine. They started dimly, unlike his spotlight, and their brightness increased until he saw ten Jedi Masters standing in a circle around him. They wore simple robes on their bodies and scowls on their faces. They were all in great concentration to ensure that their prey remained restrained.

Drip.

Ethan was shaken for a moment by the sound. It seemed so out of place, yet for him it seemed the most normal thing in this room.

"Grand Master Windu. You didn't need to call out the entire Council just for little ol' me," he said, every word edged with sarcasm.

"Ethan Organa, you have been convicted of some of the highest crimes in the Jedi Order. Your conduct before, during, and after the assignment on Ord Mantell not only shamed yourself, but the Order as a whole," Master Windu said in his deep voice.

"I'm supposed to shed tears about making you look bad?" Ethan mocked.

Mace Windu continued without addressing the remark. "The damage you caused, the lives you ruined, everything that you've become has convinced the Jedi High Council that you have been twisted by the Dark Side of the Force."

"You are blind, all of you!" Ethan shouted. "Just because something is different you condemn it before you fully understand it. What I did on Ord Mantell was..."

Drip.

Ethan felt a strange connection to that drip. It was so simple, so basic, a building block of life. If anything, this slow leak of water, this puddle on the floor, was more real to him than any of the Jedi Masters who were condemning him.

Master Windu continued. "As a result, the Jedi High Council has determined that you cannot continue as you are now."

The color drained from Ethan Organa's face.

"You can't kill me," he said in a broken voice barely above a whisper.

"Have you learned nothing about the Jedi? Or has the Dark Side corrupted you to the point that you believe us to be as savage as you," Master Windu replied.

Drip.

"If death will not greet me, then what does the righteous Council propose?" Ethan asked.

"The Council will do what no Council has ever had to do in the history of the Jedi Order," Master Windu nodded toward his fellow Jedi Masters.

They all looked down at the floor. One by one, the members of the Jedi High Council raised their heads and looked directly at Ethan Organa. A quiet, almost mechanical, humming filled the room.

"Don't you know who I am? I am Ethan Organa, Crown Prince and Heir to the Throne of Alderaan! You cannot do this to me, I will not allow it!" he shouted.

The humming remained.

"I am the Daetan, the Chosen One," he pleaded.

The humming remained.

"Master Ki-Adi-Mundi, I saved your life once. Don't let them do this to me," he begged.

The humming remained.

He wanted to thrash around, seeking any escape. Only his head was able to whip back and forth.

The humming remained.

Ethan reached out with the Force. Summoning the same power he had used to level city blocks with, he found he could do little more than cause a wind to blow through the chamber. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead from the effort.

"Mace, please!" he cried out.

The humming intensified.

Ethan tried to find the drip again. He tried to anchor his mind to that one tiny, precious bit of realism. All of his training, all of his experience, everything that the heir to the throne of Alderaan could muster tried to focus on that tiny drip of water.

Something pierced Ethan's mind. The Daetan vainly tried to work against the minds of the Jedi Council. He could feel his mind being altered, being erased. A piece of himself was being ripped out like a malignant growth.

Ethan screamed.

When it was finished, all sound was stolen from the sacred chamber. Ethan dropped to his knees, succumbing to the madness. He collapsed onto the floor.

Ethan knew he was breathing heavily, but his ragged gasps made no sound. It was as if the Council Chamber was now a vacuum that absorbed all noise. He looked over and saw the drip hit the puddle, but heard nothing.

He felt as though he were smothered with a giant blanket, as though he were blind as well as deaf. A horrible realization came to him.

He couldn't sense anything anymore.

The Jedi Masters, the receptionist outside, the service droids cleaning the hallways several floors below, the people in the City of Spires, the puddle, nothing was open to him anymore.

Tears filled Ethan's eyes as he crawled on his hands and knees toward Master Yoda. He clutched the hem of Yoda's robe and turned his tear-stained face to the small Jedi. The look of despair on Ethan's face spoke his mind for him.

The sound of laughter pierced the room. Someone was laughing at the Crown Prince of Alderaan as he was wallowing in misery.

A tall, young man with sandy colored hair was walking across the room toward Ethan. He walked with the same swagger that Ethan used to walk with. The confidence, the arrogance, and the ego showed with every step. The other Masters walked to this man and began laughing with him. They all laughed at Ethan.

"Who are you??" Ethan screamed at the sandy colored man surrounded by the Jedi he used to belong with.

The laughing continued. Mace Windu placed his hands on his knees and guffawed. Kit Fisto had blue tears streaming down his face. The sandy haired young man used the Force to lift Ethan into the air. He kicked at nothing in the air and the Jedi Masters roared with laughter. The sandy haired man ignited a lightsaber.

The golden blade hummed inches from Ethan's face as he struggled in mid-air. The laughter abruptly stopped. The sandy haired man caught a drop of water from the leak in mid-air with his hand. He studied it for a moment. He used the Force to completely dissolve not only that drop, but the puddle, the leak, every drop from the room.

"I free you, Ethan Organa," he said.

Every face turned deadly serious as the young man swung the blade directly at Ethan's neck.

Ethan awoke with a start. He flung the sweat-soaked sheets from his body and stared out of his window. He saw the people outside, but still could not sense them. The Force was still denied to him. Ethan's head swam with the vision and only one question pounded into his head.

Who was that man?

## Chapter I

*Citizens of the Galactic Republic! Our fighting men, women, and clones are waging courageous battles across the Outer Rim! Today's little slice of the war showcases the sailors and pilots of Task Force Seven, known as the "Deadly Mynocks" as they wage a terrific fight near the star system of Belkadan. The rebel ambush is foiled by Admiral Illian and his band of death-defying star pilots. The rebellious forces are driven back with heavy losses.*

*Elsewhere, our clones fight magnificently, led by such young heroes as Captain Terellia and ace pilot Lieutenant Liam, who has already racked up an impressive thirty-three kills on his first tour of duty.*

*On Coruscant, the Galactic Senate gives a raucous ovation to Grand Centurion Palpatine as he delivers the latest news on the war and the source of the Jedi Clones.*

*“Even with all of their lies and denials, it is clear that the rebels are behind the unleashing of this monstrous threat to the galaxy. For bringing this horror to us, the rebels shall know the true fury of the Republic!”*

*Keep bringing the fight to them! No rebellion! No division! No backing down! Show your patriotism by buying war bonds to give our fighting people the support they need!*

The red-painted transport affectionately known as *The Bucket* responded to Aiya Rios’s quick maneuvers before she engaged the light-speed engines. She had to slide the ship past the new warship dockyards and through the two security checkpoints that went into service only four months ago. Aiya’s skillful piloting enabled the ship to duck under the newest of three Orbital Weapons Platforms being constructed in orbit around Coruscant. To the public, this was all part of the build-up the Republic required to quell the rebellion that plagued the Outer Rim.

In private, it was in response to a surprise series of raids by the rebellion on Corellia, Ord Mantell, and Carida. The damage was mostly superficial, but enough to cause a near-panic among the government.

Several days into the voyage, one of the passengers *The Bucket* carried found himself at his favorite viewport at the front of the bridge. However, he found no comfort in the breathtaking view that space offered.

Anakin Skywalker began to pace back and forth on the bridge, wondering when they would arrive at Illum, the Jedi planet where he would begin construction of his own lightsaber. He had grown over the past few months and his height nearly matched that of his master, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Although he still kept his hair closely cut and tied into a long braid, it still had the sandy color since he was a boy.

His impatience, however, had grown along with him.

“Time to destination?” Anakin asked.

“A whopping seven minutes closer than the last time you asked,” Aiya Rios responded with an edge in her voice.

“If you’re looking to get there faster, I’m always up for a rematch in my Delta-7. Fairly, this time,” she quickly added. “No fair ripping my ship’s wing off just so you can hoist a trophy.”

Anakin turned to glare at her, but continued pacing. Aiya had once been Anakin’s rival when he was a starfighter racer on his home-world of Tatooine. Even though it was only a year ago that he had left that worthless hunk of rock, it seemed like a lifetime had passed. He tried hard to push that life out of his mind. That Anakin that was a nobody from a backward world.

On the far side of the bridge, Obi-Wan Kenobi frowned at his padawan while he stood with Captain Raust. Together, they looked at the pacing Jedi as he barked at Aiya.

“He’s extremely impatient, Commander,” Captain Raust said.

“That will change,” Obi-Wan replied. “And please, Captain, I prefer the Jedi title that I earned to the military title that was given.”

“Palpatine’s law is specific about your wartime commission, Commander,” the captain replied.

“The law is only temporary until the Clone Wars is over. You will return when I signal, no matter what the status of the task force is. Master Fisto will understand your absence. Anakin and I will be quite busy, but when it is time to leave, we will leave quickly.”

“You meant to say General Fisto, Commander,” Captain Raust corrected.

“No, I didn’t,” Obi-Wan said coldly.

“I have always enjoyed Iillum in its summer season. It is a fine choice for the boy’s education,” a soft voice said from behind them.

Captain Raust saluted sharply as Obi-Wan embraced Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi.

“Master, I am pleased you could join us on our journey. I was beginning to wonder if you would ever leave your chambers,” Obi-Wan grinned.

“Roaming the ship will not help it move faster. I felt my time was best served studying the Force,” the Jedi Master said plainly. “The Jedi Council has taken an interest in the boy’s development. As such, they have tasked me to observe and fine tune his training.”

“He is my padawan,” Obi-Wan protested.

Captain Raust held the salute.

“Of course he is, my dear boy. However you are just barely a year removed from being a padawan yourself, are you not? It is only with extreme circumstances that you are allowed to claim someone this old as your padawan,” Ki-Adi-Mundi remarked.

“Given his abilities and his potential, Master Yoda himself wanted to train Anakin. However, things are what they are and with the way the war is occupying our efforts, perhaps it is all for the best that you are his master,” Ki-Adi-Mundi eyed Anakin carefully.

“I can instruct him just as well as Yoda,” Obi-Wan indignantly said.

Master Ki-Adi-Mundi raised an eyebrow. “You believe so?”

Obi-Wan blushed at his arrogance.

“You are in charge of his education. I am here to make sure that what you say sticks to him. Master Yoda is concerned that we are putting too much into him at too great a rate. He must learn the value of our ways, not just the knowledge,” Ki-Adi-Mundi smiled.

Captain Raust’s arm trembled.

“To be honest, I was glad when Master Yoda asked me to come along. I look forward to discussing Cerea with young Anakin. I have no doubt he can tell me much about my home since I have been forbidden to return,” his voice trailed off and his eyes glazed over in thought.

“Oh do put your arm down, captain, you look the fool,” he snapped.

They watched Anakin turn abruptly on his heel and ask Aiyia, yet again, when they were arriving.

“He’s extremely impatient, Commander,” Captain Raust said again, flexing his sore arm.

Obi-Wan frowned as he watched his padawan.

"Illum will change that. It always does," Ki-Adi-Mundi replied and put a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder.

"Really sir, I don't think you have the first idea of what you're talking about." Padme Amidala, Chairperson for the Alderaan Committee of Armed Services, was growing weary of listening to this same, tired argument.

"It's all too clear!" the shrill voice of the dissident rang through the chamber. "Why can't you see that the corporations are the ones behind this war simply to line their pockets? They're raking in profits with the Republic footing the bill!"

Padme rubbed her throbbing temples.

"Mr. Remmick, you have no direct evidence, no proof, and no facts to back your rather insane accusations. While it is true that INCOM ships have been seen used by both sides, can you show us undeniable evidence that they are responsible for selling arms to rebels?" she countered.

"You sold yourself to INCOM, SoroSuub, TaggeCo, and Adascorp when the war first started!" the squat, little man screeched. "People are dying out there by the millions while you sit here in a committee room doing nothing to stop them from taking away our freedoms!"

Padme signaled for order several times. The sound of chimes filled the air. "Mr. Remmick, unless you have something substantial to bring before the committee, we're adjourned for the day."

"What about the weapon? Can you sit there and deny that the Republic is constructing a weapon so monstrous that it could make star fleets obsolete? That it can bring any star system to its knees with its terror?" his eyes bugged from the effort.

"Fascinating," Padme yawned. "I suppose it's powered by a team of Rancors running on giant wheels?"

Several committee members laughed, but Remmick was un-deterred.

"And I suppose you can sleep at night knowing that citizens of the Republic you claim to defend are being harassed, arrested, detained, and eliminated for speaking out? We have Republic Enforcement Squads rampaging throughout the galaxy making citizens disappear on a whim!" Remmick shouted.

"It appears they missed one," Senator Mira said and a ripple of chuckles went through the chamber before Padme shot him a cold stare.

"Once again, no evidence, no facts. I am growing rather tired of hearing your voice in this chamber. I thank the members for appearing today," Padme signaled for adjournment.

"You want proof? I'll give you proof! You'll see, you'll all see! I'll give you something so explosive it will shake this tyrannical government!" Remmick screamed as he was dragged out of the room.

"I thank the committee members for appearing today. Please abide by the wartime curfew and remember that security staff will be coming by your offices today. They will need to scan for any illegal surveillance equipment that rebels might have planted," Padme said in a dead voice.

Padme shook her head sadly before stepping out of the chamber. She was immediately flanked by her Chief of Staff.

"I hate reading a statement detailing how our freedoms are being restricted. Maybe Mr. Remmick is wrong about rampaging legions of soldiers, but not so wrong about the erosion of our basic liberties," Padme said.

"Senator, we've received another request from *Alderaan Today* for an interview, Senator Rand wants me to remind you about the gala next week, and you promised the Committee for Patriotic Support you would stop by their meeting tonight," the Chief of Staff ignored her as she typed into a digital tablet.

"No interviews today, tell Senator Rand I have not forgotten, and tell the 'Committee for Unconditional Loyalty' they can..." She was stopped in the bustling corridor in front of her office by a tall man with a scar on his face that ran just above and below his left eye.

"The Senator has to meet with a different committee at the moment. I'll have her contact you when she is ready to sacrifice the rest of her life to the glorious cause that is the Republic," he said as the office door slid shut behind them.

Padme slumped into her chair and let out a sigh as she looked at the flashing messages that were displayed as "unread" on her desk.

"Four hundred and fifty-one and the day isn't over yet." Padme said.

"I thought your Chief of Staff was supposed to be your gatekeeper? Doesn't she filter the junk out and only send you what's important?" Khian asked. He ran a hand through his black, shortly cropped hair before finding a spot on her desk not covered in digital pads to lean against.

"This is *after* the filter," she sighed.

He picked up a tablet at random. "Oh yeah, a message from the Deputy to the Assistant Regent about the lateness of a report detailing why your reports are being submitted after their deadlines. I can see how this is critical to the war effort." Khian said.

He grabbed one out of her hands. "Oh this is a real gem. You need to submit a report detailing what you can do to inspire your droids. Can droids even be inspired? I'm curious, how does the Undersecretary for Records and Logistics think anyone can inspire a droid?"

"And here's a message detailing how I'm not paying enough attention to the media or the transmission screaming about how I'm supposed to be inspiring our glorious troops from behind my desk. Khian, I'm dying back here!" Padme dropped her head on the desk and several tablets clattered on to the floor.

"Listen sweetheart, you have looked at more strategic naval plans and army tactical reports than anything else. You're not the Grand Centurion, but you sure as hell are working like him. What more can you do?" he asked.

"Yes and how did I discover the existence of the clones to begin with? It wasn't from sitting behind this desk. How did Anakin stop Darth Maul? Which desk is he sitting behind now?" Padme fumed.

"Anakin Stumpwalker is probably out in the middle of nowhere getting his head filled with Jedi ramblings about how everything is a part of everything." Khian folded his arms.

Padme slapped Khian's shoulder. "I asked you not to call him that."



"I didn't hear an answer for my question. If this desk is a problem, I'll haul it out faster than a Hutt moves to a buffet. What more can you do? Are you going to enlist in the Republic Armed Forces? If you do, let me remind you that protecting you in a planetary battle ain't in my job description," Khian said.

"I might need a raise," he winked.

"Senator Cordellian was offered a commission and is now a Captain of the Line in charge of a *Mandator* Class Dreadnaught. Lucky me, I got to inherit his seat as a chairperson. Even General Tarkin got a promotion and is now a Surface Marshal in charge of six sectors!"

"Cordy was offered the commission because he was a Lieutenant Commander long before he served on the Armed Forces Committee. What navy did you serve in? What weapons training have you had?" Khian asked.

Padme turned to look at her protector. "Once again, you make a convincing argument. Maybe you should run for office."

"And wind up stuck behind a desk staring at forms all day instead of a woman whose smile lights up the room? I think I'll pass," he leaned in closer to her.

Padme pretended to focus on a digital tablet instead of his green eyes. "Do you think there's any truth to what Remmick was saying? Is it possible that the corporations are dealing under the table to the rebels?"

Khian shrugged his broad shoulders. "As possible as a smuggler going straight. The rebellion can't last very long and backing the loser never looks good to your shareholders."

"Then how are the rebels getting their equipment? They have an impressive number of clones, but if they were limited in the number of ships and land vehicles then they should adopt a 'hit and run' strategy. The reports I have read show they are engaging us in open warfare in numerous systems across the Outer Rim."

"That's why Grand Centurion Palpatine gets the big payday," Khian said.

"There has to be some way to determine that." Padme's voice trailed off as she stared out the window at yet another pristine day. "I need to dictate a transmission to Grand Centurion Palpatine. I think he and I can help each other."

"You should know better than anyone else that investigations lead to a world of trouble. In your case, it leads to explosions and Sith Lords." Khian fingered his scar in thought.

"That was one time, what are the odds it will happen again?" Padme asked.

Her desk intercom buzzed. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but Viceroy Organa insists that he meet with you as soon as he lands on Alderaan. Also, Magistrate Tyr wants to know when he can expect you at tonight's committee meeting and the fitters are here to make sure your dress is ready in time for next week's gala."

Khian stifled a laugh as Padme rolled her eyes. "All for the glory of the Republic, I suppose," she said.

Padme's hand moved to press the reply button, but Khian's hand shot out and grabbed hers before she could.

"Padme, why don't you let me help?" he asked.

"Help?" Padme asked and tried to pull her hand back.

Khian's grip was firm, but not crushing. "You, very dramatically, said you were dying back here. You have hundreds of unanswered transmissions, and you're wasting

time with all this nonsense. Isn't it my duty to stop you from dying, even figuratively? Please, I can help."

"And you have experience dealing with diplomats?" she asked.

"I have experience dropping them out a window," he grinned.

Padme didn't return the grin.

Khian stood up straight and adjusted his vest. "I am well versed in the art of politics. I know I can help you. I want to help you."

Padme smiled sweetly at him. "I suppose we can add 'Administrative Liaison' to your job description. That's very sweet of you to offer."

"Sweet is my middle name," Khian smiled back.

"I don't even know your last name," Padme giggled.

"Well I have to save *some* mystery, now don't I?" his thumb began to slowly caress the top of her hand.

Padme blushed, but didn't withdraw her hand. The intercom buzzed causing Padme to jump back. She smoothed her hair before pressing the reply button. "Tell them they can come in and let them know my Administrative Liaison will need to be fitted for a suit as well."

Padme giggled as Khian put a hand to his forehead in mock horror.

Anakin turned to watch *The Bucket* begin its ascent away from the surface of the planet. He shielded his eyes when the blast from the engines caught up to him, then turned to face his master. Obi-Wan wasn't next to him, he was already walking toward a sheer cliff with Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi, a bag slung over his shoulder.

He hastened to join his master. "Master Kenobi, when will the ship return?"

Obi-Wan turned his head, but Master Ki-Adi-Mundi put a hand on the Kenobi's shoulder and they kept walking.

The bitter cold ripped through Anakin's robe. "Master Kenobi, is the Jedi Temple close?"

Obi-Wan didn't look back.

A sudden blast of snow hit Anakin in the face. "Master Kenobi, I'm starting to miss Tatooine," he tried to chuckle.

Obi-Wan maintained his pace.

Anakin pulled his hood up over his head to provide some measure of protection from the howling wind and walked on in silence. He tried to count the hours as they approached the cliff and then he saw their destination. Anakin turned to the Jedi Master for answers.

"Master Ki-Adi-Mundi, why are you here?" Anakin asked.

The Jedi Master also said nothing.

The cliff was massive with sheer, icy walls, but housed the entrance to a tiny cave that beckoned to Anakin. "Is that where we're headed?" he asked them both. Anakin was desperate to know more, but they returned his question with stony silence.

He couldn't help but feel disappointed. Where was the Jedi Temple? Where were the massive columns or the hallowed steps leading up to a grand entrance? As they ducked slightly to get in the jagged entrance, he sucked in a quick breath of air.

Anakin could almost swear that the dark, foreboding cave was a living being with a Force presence of its very own. He felt fully engulfed in the darkness and lost all

track of time as they walked. The two Jedi did not ignite their lightsabers, but walked on without missing a step. Anakin seemed to find every hole, gap, and fissure that tried to trip him up.

How long had they been in this cavern?

Time dragged on until Anakin wasn't even sure if it was day, night, or the following week. His feet ached, his throat was parched, and yet they trudged on. Finally, he saw that they were headed for a light that emanated from an opening. Anakin's breath caught in his throat as they entered a vast cavern with formations of blue and green crystals that seemed to go on forever.

Anakin couldn't even see the room's ceiling. It was a cathedral of wonder that stretched on forever. He ignored his throbbing feet, staring in awe at the Jedi chamber around him.

The two Jedi continued walking up a path that lead to a higher level of the cave without pausing. Anakin stared for just a minute longer before following. They left the breathtaking room and entered another shaft that, except for the occasional pocket of crystals, left them walking in the darkness once again.

There were some crystals in the larger cavern that were as big as Anakin's fist, why didn't they just stop there? It seemed like that was the main room, why are they still walking? Is Obi-Wan using a cruel form of punishment by teasing him with crystals? With every step they took, questions grew in his mind.

After what seemed endless twists and turns in the tunnel, Anakin had completely lost of their whereabouts. New thoughts entered his mind. His master and a heralded Jedi Knight, was guiding him through a crystal cave on a sacred Jedi planet en route to building his first lightsaber. They were accompanied by not only a Jedi Master, but someone who sat on the Jedi Council itself. Anakin let go of his control over the events and give himself totally to the moment.

Why should time matter in this place? Why does it matter if they travel two kilometers or twenty? The galaxy would still be there when they left the cave. Anakin gave himself to the Force, letting it guide him.

Obi-Wan and Ki-Adi-Mundi came to an abrupt halt. Ki-Adi-Mundi dropped his bag near a small patch of green crystals.

"Now you're ready," Ki-Adi-Mundi said.

"Wait, what?" Anakin stammered, almost walking into him.

Master Ki-Adi-Mundi stretched his legs and smiled at Obi-Wan as if they were sharing a private joke.

"You've learned lesson number one. Now we can move on to other parts of your education. To be honest, I wish you had developed your mind a little sooner. My feet are killing me," Obi-Wan grinned.

Anakin immediately understood. "Then it begins."

## Chapter II

"Have patience, the moment will come. Don't rush it," Jedi Knight Rogan whispered to himself as he stared at a small park bench.

He tried to sharpen his concentration, but it didn't budge. Rogan exhaled sharply and closed his eyes again. The bench was there, the Force was there, but as he sat in a park just a few kilometers from the Jedi Temple his mind was besieged with distractions.

Rogan knew the only reason he had been knighted was because of the rush of the war, but that was fine with him. He hadn't yet been assigned to any particular unit so there was time to hone his skills and prove himself worthy of the title Knight of the Jedi Order.

His hand absently wrapped around his former master's lightsaber. Master Tarien had shown infinite patience and a great deal of faith in Rogan even during his last moments. The ceremony to pass the master's blade to the student had been very personal. Rogan silently cursed the war for taking great Jedi like his master away.

Rogan shook his head. "I have the focus of a wookiee," he muttered.

Long, tense moments came and went. It didn't matter how long it took, all that mattered was that it happened. Sweat rolled down his back as the sun peeked out from behind one of Coruscant's massive starscrapers.

One end of the bench finally twitched.

Or did it?

He squinted hard at the bench. "Relax, relax," he whispered, closing his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them again, two people were sitting on the bench smiling at him.

"Blast," he groaned. "I don't need complications."

A laser blast obliterated the citizens, the bench, and left only a smoking crater behind.

Rogan was knocked backward from the concussion. While on his back, he looked at a squadron of upside-down starfighters soaring in-between the starscrapers. Additional laser blasts landed in the buildings nearby, along the streets, and struck anything that moved.

The never-ending stream of civilian traffic was easy pickings.

Rogan looked around, astonished, as it began raining wreckage and debris. His lightsaber ignited to help him hack and dodge the pieces of transports that fell around him.

"By the Force...not Coruscant," he breathed as another series of laser blasts rained down on the buildings around him.

Rogan raced to the other side of the park where another Jedi Knight whom he had only seen once or twice previously was also running. The dark-skinned knight was using the Force to slow the rain of debris around them.

"What is all this?" Rogan shouted as three more starfighters flew past them.

"How can you not know what war looks like?" he shouted back.

Rogan whooped as several Republic starfighters shot past them and pursued the rebel fighters. "How are they able to invade Coruscant? No, it must only be a raid, right? I mean, surely it's just a raid, right?"

Two large, metal cone-shaped objects fired retro-rockets and landed in the middle of the park. Their doors shot off, crashing several meters away. Over a dozen

Jedi clones climbed out of each one and raced in every direction. They were attacking anyone they could find, causing as much mayhem as possible.

The knight looked at Rogan in exasperation. "Thanks for jinxing things," he ignited his lightsaber.

Rogan took a step backward as fear began to creep into him. "We should wait for help," he said timidly.

"I don't think they'll agree to that," the knight answered and raced to meet four clones that were already sprinting toward them with lightsabers of their own.

Rogan looked down at the lightsaber he held in his hands. His master had given his life so that he might make something of himself. Now was the time to prove his master's faith was not wasted.

By the time he had reached the clones, the dark-skinned knight he had spoken with had already dispatched two of them. The other two furiously fought to bring him down. Rogan yelled the fiercest battle-cry he could muster and leapt over both clones to attack them from behind.

Rogan used his technique combined with the patience he had tried to exercise earlier to force his opponent back to back with the other clone.

His clone finally made an error and over-swung, missing Rogan badly. The young Jedi Knight responded by cutting off the clone's saber arm.

"Ha!" he cried out in victory.

The clone grabbed the lightsaber with his remaining limb and shoved it through Rogan's chest.

He had just enough life left in him to see the two clones slash at the knight that was fighting with him. The knight retreated directly into the path of three other clones.

Within seconds of each other, they became one with the Force.

Sweat was dripping from Anakin's forehead, but he ignored it. His hands cramped from the effort, but he pushed the pain from his mind. Pain was for lesser beings. He had to push aside discomfort to be better than he was.

"Let it happen, don't force the issue," Obi-Wan encouraged. Master Ki-Adi-Mundi nodded approvingly.

Thanks to the parts that his master had brought with him, Anakin nearly completed a lightsaber that would be a part of his very essence for all time. The Diatium power cell had fit very snugly into the power field conductor. Anakin had to be very careful to screw it into the primary crystal mount. The energy modulation circuits were ready, the cycling field energizers were waiting for power, and the blade energy channel was waiting for a crystal to focus its awesome power.

Anakin sat back after the power cell clicked into place. His eyes closed for a moment as Obi-Wan nodded approvingly at him.

"The blade is ready. You must select your blue or green crystal and infuse it with the power of the Force. Once that is complete, your lightsaber will be ready and your training on Illium will be complete." Obi-Wan said.

Anakin looked around the tunnel. "The Guardians of the Galaxy get a whopping two colors to choose from?"

Obi-Wan let out a sigh of frustration. "You are not making a fashion statement, Anakin. I'll have only these two crystals for you to finish your lightsaber."

"Gently," Master Ki-Adi-Mundi commented from behind Obi-Wan.

"So I just pick one?" Anakin looked at the small formation growing almost within his arm's reach.

"Not exactly, Anakin. You must let the Force guide you. Let go of your conscious self and travel throughout the cave. When you find your crystal, you will know." Master Ki-Adi-Mundi instructed.

"Your lightsaber will be unique to you, even though it will share a color with many other Jedi Knights. Make it truly yours and it will never be separated from you," he continued.

"Was it like this for you?" Anakin asked Obi-Wan.

"Not even close. Master Yoda took me to Adegan. Not nearly as cold as I'llum, but the bugs were the size of a Z-95 Headhunter. I can remember..." Ki-Adi-Mundi cleared his throat, interrupting Obi-Wan.

"It was an enriching experience," Obi-Wan finished.

"Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" Anakin asked.

"Anakin, the crystal is the heart of the blade. The heart is the crystal of a Jedi. The Jedi is the crystal of the Force. The Force is the blade of your heart. All are intertwined, the Jedi, the Force, the blade. You are all one," Master Ki-Adi-Mundi said.

Anakin gathered his courage as he stared down the dark tunnel. He began to step toward a tunnel they had not yet been through, but hesitated. His instincts told him to go back down the way they had come, to the familiar path.

Anakin backtracked for what seemed to be hours, until he was almost back at the Grand Crystal Chamber. He wasn't particularly interested in where he was going, allowing the Force to guide his journey. He stopped when he noticed a fissure that he hadn't seen on their first time through the tunnel.

The fissure was somewhat narrower than Anakin was. There was a light coming from beneath it, but Anakin didn't have much of an idea as to how he would get down into that particular chamber.

"Just when a lightsaber would come in handy," he muttered.

Anakin rolled up the leg of his trousers until it was above his knee. He tapped a few keys on the digital readout on his artificial leg and, after a series of clamps opened, removed the leg from below his knee.

"Lightweight, yet durable." Anakin said as he used the heel of his leg to enlarge the fissure. He stopped after a few hits to consider what he was doing.

Anakin was in a hallowed Jedi temple on a sacred Jedi planet. How was he honoring the Jedi by hammering away at the cave itself to suit his own needs? His pause didn't last long when the light called to him again. The chamber below begged him to drop down.

After a few more hits, pieces of the wall began to give way and the fissure widened to the point where Anakin could get through. He reattached his leg, tested his weight against it, and peered through the fissure.

Below, there was a large cavern where oddly shaped stalactites and stalagmites jutted out at identical angles. Every single one of them pointed inwards to the center of the room, not straight up or straight down as they normally should grow. In the center of the chamber, there was a single golden crystal about the size of his thumb.

And next to it was another person wearing brown robes.

“Who are you?” Anakin asked and the figure remained motionless and speechless.

“Did Master Ki-Adi-Mundi bring you?” he asked, but got no answer.

“Are you another padawan?” Again, he received silence.

Something seemed incredibly familiar about this person, but from this distance and angle, Anakin couldn’t make out any more about him. He decided to let go of his hesitation. Anakin grabbed onto the edge of the fissure and jumped down into the chamber.

He landed directly in front of the intruder and found himself face-to-face with himself.

“How is it possible for our Armed Forces to be so depleted? This war should have been over inside of a week. Instead our capital world has been struck in a cowardly raid,” the High Speaker of the Republic fumed. The hour long meeting between the Committee for Galactic Security and Supreme Chancellor Valorum had now entered its fourth hour.

The committee, which had started with three members, had been grown by Grand Centurion Palpatine to include Senator Bail Organa of Alderaan, Senator Theria Eddic of Corellia, Grand Admiral Aret Etherian, Oreana T’riek from the HoloNet News Network, and the CEO’s of INCOM, SubPro Starship Company, and the Loronar Defense Industry.

Only recently, and with the insistence of Chancellor Valorum, was Jedi Master Yoda added. Palpatine selected a chair for the small Jedi and placed him at the far end of the table.

“It was a gradual drawdown over several decades after the Stark Conflict ended. I firmly believe that if we could address the underlying causes that would lead us to war, then there would be no war.” Supreme Chancellor Valorum said as he sat alone on his side of the conference table.

“It seems the rebels disagree with your belief,” Senator Eddic said as another massive repair droid flew past their window.

“To the tune of thirteen thousand dead or injured including fifty-seven Jedi, eleven starcrapers unusable due to the raid, and over six hundred billion credits in overall damage. Of course, I can’t put a price on the sheer panic this has caused nor the damage it will do to our economy in the short-term while we recover,” Tarvis Incom added.

“Have all of the Jedi clones been accounted for?” Oreana spoke up while she took notes.

Several heads turned toward her, and then everyone looked at Master Yoda. Senator Eddic gripped the arms of his chair tightly.

Yoda had to stand on the chair to be seen over the top of the table. Even still, his chair height was hardly sufficient to be clearly seen by the other members of the committee.

“Not all,” Yoda said heavily. “Continue, our efforts do, to find them all.”

“And you...I mean no insult...but how do we know...” Oreana sputtered.

“She’s right of course,” Palpatine interjected. “No offense Master Yoda, but how can we trust the Jedi Order at this time? You might be a clone sending information back to the rebels.”

Senator Organa stood up quickly. “You can’t be serious!”

“I take the security of our Republic very seriously, senator,” Palpatine replied. “I’m afraid I have no choice but to order that all Jedi Knights and Masters undergo medical testing every fourteen hours to verify they are not clones. I would think you of all people would support this necessary measure considering what happened to your son.”

“Not your decision to make, that is,” Yoda interjected as Bail Organa’s face turned very red. “From the Supreme Chancellor, that directive must come.”

All eyes turned to Chancellor Valorum, who cleared his throat loudly.

“I’ll certainly take that under advisement. I believe the topic at hand is the conduct of the war and state of our military?” he asked meekly.

Palpatine’s eye twitched.

“I cannot believe that your naïve ramblings about peace and harmony actually got through to the Senate. Peace is a wonderful idea on paper and preaching it will get you elected, but if you don’t have the force to back up your words then you sound too much like a Jedi. No offense intended, of course,” Teal Loronar nodded toward Yoda at the end of the table.

“It’s shameful and almost criminal behavior to allow the Republic to become so defenseless. Countless billions of citizens depend on you for their very lives,” the senior Senator from Corellia said with distaste.

“Thankfully INCOM and other corporations are posting record profits and production has exceeded expectations. Within twelve to eighteen months, we should have an army and navy worthy of the Galactic Republic.” Valorum smiled.

“It wouldn’t have taken nearly this long if you would stop tying the hands of our Grand Centurion. How can you charge him with the conduct of the war, then not give him the tools necessary to do the job?” the High Speaker asked as more of the committee members began shouting at once.

The room grew quiet when Palpatine stood. “Gentlemen, we all have our concerns over how the war is being run. Rest assured, clone production is increasing every day. New shipyards in twenty-three systems are coming online this month and I am confident that, with the proper support, the Republic shall be victorious,” applause broke out from the committee.

“Are the clones even necessary? There are still many questions about them we can’t answer. Is it right to breed people simply for war? What happens to them when the war is over?” Senator Organa asked.

“If you would prefer to wait a year for a properly trained military, Coruscant would be in ashes,” Grand Admiral Etherian said. “We need troops now to counter the rebel threat. The rebels are using them, why not us?”

“I don’t see those production reports,” Valorum tapped a few keys on his digital tablet. “The few reports I’ve been receiving have been rather sketchy.”



"Finis, I assure you, I am sending you the exact same reports that I see. The war will improve, but it would be going better if we had more cooperation from our Jedi leaders in the field," Palpatine looked at Master Yoda.

"Told you, I did. Answer to politicians, we do not. Pawns for the military, we are not. Many of our Jedi spread across the galaxy, leading your forces. Too few, I fear, available for such a task. Too few to respond to the Coruscant raid," Yoda said.

"You have so many padawans that are anxious to lead our clones. I wonder why they are being held back? And what of our latest hero, young Skywalker? I haven't heard from him since his injury." Palpatine said with interest.

"Continues, his training does. Ready to command, he is not," Yoda replied.

"Oh I think someone so gifted should not be kept on the sidelines. Master Yoda, I would consider it a personal favor if you would let me know immediately when he returns from his training. I want to welcome him back, personally."

"Consider your request, I will, but much training young Skywalker requires," Yoda insisted.

"I think he demonstrated on Cerea that he can skip Lightsaber 101." Palpatine and the committee members chuckled. "Now Finis, about these shipyards, I think a few more in the Sluis Van system will make that system more strategic. What is the delay in completing their construction?"

"Well Palpatine, these things take time." Chancellor Valorum said as he began shuffling through a pile of papers on the table. "We simply can't wish them into existence."

There was a murmur of dissent from the committee members. Yoda did not join in and Palpatine raised an eyebrow at the small Jedi.

For less than an instant, they locked eyes, even though Yoda could barely see over the top of the table. Palpatine quickly looked away and scanned the faces of the other members.

"Now now gentlemen, I'm sure that the Supreme Chancellor is doing all that he is capable of. If there is no other business before this meeting, I would like to get some lunch. Care to join me, Tarvis?" Palpatine rose from the table.

"I'd be honored, of course," Tarvis Incom blushed.

"One concern, I have," Yoda spoke up.

"Yes, Master Jedi?" Palpatine answered with an air of annoyance.

"Many troops there are, on Republic worlds being used to enforce the peace. Much violence there is when the soldiers attempt to stop the protests against the war."

"Those who dare to protest against the Republic deserve to be punished. Our methods are in place to ensure that those who are loyal remain loyal." Palpatine bristled.

"If loyal they are, then why punish them?" Yoda asked.

Palpatine took a deep breath. "Master Jedi, I will not see my beloved Republic ripped apart. I will crush all opposition no matter the form it may take. Opposition begins with a whisper in dark corners, but if you don't obliterate it immediately, it will fester like a disease. I will cure the galaxy one traitor at a time, if need be."

The entire committee broke into thunderous applause. Many stood and cheered.

“Cured, diseases are, to make the body whole again. Rarely enjoyed obliteration is, in medical bays,” Yoda countered and the room grew quiet again.

“Master Jedi, disloyalty must be dealt with. I will *not* tolerate dissention in the Republic. Either we stand united or we shall fall. Which would you prefer?” Palpatine was staring at Yoda now.

“Many voices exist within us all. Tell us to fight, some do. Tell us to talk, others do. Listen to all voices, we must, to be a true and honorable republic,” Yoda matched the intensity of the stare.

“I will take any and all steps needed to deal with *anyone* who will threaten the security of the Galactic Republic,” Palpatine’s glance scanned the faces around the table, including Valorum and Grand Admiral Etherian, for a brief moment.

Yoda’s long ears twitched.

“Is there any other business? I believe I mentioned something about lunch,” Palpatine said as he walked away from the table.

The committee members were jostling to be in position to walk next to the Grand Centurion as they exited until only Yoda and Chancellor Valorum remained seated at the table.

“Meeting adjourned.” the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic said softly as the doors slammed shut.

Yoda remained at the table, eyeing the Chancellor carefully.

“I said I would take it under advisement, I didn’t say I would support genetic testing of all Jedi,” the Chancellor said.

“Easily seen, your thoughts are,” Yoda replied.

Valorum stood and stared out the large window at the nearly empty sky devoid of civilian traffic. Where once millions of transports flew above and below the building, now only essential traffic was allowed near the Republic Executive Building following the raid.

“These are perilous times and they bring up a good point. How can we be sure which Jedi is a real Jedi?” he asked.

“Poor speech, they have. Poor copies, they are,” Yoda replied.

“This is true,” Valorum rubbed his chin in thought. “Very well. I shall hold Palpatine at bay for a little while about the medical tests. However, if they come up with a way to overcome the speech problem, I must give the order to have all Jedi tested. It turns out we may not need to worry about this much longer...” his voice trailed off.

Yoda nodded approvingly, but his gaze held firm on the Chancellor.

Valorum chuckled slightly. “You know me too well, old friend.”

“Know you have something to propose, yet fearful you are to propose it, I do,” Yoda said.

“This is something I have told no one, until now. I have reason to believe the war may come to a peaceful end rather soon,” Valorum replied.

Yoda smiled and waited patiently while the man he had come to know as a close political ally gathered his courage.

“I have begun a dialogue with several leaders of the rebellion. With any luck, I will be able to broker a peace treaty and welcome them back into the Republic,” he said proudly.

“Not news our Grand Centurion would enjoy hearing,” Yoda said. “Search for political allies to aid you, I will. Save our Republic from without and from within, we can.”

They both smiled.

Some people became obsessed over money, others over power. He had seen obsession drive some people insane, others allowed the obsession to become their entire lives.

Khian had always dismissed obsession as something that “lesser” people succumbed to. Toiling into the late night hours for the past several weeks helped him see the other side of obsession. Its grip was powerful and, he hoped, obsession would serve a powerful purpose.

It hadn’t been easy to get the recording of Anakin’s duel with Darth Maul on Cerea. Now that he had it, he watched the recording over and over again. That fight had served as a catalyst for young Skywalker with the Jedi and with Padme, but so many things puzzled Khian.

First and foremost, why did Darth Maul allow Anakin to live?

As a trained killer, Khian could see that the Sith Lord was toying with Anakin. Although his gifted friend was throwing everything he had at Darth Maul, it was clear that he didn’t stand a chance.

In fact, there were more than a few opportunities when Darth Maul could have killed Anakin with ease. Once, he even had the padawan on his back, lightsaber out of reach, and his own red blade ready to strike, yet he held back.

Khian took a moment to tear his eyes away from the recording to answer another of Padme’s transmissions. This work was incredibly mundane and tedious, but he took on the job with passion. He was grateful for another chance to prove himself to Padme as someone who is always there to help her.

Khian turned back to the video and scowled. The two of them actually carried on a conversation during the duel. More disturbing, Anakin seemed to be enjoying himself.

Although the camera’s microphone was destroyed after Obi-Wan was thrown through a building, the lens continued recording images. Khian opened a unique image recognition program that he had used on prior occasions with great success.

Something about this duel just wasn’t right. It was his job to investigate any and all threats to Senator Amidala. Investigating his friend made the bile rise in his throat. He had to know for sure if Anakin was now a threat to her.

Khian smiled to himself and began to finger the trigger to *Alanna*. The program began scanning each frame of the video and processing their lip movements. Sooner or later, he would know just what in the stars they were talking about.

## Chapter III

*Citizens of the Galactic Republic! Today our beloved Grand Centurion is ratcheting up our depleted forces with aggressive expansion of shipyards, dockyards, and clone production to counter the rebellion’s military might!*

*"I am moving immediately to beseech the Senate to further expand production of our war materials. Our troops will have the finest equipment, the finest weaponry, and the finest care available anywhere! Remember Coruscant!"*

*"Our forces dwindled during this administration, but fear not, citizens! Our Grand Centurion will ensure that victory is at hand! Even now he is leading our fighting men, women, and clones onward to crush the rebellion and keep the Republic safe for us all!"*

*"We will continue to hunt down the Jedi clones that raided Coruscant even if they seek refuge in the Jedi Temple itself. Civilian traffic must remain limited and a full curfew is in effect until this crisis is abated. Please cooperate with all Security Forces as we establish mandatory ID checks. These measures will ensure that no Jedi escapes the grasp of the Republic's justice!"*

*Keep bringing the fight to them! No rebellion! No division! No backing down! Show your patriotism by buying war bonds to give our fighting people the support they need!*

This should have gone much easier. Vice-Admiral Norris stared out the viewport from his flagship, the R.S.S. *Indomitable* in frustration. His intelligence corps had received confirmations of what he had suspected for several weeks. The rebels were receiving supplies from sympathizers on the planet Mon Calamari.

This shipment was supposed to be the largest yet. He had devoted half of his task force to seizing these twenty-nine cargo ships to determine who the sympathizers were and what other connections they might have.

That was supposed to be the plan.

Instead, there were only five freighters that hadn't escaped. A third rebel flotilla was entering the system on an intercept course for his fleet. This "snatch and grab" operation had turned into a battle he didn't want.

"How many are there this time?" he asked the captain with a grimace.

"Six frigates, two cruisers, and another fighter carrier. I show four squadrons of starfighters that will be here within four minutes," the captain returned the grimace.

Admiral Norris knew that four minutes of shield regeneration time was just not enough. Undoubtedly the rebels would try to draw his depleted forces away from the freighters in an effort to bleed his fleet dry while the cargo ships escaped.

"We must secure the freighters, the crew, the cargo, manifests, communication logs, everything. I refuse to go home empty handed," he slammed his fist against the bulkhead before turning to face the bridge crew.

"Captain, order the remainder of the fleet to regroup between the freighters and the incoming rebel flotilla. They have to act as a screen to keep that scum away from us. Order our own starfighters to keep harassing the column until we arrive. We're taking the *Indomitable* in."

"Admiral, we don't have the capability to secure five freighters worth of cargo. This is a ship of war, not a garbage scow," the captain said.

"Jettison all of the spare parts canisters, extra ammunition packs, anything and everything that can be dumped from our own hangar bays needs to experience the vacuum of space. In war, we all need to be a little more versatile, captain," Admiral Norris scowled.

“It is going to be very crowded in here,” the captain said. “Major, prepare your boarding parties and prepare for a lot of guests to come on board. Prepare the detention facilities and I want double guards around all critical areas of the ship. Remember Coruscant!”

Admiral Norris watched as his fleet broke up and began to engage the rebel forces. The digital readout that laid out on the viewport showed the blue ships of his battered fleet moving between him and the red ships of the newest rebel nuisance. His bulky battlecruisers unleashed a vicious barrage that was answered in kind by the sleek rebel ships.

“They have their job, we have ours,” Admiral Norris said to the anxious crew.

The *Indomitable* swung toward the fighters that were swarming the Super Cargo Vessels like a swarm of angry insects.

“Captain, I want those ships disabled immediately. Time is short,” Admiral Norris said.

“Order all fighters to target the engines of the SCV’s. Gunnery Officer! I want this section of space filled with ion bursts,” the captain ordered.

The pride of Admiral Norris’s fleet opened its gun-ports and short, blue bursts of light shot toward the Super Cargo Vessels.

“Sir, our battlecruisers are taking a terrific pounding. They are too weak from the other two attacks. If we don’t withdraw soon, we will be quite alone facing a rebel flotilla that might overpower us,” the captain’s voice cracked with concern.

“They will do their job as they have been trained to. The mission is the freighters. The target is the freighters. Nothing else matters but capturing those freighters. If they escape, then the four frigates and one battlecruiser we already lost would have been in vain. Moreover, those 42,000 souls we’ve lost would also have been in vain,” Admiral Norris was now considering re-assigning the captain of this vessel.

“Assuming clones even have souls,” the captain muttered.

“Captain, the freighters have been disabled. Our remaining fighters are requesting permission to dock,” the communications officer announced.

“Put them in hangar bay number...” the captain began.

“Belay that order,” Admiral Norris interrupted. “Captain, did you not understand my previous order? Putting our starfighters in any hangar bay compromises the entire mission.”

“So, our pilots just sit and rot in space? How many more lives are you going to sacrifice for your precious mission?” the captain asked.

Admiral Norris let an audible sigh escape his lips. “I realize that the war is thrusting young and inexperienced officers into lofty commands, but if you question my orders in front of the crew again, I will have you cleaning airlocks without a pressure suit. You had better hope I don’t wander the ship with an irresistible urge to press buttons.”

The captain swallowed hard.

“Communications Officer, instruct our starfighters to join the rest of the task force in dealing with the remaining rebel starships. Once victory is assured, they can land on those ships before we leave the system,” Admiral Norris turned back to his viewport.

The SCV's grew larger as white beams captured each one and brought them into the belly of the R.S.S *Indomitable*. Admiral Norris smiled once again.

It was an incredibly boring task. In fact, it was the latest in a long line of incredibly boring tasks that would doom his career to never ending mediocrity. No matter how hard Sub-Lieutneant Piett worked, no matter how many hours he put in every day, there was always another pile of reports to sift through. The tediousness of it all would have driven a lesser man insane.

As it was, when your superior officer wants something done, you drop whatever you're doing. It doesn't matter which report is days behind, which logistics log is begging for your attention, or which duty roster hasn't been filed yet.

Anytime the boss barks, you jump.

Sub-Lieutenant Piett examined the latest report from their narrow victory just outside the Mon Calamari star system. It included crew manifests and transmission logs from all five of the freighters they had captured.

Each freighter had a crew of nearly eighty rebels. Each of those eighty rebels had personal logs, military logs, transmissions home to loved ones, and encoded transmissions that had Intel Astromech Droids working around the clock to crack.

So far, only ten percent of the coded transmissions had been deciphered. Most of it was regarding the timetables of their departures, projected arrival time, lousy food on the ships, and expected Republic opposition. The latter estimate was horribly inaccurate.

Ten hours later the bleary eyed young man stopped the computer. There was one transmission that caught the eye of the Sub-Lieutenant.

It mentioned the Mandalorians.

Piett double checked his decryption to make sure it wasn't a mistake. He made a note to look for any further transmissions that would shed more light on this subject before continuing to the next set of logs. What would the rebels be doing mixed up with a race that died out over three thousand years ago?

"All hands to general quarters. All hands to general quarters, this is not a drill!" Klaxons began wailing throughout the ship.

Sub-Lieutneant Piett activated his intercom. "Sir, what's going on?"

"Get to your battle station, *Sub-Lieutenant*," his superior put special emphasis on the rank to make him wince. "We're en route to join Task Force Four to beat off a rebel force attacking a planet," he replied.

"Which planet? Surely not Coruscant again?" Piett asked.

"No, it's some Jedi planet called Illum. Remember Coruscant!" his commanding officer barked.

"Remember Coruscant," Piett said grimly.

No, it wasn't exactly Anakin, but someone similar. He had the same sandy colored hair, the same look of arrogance, and the same posture that seemed to radiate confidence. If Anakin didn't know any better, he would have thought he had discovered a long-lost brother.

"Who are you?" Anakin asked.

The figure didn't answer.

"How did you get down here?" Anakin gestured around him to the spherical cave where all the stalactites pointed to the hovering golden crystal.

The figure didn't answer.

"Whatever," Anakin mumbled and reached for the crystal.

"Disappointing," the man said.

"So you *can* talk? Thank goodness, I was starting to think you weren't smart enough to do more than look stupid," Anakin smirked.

"Any fool can talk, but listening is a true sign of intelligence. Talk to me Anakin Skywalker, tell me what you truly desire," the man folded his arms.

Anakin folded his arms in response.

"Are you too brave to bare your soul? You must have some real issues," the man laughed.

"What are you, my therapist? You need to tell me how you know my name and how you got down here, right now," Anakin growled.

"Or what? You'll attack me?" the figure mocked.

Anakin paused again. Apart from seeing a total stranger in a crystal cave on a Jedi planet, something seemed very wrong here. He let his tension go, but did not drop his guard.

"Attacking you would solve nothing. I'm also pretty sure that Master Kenobi would not approve of me destroying someone that I just met," Anakin said.

The man cocked his head to one side, like he was studying Anakin. "Perhaps there is another way for you to go after all. It might not be too late," he said.

"I really don't have time for riddles. Next you'll be saying how 'he can bring us hope' or 'he could be the one after all', but hold back all the details. I've heard it all before from a thousand Jedi back on Coruscant. They're all waiting for..." but Anakin was cut off.

"The Chosen One?"

"Well, it has been tossed about a little bit, but I don't put much stock in it," but Anakin knew it was a lie as soon as he said it.

"You and I are too alike, Anakin Skywalker. I was once a Daetan, like you. I was a Chosen One, the next best thing to come along," the figure said.

"You know what the trouble is with being the 'next best thing'? There's always another 'next best thing' to come around. When that happens, your place belongs to history," he continued.

Anakin uncomfortably shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"It's crazy when you think about it," the figure said. "You are the hottest thing to come to the Jedi Order. You're going to shake things up, do things that no Jedi has ever done before. Then before you blow up like a supernova, some new hotshot comes along and your name is forgotten," his laughter rang across the cave.

"That can't be," Anakin said. "I've already faced a Dark Lord of the Sith, uncovered a galaxy-breaking conspiracy, and saved my master's life before I had any real significant training!" Anakin's anger rose with his voice.

"Wow yeah. You're a real trailblazer!" the man laughed deep and long. "You don't think Yoda did great things before Mace Windu came along? Windu didn't do great things before Obi-Wan joined up? You really think Obi-Wan didn't do great

things before you came? Who will follow and then surpass the ‘great’, Anakin Skywalker?” The figure laughed again, this time louder, bordering on maniacal.

Anakin balled his hands into fists. “There will be no one like me! There hasn’t been anyone like me before and there won’t be anyone like me after!”

The man was cackling, his hands on his knees. “You’re too much! The Jedi Order has been in existence for thousands of years. How are you going to ensure that you will be *the* best in history? There will *always* be someone after you!”

“I will bring my power to new heights! I will be the greatest ever and I will use the Force to take me there! Now tell me who you are!” Anakin roared.

The laughing stopped. The figure rose to his full height and he stared directly at Anakin. He almost seemed to be staring through Anakin. His pale, blue eyes fixed onto Anakin’s and he dared not look away.

“You will destroy yourself. Power only brings misery. Glory spawns from destruction. To get everything you want will cost you everything you need to survive,” the figure said.

Anakin instantly knew who the man was talking about.

“You’re wrong,” he growled.

“I’ve finally getting everything I’ve dreamed of. You couldn’t be more wrong,” Anakin continued. He now eyed the crystal in the center of the room with renewed interest. His hand twitched toward his unfinished lightsaber. The golden crystal beckoned to him. The stalactites that surrounded the room, pointing inward to the crystal, seemed to close in on them both.

“This path you’ve chosen for yourself will only lead to the destruction of everyone around you,” the figure said and Anakin froze.

“I’m going to be the greatest Jedi in the history of the Order!” Anakin shouted.

“Meaningless,” he said and also stopped moving, but the stranger did not lose the look of a predator stalking its prey.

“Jedi for thousands of years won’t even approach my level of power,” Anakin countered.

“You will lose yourself and destroy everything you have ever loved. You will have glory, you will have victory, but you will have no legacy. No one to celebrate it with you,” the man said with pitifully.

“Tell me who you are or just SHUT UP!” Anakin shouted.

“You’ll allow darkness to twist you into a weapon of evil that will bring nothing but despair. You will probably even *welcome* the darkness, and that’s when you’ll lose her forever, just like I did,” his grin widened.

Time and space froze for Anakin. The statements that this mystery man had made before had been mere barbs to provoke Anakin. This last one had sent him over the edge.

In half a heartbeat, Anakin used the Force to pull the golden crystal into his lightsaber. It snapped into place and the lightsaber came to life in his hands. The blade felt like it had been waiting for him! The crystal roared to life as the blade ignited. The room was bathed in a golden light before Anakin used that light to pierce his doppelganger’s chest.

The man with the sandy colored hair looked down at the lightsaber still in his chest before looking up at Anakin.



“Nothing of you will be left. The great Anakin Skywalker will be destroyed. The only greatness you will achieve is your implosion,” he said before laughing.

The laughter started as an almost sinister giggle. Then it deepened into a laugh that filled the room. The hideous cackle did more than fill the room; it bombarded Anakin with an incredible intensity that ripped through his body. The cavern seemed to shake with the laughter.

Anakin let a primal scream rip from his lungs. The Force shattered this man into a thousand pieces and continued on. The cavern shook, but only from Anakin’s energy. His scream fueled the fire of the Force until the stalactites melted against the wall. When he finally reigned in his fury, the walls of the small room were polished to a fine shine. There was no trace of the roughness and the many points of the rocks that had jutted out at him.

Anakin drew his breaths in ragged gasps before looking at the completed lightsaber for the first time. He had a blade, he had the teachings of his friend and master, and the first thing he did with the symbol of a Knight of the Jedi Order was use it in anger.

Anakin dropped to his knees and wept.

He heard a whisper in his ear that was so quiet Anakin almost missed it.

*“Ethan is waiting for you.”*

“He’s rash, impetuous, and far too eager to chase glory,” Master Ki-Adi-Mundi argued.

“Weren’t we all at that age? He doesn’t have the benefit of a decade of training like we did,” Obi-Wan countered.

“Too much, too soon,” the Jedi Master shook his head. “Nobody can handle this much exposure to the Force and not see some ill come from it.”

“Anakin can handle it,” Obi-Wan affirmed.

“The Council has heard that before. Every time a ‘Chosen One’ appears, the Council must move to contain that person and keep tight control over them. We made one mistake and so many lives were ruined. The Council will not let it happen again,” Ki-Adi-Mundi said.

Obi-Wan folded his arms. “What actions are they prepared to take?”

Ki-Adi-Mundi looked at the floor. “That is the Council’s concern.”

“It won’t come to that, Anakin can handle this,” Obi-Wan repeated.

“Master Yoda is not convinced. This war is forcing far too many Jedi to be rushed through their training to lead troopers in combat. This is *not* what the Force is to be used for,” he replied.

Obi-Wan paced back and forth in the narrow passage. “He is destined for great things.”

“No one denies that,” the Jedi Master said. “But great according to whom? He could be a leader to other young ones to show them the benefits of what nearly a thousand generations of teachings really mean.”

Obi-Wan looked at him, but said nothing.

“You too, are slipping with him?” Ki-Adi-Mundi asked. “Surely the so-called glory of war is not calling to you.”

“I know what Yoda would say, you don’t have to quote him,” Obi-Wan sighed.

“Be mindful, Obi-Wan. There is still a great destiny placed on you as well,” the Jedi Master smiled at him.

“You wouldn’t care to expand on that, would you?” Obi-Wan said wryly.

“Not until Master Yoda is further along in his work. Let us meditate on it together,” Ki-Adi-Mundi closed his eyes.

Obi-Wan settled on the cave’s floor and closed his eyes. Every breath was slower and deeper than the last. His eyes fluttered open to see his breath hang in the air for a few moments. In that span of a few moments, the Force was open to him. Master Ki-Adi-Mundi’s voice entered his mind and Obi-Wan relaxed; closing his eyes once again.

*“See the great river before you. Hear the water pass by the bank, feel its influence on the Force, and be one with it,”* the voice echoed.

Obi-Wan stretched out with his mind and there was a massive river rushing before him. It had to have been over one hundred meters across and have a very strong current.

*“The river beckons to you. It is within our very nature to cross such a river,”* the voice echoed in his mind again.

Obi-Wan walked to the bank of the river, yet hesitated. The river was such an obstacle, how could he overcome it?

*“Obstacles must be overcome, they must be surpassed,”* the Jedi Master’s voice prodded him in his meditation.

Obi-Wan stuck out one foot and held it over the water. The water rushed over the bottom of his boot and Obi-Wan began to lean forward onto that foot.

He stopped himself.

*“Crossing a river does not further myself, crossing my own limitations and boundaries will. I am the obstacle to myself.”* Obi-Wan thought.

Even while meditating, the two Jedi smiled.

## Chapter IV

“No, tell him I’m *still* waiting. In fact, I’ve been waiting for three days,” she sighed in frustration.

“I will pass the message on, Senator...” the receptionist hesitated.

“Amidala. Padme Amidala. You should see me all over your transmission logs,” Padme threw her hands in the air.

“Very well Senator Amidala. I will tell the Grand Centurion you were looking for him,” the prissy, human receptionist smiled a much practiced smile.

“Yeah, I bet you will,” Padme said angrily before shutting down her terminal.

She sat back in her chair before staring out her window at the pristine, snow-capped mountains just beyond the city of Aldera. In the distance, she could make out the tourists riding up the hover lifts to the top of one of the mountains before they could enjoy their choice of rides down to the bottom again.

Tourism had quickly become one of the chief industries on Alderaan. With other worlds being raided during what the Holo-net had dubbed the “Clone Wars”, people from across the galaxy flocked to her world.

Soldiers, sailors, and pilots of all ranks had come to enjoy shore leave on a paradise. Fleet Admiral Chodun had visited Crevasse City and re-affirmed that it was indeed one of the Twenty Wonders of the Galaxy. Families came to get away from it all and live a fantasy life they once had before the war started. The unspoiled countryside attracted a flurry of new businesses to the planet catering to every whim and desire that anyone could want.

Everywhere she walked, vendors had merchandise capitalizing on the Clone Wars. Armbands featuring the slogan "*Remember Coruscant*" and "*I support G.C.P.*" were the latest craze to sweep the planet.

Padme wanted to enjoy it all. Her planet was thriving, her home was finally going in the direction she wanted it to go, and she couldn't afford to take even a handful of moments to revel in the transformation.

The only drawback had been the mandatory ID checks that Republic Enforcement Squads were performing on any citizen deemed "suspicious". The required curfews were equally frustrating, but the government was determined to keep the war at bay and terror in check. Padme wanted to fight these restrictions, but ending the war would end the constraints on the people regardless.

Right now, all Padme wanted was for the person who helped her in the past to just acknowledge her existence. She was well aware that the Grand Centurion of the Galactic Republic was busy trying to end the Clone Wars, but she thought that everything they had gone through together would merit at least an acknowledgment.

"Let's see. We have a man in power who is stalling, refusing to answer our questions, and not helping us in any way. Does this sound familiar?" Khian asked, twirling his favorite vibroblade, *Alanna*, in his hand.

"Even Tarkin was kind enough to be arrogant to my face," Padme answered.

"So now what does the great investigator do?" Khian asked.

"She does what she has done before. I can ignore the baseless ramblings of a dissident who attends committee meetings just to get his kicks," she said.

"He rambles like a Rodian on a bad day, but I ain't heard much of Remmick's ramblings lately. Where has that bug been hiding?" Khian asked.

Padme hesitated. "It's funny you should ask. He stopped bombarding my office with calls. There are no more chanting protests outside my door. He has missed the last two meetings including the vote to extend the curfew. I thought for sure if Remmick would be squawking at any meeting, it would have been that one," she stood up and leaned forward on her desk.

"Could be his ramblings weren't so baseless," Khian offered.

"Oh please, you don't really think there is a vast conspiracy to silence any opposition to the war. That the corporations are really double dealing to the Republic and the rebels? This would go so far beyond even the craziest of theories," Padme said.

"Maybe that is why it might be true. No one can believe it because it is too unbelievable," Khian slid the weapon into a hilt attached to his thigh.

"So I am supposed to believe that half a dozen corporations with *millions* of employees spread across numerous star systems are selling weapons to rebels with *zero* leaks to the media?" Padme asked.

Khian stood, tossed a digital tablet in her direction before leaning on the opposite side of her desk. "Then how are the rebels so well armed? They just captured the Space City of Numidia. They attacked with a fleet of warships, not just a flotilla or a squadron. They hit us with forty-one capital ships and this was not their usual hit-and-run. They broke from their MO and *invaded*."

"I agree it has to be coming from somewhere," Padme replied.

"And what about the dissidents? We've both seen the reports of protests across the Republic's Outer Rim being brutally put down," Khian continued.

"Those were rioters, not protests. They were looting, pillaging, and causing chaos. I don't see the R.E.S. snatching citizens from their beds in the middle of the night because they're not thrilled with how the war is going," Padme leaned in a little further.

"Were they really looting? Or is that what the Palpatine news network is telling us? And you don't think the R.E.S. is really doing mandatory ID checks on only 'suspicious' people?" Khian countered.

"Are you saying Palpatine is ordering the abduction of rabble rousers?" Padme asked, her eyes locked on the captivating green eyes of her bodyguard.

"Remmick is an ideal rabble rouser and where is he now?" Khian also leaned in, refusing to break the stare her liquid blue eyes held.

"How should I know? I can't keep track of every single citizen!" Padme leaned in until they were inches apart.

"Then what *can* you do apart from whining?" Khian pressed.

"Unlike some people, I don't shoot first and ask questions later!" Padme countered.

"I don't even like using blasters!" Khian replied, his voice rising.

"I know that!" Padme said angrily, but she couldn't look away from him.

"Then what are we even arguing about?" Khian shouted.

Padme hesitated, her mind going completely blank.

"I don't know!" Padme shouted back, determined to say something.

They were both breathing heavily. Khian's cologne mingled with her perfume and their eyes could not break apart. Padme had been used to looking into his bright, green eyes, but this was different. His eyes now held a warmth that she had been yearning for, a kindness she had sought, and a tenderness she had been looking for. She closed her eyes and leaned in a little further. Padme's heart pounded in her chest.

"Senator? I'm sorry, but Viceroy Organa is back from Coruscant and would like to set up a lunch meeting with you at the Orbital Mansion. Shall I clear your afternoon tomorrow?" Padme's Chief of Staff shattered the moment.

Khian went back to pacing in front of the window. Padme smoothed her hair and pressed a key on the intercom.

"Apologize to the senator and ask him if we can meet sometime next week. I have a feeling tomorrow won't be good for me," Padme answered.

Khian cleared his throat. "I need to review the security arrangements for your town hall meeting tomorrow."

"Khian," she said, but he kept walking.

"Khian, please," she said and he stopped within a step of the door.

"If you would check with some of your 'associates' regarding Mr. Remmick, I would appreciate it," she said.

"I'll do anything you ask. But if I may, I don't think Palpatine will ever respond. You're chasing a comet with an airspeeder," and he left the office.

"Alone again," Padme sighed to herself and stared out her office window at the snow-capped mountains beyond the city.

Padme became lost in her thoughts as her eyes glazed over at seeing the numerous people soaring down the various ski slopes. She wanted to be there and she didn't want to go alone.

Her intercom buzzed on her desk. "Senator, you have a transmission from Coruscant."

"Uh huh, that's great, Khian," she murmured.

"Senator? Khian left some time ago," her Chief of Staff said.

Padme's eyes lit up and she shook her head to get back to reality. Had Grand Centurion Palpatine had finally responded to her multiple messages? She activated her holo-imager and instead, Jedi Master Yoda's face smiled at her.

The flicker of disappointment on her face was enough to make the learned Jedi cock his head to one side.

"I'm sorry," she began and resumed her smile. "I was expecting someone else."

"Expect many things, people do," Yoda said. "Pleasant also, the un-expected is."

Padme's expression softened. "You're right, of course. It is very good to see you again, Master Jedi. What can a humble senator do for you?"

"More than you know," Yoda smiled. "Discovered the rebellion's plot, you did. Help to end it, you can."

His polished boots clicked loudly on the floor, completely disregarding the silence ordinance on this level. Ethan was already breaking protocol on so many levels that one more infraction would make no difference. The Jedi clones who flanked him as they walked down the dimly lit hallway eyed him with contempt.

"He will not be verrrry happy to see you," Clone Windu said.

"A Sith and happiness go together like a Hutt and a bath," Ethan retorted as they turned a corner.

"I don't know why he uses a brrrrroken toy like you," Clone Kenobi spat.

Ethan whirled around and felt the anger rise within him. "I may have been broken, but I'm not a jealous test-tube freak who has limited ability at best and has never known the true power of the Force."

There was a tense silence before they resumed walking to their destination.

Two clone Yodas stood on either side of the standard looking door. They both looked up at Ethan and ignited their lightsabers.

"Belong herrrrre, you don't," one of the Yodas said. The other Yoda twitched for a handful of moments before resuming its normal state.

Ethan sighed. It was amazing how the clones that he had brought into existence could have become so impertinent and arrogant. It didn't seem that long ago that Ethan had been directly responsible for the creation of over two thousand Jedi clones that were now ripping through the galaxy.

“You don’t belong in existence. Why don’t you go levitate something or find another equally mundane task? I have business here and I will be heard from. Now either you will fetch your master from behind that door or I will put you back in the petri dish I formed you from,” Ethan snarled.

“You meant, ‘our master’,” a cold voice said from behind them all.

Ethan whirled around, but all four of the clones instantly dropped to one knee. The Yodas extinguished their lightsabers and bowed their heads.

Ethan remained standing.

He marveled at how Darth Maul seemed to emerge from the darkness itself. The gold in his eyes glimmered like smoldering coals.

Ethan wanted to say something. He had this immediate urge to apologize for any wrong he might have done to this force of evil. Fear began to encroach upon him. A great weight descended on Ethan’s chest and settled there.

“You said for my clones to fetch ‘your master’ when you really meant ‘our master’, didn’t you Ethan? Or are you offering me your resignation?” Darth Maul asked.

An icy lump began to form in Ethan Organa’s throat. He tried to swallow, but couldn’t. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as the Dark Lord of the Sith stepped closer. He almost seemed to bring the darkness of the hallway with him.

“I offer my apologies, my Lord. I wish to continue to serve you as I always have,” the Crown Prince of Alderaan slowly dropped to one knee.

Darth Maul walked up to the kneeling Ethan and looked his red and black face down at him. One of the small Yoda clones began to twitch uncontrollably. His head whipped side to side and he began mumbling incoherently. Darth Maul’s ended the creature’s genetic suffering in one swift motion with his lightsaber still hanging from his belt.

“Rise Ethan, we have much to discuss.”

Ethan felt a tremendous weight lifted from his chest as he stood and walked behind the Dark Lord of the Sith. They went through the door, but before it closed behind them, Ethan threw a smug look back at the waiting clones as they picked up the body of their fallen brother.

“It’s a pity they live much shorter lives than the cloned troopers due to genetic flaws. We only have enough left to cause widespread terror for a short while or use them all in one magnificent battle,” Darth Maul observed. He looked at Ethan as if he remembered he was there.

“Despite your brash disrespect for my wishes, I have great plans for you,” Darth Maul said as they entered a wide, circular room.

The room was brightly lit and contained absolutely no furniture with the exception of a console off to one side. Darth Maul walked to that console and activated it. The room’s lighting quickly dimmed and a holo-image of a massive installation filled the room.

“Great plans indeed. My master needs to accelerate the war and because I cannot be in two places at once, you are needed to serve once again.”

“It is my pleasure to serve. Is this my destination?” Ethan asked, pointing at the hologram of the planet hovering in the room.

“You must let the will of the Force determine where its exact location is. This was a place long feared by many. With your work and the work of your clones, it will be feared once more,” Darth Maul said.

“Where will you be?” Ethan asked before he could stop himself.

The room seemed to darken without the lights dimming.

“I have an old business partner to get reacquainted with. That is all you need to be concerned with,” Darth Maul growled.

“I am only concerned for your safety, my Lord,” Ethan said.

His master saw through his half-truth. “You are only concerned with yourself and making yourself superior to the clones that must accompany you.”

Ethan chewed on his lower lip.

Darth Maul’s eyes narrowed. “They are your own creations, Ethan. If the Jedi learn of this planet as well, they will send their knights to secure it. Their protection will be necessary.”

“It wouldn’t be necessary if you would fulfill your end of the bargain,” Ethan said, but his breath caught in his throat.

“I see,” Darth Maul said in a quiet voice that dripped with death. His eyes locked on Ethan. “You believe me to be untrustworthy.”

“Would you prefer to return to the life I found you in? Constantly looking over your shoulder, on the run from the Jedi Order? Always wondering when your father might learn of what had happened to you? Fearful of what the Jedi Council would do when they got their hands on you once again?” Darth Maul asked in that same quiet voice. It was a voice that held a warning for Ethan.

“I am always grateful for what you have done, my Lord. I simply meant that I delivered the clones to you. I am just waiting to be restored so that I might serve you better,” Ethan hoped this calculated risk would pay off.

“The Force is not a light switch. You can’t earn enough points and cash them in to get the Force back. You will be rejoined with the Force when you are worthy,” Darth Maul said.

“How many clones will you send with me?” Ethan asked.

“Twelve,” Darth Maul replied.

“That should hold off the Jedi Order for all of sixty seconds,” Ethan scoffed.

Darth Maul’s eyes narrowed. “I used five hundred of your clones for something that was necessary to all of our fortunes. Having them aid you instead would have done nothing to speed your search in any way. When you determine the exact location of this planet, then will you have the reinforcements needed to hold it.”

Ethan stood back and stared at the rotating planet. It seemed like a peaceful world; beautiful, but not extraordinary. He felt that this planet held the key to his destiny. On this world, he would become one with the Force. When he did rejoin the Force, every Jedi in the Order would feel his pain, his father would feel his wrath, and even Darth Maul would understand why he was the Daetan.

And then entire galaxy would learn what fear truly is.

“Master! MASTER!” Anakin was shaking Obi-Wan Kenobi by both shoulders, but he got no response. He went from his friend to Master Ki-Adi-Mundi, but also got no response.

"How deep of a meditation can you be in to ignore this?" Anakin asked as the cave shuddered with the force of another set of explosions.

"Wha...what's going on?" Obi-Wan asked as he blinked himself out of his meditation.

"If I knew that, I probably wouldn't be this panicked," Anakin said as he helped his master to his feet.

"Calm yourself, Anakin. We will accomplish nothing by giving in to fear of the unknown," Obi-Wan said and he closed his eyes.

A moment later, his eyes flashed open in alarm. "There's an orbital bombardment. I can't believe I'd see the day when someone would dare attack a Jedi planet. I have no doubt that some landing craft will be arriving shortly," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin also closed his eyes and stretched out with the Force. "Master, why would they send troops down here? If the rebels wanted to obliterate this cave, so why not just do it from orbit?"

"They cannot be truly certain of this temple's total destruction unless they have boots on the ground to confirm it. They want this hallowed place wiped from history," Ki-Adi-Mundi stared at the cave's ceiling.

"But why?" Anakin asked.

"The why is not important. Stopping it from happening is what matters," the Jedi Master replied.

Another set of explosions rocked the cave.

"Master, I don't think we will stop anything if we're sealed in here," Anakin said and they rushed out of the small chamber and back into the Grand Crystal Chamber.

Obi-Wan and Ki-Adi-Mundi hesitated when they saw how the cave had suffered from the attack. Light poured in from several holes that had been blasted from the bombardment. Where there had once been simple and beautiful crystalline formations of blue and green now lay brittle fragments. They were now dull and listless by the hell of war that had been brought to Iltum.

Anakin sensed the briefest flash of outrage from Obi-Wan. He looked back to see his master standing beside Ki-Adi-Mundi. The Jedi Master was cradling a crystal in his hands before looking to the sky.

"Masters, we need to get back to the surface and find out what is going on," Anakin urged. He placed a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder.

Obi-Wan nodded to his friend and extended a hand to Ki-Adi-Mundi. The crystal fell from the Council member's hands and shattered on the stone floor. He nodded grimly to Obi-Wan and then to Anakin. Together, they raced out of the cavern.

Khian never left anything to chance. That being said, he double-checked his equipment before embarking on a mission that Padme wouldn't quite approve of.

The time they had spent together had been extraordinary. Khian stomachached boring meetings with squawking bureaucrats just so he could state Padme's position and race back to see her and deliver his report. She had been grateful and every moment they spent discussing politics had brought them closer together.



There had only been one or two meetings that Padme vehemently insisted she handle herself and Khian agreed. All that mattered was that she saw that Khian was making her happy as well as keeping her safe.

As he walked down the avenue, the cheery decorations and numerous street vendors catering to tourists brightened his heart. Before, he would have been suspicious of them and held each of them with contempt as they waved “Remember Coruscant” memorabilia at him.

Today, the music and the brightly colored lights and streamers warmed him. He knew it had nothing to do with them, it was all Padme. The world itself seemed to glow just by thinking about her smile.

It was the height of the Regent’s Festival in Aldera and more people had flocked here than ever before to escape the misery of the war. It made the local businesses go the extra mile to oblige the masses with lights, streamers, banners, and musical groups around every corner.

Khian wanted to embrace it all. He wanted to join in with the revelers, but when a kid with sandy colored hair brushed past him, Khian’s mind snapped into focus.

From the very beginning, he liked Anakin. When he held Padme hostage during his interview to get the position of being her bodyguard, it was Anakin that dared make a move to free her. The other paid security stiffers were frozen. At least the kid had guts.

Since then, he had really warmed to Anakin. Keeping sane while being around a few thousand Jedi would have been nearly impossible for most people, but this guy was different. He still held his sense of humor. He smiled, joked, laughed, and seemed to enjoy himself regardless of his sterile surroundings.

Now, as Khian pushed through excited tourists who chanted “Remember Coruscant”, his mind was troubled. He wanted to give Anakin the benefit of the doubt. After all, Sith were legendary liars and twisters of words. Whatever they were talking about might have been playful banter. Khian himself had been known to trade a few quips with people trying to kill him.

The digital tablet in his bag beeped. Khian ducked into a side-alley away from the vendors and the cheering masses. He frowned when he saw what the tablet displayed.

The program he was using was painfully slow in figuring out what Darth Maul and Anakin were discussing. He only had twelve percent of the conversation deciphered, barely one word in ten. But two pieces of text struck him.

*“Jedi will restrict”*

*“Ability is being wasted”*

Khian leaned back against a wall. So far it wasn’t anything too serious. True, this raised more than a few red flags within him, but there was more of the program to see.

There was still time for Anakin to redeem himself.

## Chapter V

“You’re looking at every ship I had left, Admiral. We have to get more reinforcements here fast!” Vice-Admiral Norris said into the communicator.

His battered task force arrived at the Illium system to find a chaotic battle well under way. He had seen large engagements before, but the rebel force attacking the Jedi planet was one of the carrying enough firepower to take his breath away.

“We’re bringing in two additional task forces, but they won’t be here for another twenty minutes, we must stop more drop ships from getting to the surface. Your task force is given this assignment. We will engage the fleet in open space and try to keep the rebels from the planet. Whatever else slips by, stop them at all costs,” Fleet Admiral Eleria said.

“I would feel a little better if I we could transfer a Jedi General to my task force,” Admiral Norris said.

“If I had any to spare, I would,” Admiral Eleria said before terminating the transmission.

Admiral Norris quickly issued orders to deploy his remaining twelve ships between the planet and the rebel force. Given that there are an infinite number of points to invade a planet from made this exceedingly difficult.

“I want full sensor sweeps. If any landing craft make it away from the battle, I want to know about it immediately,” Admiral Norris ordered and turned to his captain.

“What do we have on the surface?” he asked.

“Indeterminate life signs on one area located in the northern hemisphere. We know that two landing craft made it to the surface near the life signs. Information is sketchy, but we believe that there are already Jedi on the planet,” the captain replied.

“Major Randlin, get your clone troopers ready to disembark. Support the Jedi and try to take some prisoners. I’m damn curious as to why the Jedi have a planet I never heard of and why the rebs want it so bad,” Admiral Norris ordered.

A voice rang out from across the bridge. “Admiral, I have enemy ships heading this way from the battle zone! Nine frigates are on an intercept course!”

“Belay that order, Major. All hands to battle stations,” Admiral Norris turned toward the tactical display as nine ships, outlined in red, headed toward his position.

“Fifteen thousand Jedi in the galaxy and just one in the right place at the right time could turn the tide for us,” Admiral Norris muttered shortly before two rebel frigates opened fire on his ship.

After they left the cave and saw rebel ground troops heading toward them, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Ki-Adi-Mundi leapt into action.

“All these humans will attract far too much attention!” Ki-Adi-Mundi shouted before igniting his lightsaber. He nodded to Obi-Wan and together they raced toward the rebel clones.

Anakin froze as he saw them slicing through clone troopers as if this were a training exercise. They had no problem at all entering combat and ending lives of clones.

Anakin just looked blankly at the hilt of his lightsaber.

For nearly a year, all he wanted was what he now held in his hands. He had once coveted the idea of slashing into battle just as he was supposed to now. Now that the opportunity was there, Anakin found that murdering someone in the name of battle wasn't as glorious as it appeared.

The memory of his first act with a lightsaber chilled him deeper than the cold winds of Illum that ripped through his robes.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan's voice carried through the wind.

He and Ki-Adi-Mundi were heavily engaged by clone troopers over one hundred meters away. Anakin saw teams of them setting up heavier weapons. Mortars were being unloaded and small cannons were being unlimbered. Blaster bolts rang out around the two Jedi already fighting for their lives.

Three more landing craft hit the snowy ground. One was badly hit from the battle raging in the heavens and crashed, spreading death and debris. The other two unloaded even more troopers; their blaster rifles already out and racing toward his friends.

Anakin's mind suddenly became clear. He had to act, the choice was not his. If he did not act, then his life and the lives of his friends would be forfeit. Murder for murder's sake was cold and inhuman. If the cause was just, then honorable combat had to be necessary.

Three dozen cloned troops broke off and raced for the cave entrance to the temple, closing the gap to the Jedi Temple in a handful of seconds. The choice was made, the die was cast.

A golden blade erupted from the hilt and its glow shone brightly against the cold mountainous cliffs that housed the Jedi Temple. The troopers, seeing their lone adversary, paused for a moment.

That moment cost all of them.

Anakin looked up after he had finished with them to see that the rebels had changed tactics. They were trying to drive a wedge between Obi-Wan and Ki-Adi-Mundi. Separating them would make them far more vulnerable.

Anakin raced toward his master, leaving his doubt and hesitation behind him. He used the element of surprise to cut down two clones and engaged the others, putting himself between them and Obi-Wan.

"Better late than never?" Obi-Wan asked as he flipped over Anakin and the clones to attack them from behind.

"Survive now, complain later," Anakin grunted.

Working in tandem, Anakin and Kenobi had their clones pinned between them. The predators had now become the prey.

"Anakin, help Master Ki-Adi-Mundi!" Obi-Wan ordered.

"And leave you twiddling your thumbs?" he asked as he parried a series of blaster bolts from the troopers.

"He needs help more than I do," Obi-Wan argued as he also fended off a furious slash from his opponent.

"We go together or we don't go at all," Anakin countered. He shoved away his clone's lightsaber and thrust out with his left hand. The impact of the Force knocked the off their feet, making them easy to finish off.

The two of them caught their breath before looking over at the Jedi Master. He had finished off several troopers, but was hard pressed by others.

“Anakin, we have to finish them off quickly!” Obi-Wan panted.

“We’ll help Master Ki-Adi-Mundi and then get the others as well,” Anakin affirmed. “But I don’t see how it can be done quickly. There are just too many!”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “You don’t understand. There’s a reason this planet has no Jedi guarding it. There’s a reason only two or three of us are on Illium at any one time.”

Anakin scratched his head and thought for a moment.

That moment cost them as well.

A lobbed charge from the mortars knocked Ki-Adi-Mundi to the ground. The troopers closed in and unleashed a terrible barrage with their rifles. The Jedi Master tried to stand, but was cut down. His body shook from the impact of the weapons and then vanished, leaving his clothes behind to fall to the snow.

Anakin’s mouth fell open. He had never seen a Jedi die before, let alone a master who sat on the Council. The reality of the moment struck him. This wasn’t a game, people were dying, and Jedi could die as well.

“NO!” Obi-Wan cried out.

He took a quick step toward the clones, but Anakin held him back. Obi-Wan rounded on his padawan, outraged at the loss of his friend, but Anakin’s grip was firm.

Obi-Wan gave his padawan a quizzical look, but Anakin held up a finger and looked into the air. A strange buzzing noise had begun to fill the air, replacing the howling winds.

Anakin pointed to a nearby snow bank and Obi-Wan groaned loudly. “We’re too late!”

“Too late for what?” Anakin asked, his eyes locked on the mound of snow.

It had to be a trick of the snow, or perhaps Anakin had been hit in the head during the fight. He squinted hard and saw that the snow itself was moving! It was crawling and undulating toward the battlefield. Anakin’s eyes widened when he saw the snow creep toward the troopers manning the mortars.

Thousands of small pieces of snow rose up and swarmed over the clones. The men shrieked for a mere moment before they were engulfed and fell into the crawling mass of snow. Several of them tried scrambling out, only to be pulled back in.

Their cries pierced Anakin.

“Too late for that!” Obi-Wan shouted over the buzzing. “I never said this planet was uninhabited, did I? Now the natives are restless and we’re on the menu!”

The clones that had slain Master Ki-Adi-Mundi looked behind them where the screams had come from with horror. They fired round after round into the creeping and ever-growing pile of snow, but to no effect. One clone lobbed a thermal detonator into the mass. The explosion created a small hole, but it was filled in a handful of moments.

The pile continued to move.

Anakin took a step backward and ignited his lightsaber. Obi-Wan put a hand on his arm and shook his head.

“You really think a lightsaber is going to do anything against that?” he asked.

The pile decided on its next set of victims and lunged toward the clones. They fired over and over again, but the mass rose up and engulfed all of them. Several broke away and stumbled toward the cave, firing blindly over their shoulders.

The mass caught them as well.

Anakin squinted hard to see that the crawling mass was actually composed of millions of individual snow-spiders moving just under the snow's surface. With the exception of their tiny, black eyes, they were completely white and blended in with the snow perfectly. Obi-Wan was right, he had a tremendous weapon in his hands and it was absolutely useless.

The troopers tore at their armor as the snow-spiders crawled into any crack or tear they could find to get to the flesh of their victims. Obi-Wan began to move toward the cave, but Anakin stopped him.

"The cave won't help us," he shook his head.

"And your brilliant idea is?" Obi-Wan replied.

Anakin's face was set in stone. "You take the left, I'll take the right. Run as fast as you can and we'll show them that we are not an easy meal."

Obi-Wan's confused expression remained unchanged for a moment. Then he slowly grinned at his friend. "We'll do this together."

He and Anakin shook hands before they sped off in different directions around the clones.

Anakin felt the Force speed him toward the troopers and snow-spiders. The cold terrain of Illium that had plagued him when they first arrived was now moving with him in a fluid motion. His heart pounded, but he never felt more in control.

He and Obi-Wan shot past the group, coming to a skidding halt within a few centimeters of a cliff that plummeted far below where Anakin could see. He caught Obi-Wan's eye as his master waved his arms to keep his balance. The two of them looked back to see a mass of snow and ice fifty meters high rushing toward them.

Anakin gaped at the beautiful sight. A giant cloud of nature itself billowed toward them. The mixture of snow and ice was absolutely breathtaking. The indescribable power of the planet made his lightsaber pale in comparison.

The "Jedi Blizzard" that rushed toward them enveloped everything it touched and the great snowy mass blew off the nearby cliff. Snow-spider and clone alike were caught up and plummeted over the side.

Anakin raced to his master, who was on one knee, catching his breath beside the cliff.

"I think Master Ki-Adi-Mundi would have been proud of that one," he smiled.

Anakin offered his hand to Obi-Wan to help him up. He stopped smiling when he saw the look in Obi-Wan's eyes.

"He is one with the Force now," Obi-Wan said solemnly.

"There can't be too many more," Anakin said as he watched the other clones retreat behind a snow bank.

"I sense at least fifty more taking cover by those transports, but if our fleet can't hold them off or they start using that artillery, I fear we will be overrun," Obi-Wan said.

“Never mind that if the fleet doesn’t hold, our best case scenario is that we’re stranded on a ball of ice with no chance of rescue. We’ll freeze to death out here!” Anakin felt panic creep back into him.

“That will never happen. Think for a moment! If the fleet is in danger, they will send out a distress call to other ships. Word will spread through the Order that Illum is in danger and Jedi will flock here by the hundreds,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin’s face revealed his feelings.

“The Jedi are never alone. We are strongest when we are together,” he put a hand on Anakin’s shoulder.

Anakin smiled at his friend and pondered for a moment. “If we stay out in the open, they’ll flank and destroy us. We can’t win out here,” he said.

“What do you suggest?” Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin turned to look back at the Jedi Temple.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Obi-Wan groaned.

“It makes the perfect cover and negates their numbers entirely. We can take them all out at once instead of letting them pick us off. If you have a better idea, I’m waiting to hear it,” Anakin said.

“Let’s go counting down from three.” Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber in preparation. “Three, two...” Obi-Wan began, but when he looked up, Anakin was already gone.

“And I chastised him for being late,” Obi-Wan groaned before chasing after Anakin. He turned when the Force guided his blade to deflect a blaster shot that got a little too close. Anakin entered the cave before he did and they both ran straight for the massive crystal chamber. There, they paused to prepare for their pursuers.

“I have no doubt that they will be more cautious now, but at least they will be fighting on our terms,” Obi-Wan looked around the crystal filled cavern.

“Even with us taking away their advantage of numbers, we’re still outgunned. If we stall them for too long, they may decide we’re more trouble than we’re worth. If they lob a few thermal detonators in here, they could seal off the entrance and we’re as good as dead,” Anakin replied.

“Please tell me you have a well-thought-out plan that ensures total victory and no chance of us getting killed,” Obi-Wan said.

Anakin ignited his lightsaber, his golden blade lighting up the room. “We’re out of time,” he whispered.

The battle was beginning to slip away from the Republic. Although they had destroyed numerous enemy capital ships, too many were breaking away from the main battle zone and heading toward Admiral Norris’s smaller force. His twelve ships had taken significant battle damage in their previous campaign. Now, they were in another combat situation where they were being tested to their breaking point.

“Order the *Sutheria*, the *Carrack*, and the *Corellia* to move closer to us. If they stay that spread out, we will all be destroyed piecemeal,” he ordered. “And move the *Resolute* down at least twelve thousand meters. We have to cover all three dimensions.”

“Admiral, two more rebel frigates are moving into our sector,” his tactical officer announced.

"Increase power to the port shield and keep us between them and the planet," he pulled Captain Felia aside.

"Captain, we're going to lose control of the situation here very soon. The rebels are absolutely fanatical about reaching Illum. I don't know why they are so desperate to get there. Your crew has acted beyond all my expectations, but I just don't see how we can survive. Prepare to transmit our final logs to the flagship on my signal."

Captain Felia nodded silently before walking away.

A shrill alarm rang across the bridge and Admiral Norris placed his head in his hands. "How many more?" he asked.

Captain Felia sprinted back toward him. "Sir, we have thirty-four ships coming out of light-speed. It's General Fisto's fleet! He's broadcasting a rallying call to relieve us!"

Admiral Norris watched as the tactical display filled with blue warships, frigates, destroyers, and starfighters that swarmed the battlefield. The few red rebel ships that were approaching his sector began to move away while those unfortunate enough to be near the planet were overwhelmed.

"May the Jedi last another thousand generations," he murmured.

The clones had learned the patience that Anakin hadn't. They moved into the great chamber slowly, cautiously. Their headpieces had sophisticated scanners that instantly pinpointed where the Jedi were waiting, yet they hesitated.

Four of them would lay down a suppressing fire while one or two of them moved into the room, finding cover anywhere they could. They crept into the room just a few at a time.

It was driving Anakin crazy.

"Anytime you're ready with that plan of yours!" Obi-Wan shouted at Anakin over the din of the firepower being poured at them.

"There's no point in taking out just a few of them!" he shouted back.

"Do you have a Plan B?" Obi-Wan asked sarcastically.

"I'm still working on Plan A!" Anakin shouted as he ducked behind a boulder.

The soldiers would move in slowly until there were enough of them to overwhelm the two Jedi, no matter what plans he came up with. Anakin knew that he had to get them to rush in recklessly. But how did you get trained, disciplined, cloned troops to do something foolish like that?

"Could it be so simple?" Anakin wondered before closing his eyes.

In this sanctuary of the Force, he let his mind wander. The roar of the blasters faded, the sparks flying around him drifted away from his consciousness. Soon, even his master didn't exist as far as Anakin was concerned. The only beings he focused on were the soldiers.

Their bodies radiated with the Force. He could sense not only their bodies, but their armor, their weapons, their intentions, their orders, and...their minds. Anakin could sense their minds, their thoughts, and their emotions.

It was then that Anakin knew he had them. He sharpened his focus of the Force to push the calm discipline of the clones into reckless disregard for their orders. But why stop there? Anakin grinned to himself as he saw their whole minds opening up to him.

Not just one clone, but five, a dozen, fifty minds lay open to him. Their hopes, desires, and fears were right there for the taking!

Anakin played on those fears. He tapped into the darkest parts of their minds and pushed just a little bit, allowing the Force to guide his actions.

Tapping into the mind was the most exhilarating sensation Anakin had ever felt.

A cry rose up from the clones and all at once, they rushed into the chamber. This was exactly what Anakin had been waiting for. They stopped in the middle of the floor, fear frozen on their faces as they stared wildly around looking for the fear Anakin had implanted in their minds.

Anakin kept his eyes closed and let his go of his hold on their minds. He focused instead on the walls and the ceiling of the cave. The various rocks and crystals reached out for Anakin and he used the Force to pull back on them. Strain showed on Anakin's face, but nothing would deter him from saving his master, the Jedi Temple, and all of Illium from this rebel threat.

Loose rocks, small boulders, even pieces of the walls tore themselves toward the rebel clones who dared to invade this hallowed place. Anakin used every piece of rubble as a weapon, sending them flying toward the cloned troops and cloned Jedi with remarkable speed.

The soldiers began dropping once they were enveloped in a cloud of debris. Anakin had a solid grip on the Force within the giant cavern and he wasn't about to let go. If anything, he was intensifying that hold. He loved feeling the fear of the soldiers, knowing that this massive structure was fully at his command.

"Anakin, back down!" Obi-Wan shouted.

But Obi-Wan didn't exist where Anakin was concerned. All of Anakin was focused on the Force now. Boulders were rolling down off the ridges, piles of rocks flew at the remaining soldiers, and chunks of the walls and ceiling were being ripped apart as ammunition in Anakin's horrific attack. The maelstrom was nothing short of terrifying.

Obi-Wan ran to Anakin, who seemed completely at ease. "I said that's enough!"

But Anakin didn't want to hear him. All he wanted was more. More of the Force, more of the cave, more of the fear and terror. He tapped into facets of the Force he didn't even know were there and ripped apart larger sections of wall. All of the clones were buried in a tomb of stone and crystal, but Anakin didn't want to stop. Light and snow poured in from gaping holes Anakin was causing, the cave itself groaned.

Obi-Wan hit Anakin in the stomach with his fist. Anakin gasped and his eyes flashed open in shock. Every rock that was still in mid-air dropped to the floor with a resounding crash.

"What did you do that for?" Anakin was furious.

The look on Obi-Wan's face spoke louder than any words. It was a look of horror mixed with disgust that stared at Anakin. Worse still was the disappointment that Anakin felt.

Anakin was breathing heavily, but broke the stare to look at the room around him. There truly wasn't much left of the place Anakin had been awestruck by just a few hours earlier. Multiple pieces of the roof were missing, the walls looked dangerously close to collapse, and Anakin saw only a few fragments of crystal that glimmered with some remnant of the Force still within them.



"This is why the council wanted you to slow down. This is why I have told you that you were not ready for combat. Anakin, you have power the likes of which the Jedi Order hasn't seen in a long time. But you must...learn...control," Obi-Wan painfully stated each word of the last statement.

"At least we're out of danger," Anakin tried to smile.

"Yes my friend, we are. But this hallowed ground is now just a memorial to those you destroyed. I wonder how many other planets will suffer the same fate as Illium before the rebels see reason," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin looked around at the numerous dead on the battlefield and stared down at his own hands. Was this what he pictured as the glory of war?

## Chapter VI

*Citizens of the Galactic Republic! Our heroic forces continue their valiant struggle against the rebel forces across the galaxy! Despite stubborn resistance within the Galactic Senate, Grand Centurion Palpatine refuses to back down on the Military Conscription Act.*

*"Clones are not the answer, we knew that going in. It is time for the youth of the Republic to enlist and show their patriotism by joining our brave troopers already engaged in conflict."- Grand Centurion Palpatine*

*Troopers such as the clones in the 37<sup>th</sup> Delta Wing, or the "Delta Devils", who are pushing the rebels out of the Yavin system. Or troopers such as those in the mysterious 501<sup>st</sup> Legion who do the dirty jobs normal troopers cannot accomplish alone. They are responsible for hunting down and bringing justice to those that were responsible for the cowardly raid on Coruscant.*

*"Every day, we have scout teams across the galaxy reporting back to us on the whereabouts of rebel traitors. They are always out there, always searching, and they will not stop until every rebel is brought to face the light of justice." -Marshal Tarkin*

*There are thousands of heroes, millions of soldiers, and trillions of citizens whose hearts all beat proudly for the Galactic Republic!*

*Keep bringing the fight to them! No rebellion! No division! No backing down! Show your patriotism by buying war bonds to give our fighting people the support they need!*

For countless weeks, Kentaru Remmick had assailed Padme's office with transmissions about how corporations loyal to the Republic were also dealing under the table to the rebellion. The one time he claimed he had actual proof, he disappeared.

Khian watched through hours of surveillance recordings and never saw Remmick.

Khian tried to track down his financial records only to be stonewalled.

As far as the Republic was concerned, Remmick never existed.

He sighed heavily as he activated his personal communicator. Desperate times clearly called for desperate measures. He winced as he saw the pale woman's face appear on his monitor.

"I'm tracing this transmission and if I find you're within fifty kilometers of me, I'll come down on you so hard the Nightsisters will look like nurse maids," she said angrily.

Khian couldn't help but smile. "I promise I'm not even on the same planet."

When her expression didn't change, Khian's smile widened. "Lina, was it that bad?"

She ran a hand through her mass of bright blue hair. "Saying our relationship was bad is like saying a Hutt has an eating problem."

"I don't know why I broke it off with someone so incredibly beautiful, talented and verbose," Khian said in his most flattering voice.

Lina's hair turned jet black. "Cram it, Khian. What do you want?"

He took a deep breath and her hair turned a mousey brown. "I need a favor."

Her hair shot into bright blonde and she laughed hysterically. "Goodbye Khian."

"The safety of the galaxy is at stake," he offered.

The hair remained a shocking shade of blonde. "Now I know you're joking. There are only two things you have ever gone after and if money's involved, I twenty percent, not ten."

Khian shook his head. "Not a money job this time, but it is nice to see you're still as honorable as ever."

Her hair slowly returned to the mousey brown. "Flattery will get you ten-to-twenty years in a Republic Detention Facility."

"I need a slicer and you know I only go to the very best. But since Nerat is working exclusively for the Black Sun I came to you instead," Khian grinned.

Lina's hair turned a lighter shade of brown and Khian's hopes rose.

"What's the job?" she asked.

"I need you to track someone down that the Republic has done a very good job of hiding from me," he said.

"You lose a girl?" Lina asked.

"No...no girl," Khian quickly stammered.

Lina's hair turned the playful blue and she leaned back. "That's the other thing you always go after. This wouldn't have anything to do with that politician I saw you with on the Holo-Net, would it?"

"It's just a job, nothing more," Khian said.

Lina's hair turned black again. "Don't you lie to me! It's worse than an insult."

Khian exhaled slowly. "It's important to me and to her."

"Aw hell Khian, you fell in love with her," Lina's hair lightened. "What did you go and do that for? You will remember to invite your ex to the wedding, right?"

"She doesn't know," Khian blurted before he could stop himself.

Lina stared at him. "You remember what holding the truth back did, right? You have to tell this girl how you feel and I mean tell her point-blank."

"We're getting away from the point," he argued. "The job. Yes or no?"

Lina's hair now turned a dark, almost blood red. "What's the guy's name?"

Lina was as good as he remembered and more. She verified that someone had gone through and completely eliminated him from any possible record.

"If there's no trace, then how do you know it's his place?" Khian asked.

“The apartment is registered to a business called ‘Mire KMC’. It was clever to make it sound like a business, but you need to get a move on if you want to stay ahead of the Republic Enforcement Squad sent from Coruscant for this job,” she warned.

“They’re not going local for this?” Khian asked.

She shook her dark brown hair. “This is a special group. They have visited twenty-four star systems prior to this and someone always goes missing on each world they go to.”

“Oh well I can’t keep all this fun to myself. Thanks for the info, I’ll send some credits your way,” Khian offered.

Lina’s hair softened. “Stop torturing yourself and tell the girl you love her. We’re all living on borrowed time. Talk to her before your time runs out.”

Khian paused in front of the building that held Remmick’s hideaway. The dwelling was a modest enough apartment. Entering through the lobby would invite trouble as his image was recorded by multiple cameras. The best way in was from the outside. The problem was that his apartment faced out onto a park and not another building and was over twenty stories up.

“It figures. Can’t make this too easy, can we?” Khian muttered.

He waited for a transport to pass before he raced to the building’s wall. He leapt as high as he could and slammed himself against the building’s smooth surface.

The Black Diamond Pitons that extended out of his wrists, forearms, and knees fit very easily into the exterior of the building and made his work physically taxing, but allowed him to scale the vertical structure.

Khian held his breath as a resident wandered onto their terrace on the floor above him. The woman stared out into the park for a handful of moments. Khian’s palms began to sweat and he prayed she continued to look out and not down.

She sipped something from her mug and coughed loudly. “You call this a drink?” she swore and dumped the liquid over the edge. It came within inches of hitting Khian and causing a loud splash a few feet from her instead of a few stories.

He continued his ascent when she disappeared back inside. Once he reached Remmick’s terrace, Khian deftly swung himself onto the landing and waited to see if there were any noises to indicate he had been given away.

Silence confirmed a job well done.

Khian smiled to see the door was unlocked. Who would think a burglar would climb over thirty meters when the front door was the easier path? He stepped inside and ran a quick security scan to see if Remmick had any intruder devices running.

True to his paranoid nature, Kentaru Remmick had four anti-intruder devices on his front door, but nowhere else. Khian’s search began.

His eyes passed over the usual material regarding Republic battles, various diplomats’ speeches, and other ordinary propaganda spewed by both sides of the war. Remmick had been spouting about proof just before he disappeared, was he just bluffing? Desperate for attention?

Khian had no trouble getting access to Remmick’s computer, but found nothing of importance. He went through a number of digital tablets that Remmick had all over his apartment, but nothing substantial was on any of them.

He froze when he stepped into Remmick's sleeping quarters and saw twenty thermal detonators shelved above his bed. Was he planning a campaign of terror? Was Padme a target?

Khian's scanner revealed more questions than answers. None of the detonators were active. In fact, none of them had any moving parts. When was a bomb not a bomb?

He stood on Remmick's bed and cautiously pulled one off the shelf. Khian examined it carefully for any possible signs of life before he sat down and really studied the device.

It truly was a thermal detonator and not a copy or a toy. But why would he have so many of them with nothing inside? Khian decided to tempt Lady Fate and pressed the button on the detonator.

The circular device popped open and he gasped when he saw a piece of paper inside. The rolled up piece of parchment was reasonably fresh and in good condition, despite being so small and shoved into a palm-sized device.

Khian marveled at Remmick's cunning. Paper cannot be sliced or hacked by anyone. There was no computer to access and no network to penetrate. The simplicity of it was very amusing. Khian quickly opened all of the detonators and put together the puzzle that Kentaru Remmick had created.

What he read made him break out in a cold sweat.

Remmick had obtained real evidence that the rebels were indeed being sold weapons and equipment from the largest supply depot in the entire Republic. While the evidence didn't say who was doing the selling, it was the location of the depot made Khian's heart race.

Dare he return to Ord Mantell?

Now the full weight of the dilemma sat upon Khian's shoulders. If he told Padme about this, she would demand to rush off to the depot. She was headstrong and determined, that's what he admired in her.

If she went to the depot, could he protect her? His thoughts wandered to Alanna and how he had failed her on the same planet. Thinking about it was painful enough, living it again would be a nightmare. How could he live with himself if Padme met the same end?

The only way to keep Padme from Ord Mantell was to destroy this evidence. He could just tell her that he had learned nothing and leave it be. Lying to Padme might save Padme. There was simply no way that he could show her what he found. He had to lie.

He wrestled with this a handful of heartbeats longer before he heard an all too familiar sound. Khian's head whipped around to see the front door's keypad glow bright blue. A humming intensified before the keypad blew out completely and landed on the floor.

Khian had another handful of heartbeats to act.

The door slid open and six men dressed in black armor rushed in to Remmick's apartment. They moved with the precision of a veteran strike team, their blaster rifles covering all possible entry and exit points.

"Clear," one said.

A seventh man passed through the doorway. His armor was a shocking white, with blue outlining the various panels, in stark contrast to the rest of his team. The others in his team hadn't moved. They were still crouched in various firing positions, tensed and ready for combat.

The man in white slowly removed his helmet and placed it down on a table in the living room. His white-blond hair and pale skin glowed in the artificial lighting. What stood out the most were his equally white eyes. There was no iris, no pupil, nothing at all that Khian could make out from his hiding place. His gloved fingers traced the outline of a desk and ran along the top of a couch before he turned back to his team.

"It doesn't have to be neat, but it needs to be thorough," he muttered.

His team went into action tossing the table over, ripping up cushions with long knives, and shattering dishes in his kitchen.

One of them dashed into the bedroom and froze. "Colonel Adani!" he called.

The man stepped slowly into the room and raised an eyebrow when he saw the thermal detonators placed perfectly back onto the shelves Khian found them on.

"You must respect a man who has a love affair with explosives," Colonel Adani said.

"Move to evac point Delta!" the soldier called, but the colonel raised his hand.

"I said 'respect' not 'fear'," he growled and stepped into the bedroom.

Despite the obvious danger he faced, this man walked casually around the bedroom. The colonel's gloved fingers touched various objects as he moved around the room. He finally halted at the side of the bed and cocked his head to one side as he looked at the detonators.

"They're fakes," he observed without touching them.

"Sir, how can we know..." the soldier began.

Faster than Khian could blink, Colonel Adani grabbed one and threw it past the soldier's head. The detonator collided with the wall, cracking it and sinking in several centimeters.

"You'll just have to take my word for it, corporal," the colonel said grimly.

"Collect them and nothing else. This is what Tarkin wants us here for," he ordered.

The corporal swiftly gathered the detonators and shoved them into a bag that he then slung onto his shoulder.

The colonel took one last look around the room and moved toward the door. As he neared the door, Khian let out a sigh of relief.

The colonel's white-blond hair whipped around and he inhaled sharply. His eyes closed for a long moment and the whole room seemed to stop.

"Someone has been here," the colonel breathed. "Ten...no eleven minutes ago."

Khian swallowed as he heard the blaster rifles become unslung. He ducked down into the refuse chute and gripped his Black Diamond Pitons even harder. Khian silently cursed himself for letting his curiosity get the better of him.

The colonel stepped back while four of the soldiers entered the bedroom, rifles at the ready. They checked the obvious hiding places under the bed, glanced at the ceiling, the closet, and even outside the bedroom window.

"We're clear here, sir," the corporal reported.

"No...I don't think we are," Colonel Adani replied.

Footsteps neared the refuse chute and the sweat on Khian's forehead intensified.

The barrel of a rifle poked the door once, then pushed through and held the door open. Khian waited for a head to follow and see him clinging over twenty stories from the bottom.

"Don't be so stupid!" the colonel hissed. "If there was someone in the chute and you stuck your face in, that person could kill you without thinking twice. Send in a crawler droid and let it kill whatever's in there."

The footsteps backed away. Khian's sweat dripped off of his chin.

A noise of a metal object hitting the floor was the turning point. Khian re-gripped the handles of his pitons and pressed his feet against the back of the chute. In one swift motion, he pulled himself up and kicked hard at the chute to propel him out and into the room.

Khian was fortunate to have two soldiers standing close enough to the chute. They were kneeling down, preparing the droid, when Khian collided with both of them. His pitons pierced their chest armor and he heard the sickening crunch of breaking ribs.

He stood up quickly and *Alanna* flashed in his hand as a third soldier charged him. The man was fast, slamming his helmet into Khian's midsection. Khian grabbed the man around the helmet and his blade sliced across the man's unprotected throat.

Colonel Adani's open and gloveless palm slammed into Khian's upper chest and he crumpled to the floor. He didn't feel pain, but numbness radiated through his body.

"You're either very good, or we got very sloppy," the colonel said as the rest of his team entered the room with their weapons drawn.

He cocked his head to one side and put his gloves back on. "Perhaps a little of both?"

Khian could only grunt.

"You provide me with an unexpected bonus," Colonel Adani smiled and motioned to his team. "You appear to be about Remmick's size and shape. Close enough for the post-mortem medical team anyway."

Two men came forward and put Khian on Remmick's bed while others were spreading a foul smelling liquid on the floor in a very deliberate manner.

"Clean-up protocol Alpha," the colonel ordered. "I want no DNA trace or blood stains when the locals arrive to put out the fire."

Other soldiers picked up the three bodies and dragged them out of the room. The corporal opened a small box he had removed from his pack. Seven boxy-looking droids no larger than the palm of his hand immediately hopped out of the box and went to work. The droid scrubbed and used small lasers to eliminate any blood that the dead soldier left behind.

Colonel Adani gave Khian a bow with a great deal of flourish before leaving the room. One last member of his team tossed an open lighter into the room and backed out.

The fire spread quickly.

"...got to him when I did..."

"...how can I repay..."

"...he's always been headstrong..."

Khian blinked his eyes hard a few times as they tried to adjust to the light. Two heads entered his field of vision and he coughed a few times.

"He might be doing that for a while longer," Lina said. "Just keep giving him water and I think he might just live to try and die another day."

A soft hand caressed his forehead and his eyes focused around the worried face of Padme Amidala.

Khian couldn't help but smile.

"Lina," he croaked. "How did you..."

"I told you I was tracing the transmission. I know you too well than to leave you on your own. When I saw the smoke, I knew you had to be in the middle of something devious," Lina smiled and her hair turned blue.

"I thought we weren't on the same planet," Khian said.

"No, *you* assumed I wasn't on Alderaan and, once again, *you* assumed wrong. All I said was that I didn't want you within fifty kilometers of me," Lina smiled. "You can thank me later, with a bonus."

"Lina...thanks," Padme smiled.

Lina shook her head. "That boy is all kinds of messed up. If I were you, I'd straighten him out."

Padme's head swung back into Khian's field of vision. "Can I get you anything?"

Khian sat up with difficulty and coughed again. His entire body smelled acrid from the smoke and he gratefully drank down a cup of water Padme handed him.

"A good cleaning service?" he smirked.

He braced himself for the smack on his shoulder that was sure to follow, but she didn't move. The same tender expression on Padme's face remained.

"I'll let you rest. When you're better, I want to know if you found anything at Remmick's," she said.

"Back to business already?" he joked.

Tears formed in Padme's eyes and Khian stared. Did she feel...?

He had no time to think about it as she turned and left the room without another word. Khian leaned back against the pillow and welcomed sleep. His hand reached into his pants pocket and felt the scraps of paper he saved from Remmick's apartment. The look on her face was all the persuasion he needed.

She deserved to know the truth.

Being the lead producer for the leading news organization in the galaxy came with some tremendous perks. You could meet and arrange interviews with only the elite, the most famous people in the Galactic Republic. You could make or break careers of celebrities with a single phone call. The famous people that billions adored would adore you if you set up a favorable set of questions during a show. This always meant lavish gifts that bordered on sheer bribery that had made her lifestyle very posh.

You would also lose too much sleep worrying about doing whatever it takes to *stay* the lead producer before some young hot-shot with a handheld device gets a great story and then gets your job. In a flash, her posh apartment, extensive wardrobe, spa sessions, and daily massages would vanish.

What made Oreana T'riek pace late in her office that night was that fear. The walls of her illustrious office were covered in awards, photos of her shaking hands or

hugging history makers in the Republic. Twelve years ago, she had catapulted straight to the top of the HoloNet News Network. Now her career was threatening to plummet right back to the bottom. Sure, she had met with great success in the past. But when you have the capability to communicate nearly instantly with only three hundred trillion citizens, the prevailing attitude is “what have you done for me today?”

The good news was that this little spat between the Republic and a few hundred renegade star systems was shaping up to be a full-scale war. That meant there were tragedies to exploit, drama on every planet, and millions of soldiers to interview and proclaim as heroes.

The bad news was that there were millions of soldiers to interview! The public tired so easily of grunts and flight jockeys making headlines who would die at the next skirmish. Admirals were always gave the most predictable quotes. Jedi generals were too boring. With battles raging across vast sectors of space, there wasn't one person the viewing public could rally behind.

She stopped pacing for a moment. She didn't really believe in a sixth sense, but chills went up her back as if someone was watching her. Oreana shrugged this off and went back to pacing.

Suddenly, she wasn't at her desk. Oreana T'riek was standing at the top of a snow capped cliff, looking down on a great battle below. Even though she seemed to be at a great distance from the fighting, she could make out every detail with no difficulty. Even the driving winds and snow had no effect on her vision.

Below was a lone figure surrounded by rebel soldiers. The rebels were snarling at the man like vicious animals as he stood his ground. Without warning, they moved as one and pounced on the brave man. Oreana screamed as they buried him with their bodies, their hands savagely tearing away at anything that resembled their prey.

The man with sandy colored hair burst through the pile, sending rebels tumbling away in all directions. In his hands, a golden lightsaber bathed the area in its light. The look in his eyes resembled a furious storm and Oreana was overwhelmed by the courage and confidence he irradiated.

Moving quickly and with wondrous agility, the Jedi with the golden blade cut through the swarms of rebels. Everywhere the young man with the sandy hair was, rebels fell before him. There were none that posed a challenge to him. When it was all over and they were all destroyed, Oreana couldn't help but fall hopelessly in love with this handsome hero of the Republic.

As quickly as it happened, she was back at her desk. The image of the young man was seared into her memory and her heart that thudded in her chest. She knew then and there that she had her hero and the entire galaxy would know and cheer him.

“*Skywalker*,” the voice trailed off in her ear.

Her hand slammed down on her console. A sleepy voice answered her transmission a few moments later.

“This had better be about a tawdry love affair,” her producer's voice groaned on the other end of the transmission.

“I need to know what happened at the planet Illum today,” Oreana said, still trying to catch her breath.

“Illum? Never heard of it,” the tired voice on the other end grumbled.



Oreana ended the call. Clearly, this could not wait for her boss to wake up. Her heart thudded madly in her chest as her mind was locked in on that young and handsome hero.

“Computer, I need to know everything about the planet Illum, starting with any activity in the last twenty-seven standard hours,” she said and a single message flashed back at her.

*Illum Battle Status = Republic Victory, please stand by.*

Oreana pulled her knees up to her chest and rocked back and forth. She had to know who that was, who her hero was, who the hero of the entire Galactic Republic was.

And she would make him a star.

## Chapter VII

As Jedi Master Kit Fisto’s shuttle landed, Anakin stood with his master and surveyed the scene that lay before him. The Republic troops that had already arrived to secure the area counted over two hundred dead clones in the snowy battleground. This didn’t include those that remained buried in what little was left of the Jedi Temple.

Obi-Wan gathered up Master Ki-Adi-Mundi’s robes.

Anakin was basking in the glow of a hard-fought victory, but was silent in respect to the fallen Jedi Master.

“I wish I could have saved him,” Anakin murmured as Obi-Wan walked with him.

“There was little either of us could have done. Don’t blame yourself, Anakin. You saved me and I will never forget that. A loss of life is regrettable in war and that is why we must work to stop this conflict,” Obi-Wan replied.

“Damn the rebels for doing this,” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan stopped where he was.

“Can you embrace that so easily?” he asked.

“And you can’t?” Anakin replied. “After what they did?”

Obi-Wan took a long look around and his hands clenched into fists. Anakin could feel his friend’s uneasiness and frustration, but it wasn’t directed at Anakin.

“I’m not condoning what they did, but surely that has to be a better reaction. At least, I hope there is,” Obi-Wan said with a shaky voice.

Anakin didn’t have time to reply as a landing shuttle approached the surface.

He shielded his eyes from the blast of snow that came from the shuttle touching down. Anakin and Obi-Wan Kenobi walked to greet the Jedi Master as the ramp lowered to the surface. Anakin had only met the heralded, green-skinned, aquatic Jedi a handful of times before. Once, the Master had tested Anakin by creating copies of himself in the Jedi Council Chamber and making Anakin choose which one was the real Jedi.

Anakin swelled with pride when the Jedi Master descended from the shuttle with two other Jedi Knights Anakin had not seen before. Both Anakin and Obi-Wan bowed with respect when the Master approached. Obi-Wan walked to him and handed him Ki-Adi-Mundi’s robes.

“Show me the temple,” Master Fisto said.

“Master,” Anakin interjected. “Wouldn’t you rather hear about the battle? Or read the reports about the victory?”

Master Fisto did not stop even to acknowledge Anakin. Instead, he walked between Anakin and Obi-Wan to proceed toward the remains of the temple. The two Knights that flanked him gave Anakin a scornful look.

As Anakin and Obi-Wan turned to follow Master Fisto, Anakin turned to look at his friend. “Obi-Wan, I don’t understand. Am I being punished?”

“Not officially, I think your realization of the destruction you caused would be enough for the time being,” Obi-Wan answered.

They continued to walk through the snow. Overhead, the dim sun of the Illum system broke through the clouds.

“I still don’t understand. Didn’t Master Fisto destroy a number of rebel ships in orbit along with countless numbers of rebel clones and soldiers?” Anakin asked.

“Indeed I did,” Master Fisto appeared as if out of nowhere. “It is true that life is precious enough to mourn its loss even in times of war. But what you did caused the death of something far greater,” Kit Fisto paused briefly while he held out his hand to catch a single snowflake.

“Anakin, every snowflake is unique. There is no other one exactly like this one on the entire planet.” Anakin also held his hand out and held a flake in the palm of his hand.

“The Dark Side of the Force wants destruction in any form it can find. Go ahead,” Master Fisto encouraged.

Anakin gave the master a questioning look for a moment before closing his eyes. He then used the Force to shatter the snowflake into miniscule fragments hardly visible to the naked eye.

“The Light Side of the Force celebrates life in any form it can find. If we must extinguish that life, we do it only to preserve other life and *only* as a last resort. Diplomacy, democracy, negotiation are our weapons. The rebels wanted to destroy this place, so we fight to preserve it,” Kit Fisto then closed his eyes.

Anakin marveled as the tiny fragments began to re-form in his hand. In a matter of moments, the snowflake was re-made.

“Then we can save the Jedi Temple! That’s why you came here!” Anakin exclaimed.

Kit Fisto shook his head. “No. Feel the Force, Anakin. The snowflake is there in your hand, but it will never be the same as it once was. It will never be one with the Force again, just as the temple never will be.”

Obi-Wan stared at Master Ki-Adi-Mundi’s robes and a tear formed in his eye. His hands shook due to something other than the cold. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly before turning to look at Anakin.

“You truly are a marvel, my young padawan. You have proven to be quite extraordinary and a capable fighter, but there is more to being a Jedi than defeating your enemies,” Obi-Wan said and Anakin nodded.

“Master, I have never had to ask for help before. On Tatooine, I always had to fend for myself; there was never anyone else that I could rely on. I do hope you won’t give up on me and with *your* help, I will try to make you proud of me,” Anakin smiled.

"I am already proud of you, my friend," Obi-Wan returned the smile. "Heed my teachings, along with a little humility, and I think we shall be just fine."

"This tragedy is unprecedented in the history of our Order. Anakin Skywalker, I am glad that you and your master survived this dreadful attack. Although this hallowed place is gone, we must now move beyond this moment in time and ascertain why the rebels attacked in the first place," Master Fisto said.

"Have they attacked other Jedi areas? Is this an assault on all Jedi across the galaxy?" Obi-Wan asked.

"As far as we know, this is the only world attacked. The Jedi Order has sent Knights to guard other locations for the time being, but we need answers," Master Fisto sighed.

Anakin looked thoughtfully at the others in the Jedi gathering, and then his eyes focused on the ruins of the Jedi Temple. The large holes and still-crumbling mountainsides helped illustrate the magnitude of the event. It also served to help him ask the question that was on everyone's mind.

"How did the rebels even know this was here? I mean, I didn't even know this planet existed until I was already on the ship," he asked.

Master Fisto's eyes grew hard and glittered in the dimming light of the distant sun. "We have been betrayed. An encrypted transmission was sent to the rebels with details on this world and its importance to us."

Anakin's eyes widened. "Did we discover who it was?"

Master Fisto nodded. "The spy was clever in hiding her tracks, but our droids were able to decipher the person's technique and cross-reference it with previous transmissions the spy had made. The language, syntax, and grammar were all similar enough for us to question her. She confessed, rather proudly, to being a rebel spy after we arrested her."

"Her?" Obi-Wan quoted. "Who is the spy?"

Master Fisto nodded to the two other knights with him and they flanked Obi-Wan. "Naturally, since she was close to you, we must ask you a few questions as well to be thorough in our investigation."

"This is outrageous!" Anakin exclaimed. "My master has done nothing to betray the Republic or the Jedi Order!"

Master Fisto turned and stared at the young Jedi. "Then he has nothing to worry about."

Obi-Wan could not hide his look of apprehension, but he patted Anakin on the shoulder. "I would be glad to answer any questions that might help us defend ourselves from whatever this may turn out to be. However, I believe I have the right to know just what the connection is to me. Who was close to me and to the rebellion that I didn't notice?"

"Don't feel ashamed Obi-Wan. You are a new Knight yourself and still in need of training. It took Master Ki-Adi-Mundi's presence to be truly sure of who she was. That is why he was placed onboard your ship," Master Fisto said.

Obi-Wan's hands clenched. "Who was it," he said slowly.

"Your navigator, Aiya Rios," Master Fisto replied.

The more Chancellor Valorum saw, the wider his smile grew. Everything was falling neatly into place exactly as he had projected. Through numerous back-channels, several prominent rebel leaders informed him that they were making plans to join him on Alderaan. They were open to peace, even hinting that the war could be over within the month.

*"Incoming transmission. Identity: Alpha-One. Please verify."*

Valorum could have danced when the computer displayed the message on his desk. He eagerly approved the message and watched as Yoda's holo-image appeared on his desk.

"Speak freely, we can," the Jedi Master said.

"What news do you have for me?" Valorum asked, trying to hide his anticipation.

"Set, the date is. Be on Alderaan in one standard week, you must. Join you, I will to aid in securing the peace. A secluded location, and Senator Amidala selected, for the peace talks," Yoda said.

"Wonderful! Simply splendid!" Valorum sat on the edge of his chair.

The door chime sounded and the sound of Chancellor Valorum's droid receptionist came through the comm channel.

"Senator Palpatine and Grand Admiral Etherian to see you, sir. They say it is rather urgent," the prissy sounding protocol droid said.

"Go, I must," Master Yoda said.

Valorum nodded to the Jedi Master. "I'll see you on Alderaan."

Yoda lingered a moment longer. "A courageous idea, yours is. Proud to see my old friend working for peace again, I am."

The door opened and the two men walked to the Chancellor's desk in great strides. Master Yoda's image faded as they approached.

Palpatine looked with disgust at the fading image.

"I'm afraid I'm rather busy today gentlemen, can we make this brief?" Valorum asked.

"Ah yes, planning your little holiday?" Palpatine asked.

Valorum shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "Running a Republic in the middle of the war is very taxing, Senator. Your Chancellor could use a little time away."

Palpatine noted the disdain in his voice.

"And so you chose Alderaan," Palpatine smirked.

"It seems quite a popular tourist destination and is mostly un-touched by the ravage of war. I would say it is an ideal spot," Valroum countered.

Palpatine leaned forward. "Ideal for what, exactly?"

Valorum leaned back into his chair and smiled at his triumph. He had been looking to see a look of surprise on Senator Palpatine's face just one time in his life. "For peace talks with the rebel leaders."

Chancellor Valorum wasn't disappointed as Palpatine's face fell in shock.

Grand Admiral Etherian's nodded slowly in understanding.

"That's insane!" Palpatine said.

Both men looked at him curiously.

"A noble idea, if you can make it work," Etherian said.

Chancellor Valorum stood up defiantly. "Are you balking at the idea of peace?"

His question did nothing to deter the senator. "You never consulted me," Palpatine protested. "You went off and did this on your own, without my supervision?"

"That is not your place," Etherian argued.

"You don't get to tell me where my place is!" Palpatine spat.

"That's enough!" Valorum shouted back. "I don't need to consult a *senator* and I have always argued against the creation of such a broad military. Once the war is over, my first act will be to start dismantling those monstrosities."

"Once the war is over, I agree. There will be no one to wage war against and such a large force will only drain our economy and make the populace mistrust their government," Grand Admiral Etherian said.

Senator Palpatine remained silent, but his eyes narrowed.

"It is decided. I am ending this war before more people are killed. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an agenda to plan," Valorum dismissed them.

Etherian turned to leave, but Palpatine remained where he was. His eyes locked in on the Supreme Chancellor and, for the first time, the Chancellor's stare did not waver. Etherian turned to look back at the two politicians.

"Any more surprises for the Republic?" Palpatine asked slowly.

Valorum sat back down and touched his fingertips together. "Perhaps one more."

Palpatine's eye twitched. "And what might that be?"

Valorum picked up a tablet and accessed one of the secure files. Once it appeared, he tossed the tablet to the senator, who caught it instantly with one hand. His eyes scanned the file and the more he read, the more his face twisted into a snarl.

"The Clone Civil Rights Act?" he spoke the words as if he were saying something dirty.

"Your friend, Senator Amidala inspired me with the idea. Senator Bail Organa and several others have jumped at the chance to co-author the bill," Valorum beamed.

"But clones don't have a life span beyond ten years, we've proven that," Palpatine said.

"And just think of what medical science might be able to do in that time," Valorum countered. "If we can help even some of them lead normal lives once the war is over, I think we have a duty to pursue it."

"For the men under my command to have a real future and a promise of citizenship? I'd rather fight for that in the Senate than any of fifty battles in space," Etherian agreed.

"I look forward to fighting that fight with you," Valorum nodded.

Senator Palpatine opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. Instead, he abruptly turned on his heel and quickly walked out of the office. Admiral Etherian shrugged at the Chancellor and followed him.

Once in the turbolift, Palpatine fought to maintain his composure while he attempted to understand just what had happened to the iron grip he had on the events that shaped his Republic.

Palpatine tried to focus on the traffic that passed by their lift.

"Cheer up, Senator," Etherian chuckled as they exited together. "There's always a chance the peace talks could fail."

Palpatine grinned at the job the opportunity offered.

“Or they could declare an immediate cease-fire and put a crimp on your place in history,” Palpatine said softly as they pushed past a few people in the lobby of the Republic Executive Building.

Etherian stopped smiling. “My place in history is set. I have served my Republic faithfully for three decades now in peace and war. That’s something a...politician... like you will never understand.”

Palpatine couldn’t let this chance slip away.

“Ah yes, us wicked politicians who just get in the way of the noble military,” he casually remarked.

Etherian rounded on him. “That’s right, politicians who want to play toy soldier with real lives in their hands. Politicians could possibly be the lowest form of life in this galaxy because they create the chaos we find ourselves in. If it were up to me? Politicians would be a thing of the past. Valorum may be the only one of your kind with the vision to see that war does not make people great. Instead, it makes great people blind.”

He walked toward his official military transport and Palpatine rubbed his chin thoughtfully. That little nugget may prove useful, but Valorum was supposed to be firmly under his thumb. Somehow he wiggled his way into striking distance of ending the war before Palpatine needed it to end.

Clearly, his hand was forced. Now was the time for far more drastic measures to be taken and far sooner than he had planned. With any luck at all, he could twist this unexpected event to his advantage as he had so often before.

Or else this may be the one event that would break him.

Palpatine shook that thought from his head. Lesser beings fail, he would rise. The situation Valorum pushed him into called for taking greater risks. He keyed in his communicator and waited for Darth Maul to answer with the proper response code.

Palpatine risked being detected and exposed himself to the Force just long enough to secure every detail of the past ten minutes. Risk was part of the game he played with the Jedi and, thus far, the risks had yielded exceptional rewards.

If his puppets wouldn’t dance to his tune, he would change the tune. If they utterly refused to dance, he would cut their strings and watch them burn.

Sub-Lieutenant Piett refused to indulge his need to fidget while standing rigidly at attention before the two men sitting before him.

One of the men was his supervisor, Captain Yera, who usually assumed a “laid back” approach to life on board a Republic starship. His rank and career insignia were off center. His hair was longer than it should have been and his boots hadn’t seen a shine rag in weeks. The other man, however, was the head of their entire section. Commander Lees was the epitome of what a military man should be. From his uniform to his demeanor, he lived the life of someone who had devoted himself to the Republic Armed Forces.

Piett decided decorum was of the utmost importance considering the evidence he uncovered.

“This is excellent work, Sub-Lieutenant,” the commander said.

Piett remained motionless. He hadn't been asked a question so there was no reply needed.

"Excellent, but inconclusive," the commander dismissed.

His rigid stance wavered for a moment. Piett's supervisor scoffed.

"Inconclusive?" Captain Yera echoed. "The logs from the officers alone seem to indicate some kind of hidden base where a secret project is being worked on."

Commander Lees straightened his tunic. "And yet, too many details remain missing. Where is this base? What is the goal of the project? Better still, who is working on it? They could be describing one of our own facilities."

Piett cleared his throat loudly.

"You may speak, Sub-Lieutenant," Commander Lees granted.

"Surely this warrants a more thorough investigation from Republic Intelligence. If it is one of our own research bases, then we have nothing to worry about."

"However, if it is a rebel plot, then we need to put a stop to it. With the energy readings these records show, whatever is being worked on is massive with extreme repercussions to whoever uses it. I strongly request this be passed on," he continued.

Commander Lees took a moment to consider. "Very well, I shall forward this up the ladder, but I don't expect much to come from it. However, you are to be commended for your diligence. I shall recommend that you be promoted to full Lieutenant and transferred to Republic Cryptoanalysis for your next assignment."

Captain Year nearly fell out of his chair. "Oh come on! You're taking him away from me? He's one of the best officers I have!"

Commander Lees remained unfazed. "The Republic needs all the help it can get. I see potential in this young man that needs to be tapped. I don't think that your logistics department is the right environment for him."

"But sending him to the R.C. is putting him on the fast track!" the captain protested.

"We need bright minds right now. My decision is made and final. See to his transfer immediately. With any luck, we will both end up saluting Lieutenant Piett before too long," Commander Lees smiled.

It was a breakthrough, but not one that cheered him. Khian's software had been able to determine about seventeen percent of what Darth Maul and Anakin had talked about during their duel. Most of it was the usual banter about how the Jedi are weak and the Sith are strong.

He had finally come across one part that made him sit up straight. Darth Maul was taunting Anakin after throwing him against a wall. He paced back and forth and the software picked up something interesting.

Khian sat in his quarters with Remmick's scraps of treason scattered on his desk. He would show them to Padme in the morning after checking the progress of his program.

The progress was painfully slow, but quality mattered, not quantity. He would sometimes work on the video until the sun began to peek over the horizon, but the cost was worth the lack of sleep.

A thought struck him that he would only fatigue himself and not be able to fully protect Padme. He shook his head quickly. This was part of protecting her. He had to determine what had really happened on Cerea.

A piece of text flashed across the screen that caught his attention. Khian sat up and his jaw dropped.

*Through strength I gain power,  
Through power I gain victory,*

Khian's heart froze as he re-read the text on the screen. That sounded like some kind of creed or motto, but it was hardly what the Jedi would preach. There was no question that this duel had turned into a lesson. The only thing left to determine was if Anakin was learning or not. So far, the kid had brushed off the Dark Lord and the duel had resumed.

The truth would shine through one way or the other. Khian still held hope that the light of the truth would shine favorably on Anakin.

## Chapter VIII

Master Kit Fisto himself interrogated Anakin's one-time friend due to Obi-Wan's conflict of interest. Unfortunately, Jedi mind tricks wouldn't work on such an intelligent and cunning person. Master Fisto resorted to basic psychology and reverse psychology, but Aiya refused to reveal anything.

Under arrest, humiliated, and facing a lifetime of imprisonment, Aiya Rios still looked beautiful and defiant. Her dark skin was impossibly smooth; her purple eyes gleamed in the light. Her hair was usually tightly braided, but now hung loose and free down past her shoulders.

"We're not going to kill you," Master Fisto reasoned. "We just want to prevent needless death and destruction. Tell us where the next attack is going to be."

Anakin paced back and forth on the other side of the glass separating him from the interrogation room. He had watched every agonizing moment and with each passing moment, Anakin's temper grew.

This girl had gotten close to Anakin, flirted with Anakin, and shared so many common interests with him it was easy to befriend her. She had even helped save his life once on Cerea. This treachery struck home with him in a way he hadn't thought possible.

"I'm not telling you anything," she said and flipped her hair to one side.

"Aiya, please," Kit Fisto said. "At least tell me why the rebellion was here at Iillum. Why did you want to destroy the Jedi Temple? What possible purpose would it serve to strike at us and not the Republic's military?"

"You can kiss a bulkhead," Aiya spat on the floor.

Master Fisto ran a hand through the tentacles that grew from his head and down his shoulders in frustration. "The Jedi are not your enemy. You should know that better than most by working so closely with your friends Obi-Wan and Anakin."

Anakin cracked his knuckles and grimaced.



“Who is and isn’t the enemy depends on your point of view,” Aiya Rios said. “The Jedi Order has a planet you have kept hidden from the public and that harbors the necessary components for weapons that can slice through metal or flesh. That sounds fairly hostile to me.”

Master Fisto looked directly at her. “So the rebellion is targeting the Jedi Order,” he said slowly.

She broke the gaze and looked at the floor. The muscles under her toned arms flexed in frustration.

“Where else? What other Jedi?” he asked.

“We don’t want your precious Order,” Aiya Rios said angrily.

“Your actions on Illum say otherwise. If I’m missing the point, please enlighten me. I’ve been told I’m an excellent learner,” Master Fisto said.

A Republic officer entered the adjacent room where Anakin was watching. “Sir, General Fisto is needed on the bridge at his next convenient opportunity.”

Anakin sighed. “He’s a little busy at the moment,” and he gestured to the other side of the glass.

“Oh, I see. Well, Admiral Norris said it could wait if necessary,” the young man said.

Anakin thought about this for a moment. The interrogation had to continue. As painfully slow as this was, Master Fisto was close to getting the truth out of her. If he could determine what the true nature of the threat was, the Republic could gain an advantage in the war.

But at the rate the Jedi Master was going, it might take days before she cracked.

“Inform the admiral that Master Fisto will be there shortly,” Anakin said and the Republic officer left the room.

Anakin needed to speed things up. If he could get the information out of the officer, lives might be saved.

He walked into the interrogation room and could feel Master Fisto’s frustration.

“Master, you’re wanted on the bridge immediately.”

Anakin held his breath and kept a tight hold on his thoughts.

“They do know I’m conducting an interrogation. Does it have to be right now?” he asked.

“It was Admiral Norris who asked,” he dodged.

Master Fisto looked at Anakin for a moment before nodding. “Keep an eye on her in case she decides to do the noble thing and cooperate.”

Anakin was left alone with Aiya Rios.

His eyes bore into her, but she refused to look at him. She locked in on a piece of tile on the floor and didn’t move. Her breathing slowed and as he approached, her eyes began flittering back and forth.

“You’re going to tell me where the rebellion’s targets are and what threat you pose to the Jedi,” Anakin’s voice was barely above a whisper, yet carried enough weight to crush the entire room.

Aiya flipped her hair back and laughed at him. “No small talk? No witty banter? You should at least start off with ‘how could you?’”

“This isn’t a sick game we’re playing. I watched people die on Illum, I watched a Jedi Master die down there. If you can stop others from being killed, do it now,” Anakin said.

Aiya’s eyes softened and her smile grew. Now she locked eyes with him and her beauty was beyond measure.

“You aren’t so righteous. The Anakin I know is more fun-loving than this. Where did he go? Is he hiding under that robe?” she asked.

Anakin shifted his weight uncomfortably. “I am a Jedi.”

Her grin grew and she eyed him up and down before licking her lips. “I liked you when you were a hotshot racer who added an element of excitement to my life.”

“I’m not here for that,” he replied. “I’m going to get answers no matter what.”

Aiya Rios crossed her legs and winked at him. “Oh flyboy, I bet you are.”

Anakin ran a hand through his hair. He realized that he had walked in here with no plan at all and now she was toying with him. How was he supposed to get answers out of her when Master Fisto couldn’t? He didn’t have any training in interrogation at all. What was he supposed to do?

Aiya’s foot rubbed against his leg. “You’re so cute when you’re awkward. Is this how it started with Padme too?”

Anakin moved his hand. The chair she was sitting on flew out from under her and hit the far wall. Aiya dropped to the floor in a heap.

“Hey!” she shouted.

Anakin rushed up, grabbed Aiya by the front of his tunic and pulled her to eye level. “I can make things *very uncomfortable* for you. Answer my questions and you end up in a holding cell with most of your body intact.”

Anakin looked at the chair and it sailed through the air and collided with Aiya’s back. She grimaced in pain, but the look on her face said much more.

Her fear began to fill the room.

Anakin tried to tap into that fear. He reached out with the Force and tried to reach into the beautiful pilot’s mind, but unlike Illum, this was different. She was intelligent, highly educated, and had a keenly developed mind. Going through a trooper’s mind was like wading into a clear lake.

Reaching into Aiya Rios’s mind was like diving straight into mud.

“What happened to talking about the wrongs I’ve committed in my life and how the only way to go is with ‘peace and serenity?’” she asked with wide eyes.

Anakin pulled her closer. “Peace and serenity is an illusion,” he whispered.

Aiya’s eyes grew very wide and Anakin dropped her back into the chair. He stepped back a few paces and addressed her again. All of Anakin’s hesitation and self-doubt had evaporated.

“Where is the next target?” he asked.

Aiya Rios’s eyes grew very narrow. “When Obi-Wan returns and sees these bruises on me, you’re going to have an afternoon filled with more fun than you can handle.”

“Bruises,” Anakin scoffed. “You think I’m going to stop with bruises?”

“Please, you don’t have what it takes,” she smirked.

“Where is the next target?” he asked again.

“You can rot,” she said, her fear fading. Anakin wanted her to be engulfed in it until she drowned.

Anakin moved his hand again and she flew against the wall. Her arms and legs were spread and her look of contempt was replaced by absolute terror.

"Last chance before I lose my patience," Anakin warned.

A single tear rolled down Aiya Rios's face.

Anakin stared down at her leg. "Tell me Aiya. Do you like to dance?"

Her eyes automatically looked down. "What?" she blankly asked.

Anakin cocked his head a little to one side and began to move his hands slowly. In response, Aiya's right leg began to move up until it was straight out in front of her.

"Are you sure you don't want to tell me?" Anakin asked.

Aiya tried to put on a determined front, but Anakin could easily feel her fear filling the room. "I...I'm not t...telling you anything," the words stumbled out of her.

Anakin just shrugged his shoulders. "As you wish."

Anakin thought back to Cerea and his struggle with Darth Maul. At the time, Darth Maul had been able to use the Force to choke Anakin and Anakin remembered how powerfully his fear gripped him. Anakin retaliated by using the Force to try and stop the Dark Lord's heart from beating. There was fear on the Sith Lord's face as well that day.

And fear was power.

It didn't take a lot of effort to isolate Aiya Rios's tibia.

Breaking it was much easier.

Aiya whimpered in pain and tried to grasp the injured leg, but Anakin's use of the Force held her firm. All she could do was squirm on the wall and bite her lower lip in a vain effort to keep her composure.

"Feeling more talkative?" Anakin asked.

Aiya shook her head quickly.

Anakin grinned and moved his hand again. He broke the woman's tibia for a second time and this time Aiya screamed. She shook from the pain, despite Anakin's use of the Force to restrain her.

"You have over two hundred bones in your body. I can break each of them two hundred times. You have veins, blood vessels, organs, and I can make all of them feel any way I choose. All I want is a little information and you can spend the rest of your trip home in the brig."

Anakin sat down in the chair and folded his arms.

"Or you can spend it, right here, with me."

Padme sat back in her chair and re-read the information on her tablet for the third time. Even after digesting it all again, she found it hard to believe.

"They're calling the Clone Wars a misunderstanding?" Padme asked.

Supreme Chancellor Valorum's image nodded.

"It doesn't mention anything in here about terms or if they want to remain independent," Padme noticed.

"It's a critical first step to ending the war. If we seize on this and act quickly, the Clone Wars will be over and the Republic could be made whole again," he replied.

Padme raised an eyebrow.

"I believe the rebels to be sincere," Valorum affirmed.

“Why me?” Padme asked. “There are Galactic Senators who surely would be more influential and carry more weight than I.”

The holo-image on her desk looked around nervously. “You discovered the clones, you ignited the war with your investigation, and you were deeply involved at the beginning. The rebels will recognize you and respect your word.”

“According to what I’ve been reading here, there doesn’t even appear to be an actual rebellion,” she said.

“Another investigation for you to begin once the war is officially over,” his image smiled at her.

Padme folded her arms. “Senator Bolet always said ‘a Hutt with good news is the one who doesn’t give you all the news’.”

Valorum smiled. “Fair enough, young lady. There aren’t many in Coruscant I can trust, especially with something as delicate as this.”

Padme sat upright. “Then you’re not going to hold the peace talks at the capital.”

“You see the whole board very clearly,” Valorum’s smile widened. “I want to host them on Alderaan, away from the Senate. I can use the recent boom in tourism there as an excuse for me to be on vacation. ‘Stress of war’ or some such nonsensical press release will give me cover to conduct negotiations and end the war.”

“I’m already hip-deep in an investigation to determine where the rebels are getting the supplies from,” Padme weakly protested.

Valorum straightened his jacket and cleared his throat. “Senator Amidala, the Republic needs you for a greater purpose. I offer you a chance to make history with me.”

“When is all this supposed to take place?” Padme asked.

“I’ll be in orbit the day after tomorrow,” he beamed at her.

“I’ll get Khian to...” she began but the Chancellor held up his hands.

“He cannot be consulted, no one can. We have a suitable location in mind. All you need to do is clear your schedule and give people an excuse. I would not recommend the vacation idea, however. It would look too suspicious if we both take a holiday,” he said.

“I trust Khian with my life. He’s everything to me,” Padme said.

“We’re not talking about your life; I’m trusting you with the security of our entire Republic. No one is to be told, not even your beloved bodyguard,” he said sternly.

“I don’t love him,” Padme said weakly.

Chancellor Valorum raised an eyebrow. “And yet ‘he’s everything’ to you.”

Padme blushed all the way to her ears.

Anakin strutted onto the bridge of the *RSS Venture* and approached Master Fisto, Jedi Kenobi, and Vice-Admiral Norris. He didn’t need to be a Jedi to feel the tenseness of their conversation.

“The entire Order could be under assault at any moment! We don’t know where or when or even how many knights could be targeted. I am pulling as many Jedi back from the front as possible and I don’t care what Palpatine says about it,” Master Fisto insisted.

“That won’t be necessary, Master,” Anakin bowed in respect.

“What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be watching Aiya Rios,” Obi-Wan said while Master Fisto and Admiral Norris continued talking.

Anakin smirked. “She was more cooperative after Master Fisto left. I know exactly what the rebel’s plans are.”

The entire bridge, including Master Fisto and Admiral Norris, stopped talking.

“Say that again,” Master Fisto said.

“She was very helpful once I asked the right questions. I suppose our deep and everlasting friendship played a role,” Anakin said while rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

The grin on Obi-Wan’s face grew immensely. “Did I mention that he’s *my* padawan?”

“Anakin, time is precious,” Master Fisto pressed.

“The rebellion isn’t targeting the Jedi, at least not specifically. They’re targeting anywhere we get our lightsaber crystals from,” Anakin said.

“But why? If they wanted them for their Jedi clones, why not harvest them instead of destroying them?” Admiral Norris asked.

“Because the rebellion didn’t make the Jedi clones,” Anakin said and even Master’s Fisto’s expression showed his surprise.

“Then it makes sense,” Master Fisto said thoughtfully before turning to look out at the planet Illum through a window.

“Well it doesn’t to me,” Admiral Norris said.

“The rebels see the Jedi clones as big a threat as we do. They believe as many as five thousand of them are roaming the galaxy, rampaging almost at will. However, not all of them are armed with lightsabers. The rebels want to stop the clones from getting more. If they destroy lightsaber crystals, then we no one can make lightsabers. Not us or the clones,” Anakin said.

Master Fisto walked quickly to the communication station and spoke to an officer. Although he was out of earshot, Anakin sensed the near-panic from the officer and he knew what Master Fisto had ordered.

When he returned, the look on Master Fisto’s face was grave. “This is a crisis. Although the Jedi aren’t being targeted directly, this threatens the future of our Order.”

“On my authority, I am ordering two hundred Jedi Knights and Masters to pull away from the front and move to guard the planets of Adega, Illum, and Dantooine. Once we’re relieved here by Jedi Master Kiannis, we’ll proceed directly to Coruscant to meet with the Council. The idea that the rebels did not create the Jedi clones has just changed the war. Thank you for your efforts, Skywalker. You have done the Jedi Order a great service this day. I will be returning to my own ship shortly. May the Force be with you,” Master Fisto shook Anakin’s hand before speaking with Admiral Norris again.

Obi-Wan beamed with pride while he and Anakin rode the turbolift back to their quarters. “In light of this, I think we can overlook the devastation on the surface,” Anakin said.

“I wouldn’t go that far, but you are showing that you have many surprises and many hidden talents for us,” Obi-Wan said.

"You have won a battle against incredible odds, demonstrated great knowledge of the Force, and revealed a great truth to us all. I couldn't be prouder of my friend," Obi-Wan put a hand on Anakin's shoulder.

"But nothing can erase what happened on Illium," he added.

Anakin felt a slight twinge of guilt. His master was glowing with pride, but Anakin knew that the methods of how he had gotten the information might not have lived up to Obi-Wan's standards.

"What is it? Was I too hard on you?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I'm just tired I suppose. After all, it was one interesting day," Anakin tried to chuckle.

"I suppose you're right. How many days will you create a lightsaber, battle a company of clones, and help the Jedi Order save itself from oblivion?" Obi-Wan asked.

As Anakin exited the turbolift, he smiled over his shoulder. "Hopefully, more than I can count."

One hour later, with the *RSS Venture* on its way home, Anakin nervously paced in his quarters. He tried to keep his mind calm and clear, but the conflict within him lit a fire in his being that could not be ignored.

True, he hadn't exactly lied to Obi-Wan. But he hadn't been totally honest either. Anakin had hidden certain aspects of the truth from the man who just called him "friend".

But Anakin had accomplished something great and saved countless lives. Isn't that what mattered? Surely the ends justified the means. He hadn't exactly lied, he hadn't betrayed his friend, and only the rebel suffered.

What was the harm?

Still, he knew Obi-Wan's pride would fall hard if the truth was known just how Anakin had gotten the rebel to talk. Just picturing the face of his friend if he knew what happened was enough to knot Anakin's stomach several times.

The door chime sounded and Anakin groaned. He had let his feelings run wild and Obi-Wan had picked up on it.

"Yes?" Anakin tried to sound confident and calm, but his voice wavered.

Obi-Wan walked slowly into the room. His brow was furrowed in concentration and his posture told Anakin all he needed to know just what was on his friend's mind without needing the Force at all.

"You're up late," Obi-Wan said.

"As are you," Anakin replied.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "I find it difficult to sleep with you creating so much anxiety for yourself. Is there something you wish to discuss?"

Anakin stared at the floor.

"Something about Illium? Nervous about going back to Coruscant?" Obi-Wan prodded.

Anakin didn't know what to do with his hands. He tried sticking them in his pockets, but only pulled them back out again.

"Was it Aiya Rios?" Obi-Wan asked.

Anakin's hands froze. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

"Sit down, Anakin," Obi-Wan gestured to the table in his room.

They sat opposite of each other and Anakin was desperate to look anywhere but at Obi-Wan's face. He pretended to be very interested in the grooves in the table's surface.

"Anakin, I'm going to start telling very bad jokes unless you talk to me," Obi-Wan smiled at his attempt to break the tension.

Anakin wasn't even sure where to begin.

"There once was a man from Nal Hutta..." Obi-Wan began.

Anakin heaved a sigh. "Fine, you win!"

He took a deep breath before continuing. "It was Aiya Rios, a friend, someone I liked. I had to get information out of a traitor not just to the Jedi but to me as well."

"I remember you were rather vague on the subject. You did say she cooperated after you asked the right questions," Obi-Wan said.

"It wasn't what I asked, it was how I asked them," Anakin said glumly.

Obi-Wan said nothing. The silence was worse than anything Anakin had thought Obi-Wan might say. He wished his master would yell at him, scold him, lecture him; anything would be preferable to the horrible silence that invaded the room.

All at once, Anakin proceeded to tell Obi-Wan everything that had happened in the interrogation room and his vision on Illum. The whole tale came spilling out of his mouth and the more he talked, the guiltier he felt. When he had finished, his friend just stared blankly at him.

"Well?" Anakin prodded.

"This is my fault," Obi-Wan said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Anakin opened his mouth to respond, but Obi-Wan held up a hand.

"If the student fails, it is the student's fault. If the student repeatedly fails, the teacher is at fault. Clearly, I have not done a very good job as your master," Obi-Wan said.

"No!" Anakin protested. "I screwed up, not you. You've been the best friend and teacher I could ever have hoped for. I've let you down, I've failed you."

"I think I should quit the Jedi Order," Anakin said softly.

Obi-Wan shot to his feet. "That cannot happen."

"Let's say hello to reality, okay? I'm not exactly a model Jedi," he said.

"You were *never* the model Jedi," Obi-Wan affirmed. "But that is not your fault. Your training started far later than normal students. Your master is a first-time teacher and the war has pushed us all farther than we wanted to go."

"I will ask Master Yoda to train you instead of me. Perhaps with a proper teacher, your potential will truly..." Obi-Wan's voice trailed off.

He turned to stare out the window at the passing star-lines. Anakin cleared his throat loudly.

"Master?" he asked.

"The river is not your obstacle," Obi-Wan muttered.

Anakin cocked his head to one side curiously to look out the viewport with Obi-Wan. "Well you don't usually find rivers in space, although stranger things have happened."

Obi-Wan didn't turn his head. "It was something Master Ki-Adi-Mundi was trying to tell me before he was killed. A great river stands between you and your goal. We're

focusing on the river as the problem, but what truly stops you from crossing the river is you, not the river itself.”

Anakin scratched his head.

His friend turned to face him with a grim look on his face. “Quitting the Order is a terrible choice to make. I am going to help you expand yourself and become a great Jedi. I won’t abandon you.”

“I just don’t see how I can stay in the Order. Quitting might be the best thing for me,” Anakin said.

“I’ve seen Jedi make rash decisions before and deeply regretted it,” Obi-Wan warned. “Patience.”

Anakin’s brow furrowed. “I make no promises.”

“The very least you can do is go to the sick bay and apologize to Aiya Rios,” Obi-Wan said.

“And that will help me cross a great river?” Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan put a hand on Anakin’s shoulder.

“This will help you cross yourself,” he smiled.

He sat down at his desk and made a hard decision. Anakin needed help and there was only one person he could think of with enough clout to help him.

“Young Skywalker! I am so pleased to hear from you,” Palpatine answered the transmission almost instantly.

“Grand Centurion, thank you for speaking with me. I hope I’m not intruding,” Anakin said.

The image of Palpatine wavered for just a moment before he sat down in a large chair. “Not anymore. I just cleared five Galactic Senators out of the room so we could speak together. Talk to me, my boy.”

Anakin’s jaw dropped a little. “Five senators? Sir, if you’re busy, please don’t let me interrupt.”

“Anakin, right now, you are more important than fifty senators. What is troubling you?” Palpatine gave Anakin his un-divided attention.

Anakin swallowed before speaking. “I think I’ve gotten into a little trouble on Illum and I’m not sure what to do next.”

Palpatine frowned. “Trouble? I find that hard to believe. I’m reading the reports from the battle and I see nothing there saying you’re at fault for anything other than a glorious victory.”

Anakin blushed, ashamed of himself. “I’m thinking of leaving the Jedi Order.”

Palpatine’s eyes went wide. “You cannot do that,” he said severely.

Anakin rolled his eyes. “Master Kenobi said the same thing.”

Palpatine’s eyes narrowed and became very hard and cold. “Your training *must* continue. I will accept nothing else.”

Palpatine leaned forward on his elbows. “What happened during the battle?”

“It was what happened *after* the battle. I was able to determine why the rebels attacked Illum to begin with. I also found out what they’re targeting next and that the rebels are not responsible for the Jedi clones like we previously thought,” Anakin said.



"Anakin, be honest with me. Exactly how did you come into such astounding information?" he asked.

He looked sheepishly at the floor for a moment. "Aiya Rios turned traitor on us and I had to interrogate her."

Palpatine's image was quiet for a long while. "You did more than that, didn't you?" he asked.

Anakin felt ashamed at what he had done and explained to the Grand Centurion what he had done to make the officer talk.

"How many bones did you break?" Palpatine asked when Anakin had finished. "Please, be honest with an old man."

"Twenty-three," Anakin replied, hating the sound of his words. "Four of those I broke three times."

Palpatine was quiet again. He seemed to be deep in thought. Anakin assumed his thoughts revolved around how quickly he could have Anakin arrested.

"And how many did you break *after* she told you the rebellion's plans?" Palpatine asked with that same, kind smile.

Anakin shot out of the chair and on to his feet. "How could you possibly know?"

Palpatine's smile widened. "It's all over your face, Anakin. You enjoyed what you were doing and you got carried away."

Anakin said nothing and didn't sit down either.

"My boy, you act as if you've done something wrong!" Palpatine chuckled.

"Well, yeah. I mean, using the Force to break a former friend's bones isn't something the Jedi would celebrate," Anakin felt himself relax a little.

"Would the Jedi frown upon one rebel being hurt, but not killed, or their precious planets being laid to waste?" Palpatine asked.

Anakin sat down again and thought.

"The girl will live, correct? She may have difficulty walking again, but I'm sure she'll enjoy living out her days in a Prisoner Detention Facility. In the meantime, you are a hero! What you did saved countless lives! I'm confused as to why you're beating yourself up over this," Palpatine looked overjoyed.

"I didn't stop after she told me what she knew," Anakin said in a dead voice.

Palpatine dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "My boy, you think you're the first person to go a little overboard? You had no difficulties killing troopers on the planet's surface, but you are killing yourself over breaking a few bones?"

"I'm not sure that was the right thing to do either," Anakin mumbled.

"The ends justify the means, my boy. I have a little pull with Vice-Admiral Norris and you won't have to worry any more about this. When you come back to Coruscant, you'll be treated as a hero, as you should be. In fact, if I get a few things taken care of, I guarantee you'll have more to celebrate when you disembark," Palpatine grinned.

"I'm not sure I should be a Jedi," Anakin said.

"Trust me, Anakin. You'll be the greatest of them all."

## Chapter IX

*Citizens of the Galactic Republic! Our clones and troops smashed a rebel fleet at the mysterious and hidden Jedi planet of Illum, inflicting heavy losses! Task Force Four rescued Jedi General Kit Fisto's floundering fleet from certain annihilation.*

*The 104<sup>th</sup> Starfighter Squadron lived up to their motto "Take no prisoners, leave no regrets" as they shredded over fifty rebel starfighters and destroyed two capital ships.*

*On the ground, the rebels were stymied by Jedi Commander Anakin Skywalker. Grand Centurion Palpatine himself will welcome back this heroic figure and decorate him with the Coruscant Star Cluster for his bravery in single-handedly saving a group of our wounded clone troopers from the savage rebels.*

*I was fortunate to have the Grand Centurion give me a few precious moments of his time to answer some of my questions in an exclusive interview brought to you only by me, Oreana T'riek.*

*"Sir, what do you think of this starburst known as Anakin?"*

*"This young man is a shining example of outstanding dedication not to himself, but to the Republic itself. If I had ten men like him, the war would be over tomorrow!"*

*"Very few of us had ever heard of Illum before this. In fact, even I had to do a great amount of research just to find its exact location. Why would the Jedi keep a planet all to themselves and go to great lengths to hide it?"*

*"That is a disturbing question indeed. In fact, what do we really know about the Jedi at all other than they are skilled weapons experts and military leaders? What were the Jedi doing on Illum to begin with? Very few people outside of the Jedi Order know the answer to that. I am working diligently to uncover the truth, but the Order is very secretive. Many people don't even know who the leaders of the Order are."*

*"And I'm hearing rumors about possible peace talks?"*

*"We have made every possible overture to bring a swift and diplomatic end to the war, but the rebels are refusing to listen. They are far more bloodthirsty than I first believed possible. They could be capable of anything at any time."*

*Keep bringing the fight to them! No rebellion! No division! No backing down! Show your patriotism by buying war bonds to give our fighting people the support they need!*

*"Escort duty. Oh man, wake me when this is over!" Lt. Serat yawned too loudly over his headset.*

*"You're escorting the Supreme Chancellor, missy, this ain't a simple job. If the damn rebs got wind of his schedule, we'll have some work ahead of us," Major Duneglider replied.*

*Lt. Serat yawned louder.*

*"Missy, are you that anxious for a scrap?" the major asked.*

*"The war is raging out *there* and I'm stuck babysitting *here*. This isn't exactly what I signed up for," the lieutenant replied.*

*"Let me tell you something. War may seem all glitz and glamor to you, but I've already seen enough to last me the rest of my days," Duneglider said.*

Lt. Serat scoffed. "Like you got many of those left. With the way Palpatine is running the war, the rebels will be long gone before I get to nail them. Or take a crack at the Jedi, either way."

Major Duneglider nearly jerked his starfighter off course. "The Jedi?"

"Yeah Major," Lt. Serat said. "You heard the HoloNet same as me. Those Jedi are up to something, I bet my next paycheck on it."

"You're worried about the guys who are fighting *with* us?" the major asked.

"A bunch of lightsaber wielding preachers who have whole planets no one has ever heard of and aren't big fans of free thinking? Yeah, those guys," Lt. Serat answered.

Major Duneglider sat back in his starfighter's cockpit and thought for a moment. He only met a Jedi once and he seemed nice enough. Although anyone is nice to you right up to the moment they shoot you in the back.

His headset crackled loudly. "Major Duneglider, acknowledge transmission from Coruscant Command and respond please to Delta-Whiskey-Gamma-Five-One-Five."

The major punched up his computer and hurriedly accessed his codebook. "Major Duneglider here, I respond with Oh-Six-Charlie-Four-Green-Green."

He waited patiently for the computer to decode the transmission. It isn't every day that you receive a Delta level code from the C.C. and his curiosity overrode his years of experience as adrenaline began surging through him.

*"Shuttle you are escorting does not, repeat does not, contain Chancellor Valorum. Destroy shuttle immediately and report to sector twelve for rendezvous with Major Issic."*

Major Duneglider let out a low whistle. He activated his Heads Up Display and opened his communications channel again.

"Looks like we've been had. The C.C. says the Chancellor ain't on this ship at all. Drop back and keep your scanners open for rebel ships while I take this puppy out," he said.

"Hot damn! I finally get to see something blown up!" Lt. Serat whooped as he dropped his throttle back and fell behind the Major's starfighter.

The Major banked left, lined up the transport's engine section in his sights and pulled the trigger.

"Striking a blow for freedom," he whispered as the two torpedoes sailed away.

"Quite an effective demonstration," Major Issic smiled. "You successfully manipulated the transmission and even used proper code frequencies. You handled that exercise very well, lieutenant."

"Just glad to do my part. It's an added bonus that I was able to come up for a little fresh air. You can imagine that we don't get a lot of free time in the Cryptoanalysis Department," the lieutenant said.

"Yes it is rather sad that you can't have a HoloNet emitter in the bunker on Carida, but we can't take chances on it being traced. I'll make sure this is noted in your report to my superior. You have a very bright future," Major Issic pretended to make notes on his tablet before leaving the room and walking back down the hall.

Lieutenant Piett smiled and leaned back in the chair.

"There's a lot of traffic around the landing pad," the pilot of Anakin's shuttle announced. "This could get dicey."

Anakin held on to his shoulder harness and tried to meditate through their descent. His mind was still filled with conflicting thoughts that he continually tried to suppress. Was he a hero? Was it okay to hurt one rebel if it meant saving other lives? It was true that the Jedi would not approve, but this was war, not a classroom exercise.

"Relax," Obi-Wan told him. "I would think the Jedi in the Temple could feel your nervousness over coming home."

"No, it's not that. I just don't like re-entry into an atmosphere," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "You didn't mind the first time we came to Coruscant or when we went to Cerea or Alderaan."

Anakin exhaled loudly.

He turned to face his friend. "I spoke to the Grand Centurion before we left Illium's orbit. He's under the impression that I'm some sort of hero."

"You spoke directly to Palpatine?" Obi-Wan asked. "Do you know how high up the chain of command you just went? Talking to me wasn't good enough?"

"No, master, I didn't mean that. I just needed to talk to a friend outside of the Order to get a more objective opinion. He said he was pleased to hear from me. I didn't think it was so out of place," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan waited until their shuttle stopped rocking back and forth from the friction of the atmosphere.

"Anakin, what you did on Illium was courageous. Interrogating the rebel officer was out of order, but what's done is done. Keep in mind, there are many Jedi across the galaxy that are taking on far more dangerous assignments. I think Palpatine was exaggerating."

Seeing Anakin's downcast look, Obi-Wan added, "But I'm sure the Jedi Council appreciates your deeds. I have already set up a hearing about advancing your training."

Anakin narrowed his eyes in disgust, "More classroom lectures?" he asked.

"Perhaps not, we shall see. Be patient," Obi-Wan advised.

As their shuttle slowed and began to approach their landing platform. Anakin and Obi-Wan could see from their windows why traffic was a problem on this day.

There was a large crowd gathered on the terminal, the ramp leading to the platform, and on the platform itself. The crowd was so large that an entire company of clone troopers was out in force, trying to keep them back so the shuttle could land. Three Dimensional Imagers buzzed the transport like flies.

"Anakin, exactly what did you tell Palpatine happened on Illium?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Actually, the battle never came up. He said he read a few reports, but he never asked me directly how I was involved," Anakin said.

His eyes lit up when he saw the full depth of the crowd below. When their shuttle neared, the crowd began to wildly applaud. They were there for him!

"Let's not get too excited. I suppose there is a small chance they are here to celebrate *your* deeds on Illium," Anakin laughed.

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. "Celebration is hardly what any Jedi would be looking for, but I suppose it is rather touching."

Anakin couldn't help but let his enthusiasm get the better of him. As they touched down, the crowd pressed forward, held back only by the barricades and soldiers pressing back against them. Anakin waved to the crowd, who only cheered louder.

When Obi-Wan disembarked, the crowd was cheering. When Anakin appeared and began to climb down the shuttle's steps, the crowd was beyond jubilant. Anakin had never seen a crowd of people so excited before. Winning a race on Tatooine didn't begin to compare with the level of adulation he was feeling now.

It was intoxicating.

Anakin pumped his fist into the air and walked up the ramp toward the terminal. He even caught Obi-Wan smiling and waving to a few people. Three Dimensional Imagers zipped around Anakin, broadcasting his figure to the masses. To his surprise, the entry into the terminal was transformed into a grand stage complete with microphones, cameras, and a field of reporters shouting his name.

At the top of the stage was the Grand Centurion himself. Palpatine positively beamed at Anakin as he and Obi-Wan began to climb up the steps to the stage.

"My boy, welcome back to Coruscant!" Palpatine shook Anakin's hand vigorously.

When Obi-Wan extended his hand, Palpatine quickly turned and raised Anakin's hand to the crowd, whose cheers seemed to shake the platform.

Palpatine waved for the crowd to be quiet as he approached the podium. The roar of the masses shrank to a dull buzz when he began speaking.

"Fellow citizens of the Galactic Republic! Your hero has returned!" Palpatine said into the microphone and the crowd resumed its frenzy.

"With the aid of another Jedi, he turned back a rebel invasion and single-handedly stopped two other attacks from occurring! Countless millions were saved by this heroic act," Palpatine continued.

"Finally, I am pleased to announce to you that your hero has been given command of his own starfighter squadron!" the crowd roared once more.

Obi-Wan shared a stunned look with Anakin.

"Our brave hero will lead our forces to victory! Glorious victory! Let us wish Commander Anakin Skywalker our very best!" Palpatine held Anakin's hand up once more to the delight of the crowd that was now chanting his name.

Even his friend got caught up in the moment. Obi-Wan put a hand on Anakin's shoulder and cheered along with the crowd.

The only thing that could have turned Anakin's great moment into a perfect moment would have been Padme's presence. The noise from the crowd seemed to deaden as his thoughts turned to her. He felt his smile fade as he wondered if he would ever see her again.

An aide dashed to the podium and handed Palpatine a personal communicator. He activated it and listened. Anakin noticed that several people in the crowd also had communicators out...and then a few more...and then more. The air was filled with the buzz of the masses.

Anakin looked to Obi-Wan, who nodded at him.

"I feel it too, something's wrong," he said.

A woman's scream shattered the moment.

Palpatine's face looked ashen and the communicator dropped to the ground. Elite guards clad in blue armor grabbed Palpatine roughly and dragged him off the podium. Anakin and Obi-Wan scanned the skies, the building, and the crowd, looking for any threat.

"What happened?" Anakin asked a nearby reporter. "What's going on?"

The reporter rushed away, caught up in the panic that now gripped an entire world and its trillions of citizens.

A lone figure paced back and forth at the height of the Jedi Temple. He leaned on his cane more and more over the years until it was becoming more of a crutch he relied on. Although his mind was still sharp and he was strong in the Force, Yoda's body was a different story.

Something was amiss. He could feel fear and panic grip the people below. Yoda closed his eyes and reached out with the Force, but the sheer amount of emotional distress made it nearly impossible to pinpoint what had happened. He would be patient. Someone would come and fetch him if he was needed.

As if on cue, one of the newest Jedi Knights in the Order came sprinting down the hallway and skidded to stop near Yoda's observation point.

"Master Yoda!" he panted and put his hands on his knees.

Yoda tapped his cane on the floor three times. "Not necessary to create such a disturbance. Create a panic, you may."

"There's panic enough on the streets," the young Jedi gulped the air.

"Sense *that*, I can," Yoda said indignantly.

The Jedi stood up straight and wiped the sweat from his brow. "I apologize Master, of course you can. Master Windu needs to speak with you immediately in his chambers."

Yoda ran a hand through his fading hair. "For what purpose, does the Grand Master need of me?"

"The Chancellor's shuttle was destroyed, he's been assassinated!" the Jedi exclaimed.

Yoda's cane clattered to the floor.

"Will you come?" the youth asked.

Yoda only nodded while staring absently at the floor. The young man turned on his heel and sprinted back down the hallway, despite Yoda's rebuke.

Yoda absently reached for a chair, but it was further away than he thought. Instead, he half-sat and half-collapsed onto the floor. He placed his head in his hands and rocked back and forth slowly. Master Windu would have to be patient as well while he mourned his friend and wondered how many other friends he might lose.

Padme sighed softly as she watched the holo-projection on her desk. Anakin's name was trumpeted by Oreana Tri'lek across the Republic. His image was projected everywhere.

She couldn't help but feel a sense of pride and admiration considering this was once the young man who nearly got them all captured by General Tarkin when he tapped on the glass of a cloning tank.

Padme reached out toward the Anakin doppelganger when a knock on the door made her pull her hand back. She didn't give approval to enter before Khian came in, holding a handful of paper.

He glanced at the holo-image of Anakin and frowned. "Pining over the kid during a galactic emergency?"

Her cheeks flushed as she shut down the recording. Padme's gaze lingered on where it stood before turning her attention back to Khian.

"I'm not pining, I really do miss him, and there's much I can do about the assassination of the Chancellor," she said.

"I don't know why you bother. It's not like you're going to see him again," he huffed.

Padme continued staring at the image. Khian's scarred eye twitched.

"The course heading of the Chancellor's shuttle would put him near Alderaan tomorrow," he offered. Padme didn't respond, but looked about nervously.

"I checked every dignitary's schedule from the Viceroy on down to local law enforcement. No one had the Chancellor on their radar. Even if he were coming here for a secluded vacation, *someone* would know about it," Khian continued.

Padme fidgeted with her fingers.

Khian's eyes locked on Padme's.

"He was conducting peace talks and I was participating," she said sheepishly.

Khian's fist slammed on the desk. "Are you joking? You didn't tell me about this? I wasn't told what site to secure or who's on the guest list or anything at all! How could you do this, Padme?"

"We had to keep this as secretive as possible. If word got out..." but Khian cut her off.

"Someone *did* find out! We have to get out of here. If they learned the Chancellor was going to hold peace talks, they might come after you too," Khian said.

"They who?" Padme asked. "We don't know who did this or why."

"What does it matter?" Khian shouted. "If someone is shooting at you, do you ask for an ID or a motive while he's reloading?"

"You're getting off Alderaan and you're doing it yesterday," he continued.

"My senate duties?" she asked. "I can't just leave my people for who knows how long."

"The senate adjourns in three weeks and won't reconvene for six months. Trust me, Alderaan will survive while the legislature isn't around," he countered.

"And going where, exactly?" she folded her arms.

Khian threw the scraps he collected from Remmick on her desk.

Padme glanced again at where the image was before turning her attention to what Khian had brought her. She read every word on every scrap twice and then looked back at him.

"You know what this means?" she asked.

Khian said nothing, but nodded his affirmation.

She sat back in her chair and let out a low whistle. "If it's true," she began.

"It is," Khian said firmly.

"Then what is happening on Ord Mantell?" she asked.

"I'm afraid you won't stop until you find out," Khian grimaced.

Padme stood up and pressed the button for her receptionist. "Get me Grand Centurion Palpatine, I'll be heading..." Khian ran to her and shut off the machine.

"Have you learned *nothing*?" he hissed. "You really think you can just announce what you're doing and no one is listening? No one cares what you're doing or where you're going? Your movements are probably being watched even now."

Padme was shocked by the severity of his reaction. "I'm sorry, Khian. I didn't think it was that serious for me."

Khian threw his hands up and walked around the office. "You didn't think? She didn't think!"

"What is this?" she asked.

Khian continued pacing. "You don't think, you just don't think about what you do and how it affects those that...those around you."

He stopped in front of her desk and his green eyes locked onto hers. "You have to be more careful, you should know better than most how dangerous it is out there. You don't know...you just don't know. The Chancellor is dead, Jedi are getting killed, even the ones you..."

Padme leaned over and touched his shoulder. "She didn't know either, did she?"

Khian glanced at his wrist and shuddered.

"I know you have to go. You can't pass this on to Republic Intelligence or let your precious Anakin know that you're going to that cesspool of a planet," Khian said.

"You meant, 'we', right?" Padme asked.

"I want to go...to be with you...but I don't know," Khian said.

Padme's jaw dropped. She stood up quickly and circled around her desk to stand beside Khian.

She jabbed a finger in his chest. "What do you mean you don't know? First you say you care about me and now you're not sure if you can go with me? I thought you cared about me."

Khian stared out the window. "More than you know, but I just don't know if I can go back to Ord Mantell," he said.

"Please," Padme said. "You know I can't be alone."

"I know, but..." his voice trailed off as she approached him.

"Please," she begged again. "I'm such a little girl and I need a big, strong man to protect me from all those assassins with blasters and pointy teeth."

Khian chuckled; she knew how to lighten the tension, but his mind was whirling. He was sworn to protect her and now that she had become yet another possible target, traveling to another world alone, and had a possibly psychotic Jedi to worry about, how could he forsake her?

He took her hand and cupped it with his. As always, her skin was so smooth, so soft, it was flawless. Padme looked up at him and blushed. Even better, she didn't pull away from him.

Her hand didn't even twitch.

Khian rushed forward and kissed her. It was so fast that Padme barely had time to comprehend what had happened before he broke the kiss.

"Perhaps I can go along, if only to keep you out of trouble," Khian grinned.

"I'd be grateful to have a friend along for the ride," Padme caught her breath. "But you know that Anakin..."



“Padme, you can’t wait for something that won’t happen,” he said. “Jedi rarely ever take wives and those that do are usually chastised. But I am here, now, for you. My heart beats for you and I will never leave you.”

His eyes held such hope, such promise, that Padme couldn’t help but feel flattered by his charm. “I just...I don’t know.”

Khian’s face fell for a moment before he caught himself and flashed his usual cavalier grin. “I’ll take care of everything and have you on Ord Mantell before you know it. It just might be by less than standard means.”

Khian heard the door to Padme’s office close behind him and let out an enormous sigh of relief. He leaned against the door and clutched at his chest with his right hand. He was sure the pounding of his heart could be heard across Aldera. The smile on his face grew into an outright grin as he walked out of the office and into the hallway.

A few transmissions between him and another old friend of his set up the meeting he needed to get Padme off-world. As he strolled along Bolet Avenue, he couldn’t help but notice how the sky seemed bluer today, the sun was shining even brighter, and the people he passed were happier.

Today was a perfect day.

The small Rodian was waiting for him, punctual as always. He was missing one of his suckered antennae and three of his fingers, but his smile was as large as ever. His missing appendages had long been called victims of an “occupational hazard”.

“Keeboo, my old friend, how have your joints been treating you?” he asked.

The Rodian embraced him before stepping back and eyeing Khian up and down. “No, no, no! Thish cannot be thes young man who apprenticed under me for three tours! You are far too happy to be Khian,” his lisp was strong, but his command of Basic was commendable.

Khian bowed with a great deal of flourish. “The one and the same.”

“And the thource of your happinessth...” Belok’s voice trailed off.

“...is the reason I came to see you,” Khian finished.

Keeboo’s smile faded. “Trouble with the Republic? I thought I wasth the only one.”

Now Khian’s smile faded. “What kind of ‘trouble’?”

The Rodian waves his good hand and shook his head. “Republic Enforshment Squads are everywhere, but thish ish not a time for that talk. What can I do for you?”

“I require discreet and rapid transport for two humans off of Alderaan,” Khian said.

“How dishcreet and how rapid?” Keeboo asked.

Khian looked around nervously. The tourists and merchants passing them on the street didn’t help his mood.

Keeboo nodded his head. “That ish fasht. I will do what I can, but there is the matter of payment for thish little errand.”

Khian ran a hand through his cropped black hair. “I’m afraid I’m a little tapped out at the moment. But I’m sure I can arrange...”

Keeboo waved him off. “You have forgotten too much. Payment in advance, always in advance, espeshially for something so urgent.”

The desperation showed on Khian's face. He was hoping to appeal to Keeboo's better nature, but business is business. He rubbed his head again with his right hand and felt something hard and jagged rub against his scalp. Khian thought for a moment and then smiled to himself. She was going to help him one last time.

"Will this work for payment?" he asked and extended his right arm.

The vibroblade, *Alanna*, shot out and he held it in his hand. The Rodian jumped back a pace and a few people stopped and stared at them. Khian looked at them and shrugged before flipping the weapon in his hand, grabbing it blade first and offering the hilt to Keeboo.

"You cannot be therious," the Rodian barely breathed, but his eyes glittered at the weapon. "You treasure thish above all else."

Khian smiled. "I treasure something far greater now and I can finally let this go. Be good to her, she was very good to me."

The Rodian narrowed his eyes, but when Khian's hand didn't retract, he took the blade by the hilt and weighed it carefully.

"Excellent condition, a fine blade indeed," he muttered.

"I'll even throw in the spring-loaded activator on my wrist. It can be very handy," Khian unstrapped the device and held it out.

"A poor joke, but a good deal," Keeboo smiled. "We have a bargain. I will thpeak to an associate of mine and get you and your friend in orbit after thunthet. Be ready."

Khian shook his hand and they embraced one more time. The Rodian turned to disappear into the crowd, but Khian took him by the arm.

"If I may borrow *Alanna* back, one last time?" he asked and bowed with great flourish again to appeal to the small Rodian's ego.

Keeboo grinned and passed the blade back with a bow in return. Khian pulled out a blaster pistol from inside his vest and used *Alanna* to scratch a single word into the barrel of the weapon.

"*Padme*"

"What more can you tell me?" Ethan asked.

"I already told you everything! It's somewhere near the Wild Space! Just stop, please!" his prey begged.

Ethan smiled grimly at the old man who had his pressed his own gun to his head. True, it wasn't by choice, but the sight of him struggling against himself was amusing.

"His will is strrrrong," Clone Windu said as he used his limited knowledge of the Force to hold the gun.

"Then this lovely discussion may have a messy ending," Ethan smiled.

"I swear, I don't know anything else," the old man pleaded.

It had taken Ethan three weeks to track this man down. Whispers and barely-there rumors hinted that there was one man who knew about a planet that held a weapon of extraordinary power. Ethan had dispatched his Jedi clones across the galaxy to find this man. Now that he had him, Ethan was convinced there was more to this than just a legend.

"Let me tell you how this is going to end," Ethan said as the old man's gun quivered.

“You’re going to die in a rather bloody fashion. However, if I don’t get the information I’m looking for, then I will order my battlecruiser to lay waste to this entire world. I will stay here as long as it is needed to ensure that everything that walks, crawls, or oozes its way across the planet will be wiped clean from existence. I leave this choice to you.”

“You can’t do that! There are millions of innocent people here!” the old man pleaded, dropping to his knees.

“You are *making* me do this. There is no question you’re holding back something from me. Tell me what you know and this planet has a future. Refuse, and *you* are forcing my hand,” Ethan warned.

The old man’s gaze hardened as he looked defiantly at Ethan, but then dropped sadly to the ground.

Ethan waved his hand and the Clone Windu released his grip on the old man. The arm holding the gun lowered to the ground.

“What do you know of the Mandalorian legends?” he asked Ethan in a soft voice.

“The warriors that left Coruscant and ravaged the galaxy nearly seven thousand years ago? They forged an alliance with Exar Kun during the Great Sith War and combined their forces with that of Lord Ulic Qel-Droma to invade Coruscant. Revan scattered the clans and they faded into myth. What does a pathetic race of mercenaries have to do with this?” Ethan asked.

“Speak with respect when you talk about my people,” the old man hissed.

The Clone Windu ignited his lightsaber and took a step backward in alarm. The old man didn’t seem frail as he rose to his full height. His eyes flashed dangerously and Ethan could feel the strength resonating from him.

“You *were* holding out on me,” Ethan whispered and took a step closer.

“Yes, I am one of the last surviving descendants of the First Mandalore. My people’s history is all but lost to antiquity, but we have one lasting legacy,” his eyes blazed with anger.

“The weapon exists,” Ethan said in awe.

“If you swear to me to spare this planet from annihilation, I will tell you the identity of the person who knows its true location,” he replied.

Now it was Ethan’s face that grew hard. “You don’t know the location?” he asked.

“This weapon is of such incredible power that we trusted very few with its knowledge. If Revan hadn’t scattered us to the four corners of the galaxy, he might have used it himself,” the old man chuckled.

“Who knows? Tell me who knows!” Ethan shouted.

“You must swear. Swear to me, Ethan Organa, that your ship will depart this system and this planet will be spared,” the old man said.

“On my honor as Crown Prince of Alderaan, I will not destroy this planet,” Ethan held up his right hand.

The old man’s expression softened. “Very well. The person you are looking for is already in your employ, although he himself does not know the knowledge you are seeking.”

“No one enjoys riddles,” Ethan spat.

“He wears our armor, is ruthless just as his father was before him, and carries the location in his sub-conscious. I do not envy the challenge you face in extracting the location from someone who doesn’t even know he knows it,” the old man laughed.

Ethan nodded to Clone Windu. “We’re done here. Prep the shuttle and tell the *Nocturne* to charge all weapons.”

The old man’s eyes grew wide. “YOU SWORE TO ME!” he shrieked.

“No one has the power to destroy an entire planet. This pathetic hamlet, however, will be a shiny new crater,” Ethan’s eyes cast a cold gaze on his victim.

“Damn you,” the old man swore and charged Ethan with a fury that would have made his Mandalorian brethren proud.

He got within four steps of Ethan before the Clone Windu silenced him with his lightsaber.

“I want Commander Jango Fett transferred to my command,” Ethan growled.

“Falsifying transferrrr records will be rrrrrisky if you want it done fast,” Clone Windu said.

“I don’t care, just get it done. I want him on my ship with dispatch,” Ethan said.

## Chapter X

Commander Jango Fett was used to being summoned. All too often, some admiral or moff or regent would be calling for his services. He was easily the most transferred officer in the Republic Army. He belonged to no unit and reported to no commanding officer.

It suited his nomadic personality perfectly.

However, he wouldn’t figure out who Major Issic was and why he had so much pull in the Republic that Jango would be reporting to him for what his orders called “indefinite length of service”.

He had spent the majority of his trip to the *RSS Nocturne* trying to track down this man’s service record or his deployment history. The problem was this major did not exist. He had no birth record, no career path, not even a paycheck to his name. Equally confusing was how this phantom major had come into command of a battle cruiser that was only a few months out of the construction yards.

The only conclusion his instincts told him was either he was about to meet the most secretive man in the Republic Armed Forces, or he was about to be killed.

Either way, he would meet this major in style. He polished up his armored uniform so that it gleamed in the light and straightened his military ribbons. As he began his final approach to dock with the mammoth vessel, Jango prepared to meet the man who dragged him halfway across the galaxy.

What he wasn’t prepared for was to see the four Jedi Knights who waited for him at the bottom of the shuttle’s ramp. The Jedi had always made him feel uneasy and he made it a point to avoid them at all costs. There was just something about their devotion to a Force you couldn’t see or touch that didn’t sit right with him. The last time he encountered a Jedi was on Alderaan.

That meeting did not improve his impression of them.

“Come with us, you will,” a small and green Jedi said.

Jango looked at the shuttle for a moment.

"All of your stuff will be unloaded," a dark skinned Jedi said. Reading minds also didn't sit right with Jango.

They walked across the ship and through numerous turbolifts until they reached a small conference room. There sat a man in a crisp white uniform flanked by two additional Jedi Knights. The man's rank insignia clearly identified him as the major he was reporting to. A large satchel rested at the major's feet.

He had a sour look on his face as he looked at the Jedi in the room. Jango smiled a little at the idea that they shared the same view about the Jedi Order.

"Welcome to the *Nocturne*, Commander," the Major said. "I've been looking forward to meeting a man with such a...colorful...heritage as yours."

A red flag was raised in Jango's mind. Any time an officer wanted to get chummy with you, it meant that you were about to receive some bad news. Hopefully, he wasn't being transferred to some backwater planet.

"I do as I'm told," Jango shrugged.

"I sincerely hope so," the major smiled.

Jango glanced at the two Jedi flanking the major. It might have been a trick of the light, or fatigue from his journey, but did he see one of them twitch? Now that he looked at the two bearded men a little closer, they looked like they were brothers.

Or maybe more than brothers.

"You are about to be a very valuable part of my team here. The duration of your stay is entirely dependent upon your level of cooperation with us," the major smiled again.

Now Jango was sure of it. One of the faces on a bearded Jedi twitched. The man reached up and scratched at his beard, but it was an involuntary reaction.

The major's attention drifted away from Jango and to the knights that flanked him. All he had to do was nod at one of his knights and the Jedi ignited his lightsaber. Jango stood up quickly, his hands flying to his twin blasters, but the major waved his hand.

"This won't take long," he said reassuringly.

The twitchy clone tried to scream in protest, but the lightsaber cut him down in mid-protest. Major Issic sighed.

"They have a rather short life span, I'm afraid. Once they start to break down, it's better just to end it quickly. That's why my Jedi clones travel in pairs. When one of them starts to lose control, the other ends its existence. Thankfully, their programming allows them to carry out this task with practically no remorse," he said in a very matter-of-fact tone.

Jango's hands did not move away from his blasters. This man talked about murder in the same voice as Jango might about the weather. In the back of his mind, he felt a tingling sensation.

"Please, Commander Fett, sit. They won't act unless I order them," and the man smiled again.

That smile was beginning to get on Jango's nerves.

"The Jedi clones are yours? After all this time, the Republic is behind the Clone Wars?" Jango asked.

Major Issic waved a hand dismissively. "Please, give me more credit than that. Let's say I work 'independently' of the Republic. Really now, I won't bore you with the details when I have much more important plans for you."

"Independently with a Republic cruiser and a major's uniform?" Jango's mind was on full alert now and the tingling increased in intensity. He unconsciously felt the need to scratch the back of his head.

Major Issic only smiled at him.

"What exactly do you want with me?" Jango's voice rose.

Major Issic's smile began to infuriate him.

"What did you mean when you talked about my 'cooperation'?" he took a step toward the door.

Major Issic glanced back at the remaining Jedi behind him.

The bearded clone shook his head.

Major Issic sighed. "Well then I suppose we'll do this the hard way." He pressed a button on the table and the four Jedi clones that escorted him entered the room again.

"It appears my clones are too weak and pathetic to penetrate your mind. No worries, I have other means at my disposal to get the information I want," Major Issic motioned to the escorts and they flanked Jango closely.

"You never asked any questions!" he shouted. "What information are you looking for?"

The major reached into a bag at his feet and pulled out a helmet. This helmet was very unique with a narrow, T-shaped visor and chrome in color. He tossed it down the table and Jango caught it in his hands. He traced a finger on the outline of the visor and stared at the helmet in wonder. He clutched this piece of his history tightly.

"Where did you find this?" he whispered.

Major Issic's smile faded. "When I said I was impressed with your heritage, I wasn't lying. You see, Commander, I celebrate and honor my ancestry. I came from a long line of great leaders. You come from a Mandalorian culture that once constructed the greatest weapon in the history of recorded time. And you will tell me where it is."

Jango's eyes went wide. "What in blazes are you talking about? How could I possibly know anything about that? My people died out almost three thousand years ago; I barely know anything about them!"

Major Issic's smile widened.

Khian slammed his fist against the wall and flung the tablet to the floor. His rage knew no bounds as he kicked over his chair.

The transport to Ord Mantell had been arranged easily enough. He had once chuckled at what Padme's reaction would be when he showed her how they would be traveling. The news he received after securing the transport was nothing short of devastating.

He picked up the tablet and watched the footage over and over again. Darth Maul gestured to the prone form of Obi-Wan Kenobi on Illum and text flashed onto his tablet's screen.

*“Or do you want to do incredible things?”*

*“Like what?”*

Anakin had sought out knowledge from Darth Maul. His friend, his comrade-in-arms, had wanted to learn from the Sith. Anakin was officially dangerous.

Padme would be crushed when she learned about this. She loved the kid, there was no doubt, but there was also no doubt that she felt *something* for Khian as well. This information just might drive a wedge between those two for all time.

Before he could do that, he had to really make himself shine in her eyes. Khian vowed to redouble his efforts. He would be so outstanding in all aspects to her that when he did drop this bombshell on her, she would fly into his arms.

All he needed was time.

“We already allowed him to skip over the Initiate Trials. Do you expect us to bend much further?”

The debate within the Jedi Council started immediately after Grand Centurion Palpatine’s announcement that Anakin was placed in charge of his own squadron of starfighters.

Two hours into the debate, it was learned that the number of pilots wanting to serve under the “Hero of Illum” was so great that his squadron was overbooked by several hundred.

Four hours into the debate, Anakin wished he had a chair to sit upon. He and Obi-Wan were standing, once again, in the great circle before the entire Jedi Council.

This debate was so unprecedented that the entire Council was assembled. In addition, Agen Kolar and Saesee Tiin were on holo-imagers while on assignments in the Outer Rim. Even Roan Shryne, the elusive recluse who rarely broke from his isolation of an intensive study of the Force, made an appearance on his holo-imager. Cin Drallig, the Jedi Battlemaster sat in his chair and looked on with great interest.

Anakin had never felt more like a specimen under a jar.

“Don’t worry,” Obi-Wan whispered. “This can’t take much longer.”

Anakin flexed his legs anxiously. “We didn’t debate on Cerea, we didn’t debate on Illum. Every time we acted, something good came from it.”

Obi-Wan’s brow furrowed. “This isn’t a battle, this is a debate. What they’re contemplating has only happened very rarely in...”

Anakin cut him off. “...in the entire history of the Jedi Order. I get it! Master, do you doubt that I can be a great Jedi?”

Obi-Wan smiled. “I think you are a great friend with tremendous ability the Force has recognized. I would be honored to call you brother.”

“Then why is the Council debating this at all? More importantly, why aren’t they asking you, my master, about this?” Anakin prodded.

His friend and mentor could only stare back at Anakin. He looked at the learned Jedi Council and for a moment, Obi-Wan felt contempt toward them.

“And yet no one has asked me about what to do with my own Padawan?” he said.

Silence draped across the room.

“You wish to add something, Jedi Kenobi?” Master Windu asked in his deep and thundering voice.

Obi-Wan took a deep breath before beginning. “What are the Jedi Trials of Knighthood? Surely we have seen that he has passed through a Trial of Skill when he was admitted over a year ago.”

Jedi Kenobi built upon the mumbled agreements that filled the chamber.

“Do we even need to mention a Trial of Courage or a Trial of Flesh?” Obi-Wan asked.

On cue, Anakin pulled up his robe and tapped on his cybernetic leg.

“The Council also witnessed his Trial of Insight here in this very room. He had little difficulty in relying on the Force to find Master Fisto when he went to great lengths to disguise himself,” Obi-Wan put a hand on Anakin’s shoulder.

“I am proud to call him a lifelong friend. Regardless of what you decide today, he will be an ally to the Order and the Republic in this time of carnage. We cannot deny him his Knighthood,” Obi-Wan declared and several Jedi actually applauded.

“Forgot something, you did,” Master Yoda’s small voice penetrated the clamor. The room fell silent again and all eyes turned to the small Jedi Master.

“Forgot the most important Trial, you did,” he affirmed.

Obi-Wan shifted his weight from one foot to the other uncomfortably.

“See through you, I can,” Yoda’s eyes bore into Obi-Wan.

“Yes, I suffered through the Trial of Spirit on Illum,” Anakin stepped forward. “While journeying to find the right crystal for my lightsaber, I encountered a vision. I am proud to say I moved through that Trial and am ready to face the Council’s judgment.”

“What know you of ready?” Yoda asked. “Will of the Council, not will of the Padawan, determines Knighthood. Green or blue crystal does not make a Knight.”

“What about golden?” Anakin asked and ignited his lightsaber. The golden light shone throughout the Council Chamber and many Masters audibly gasped.

The lightsaber flew out of Anakin’s hand and paused just in front of Yoda, hanging in mid-air. “This color, not found on Illum,” he said.

“It was there, in the crystal chamber. How else could I have acquired it?” Anakin asked. His eyes lingered on the weapon that was torn from his grip.

Yoda looked first at the golden lightsaber, then at Anakin. “Will of the Force,” Obi-Wan muttered.

Anakin almost cheered at this endorsement, but Yoda held up a hand. “More to a Jedi Knight there is, than the tool he carries. I sense much attachment you have to this trinket.”

“Trinket?” Anakin asked. “I doubt the clones on Illum would agree with that choice of word.”

“Mind your tone, Padawan,” Mace Windu’s voice dropped in volume, but not in intensity. “Master Yoda has all of our respect; he should have yours as well.”

The tapping of Yoda’s cane on the floor sounded deafening compared to the silence that followed Master Windu’s comment.

“Too fast, far too fast,” Yoda now spoke to the assembly of Jedi. “Too fast he has been trained to place such emphasis on this. Many Knights and Padawans also trained too fast, they do not honor our ways. Even some Masters forget tradition in favor of the quick and easy path.”



Obi-Wan's cheeks grew red at the implication. "He is not to be knighted?" he asked.

"He cannot command thirty-six pilots and not be a Knight!" Saesee Tiin roared and the debate threatened to break out again until Mace Windu stood from his chair. The Jedi Grand Master rose to his full height and his very presence inspired silence among the Council.

"Master Yoda?" he asked.

Yoda sighed and shook his head sadly. "End the war, we must, before the Republic is torn apart and lose everything, we do. But knighting this young one, with no discipline, with no respect for values, with recklessness and no control, we cannot. Dark tendencies he showed on Illium and with the rebel spy. Knighting him, lose our own values, we would. Lose ourselves, we would."

Anakin's jaw dropped and he took a step toward Yoda, but Obi-Wan held his arm tightly. He turned to see a similar look of disappointment and frustration on his master, but he swallowed and shook his head slowly to his padawan.

Mace Windu turned and looked out at the window. Twilight was draping itself over the sky, wrapping itself around Coruscant.

"The Supreme Chancellor is dead, murdered by what Republic Intelligence says was a rebel ambush. The Senate is meeting tonight to determine who will fill the vacuum of power. The Clone War has anywhere from two to five thousand cloned Jedi rampaging across the stars and the rebels don't control them. This means that Darth Maul has a deeper stake in this war than we believed. Our task force of crack Jedi Knights has been unable to pin him down. In addition, we are suffering casualties in our own ranks that hit us at every level that pushes us to refill those vacant posts," he paused and bowed his head in respect.

"And yet I must agree with Master Yoda. Anakin has demonstrated that he has tremendous potential and the Council recognizes that. However, we also are concerned over his reckless behavior. The Council's decision is made," Mace Windu took a deep breath.

"Anakin Skywalker will not be knighted," he said with a tone of finality that sounded like a death knell to Anakin.

"He will continue to serve as padawan under Obi-Wan Kenobi and will not take command of his squadron. When the war is over, Master Yoda will re-evaluate both Anakin's and Obi-Wan's position within the Jedi Order," Mace Windu said.

"The Council is adjourned and will proceed to the Senate Rotunda for the nomination of a new Supreme Chancellor. Afterwards, we will re-double our efforts to ending the Jedi clone threat and bringing Darth Maul to justice. We will not lose the public's trust and we will not lose this war," Mace Windu said and Yoda nodded in agreement.

Anakin tried to meditate in his quarters at the Jedi Temple, but his restless mind would not be stilled. Every time he sat and closed his eyes, he shook his head and stood up. When he tried to stand still and focus, he began pacing. Soon, even pacing wasn't enough and Anakin found himself aimlessly wandering through Coruscant until he was outside the Senate Rotunda.

He stared up at the giant building and fumed. How could he be so close to advancing and then have it all snatched from him? He had finally tasted combat for the first time and he overcame his fears and embraced his abilities. Anakin had saved lives, wasn't that worth something?

"...and so it is with humility...no no, *sincere* humility..." a nearby voice muttered.

Anakin instinctively reached out with the Force, but felt nothing at all. Even with a droid, he could feel some kind of presence, but this was like touching a hole with your bare hand.

"Who's there?" he called.

"Anakin? Is that Anakin Skywalker the Hero of Illum?" the voice chuckled.

He peered into the darkness and a shape emerged. Grand Centurion Palpatine emerged from around a corner with a wide smile on his face.

Anakin breathed a sigh of relief, then his eyes widened and he frantically looked around. "Where are your guards or your aides? Why aren't you inside with the other senators?" he asked.

Palpatine smiled. "You would be surprised how refreshing it is to be by yourself just once in a long while. Just to take a walk, to be alone with your thoughts, just for five minutes, is truly a luxury. I think you and I have that in common."

Anakin smiled as well. "It is nice, but my thoughts are less than inspiring."

Palpatine cocked his head to one side and frowned. "Yes, I heard about the denial of your knighthood. A tremendous travesty for you and the Jedi Order. It confounds me as to why they refuse to embrace you."

"And I will continue to be only a padawan. Master Windu says I cannot lead my squadron because I'm not a knight," Anakin grumbled.

Palpatine's frown deepened. He closed his eyes and exhaled sharply. "This cannot stand."

Anakin shrugged his shoulders and leaned against the massive building. "Even a man with such power as you cannot order the Jedi Council to do anything."

"This is very true Anakin," he replied with a smile. "But I am in charge of the military am I not? If I choose to put a Kowakian monkey-lizard in charge of the 99<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, then they need to find it a proper uniform."

He stepped forward and put a hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Henceforth, you, Anakin Skywalker, will lead a squadron, but will be Wing Commander of the 34<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing with all the rights and privileges entitled to a person of that rank."

Anakin's eyes widened. "You can do that?"

Before he could answer, an aide rushed up to Palpatine and whispered hurriedly in his ear. Palpatine nodded solemnly and waved the aide off.

"I'll be there shortly," he replied before turning to Anakin.

"My dear boy, as *newly elected* Supreme Chancellor, I can do nearly anything I want with the military and the Jedi Council will have no choice but to accept my edicts," his smile widened into a grin and he put an arm around Anakin's shoulder.

Padme stood on a towering cliff, with waves slamming into the rocks many meters below her. The setting sun cast a wonderful glow on Khian as he raced toward her. His broad chest heaved as he tried to catch his breath.

"Padme, don't do this, please!" he begged.

She looked over her shoulder at the jagged rocks below. The wind whipped her soft brown hair around her and her white dress billowed against her frame.

"I don't have a choice," she replied. "I can't stand to be alone any longer."

He took two steps toward her, but she held up her hand and leaned back. A small piece of the cliff fell away and was instantly lost to the swirling waves.

"But you don't have to be alone," Khian took another step toward her and extended his hand.

"What do you mean?" Padme asked. Her heart pounded inside her chest until she thought it would break her ribs. Were her prayers finally about to be answered?

Khian dropped down to both his knees only a few meters away from her. He reached to her once again, with a tear glittering in the light as it fell down his face.

"Padme, I love you. I have from the first moment I saw you. You are the most beautiful and most compassionate woman I have ever known. I cannot bear to be without you any longer. Be with me, run away with me, embrace my love and you will never be alone again," Khian cried out over the sound of the wind and the waves.

Padme was stunned by the admission. Her heart yearned painfully and she allowed it to guide her hand out to grasp his. Their hands touched and electricity shook her body from head to toe as he took her in his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and stared into his deep, green eyes.

Padme's senses were overloaded as she awoke with a start. The passage that Khian had arranged had indeed been far from the standard transport a senator would take.

Khian had managed to find the only spot that resembled anything close to serenity on this ship and offered it to her. It was nestled between two, two meter tall, gundarks. Thankfully, they had fallen asleep for much of the journey. One of them stretched and yawned, revealing forty-eight razor sharp teeth that made Padme shiver. It stretched two of its four arms out, causing Padme to shift her position closer to the cage holding the other fearsome creature.

Padme put a hand to her forehead and tried to steady her breathing. The dream was all too vivid and lingered in her mind.

"Comfy?" Khian asked as he swung himself up on top of one of the cages.

Padme jumped where she lay and wiped the sweat from her forehead.

"It'll do," she replied. "How close are we? I don't think I've slept soundly in three days."

Khian shrugged his shoulders. "The captain said we should be there by tomorrow. I thought you loved animals."

Padme cringed when one of the gundarks twitched in its sleep. "I prefer something a little cuddlier."

Khian flashed his practiced smile and Padme cringed as she expected to hear one of his flirtatious catch-phrases.

"If it really does bother you, I'll try to find something better. I'd love to get you in a warm bed in the crew quarters, but I can't risk them exposing you," his voice was sincere.

Padme smiled a little. "That's sweet of you to offer, but if we're nearly there, I think I'll make the best of this. Are you sure these creatures are safe?" she changed the subject.

Rather than press his luck, Padme was surprised to see Khian back away and settle on top of the cage. It was nice to see that he respected her more than he did before.

"These two beauties are tame and couldn't hurt anything if they tried. Domesticated gundarks wouldn't act violently unless you use them for a punching bag," Khian replied.

"Then all I want is a hot bath and a nap," Padme murmured and wrapped her arms around herself.

"You should be enjoying this! A lot of men bring women to the circus, but how many men bring the circus to them?" he pretended to be offended.

Padme rolled her eyes. "When you said you would arrange transport, I thought it would be a shuttle or a cargo ship that was chartered with discretion."

Khian gestured around them. "What's more discreet than Belok's Interstellar Circus? C'mon Padme, where's your spirit of romance and adventure?"

Padme said nothing. In a way, this was exciting and adventurous and Khian had gotten her away from her desk and its suffocating paperwork. She should be happy and even grateful, but something was missing.

"Well don't let me stop you from catching up on your beauty sleep," Khian swung himself off the cage.

Padme leaned against the bulkhead and tried to get herself situated into a position that might allow her to rest. She chided herself for being a little too harsh with Khian lately. After all, he was getting her to Ord Mantell in a manner practically guaranteed to be unnoticed and probably saved her life by getting her off Alderaan. Her heart longed for Anakin, but Khian had brought up one point that resonated with her.

Would she ever see Anakin again? The question echoed in her mind as she was listened to the rhythmic snoring of the two circus beasts on either side of her. Her teeth chattered and she rubbed her arms, trying to force some warmth into them.

Khian's leather jacket soared over the cage and landed on her lap. Padme looked up, but couldn't see him anywhere. She took the jacket and wrapped herself in it, reveling in the warmth it held when he had worn it.

She lay back against a bag marked "Gundarks Only" and closed her eyes. She could see Anakin's face in her mind's eye and she smiled at the thought of seeing it again.

When Padme opened her eyes again, a pale moon-round face with silver, gleaming eyes was staring at her from overhead. She had very short, almost pixie-like, jet black hair that curled around her cheeks.

Padme nearly screamed, but the woman held a finger to her mouth and winked at Padme. It was then that Padme realized that the woman was looking at her, but her hands and feet gripped the ceiling while her head was turned completely around.

"Didn't mean to startle you," she said softly. "We rarely get passengers and after I heard the commotion, I got curious."

The woman moved her body along the ceiling and did a complete one-hundred and eighty degree turn, but the head never moved.

"Who are you?" Padme asked.

"I have many names, most of them theatrical," she said. "For this trip, I am called Insurgo the Woman Who Laughs at Gravity."

"How...appropriate," Padme smiled.

"A girl has to have a sense of style," she returned the smile.

"Would you mind coming down from up there? It's a little un-nerving seeing you like that," Padme asked.

"Down, up, merely perspective and nothing more. However, I will indulge you," Insurgo detached herself from the ceiling and sat next to her, scratching the chin of one of the gundarks.

"Running to or running from?" Insurgo asked.

Padme looked at her blankly. Insurgo blinked her silver eyes.

"You're traveling to Ord Mantell on a circus's convoy and you're not in the ship with the cast and crew. Therefore, you are either running to something or running away from something," Insurgo reasoned.

Padme's face grew hot. "I like to think I'm going to prevent something."

Insurgo cocked her head to one side. "You are presented with two choices and you make up your own choice. I like you."

Padme stared at her awkwardly.

"Most people choose to walk in one direction or the other, I chose something completely different. I find most people only choose from the choices offered when what they really should be doing is looking in a completely different direction," Insurgo winked at her.

Padme nodded slowly. "That's very good thinking."

"No it isn't," Insurgo said and clamped onto the ceiling again. "It's just different. What you do with the thinking is what makes it good."

"Did you ever, in your almost eight hundred years, think it would come to this?" Mace Windu asked after they departed from the Senate Rotunda.

Yoda only shook his head.

"You're right of course, Anakin's moving too fast. They're all moving far too fast, but with the Republic threatened, what can I do?" he asked. "The pressure both externally and internally is building to knight him and others to get them into the field."

Yoda sighed.

"We can't stop Chancellor Palpatine from making Anakin a Wing Commander. We don't have the jurisdiction to step in and meddle with the military's affairs," Mace said. "Perhaps that should change?"

Yoda continued walking.

"Master Yoda, I seek your counsel," Mace stepped in front of him.

"More questions than answers, I have," Yoda answered.

"You could at least let me know I'm doing the right thing by moving nearly three thousand padawans to knights in only a few months," Mace chuckled half-heartedly.

"Difficult times, difficult decisions," Yoda replied.

"Save the riddles for the classroom, Jedi are dying on my watch!" Mace said harshly.

Yoda closed his eyes. His small frame rose into the air and came eye to eye with the two meter Grand Master.

“Mistake my compassion for apathy, you should not,” he warned before returning to the ground.

Mace stared at the ceiling for a moment. “You’re right of course. I’m just under a great deal of stress. I apologize, Master Yoda.”

“Within us all, many doubts are, not immune, am I. Helped Chancellor Valorum with his peace talks, I did. Encouraged him to use Alderaan, I did. Much guilt I feel,” Yoda bowed his head.

“And Senator Amidala?” Mace Windu asked.

“Disappeared, she has, with her bodyguard. Fear for her life, I do not,” Yoda replied.

Mace nodded his head.

“What did you make of our new Chancellor? I thought Palpatine’s emotional state was, turbulent,” Mace searched for the right word.

“Difficult to read him, with so much emotion from the Senate clouding our vision,” Yoda replied. “A watchful eye, we should keep on him.”

“An eye on him, Anakin, Obi-Wan, the war, the Senate, Darth Maul, how many eyes do we have?” Mace asked.

“One eye can see much, if it looks correctly,” Yoda said.

“It disturbs me that Palpatine will not relinquish the duties of the office of Grand Centurion. Surely he doesn’t need command of the military and the government,” Mace commented.

“Hmmm,” Yoda closed his eyes and thought. “End the war, we must. Only then, will stability return to the Republic.”

“These are perilous times for us all. The Force only knows what awaits us with the coming of the dawn,” Mace said. “Once the war is over, I want you to completely overhaul your education department, I also want Anakin on a very tight leash, and his eyes glued to a Holocron. He’s becoming our first ever celebrity and if he gains a following, he will be difficult to contain.”

Yoda nodded in agreement. “Difficulty in containing someone so strong in the Force, we have had before.”

Mace leaned against a window and sighed. “Let’s not mention Ethan. We coddled the boy, gave him everything because he was supposed to lead us in ways never before imaginable. We must rein in Anakin for his own good if he is to succeed where Ethan failed.”

## Chapter XI

*Citizens of the Galactic Republic! Your hero, Anakin Skywalker, has done it again! Witness his daring exploits as he and his band of starfighter aces win battle after battle liberating planet after planet and working to keep you safe from the rebels! Supreme Chancellor Palpatine released this statement to the press.*

*“This comes as no surprise to me at all. Despite numerous attempts from the Jedi Council to keep our best man on the sidelines, Anakin has overcome all odds to be the champion that the Republic needs.”*

*Anzat, Roche, Ruuria, Telos, Dantooine, Anakin has been to them all and brought the heavy hand of Justice along with him.*

*“The guy is a rancor! Tough, gritty, determined, I’d follow him into a nova if he asked me to,” - Lt. Kurron*

*Keep bringing the fight to them! No rebellion! No division! No backing down! Show your patriotism by buying war bonds to give our fighting people the support they need!*

The vision came to him again.

The same dripping sound.

The same mocking laughter.

The same feeling of emptiness when the Force ripped away from him.

The same sandy colored man walking to him when he was the most vulnerable.

The same golden blade that shone with such brilliance as he had to shield his eyes.

“I free you, Ethan Organa,” was the last thing he heard before the golden blade swung at him.

Ethan Organa awoke with a start, but that man’s face was burned into his memory. He closed his eyes and shook his head hard, but the image remained.

He walked over to his sink and splashed water on his face. The cold liquid stung for a moment, but it felt good to feel anything other than that sense of dread.

He stared at himself in the mirror for a long while, his only sandy colored hair hung limply with water still clinging to it. Who was he? What did the vision mean?

The intercom disturbed his thoughts. “What?” he snapped.

“Coming, he is,” a Yoda clone said before it cut off.

Ignoring the lack of respect from the clone he created, Ethan’s blood ran cold. There’s only one reason why Darth Maul would come to the *RSS Nocturne* and it wasn’t for a social call.

He wasn’t pleased with Ethan’s progress.

Ethan had seen, first-hand, what Darth Maul’s displeasure meant. But Ethan knew he was so close to the truth! The Mandalorian was close to cracking, he could tell. The clones he sent in to interrogate his prisoner always reported they had failed. Now their failure prompted the Dark Lord to come across the galaxy to deal with Jango personally.

Whenever Darth Maul traveled, it worried him. If something were to go wrong, Ethan would lose his one and only link to rejoining the Force. Shuttles had mechanical accidents every day. A bad engine, poorly maintained landing gear, meteor storm, malfunctioning nav-computer, ambush by the Republic or rebellion, anything could happen and Ethan would be lost forever.

Ethan had decided that it was time to stretch his mind a little more. Every day, he felt more in-tune with the Force. Every day, he felt it calling to him as a mother would to a lost child. It was time he put his abilities to the test.

He was going to pay a visit to Jango Fett personally and failure would mean severe punishment. Darth Maul might even deny his full restoration to the Force, despite all he had done for the Dark Lord. He had backed off on the deal several times already, what's one more?

No, Ethan was determined. The Force would be his once more, and his vengeance would be swift upon the Jedi, his father, all of Alderaan...he swallowed hard.

And against Darth Maul himself.

Padme knew that working on Remmick's leads would be time consuming. Given that she was trying to maintain as low a profile as possible while on Ord Mantell, she sacrificed many keys that would open doors for her. She couldn't exactly wander up to the local Magistrate and announce she was a senator from Alderaan. One standard week after leaving Belok's Interstellar Circus behind, time consuming was becoming an understatement.

Finding a sub-standard apartment was easy enough, paying for it with credits and having no questions asked was even easier. That was the lone bright spot since they arrived. Padme knew she had to work faster, but as un-officially as possible.

That left her with a difficult order to give.

"Khian, tell me something," she began as they ate a meager meal at their lone table.

"Fire away," he replied.

"Remmick's notes indicate that most of the corruption takes place within law enforcement, correct?" she asked.

Khian nodded. "The prison itself is probably a network of rebels and those willing to take a bribe to look the other way on a number of issues."

"Then I have to ask something of you," she tried to avoid looking him in the eye.

Khian stopped chewing on his bread. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

Padme's eyes grew hard and her face was set in determination. "I need you to get arrested, make contact with someone on the inside, get whatever information you can on the shipments, and then escape."

Khian grinned and swallowed. "And I thought you didn't care about me."

Three standard weeks into her investigation, Padme wondered if she had made a terrible mistake. Khian had followed their plan, but he hadn't returned yet. She paced back and forth nervously.

An hour after he had left, Padme packed up what little they had and abandoned their current apartment for another one several blocks away. She knows Khian would go to great lengths to conceal his true identity, but on the off-chance that he was discovered, it wouldn't take much to lead back to her.

She had great faith that Khian would find her, eventually. To help him, Padme decided the risk of appearing in public daily to look for food was worth it. If Khian saw her, he would track her back to their new dwelling. But how long could she risk venturing out into public hoping he would find her? What if he had been caught after becoming a fugitive? Public executions were common to help keep order on Ord Mantell, would she see Khian standing defiantly before a firing squad confessing his love for her before...



The image shook her.

Khian came stumbling into their new apartment gasping for air. He set a bag down on a nearby table and a few fruits rolled out. His hands dropped to his knees and his chest heaved with every breath.

Padme grabbed two blaster pistols and knelt down, pointing her weapons at the door. Her fingers twitched on the triggers.

"Who's following you?" she asked.

Khian waved her off. "Not...anymore...I lost...them," he panted.

Padme put the blasters on the table and helped him sit down before getting him a glass of water. His hair was no longer short and neatly cropped, but now a mass of thick, black curls that hung loosely from his head. A small amount of facial hair had sprouted while he

"Where have you been? Did you learn anything?" Padme asked anxiously.

"It was very educational," he grinned and gulped down half the glass. "The rebels are getting a vast amount of stuff from the depots here. Different depots, different times, but always a large amount."

"Then there has to be a broker between the rebels and Ord Mantell officials for business to run so unpredictably," Padme remarked.

Khian nodded, wiping the sweat from his brow. "No question someone is running the show and making credits hand over fist, but no one I spoke to in the prison knew who it was. We're at a dead end."

Padme folded her arms and fumed. "I could probably get more answers by announcing who I am and demanding that I ask people higher up some questions."

Khian's eyes widened. "You can't reveal yourself. I don't want him knowing where you are and coming after you."

Padme glared at him. "Him, who?"

Khian hesitated for a moment.

"Him...whoever killed the Supreme Chancellor, of course. You were involved in the peace talks, after all," he finally replied.

Padme sighed and leaned back. "I guess you're right, but now what?"

"We need to follow the money," Khian suggested. "We know there is a big fish out there. We need to find him and nail him to the wall."

"And to do that, we need to find a rebel willing to sell to us," Padme said.

Khian raised an eyebrow. "The credits I brought with me are for living expenses. I certainly didn't bring enough to branch out into being an arms merchant."

"All we need is enough to whet someone's appetite. If we get that, we have the attention of our fish," Padme smiled.

Two months after she had arrived on Ord Mantell, Padme was close to accomplishing two things. First, she had finally made a contact with the rebellion interested in discussing an arms sale. Second, she knew she was dangerously close to being discovered.

The only thing missing from her exposing the scandal was one piece of hard evidence she could present to the Galactic Senate. She had rumors, whispers, and nameless, faceless people, but nothing concrete.

Her greatest difficulty was the sheer size of the depots that had been established on this world. After Jedi Knight Pablo-Jill had finally brought law and order to this world, Grand Centurion Palpatine directed that this be made the hub for military supplies for four sectors.

At his direction, the depots were constructed in blocks that were ten kilometers in diameter. Each block held one hundred depots. Catching one arms sale among the hundreds of kilometers of supplies was proving impossible.

Each depot had the typical military architecture. They were blocky, grey, and built to exact specifications. They reminded Padme of the large warehouses that General Tarkin had built on Alderaan. She recalled with a shiver the horrors that were inside those structures.

Today, she had hoped to break everything wide open. There was supposedly a large shipment of heavy weaponry that would be transferred to the rebels. Her contact promised to put her in touch with a Depot-Master that would, for a price, assure her a piece of the action.

She waited inside the Wolport Museum of Military Might for her contact to approach her. She wore the dark blue blouse as indicated to signify her presence. She tried to act casual in front of a statue of a large cannon, but found herself absently wringing her hands.

Her patience paid off when her contact arrived. "Lousy weather," she said.

"When you're from Coruscant, you're glad to have any weather at all," Padme replied with the proper phrase.

"Glad to see you, senator," she remarked while looking at the statue. "Things are worse than you realize."

Padme glanced at her contact. She had a moon-round face with very short hair and silver eyes that gleamed in the light. She looked terribly familiar, but Padme couldn't place her.

"That's why I'm here," she said. "The rebels must be stopped."

"The rebels aren't the ones making things worse," she casually said as she leaned in to examine the firing pin on the cannon.

Padme blinked hard. "I'm not sure I understand. They aren't buying weapons from the Depot-Masters?"

She looked at her and smiled. "In a manner of speaking, but the question is why?"

Padme returned a blank stare.

"Why rebel in the first place? We didn't want to leave the Republic, no one really did. Sure, there were a few grumblings, but aren't there always?" she continued to examine the firing pin.

"But there were meetings, communiques, and more showing that the rebels made the first move. They were plotting this war long before the Republic acted to defend itself," Padme said.

He shook his head sadly. "It's a matter of perspective, senator. Turn your investigation around and find out if those meetings actually took place. If the so-called 'Treaty of Ambria' actually exists. If the clones really were created by us and not by the Republic to instigate the war."

Padme's eyes widened. "You keep using 'us' and 'we'. You're not my contact are you?"

She turned to look directly at Padme. "I am your contact, just not for what you were looking for. You believe you have two choices before you. Either the rebels concealed several million clone troopers, shipyards, and other war machines from the Republic, or the Republic is fabricating it all. I am here to present you with the third choice you never knew was there. We don't want to fight, but we will stop the injustices that now plague the entire galaxy."

She returned her stare in kind. "You're Insurgo, from the circus! What injustices? What are you talking about? If you don't want war, then why fight now? Why kill the Chancellor when he was approaching you with an offer of peace?"

"You're still not looking at the third choice. You really believe that there are riots and looters that are being brutally put down and not peaceful protestors? You think he isn't ordering hits on Republic citizens that voice their disapproval?" she asked.

Padme's mouth opened to rebuke him, but she stopped herself. What really had happened to Remmick?

"He will go to great lengths to paint us as the villain in this fight. I advise you to take a closer look at just what his actions are doing. He's eroding the very freedoms Senator Bolet fought so hard for," she began to walk away.

The name of her former mentor and father figure struck her like a thunderbolt. She stood still from the shock and when she had recovered, Insurgo had turned a corner.

"Well?" Khian asked as he also rounded a corner.

"Is it possible I've been so wrong all this time?" she asked.

"Remmick didn't just disappear," Khian affirmed.

Padme looked down at the floor before she took off at a run in the direction her contact walked. Her heels echoed off the tile and annoyed patrons shouted at her as she blew past them. All caution was thrown to the wind; she knew she was acting impulsively, recklessly.

She had to know more.

"Hey!" Khian shouted and took off after her, but she had too much of a lead.

Padme shielded her eyes from the sun as she entered the street. Unfortunately, Insurgo had completely disappeared into the crowd. Padme jumped to see over the heads of the people, but couldn't make her out among the mass of people.

"Don't you ever leave me like that, blast it!" Khian shouted as he caught up to her. "You could blow our cover and I can't let anything..." but a scream cut him off.

A crowd had gathered at the far end of the avenue. Padme took off again this time with Khian close behind. Her head followed everyone else's as Insurgo leapt into the air and began climbing the side of a building with her bare hands. She moved effortlessly along the building's steel frame and leapt across an alley to another building and climbed ever higher.

A shot in the back ended her climb.

Padme raced to Insurgo, but Khian held her just a few meters away from where she fell. Two men wearing all grey were standing over her still form. They each put one more shot into her before holstering their pistols.

Padme screamed.

The men looked at her, then Khian, then back to her.

"Let's go!" Khian hissed and grabbed Padme by the arm.

There were shouts from one man in the crowd, "Rebel thugs! Rebel assassins!"

The crowd quickly dispersed as Khian half-dragged Padme away from the murder scene. Her thoughts lingered on what she had told her.

*"He will go to great lengths to paint us as the villain..."*

"Khian, what if..." she began.

He grabbed her by both shoulders. "They're not done yet!" he said and pointed behind them.

Fighting through the crowd were five men, dressed in grey. They each had a blaster pistol in their hands and were struggling to get through the crowd.

Khian took her by the hand and pulled her down the street, then into a side street, then along another avenue until Padme was completely turned around. They finally crouched beside a personal transport that was parked near a corner so she could catch her breath.

"I'm starting to wonder just who is on whose side or which side is the right side," Padme breathed.

Khian looked at her and for the first time, there was true fear in his eyes. "I'm so sorry," he murmured.

"What?" she asked. "We've been in worse scrapes than this. If we can get to the local Republic garrison then I can finally identify myself as a senator and get us out of here."

"They *are* from the Republic," he said and peeked over the transport.

"But maybe they just think we're rebels too. If they realize who I am, then we might..." Khian cut her off.

"And if they already know who you are? Wouldn't this be a convenient way to get rid of you? You could end up in a story that just says 'rioters put down on Ord Mantell' just like we've seen before and nothing else would be said about it," Khian ran a hand through his mass of black hair.

Padme looked down at the street for a long moment. "If we can't go to the Republic, and our only contact to the rebels is dead, then what do we do?"

"Did you know Ord Mantell has a total of fifteen orbiting moons? I always found it fascinating that some planets have so many moons while some have none. It reminds me of the time I was on the moon Dxun and it orbited so close to Onderon that they actually shared an atmosphere," the voice belonged to a man who was leaning against the transport.

Jango struggled against the restraints with every free moment he had. The wonderful thing about mechanical restraints such as magnetic cuffs was that eventually, they would wear down. All you needed was strength and persistence. The strength he had from being a commando in the Republic Armed Forces.

The persistence to see his enemies suffer came from his Mandalorian ancestry.

His captor never came to Jango himself, instead sending various cronies in to torture his body and mind. If he truly was a Mandalorian, then he was right to fear Jango.

A Mandalorian instills fear in his enemies.

They tried various ways to extract information from his mind, but Jango's resistance was formidable. Major Issic brought in mind probes, but they extracted

nothing from him. They tried sending clone troopers to soften him up, but they failed. Jedi clones sat with him for hours trying to break his mind, but they could not read his thoughts.

A Mandalorian does not submit.

He began formulating his escape the moment they locked him up in the bowels of this cruiser. He remembered the layout and how to get back to the hangar bay. Getting off the ship would be a different matter entirely.

What truly confounded him was the information the major was looking for. He had only caught snippets of conversations that all seemed to revolve around some sort of magnificent weapon. His people certainly used weapons of every type, but they didn't build them.

Mandalorians were *not* engineers.

So what did they expect from him? There hadn't been a real Mandalorian race for over three thousand years. Perhaps if one of his ancestors had been here, that would help matters. But what was he supposed to contribute? The only thing Jango knew was that he was of Mandalorian descent, but that was all. He couldn't even trace his family history back beyond his grandfather. He was a nomad with nothing to call his own.

Jango shook his head. He had to focus on his escape. He had to focus on his revenge.

A Mandalorian was not a prisoner.

He continued to work at the shackles that held his wrists behind his back. After many exhausting hours, Jango felt his left wrist give just a few centimeters. He smiled to himself as a reward. His freedom was near.

The door slid open and Jango rolled over to see which clone was coming for him this time. To his surprise, he saw Major Issic enter. Instead of his usual immaculate uniform, he wore a simple brown vest and shirt with his black pants. He almost looked like a normal human being except for the look of malevolence he wore on his face.

Seeing him drove Jango double his efforts on the shackles. He couldn't shake the image of him wrapping his hands around the major's throat.

"Do you know how long you've been onboard?" he asked.

"Long enough to know you're a dead man," Jango spat. He found it difficult to speak with his cut and bleeding lips.

The major studied him carefully. "You have been my guest for quite some time. However, that time is running short. I will freely admit to you that I have thrown nearly everything at your mind to get it to crack. You have one last opportunity to give me what I want to know. After that, I will turn you over to the Dark Lord of the Sith."

Jango laughed hoarsely though his throat was parched. "The Sith are dead."

Major Issic's eyes narrowed.

Jango's eyes widened. "Aren't they?"

Major Issic resumed the same maddening smile. "In ten hours, you'll be able to answer that question. I'll present your armor and helmet to him myself. I understand the Sith and the Mandalorians have a very...cozy...history."

Jango turned his head to look directly at the officer, further hiding the work behind his back. "If I knew anything, I would have said it by now."

“Oh I’m sure you would have,” Major Issic said. “However, I have every reason to believe that your mind does hold the key.”

The major crossed the room and knelt down beside Jango. He leaned very close to Jango’s face. “If this breaks you, I do apologize,” he whispered.

His gaze tore into Jango. The major ripped into his mind and ransacked his consciousness with no regard to his prey’s well-being. Jango tried to fight, tried to move, tried to resist, but this man was on a different level from the clones he encountered.

A flash of an image pierced Jango’s mind. In an instant it was gone, but Jango sought to recapture that image. Another flash, but this time Jango pursued it. Once he found that image, he latched on and refused any other thought but that one image.

The image of a horrifying weapon.

That thought led to another thought, a planet. Distant, unique, foreign and yet it felt like home. That thought led to another, and another, and slowly, Jango began putting together the pieces of this puzzle of the mind. There was a world, surrounded by debris; billions upon billions of pieces of flotsam orbited this world. But where was it?

Alarms began sounding throughout the ship, which shook Jango and Major Issic out of their connected thoughts.

“Blast it! I was so close!” Major Issic swore under his breath before pushing Jango roughly to the ground.

He walked toward the door while he keyed in his communicator. “Report,” he demanded.

Jango only caught the major’s side of the conversation. “Damn, he’s an hour early. Prepare the hangar bay for my Lord’s arrival.”

“Who are you?” Jango muttered as he tried to get his eyes to re-focus.

The major shot a look of disgust at his prey before he left the room and Jango’s heart sank. The Sith Lord was approaching, but how could that be so soon? Major Issic said it was going to be ten hours before he arrived and they had only locked minds for a handful of moments.

Or was it longer than that?

The history books spoke of the Sith’s power and love of inflicting pain. Yet something inside Jango’s core was rattled at the very mention of a Sith Lord. Jango shook his head roughly. Now was *not* the time to allow his ancestry’s fear of the Sith to get in his way.

He feverishly worked at the manacles, cutting his wrists in the process. Sweat dripped from his brow as the minutes ticked by toward his eventual doom. He turned a gap of a few centimeters into a few more, and then a few more.

His work was further rewarded when he was able to slip one wrist through the manacle and quickly strip the other one away. He walked up to the door and was surprised to see it slide open. The two dark-skinned clones standing outside his prison were equally surprised when he stepped into the hallway. Clearly they had not respected Jango’s resistance to their probes of his thoughts.

Jango swung the manacles, hitting one clone in the head and sending him sprawling. The second clone barely had time to even look at Jango before a quick kick

to the ribs knocked the wind out of the copy. He finished off the clone by slamming his head into the bulkhead.

Jango pushed the two unconscious clones into his cell and moved down the hallway. Time was truly against him now. By his own estimate, the Sith Lord would arrive within thirty minutes. Before the Sith even set foot on the cruiser, Jango had to find Major Issic, take his revenge, and still get off the ship.

Jango darted through the corridors with his senses on full alert. A ship of this size should have a crew of at least three thousand, yet he rarely saw anyone. There was only one time when he was forced to duck into a side room to avoid four Jedi clones walking casually down the corridor.

He was in some kind of storage compartment, surrounded by crates of basic supplies. Jango moved into a corner where he was safely hidden and knelt to collect his thoughts.

He was on an unknown ship, with an unknown number of Jedi clones onboard, no idea where the crew might be, and a Sith about to arrive specifically to rip him apart. He had no weapons, no armor except for his skivvies, and only his burning thirst to avenge the crimes committed against him including reclaiming the helmet and armor that was his only link to who he was and where he came from.

"I might have to break a sweat on this one," Jango muttered to himself.

But he had to admit, being backed into this impossible situation made him feel alive. He felt he was returning to the roots of his people. In a twisted way, Major Issic had done Jango a favor when he revealed his heritage.

Now was the time to repay that favor. A Mandalorian didn't need armor to protect him when he had his instincts and natural cunning. A Mandalorian didn't need weapons when he was already armed with the natural aggressiveness his ancestry bore.

A Mandalorian needs only prey.

## Chapter XII

Anakin had learned to quell his feelings of nervousness and of anticipation. What would happen would happen in its own time. There was no reason to concern himself with the future.

As he walked through the halls of the Jedi Temple, random cheers and applause followed him. Within two months, he had won consecutive victories in five separate engagements. His casualties amounted to only fourteen percent of his wing. While he mourned the loss of his pilots, he celebrated that there were hundreds more eager to take their place and serve under him.

Today was a day he had long looked forward to. On this day, he had been summoned by Cin Drallig, the Jedi Temple Battlemaster himself. There was only one reason why this legendary instructor would ask to see Anakin.

Today he would learn combat from one of the greatest Jedi in his lifetime.

Anakin walked onto a large courtyard with a large fountain in the middle. There were three levels above them each open with terraces looking down onto the fountain. Master Drallig was sitting at the water's edge, meditating.

"I was very pleased to get your summons, Master Drallig," Anakin said.

Master Drallig continued to sit cross-legged. He had dark blonde hair that he had pulled back into a ponytail. He wore a simple black leather vest with no shirt under it, revealing his muscular arms and two tattoos, one on each arm. One ear was pierced and his eyes flashed open, their pale green color glinting in the light.

"Why?" he asked.

"It's not often a Jedi gets to train with you. I understand you take very few pupils during the course of a year. Those that you teach combat to go on to become great Jedi," Anakin replied.

"If they become great Jedi, it has very little to do with my teachings on combat," Master Drallig said.

"I think Master Windu would disagree with you," Anakin chuckled.

Master Drallig raised an eyebrow. "Why would you think that? Have you seen him duel?"

Anakin folded his arms across his chest. "Well, no."

"You equate leadership with weaponry and weaponry with my teachings. If that is the case, then the only reason you came here was to seek leadership yourself," he said.

"Are you saying Master Windu is horrible with a lightsaber?" Anakin asked.

Master Drallig stood up and smiled. "I'm saying lightsabers have nothing to do with it."

Anakin fumed. "Am I going to learn from you or not?" he asked.

"I can only teach, you must make the choice to learn. I've been teaching since you walked into this courtyard. You tell me, have you been learning?" Master Drallig replied.

Anakin said nothing, his impatience growing.

"Once more, why were you pleased to get the summons?" the Temple Battlemaster asked while staring into the fountain.

Anakin thought it over, chewing on his lip for a moment. "To become a great Jedi and serve the Republic in a time of war."

Master Drallig shook his head sadly. "War breeds only sadness and loss. This is not the path of a Jedi, but of a Sith. They seek out power to obtain ultimate victory when they should know that their victory lies in the Force itself. Destruction does nothing to better the lives of those around you nor does it enhance the Force. By seeking out power, glory, and war, they diminish the Force."

"Thus, they diminish themselves," he stepped forward and faced Anakin.

"I shall train you, young Skywalker, but what will you learn? That is your choice to make, not mine," he lowered his arms to his sides and his pale green eyes shone in the light.

"Then it begins," Anakin replied and ignited his lightsaber. The golden blade illuminated the area and reflected off the water in the fountain. He assumed an en garde stance and waited.

Khian and Padme could only stare up at the man, dumbfounded.



“Have you been to Duxn?” Drevin Setts asked, twiddling his thumbs over his large stomach. He had grown fatter since they had run into him on Cerea and much balder. Only a few wisps of hair remained on his shining head.

“Drevin, what are you doing here?” Khian asked.

He looked at Khian quizzically. “I thought it was pretty obvious, I’m leaning against this vehicle.”

Khian just stared at him as Drevin went on. “I’m just out enjoying another beautiful day on Ord Mantell. Say, did you know that Ord Mantell has a unique outer cometary atmosphere that makes the planet look pink from orbit? It reminds me of the third moon of...” Padme stood up and cut him off.

“Drevin, what are you doing *here*?” she asked more specifically.

“Miss Amidala, you offend me. You mean to say you don’t remember what my occupation is?” he held a hand to his mouth to feign shock.

“You said you were a hunter,” Khian stood as well, but nervously glanced over his shoulder.

Drevin smiled. “That’s as accurate as I can put it. Fascinating career choice, really it is. When Tethys Aran says he wants something, then by golly I go out and hunt it down for him. I pride myself in my abilities to find anything he needs exactly at the time he needs it.”

“Drevin, that’s great, really, I’m so happy for you. But there are these Republic soldiers after us and what *we need* is a place to hide out right now,” Padme gripped his arm.

“I would prefer sooner than that,” Khian muttered.

Drevin’s eyes narrowed and his smile turned into a grin resembling a predator that had bagged his prey. Padme released her grip on his arm and took a step backwards.

The moment passed and Drevin’s face resumed his usual jolly appearance. “Worry lines would ruin that pretty little face of you, my dear. We shall adjourn to a more appropriate setting with a table, chairs, and perhaps even a cushion or two. Leave it to Drevin, he is eternally your faithful servant.”

He bowed flamboyantly as their pursuers whipped around a corner and began firing their blaster rifles at the three.

Drevin sprang in front Padme and Khian with surprising agility for a man of his girth and age. From a pocket within his vest, he pulled out a small box and slammed it to the ground. Padme grimaced and Khian hugged her tightly as blaster bolts sailed toward them.

They bounced harmlessly off the portable energy shield Drevin had deployed in front of them. Several of the lasers rebounded back toward their attackers, causing them to take cover.

“Get in!” Drevin shouted and jumped over the hood of the transport to sit in the pilot’s chair.

Padme and Khian scrambled into the back and ducked down as far as they could. Khian encircled her in his arms, refusing to let her go.

“This bucket was yours all this time?” Khian shouted.

“Don’t be silly, I hate flying!” Drevin said over his shoulder. He pulled out a small, flat device no bigger than his finger and pressed it to the main control panel. It instantly came to life and Drevin smiled as the engine roared.

Padme thought she heard Drevin begin another story or anecdote, but the wind drown out all sounds as they peeled away into the sky. She clung to Khian as they whipped around buildings and moved toward a different section of the city.

She managed to climb her way off the floorboards and looked around. If Drevin hated to fly, his skills didn't show it. He maneuvered his way through the buildings and narrow alleys with ease. Khian pulled her back down quickly.

"Are you crazy? Keep down!" he hissed.

"There's no one else out there," Padme said before blaster bolts flew past her. Khian yanked her back down under the seat.

"*I am not losing you,*" he shouted and held her close.

"These guys have to be commended for their persistence!" Drevin shouted back to them as he jerked the control stick sharply to the left and the vehicle responded. Padme tumbled on top of Khian as the vehicle banked.

The wind whipped through the passenger section again. "Reminds...of the...wookiees...fourth toe...celebrate!" Drevin shouted over the whirlwind.

Padme looked at Khian and started to roll her eyes, but stopped when she saw tears streaming down his face. She realized that the memory of losing Alanna on this very world was haunting him even now as her life was in mortal danger.

She wrapped her arms tightly around Khian's back and pressed her head to his chest as Drevin Setts lurched the vehicle back over to the right and laser blasts danced around them.

A handful of moments later, Drevin set the transport down inside a hangar bay on the outskirts of town. Padme and Khian shakily got out and walked away, grateful that they survived both the attack and the escape. As expected, Tethys Aran had selected the most dilapidated building as far from civilization as possible without looking conspicuous.

Also as expected, the interior did not remotely resemble the exterior.

"I'll let you catch your breath for a moment while I prepare the conference room," Drevin bowed slightly before walking away.

"Won't the transponder on the transport be tracked to this place?" Padme asked.

"What transport?" Drevin replied without turning around.

Padme turned to see half a dozen small and hairy Ugnaughts disassembling the vehicle. They moved all over the machine with amazing speed and agility. When Drevin returned ten minutes later, the transport and its pieces were packed in containers no bigger than hatboxes.

Khian let out a low whistle.

"Aren't they something? How we got them is quite the interesting story. It turns out they were stuck working in some pathetic little mining facility on Bespin. Did you know that Bespin is one of only seven habited gas giants in the Republic that has a rotation of less than fourteen hours but a revolution of more than fourteen years? Fascinating!"

Padme and Khian stared at him.

"Well, I trust we feel a little better now? Got back that wonderful sense of security?" Drevin asked.

"I wouldn't say that," Khian mumbled as armed men approached.

"The conference room awaits," Drevin bowed once again.

“Well we don’t want to keep the ‘room’ waiting,” Padme groaned as they were escorted down a darkened hallway.

Tethys Aran stood when they entered the spacious room. His lekku brain-tails were longer than before with even more ornate tattoos than he had when they first met on Cerea. His eight foot frame towered over everyone in the room and his four arms opened wide as they walked in. He was, by far, the most unusual Twi’lek Padme had ever met.

“Thank you so much for accepting my gracious invitation,” his silky voice brought a wave of nostalgia rushing over Padme.

Anakin held his lightsaber in readiness, but all the Jedi Battlemaster did was smile. Several tense moments passed and Anakin glanced around nervously. What was the basis of combat training if he wouldn’t engage?

He twirled the golden blade around him a few times and reset his balance. Anakin grumbled under his breath and he closed the distance between him and his teacher. He raised the blade and swung.

Cin Drallig blinked and Anakin was flung to the other side of the room. He skidded to a halt a few feet from a wall.

“What was that?” Anakin asked.

“You attack, I defend,” the Jedi replied.

“But you didn’t even bring out your lightsaber!” Anakin said.

“You attacked with the physical, I defended with the metaphysical. Is there a difference?” Cin Drallig cocked his head to one side.

Anakin groaned and charged again, sprinting toward the man. This time, Anakin leapt into the air and tried to kick the Jedi Master.

Cin Drallig sidestepped and used the Force to fling Anakin into the fountain.

Sopping wet, Anakin got to his feet. “You’re trying to teach me how to look like a fool?” he sputtered.

The Jedi Master smiled at him. “Is that what you’re learning from this?”

Irritated, Anakin climbed out of the fountain and unleashed a merciless series of attacks. He swung over and over and each time, the Battlemaster dodged the blade. Anakin put his full experience to work now, but the Master retreated and avoided every swing with ease. Anakin’s opponent had no blade, but merely danced his way past every attack.

“Say something!” Anakin raged.

Cin Drallig promptly kicked his student in the face, stunning him for a moment. In that hesitation, Anakin found himself skidding across the floor again, this time on his back.

“From the moment you entered this courtyard, I have been teaching, but you haven’t listened,” he said.

“I don’t recall a lecture,” Anakin stood up and rubbed his chin.

“Some of the most powerful lessons can be taught without words,” Cin Drallig answered.

A grin slowly spread on Anakin’s face. “Now that is something you and I can agree upon.”

He charged again and renewed his attack, pressing the Jedi Master further back into the courtyard. Anakin heard whispers high above him. In mid-swing he glanced up and noticed several students in the upper levels.

The grin grew on his face as he continued his advance, spurred on by his admirers. His Jedi opponent moved with the most incredible agility. Anakin stopped his attack and jumped away.

"I understand that you can dodge my attacks, but how I am supposed to learn combat tactics if you don't duel with me?" he asked.

Cin Drallig frowned. "You assume that being a Battlemaster means 'guy who can swing a lightsaber'? I am here to teach you like I teach everyone that comes into my training areas. I teach the Force, as do we all."

Anakin still held his blade at the ready. "How am I supposed to be a great Jedi unless I can destroy the enemies of the Republic?"

The Jedi Battlemaster shook his head sadly. "Why must 'great' Jedi use a lightsaber at all?"

Cin Drallig began to side-step, Anakin matched his movement.

"The lightsaber is a tool and a symbol of a Jedi Knight. If it is to be used in combat, it is used to defend those that seek our aid," he said.

"By using the Force to destroy evil, we do help those in need," Anakin countered, still moving in a slow circle with his teacher.

"The Force recognizes neither good nor evil. Become strong with the Force, center yourself within it and evil cannot touch you," Cin Drallig answered.

Anakin stopped moving, but heard the murmurs high above him. He glanced up and saw a larger crowd of students. They had come to see the great Anakin in action, not see him chatting.

"I will be invulnerable? Evil will cease to exist?" he asked.

"No, evil must exist as long as good exists. Good and evil complete each other. Just as people come into your life, so they must leave it. If you seek great power, master yourself, not the blade you cling to. That is why you are here. The lightsaber is only one piece of yourself," Cin Drallig smiled.

"A flashy part to be true and a part that some people place great emphasis on," he gestured to the large group of students and Jedi Knights that encircled them on the upper levels.

"But just one part. One part of a power that is so terrific and so horrible that it shapes an entire galaxy. And when you realize that you have enough of that power, then you will be truly powerful," he pulled a lightsaber from the folds of his robe.

"I will teach, but you must make the choice to learn," the Jedi Battlemaster extended a dark, ocean-blue blade and charged.

Jango's sense of anticipation was driving him to the brink of madness. He was crouching behind a stack of cargo containers in the hangar bay waiting for his former captor to arrive. Jango could have left by now. Security was pitifully lax on a ship full of loyal clones and Jango could have stolen a starfighter and left at any moment.

But escape was only part of his plan. Hunters always had to exercise patience to ensure a clean kill. Hunters who only had one shot had to exercise extreme patience to ensure they were not killed.

The minutes ticked by. Of course the major would want to greet this Dark Lord himself when he landed. The trouble was if the major waited too long, Jango would find himself in the unenviable position of having to kill him, make his escape, and do it all while slipping past the Sith.

Time was his enemy as well.

Footsteps began to grow louder and Jango readied his already tense muscles. Major Issic stepped into view flanked by two bearded clones.

"Well of course you don't wonder, I didn't program you that way," the major said to his companions and placed a bag on the ground. Jango prepared to spring onto the major and crush him, regardless of what the clones did to him in return.

"No one should everrrrr question Darrrrth Maul. Those that do find themselves in unpleasant situations," one of the clones answered.

Something inside Jango made him wait, holding back the urge to kill the man despite this opportune moment slipping away.

"I'm not questioning, I'm just wondering aloud in an interrogative way. What do you think he'll do when he discovers the weapon's location? Well of course he would use it and how many lives would be forfeit? For what purpose? The war is already causing enough destruction to satisfy even the darkest Sith's appetite," Major Issic refuted.

"Your arrrrrgument is irrrrrelevant," another clone answered. "Darrrrth Maul will obtain what he seeks, no matterrrrr the cost and no matterrrrr the purrrpose. You will play the parrrt of a pawn, as you werrrrre borrrrn to do."

"If you're not a little nicer to me, I'll show you what a *real* Jedi can do, not some pathetic carbon copy who's ability to touch the Force is only a tenth of what mine will be," Major Issic said.

The two clones chuckled darkly.

"What?" Major Issic asked. "Speak, you damned test tube rejects!"

"It's nothing, just kind of cute that you think he will rrrreunite you with the Forrrrce," one clone said.

Major Issic took a step away from them and Jango nearly sprang at him. If he just moved a little further away, out of reach of those lightsabers...

"We have a bargain. I unleashed you upon the Republic and I will find his weapon, then I will be one with the Force again," Major Issic hissed.

"Surrre, you'll be one with the Forrrrce when he drrrrives a lightsaber thrrrrrough your chest," a clone laughed.

"If you know something..." Major Issic warned.

"We know you're a fool, nothing morrrre than a fool with a fool's drrrrream," the clone said.

Major Issic was ready to fire back, but three chimes sounded. Jango cursed himself, the signal meant the Sith was on final approach.

He had waited too long.

Jango sprang from his hiding place, his legs cried out gratefully from the release of the tension of his crouch. He viciously kicked one of the clones and grabbed Major Issic from behind. Jango placed one arm just under and one just behind the major's head. They both realized it wouldn't take much to snap the major's neck.

“Do you know anything about the Mandalorians?” Jango whispered in his ear. The two clones ignited their lightsabers, but held their place.

“The stories I heard told me they worshipped war itself, enjoy carnage, live for destruction. There was a time when the Jedi themselves feared my people and they sacked Coruscant. Their calling was simple, fight against the greatest challenges in the galaxy and take down the legendary Jedi Knights,” Jango said.

The major only sputtered in return as Jango’s grip was unshakable.

“For five millennia, we waged a thousand wars on a thousand planets using tactics and weapons learned from a thousand cultures. Did you really think you could hold me here? It took Revan to break us, yet you expected your toys to do the same?” he growled.

“Now Major, if you would be so good as to push the bag behind you. I’ll be taking my armor and helmet and getting the hell off of your ship,” Jango said.

As Major Issic began to move the bag backwards with his foot, one of the clones snarled.

“Keep chatting, fool. Darrrrth Maul will be herrrrre in moments,” he warned.

Jango cursed himself for getting caught up in the moment. “You’re getting off easy,” he whispered to Major Issic. He turned the major around, drove his knee into the man’s gut, and flung him toward the clones.

The two clones had to drop their lightsabers to avoid hitting the sprawling major. Jango sprinted as fast as he could to the nearest starfighter. He was able to jump into the Z-95 Headhunter and the engine roared to life. The two clones made the mistake of pursuing him, lightsabers raised.

One shot from the blaster cannons left him and Major Issic alone. The astromech droid in the back of the ship whistled in protest, but Jango ignored it as he focused on his jailer. The major shot him a look of pure hatred before stumbling into the hallway.

Leaving the major alive had never been Jango’s intention, but it suited his plans all the better now. The Sith would arrive shortly and Issic would have to answer to the demon for letting Jango escape. Death would have let Issic avoid such a pleasant conversation.

Jango’s laughter shook the cockpit as he sped out of the hangar bay.

Ethan counted every second of the three minutes between Jango’s escape and Darth Maul’s arrival. His abdomen still ached from Jango’s parting blow, but his fear overrode any need to see a medic.

As the Dark Lord descended down the ramp, Ethan knew any second might be his last.

“The stench of fear fills this sector of space,” Darth Maul said. “I’m guessing it is not from your quarry.”

Ethan and two Mace Windu clones dropped to one knee. Ethan didn’t dare breathe too loudly for fear of the reaction.

“Rise and report,” he ordered.

Ethan slowly got to his feet. Darth Maul dismissed the clones with a glance and he walked down the hallway with Ethan a step behind him.

“We’re still trying to determine how he escaped,” Ethan began.

"That won't bring him back," Darth Maul said and Ethan winced.

"We can track his ship," Ethan offered.

"You haven't already?" Darth Maul countered and Ethan walked another step behind the Dark Lord.

"Our turbolasers managed to damage the ship he stole before he jumped to light-speed. He can't get far," Ethan said.

Darth Maul ignored him.

They were both silent for a time. The turbolift ride up to the bridge was the longest of Ethan's life. He stood beside the Dark Lord and kept one eye on the double-sided lightsaber at his belt. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead as they entered the bridge.

The greatest fear wasn't for his life. That was stolen from him long ago by the Jedi Council. Instead, he was terrified that Darth Maul would deny his restoration to the Force because of this.

"We're close Ethan, so close. You have done well in locating this lone Mandalorian, but then you lost him. We must locate one star among a galaxy of stars that he fled to and then locate this one person out of the billions he might be hiding among," Darth Maul said.

Ethan began to feel a little easier. As long as the Sith Lord kept saying "we" Ethan knew he was safe. His eyes wandered to a transport that was approaching the *Nocturne*.

Darth Maul breathed with confidence. "I have pulled nearly every Jedi clone from the war for this assignment. My master has foreseen a great battle for the weapon and I need every clone I can get."

"Tell me Ethan, why should I honor our agreement? What further use are you to me?" the Dark Lord asked.

Ethan's fears redoubled and his face began to turn a light shade of green. "My Lord, I got you Jedi clones, this ship, I..."

Ethan's voice failed him. Darth Maul continued to stare out into the void that was the never-ending cosmos. The twinkling lights of the stars communicated their mystery and illustrious beauty.

"The clones are fading either from the Jedi or from their own madness. There are barely a thousand left. I can have any of a thousand ships and the Republic would never notice that it had gone missing. My priority is to secure the weapon for my Master. Nothing else matters, and that includes you," Darth Maul growled.

"I will order my men to double th..." Ethan felt the hand of Darth Maul wrap around his throat. His movement was so fast that Ethan didn't have time to blink. The black gloved hand was hardly even a blur as he pulled Ethan within inches of his face.

"I can give orders as easily as you can. If you can't give me one lead, one scrap of information that will lead me to Jango or to my weapon, I will crush you here and now," he whispered.

The bridge crew barely seemed to notice the tall, dark figure lifting Ethan a full foot off the ground. Ethan sputtered and desperately gripped the wrist of the Zabrak Sith Lord.

"The Daetan wants to live? You miserable wretch, you were never a Chosen One except in your own diluted mind. You're simply a spoiled, rich, brat who wants to play with the Force," he spat in Ethan's face.

Insulting his heritage was too much for Ethan to bear. The rage built within him until his focus was aligned perfectly again. For the first time, he felt the Force call to him and he was able to feel it within him for a split second.

In that second, he recalled the images he had pulled from Jango. A planet that was ancient and distant, practically on the edge of the galaxy.

A planet surrounded by so much debris that it was barely visible.

A planet forgotten by all but Time itself.

His eyes snapped back into focus and, for a moment, he felt whole again. Darth Maul gasped and dropped him to the deck. Ethan staggered to his feet, rubbing his neck and gasping for air.

"I know...exactly where the...Mandalorian weapon is," he choked.

Darth Maul's look of shock slowly transformed into a grin.

## Chapter XIII

*"Citizens of the Galactic Republic! Today we have something truly extraordinary to bring you! Oreana T'riek has secured an exclusive interview with our new Supreme Chancellor! This broadcast has been edited at the Chancellor's request for security purposes."*

*"Chancellor Palpatine, it is an honor and a thrill to have you take some time out of your day to speak with me today."*

*"Think nothing of it, my dear. It is vitally important that my administration be as open and forthcoming as possible in these dark and desperate times."*

*"I'm glad you brought up the subject of transparency. I understand that you have some exclusive news you wished to announce personally?"*

*"Some rather sad news, I'm afraid. My office has brought to light convincing and damning evidence that the rebels had help when they assassinated our beloved former Chancellor Valorum."*

*"The Republic was betrayed?"*

*"Yes indeed. It started when several, very brave and patriotic, citizens came forward to report on the strange behavior of Grand Admiral Etherian. I myself didn't want to believe it of my friend at the time, but after the Chancellor told him and me of his peace offer to the rebels, the Admiral was very anxious and rather upset. I embraced, and still embrace, the idea, but he was almost furious. Those citizens testified to the following:"*

*"He said something like the Chancellor was an 'old fool'," -Anonymous Citizen*

*"I heard him say his 'place in history' was set," -Anonymous Citizen*

*"What did your Office do with this incredible testimony?"*

*"Well of course we at once examined the holo-records of that time and place and discovered something truly shocking on this particular record."*

*"If it were up to me? Politicians would be a thing of the past," -Grand Admiral Etherian*



*“Simply shocking, Chancellor!”*

*“I was stunned to say the least, my dear. Grand Admiral Etherian and I have worked together side-by-side for many years. I was on the committee that voted to award him his rank. I insisted a full-scale investigation be launched immediately.”*

*“And what did the Jedi discover?”*

*“The Jedi? My dear I refuse to entrust something of this magnitude to those that could be biased toward him. Many Jedi fight alongside the Admiral, even more support this traitor. It’s even possible that some supported his views about Chancellor Valorum, how are we to know the truth from them? I directed my Office to conduct the investigation directly. I’m sad to say that he gave the rebels the location of the Chancellor’s shuttle and they ambushed it. However, I am pleased to announce to the citizens of the Republic that he is now in custody, awaiting trial.”*

*“Why would he do such a horrible thing?”*

*“My dear, some people will do extraordinary things to attain power.”*

Khian and Padme ate and drank their fill while Tethys looked on in great interest. Normally, accepting refreshment from the galaxy’s most notorious arms and black market dealer might not have been wise, but Padme’s body couldn’t help itself.

“Aren’t we supposed to be discussing whatever deal you have in mind for us?” she asked in-between mouthfuls.

Tethys Aran shook his head. “Never discuss business on an empty stomach.”

Finally, when members of his crew brought out plates of food that Padme declined, Tethys waved one of his four arms to dismiss them.

“Feeling refreshed? Excellent, now we can move on to business,” he said.

Padme interrupted him. “How did Drevin know where to find us?” she asked.

Tethys chuckled to himself. “It really wasn’t that difficult.”

Seeing Khian’s look of disgust he checked himself. “I offer my compliments sir; you hid this charge much better than your first.”

Khian bolted out of his chair, but Padme gripped his arm. “He’s never alone,” she whispered remembering back to the sliding wall on Cerea that hid armed members of his crew.

“I apologize if you took offense,” Tethys said. “I wished to convey what excellent skills you’ve acquired since your first charge on this planet.”

“If you’re trying to anger me, brace for pain, I don’t care how many of your goons are around,” Khian said darkly.

“Oh Alanna’s assassination wasn’t that important, I’m much more fascinated in your desperate attempts to save her,” Tethys smiled.

Khian said nothing, but slowly sat back down. Padme raised an eyebrow.

“You mean, he never told you the heroic tale of Khian The Great, scouring the cosmos for a cure to a poison that he never found? How he traded scars in a ritual to gain a salve that might heal her? How he sacrificed his family’s rather substantial fortune chasing down false leads? Tell her my favorite part, Khian,” Tethys’s grin widened.

“Shut your trap, Tethys. I’ve put her behind me,” Khian said.

“Then perhaps I should tell her why I do not allow oath-breakers at my table and why you must walk away, right now,” Tethys Aran folded all four of his arms and waited.

“The past is just that, the past. I have other concerns now,” Khian said.

Tethys’s eyes darted to Padme and he smiled as Khian stiffened.

“My boy, if I wanted her dead, I wouldn’t have had Drevin pick you two up. She is quite safe as long as she is under my protection,” he smiled.

“I left Alanna to die, I won’t leave Padme,” he said to Tethys.

“As you wish, my boy. I suppose I can bend on this one rule as I am on a deadline,” Tethys laughed. “But it is better if oath-breakers are seen and *not* heard.”

Khian raised his right arm and pulled back the sleeve slowly. Padme’s eyes widened as he showed that the spring-loaded mechanism holding his blade named after Alanna was gone.

“You disposed of a trinket, how nice for you,” Tethys sneered. “Now we can move on to new business.”

Khian made to stand up again, but Padme’s hand gripped his arm firmly. Satisfied, Tethys focused on Padme. She could guess what was in his mind. It was always business with Tethys. There were no accidents or coincidences in meeting a man like this. Drevin sought them out, Tethys knew she was here, and nothing good could come from dealing with him.

“Well I know you’re a lady who appreciates getting right to the point so I’ll spare you the details. I need you to find something for me,” he said.

“What makes you think I can find it? You seem to have quite the extensive network,” she folded her arms.

“You are one hook in the water, my dear, but a valuable one. You demonstrated that you have quite the nose for finding that which is lost. You also have contacts in the Jedi Order, with Chancellor Palpatine, various military officers as high as Tarkin, contacts throughout the Alderaan Senate, and soon the Republic Senate I hear,” he smiled.

“The same Republic that tried to have me killed?” she asked.

“My dear, I think you’ll find that people in high places can make any explanation that they choose. For example, a news release could come out and say you were mistaken for a rebel. Another one might say you even helped the soldiers apprehend dangerous rebels. The HoloNet News Network can be spun like a top,” he laughed.

Padme considered that. It was entirely possible that this was just a case of mistaken identity. Perhaps Khian was wrong in thinking the Republic was trying to kill her.

“What’s more likely? That the Republic was trying to kill you as part of a massive cover-up or that you were seen with a rebel, conversing with a rebel, and that therefore, you must be a rebel?” he asked.

Padme’s expression hardened. “Insurgo was a friend of mine,” she growled.

“Another connection for the HoloNet to make and exploit,” Tethys shrugged.

Padme stared down at the table. Khian’s words rang true to her when he had said that the past is the past. She was coming close to something very big here and focusing on Insurgo would not gain anything. She wanted to mourn, wanted to do something for the person that had been kind to her only to be shot down. Padme

balled her hands into fists before taking a deep breath. Perhaps she could honor Insurgo in a more diplomatic way.

The game was on.

"Before I agree to anything, why do you want this item?" she asked.

"Always the investigator and yet you must already know the answer," he chuckled.

Padme thought for a moment. "It's because someone else wants it and will pay a significant finder's fee?"

"An *obscene* finder's fee," he corrected.

"Assuming your net worth has probably skyrocketed thanks to the war, how 'obscene' is this fee?" she raised an eyebrow.

Tethys only smiled at her.

"Right," she muttered. "Let me ask another question a businessman like you can understand. What's in it for me?" she asked.

"My employer is none other than the Republic itself. It seems that mere legend and rumor has evolved into something quite more spectacular. If we don't find it, those awful rebels will," he replied.

"Well we can't have that happen. They won't pay you," her words dripped with sarcasm.

"Oh they will, just not as much," he grinned.

Padme stopped for a moment. It would make sense that Tethys Aran would be accepting multiple offers for any prize. She decided to push as far as she could her original reason for being here. He had also surrendered a valuable piece of information.

The rebels knew about the weapon too.

"What else have they been paying for?" she asked.

"A little of this, a little of that. They are such poor people after all," he said.

"I can assume this the great and generous Tethys Aran gave food and medicine to the needy and the wretched?" she pressed.

Tethys Aran nodded. "But of course! How can I ignore the plight of millions?"

"For a fee," she muttered under her breath. "What else?"

The large Twi'lek shook his head. "That won't do, little lady. That topic is new business when we're still discussing old business."

"That's my promised price. If you want my help, you must meet it," she pressed. The answer was here, she could smell it.

"And if I withdraw my offer altogether and turn you over to the authorities?" Tethys asked.

"You reminded me that I am a senator from Alderaan and acquaintance to numerous Jedi and the Chancellor. I'll take my chances spinning the HoloNet like a top," she said without blinking.

Tethys Aran threw up all four of his hands. "Very well."

"I have been allowed access to various sections of the depots from time to time. There's a transaction occurring just one hour from now," he said.

Padme's jaw dropped slightly. "You misspoke. You must mean that you stole from the Republic depots from time to time."

Tethys Aran slammed two of his fists on the table. "I will suffer many things at my table from a lovely lady such as you, but calling me a liar and a thief isn't on that list. Patrols were re-routed, surveillance recordings altered, shields lowered, and payments made on a timely schedule. This was *not* done by me."

Padme dared to play her game a little further. "Now I know you're joking. You expect me to believe that someone on Ord Mantell arranged for this to happen?"

Tethys Aran stood up quickly, his massive frame knocking his chair over in the process. "Don't push me young lady. I never said anything about the fools on this miserable planet arranging anything. True, there is much corruption to prey upon, but to move as much cargo as I have requires help from a higher source."

"Someone from the Republic?" she dared to ask.

Tethys Aran smiled and pulled his chair back to the table. He slowly sat down and chuckled as he did so.

"I offer you my compliments, young lady. It isn't just anyone who can rattle me into giving out information like that. Yes, the Republic itself is allowing me to deal to the rebels. The very weapons that are created for our troops to use are also being used by the rebels against us. All for a substantial profit," he smiled.

Padme clicked her tongue. "I want names."

"I want my merchandise," he replied.

"You can't expect me to believe that the Republic is feeding the very rebellion against itself without sources. Is it Tarkin? This seems like his kind of game," she said.

"Marshal Tarkin is too small a fish for this pond, although he is a very loyal customer. No, no," he held up a hand when she started to speak again. "I have answered your question."

"You have done nothing of the kind!" Padme protested.

"You wanted to know what else the rebels were paying for and I told you," he insisted.

Padme resigned herself to her fate. She had played the game well, but now it was played out. However, she now had a new starting place. Insurgo was right, something was not right in the Galactic Republic and someone bigger than Tarkin was involved.

"What is the item?" she asked.

Tethys Aran's face took on a smile that made Padme shiver.

"The item is the greatest Mandalorian weapon of all time that can change the galaxy as we know it. A weapon only a Mandalorian could possibly know the location to," he replied.

Khian's jaw dropped. "What makes you think she would have the slightest clue how to look for a weapon like that?"

Tethys Aran propped two of his four elbows on the table. He leaned forward, locking his eyes on Padme.

Tethys's smile deepened like this was the one question he had been waiting to be asked. "I suggest she look in the mirror."

Anakin's duel ranged back and forth across the courtyard. Sporadic cheers were shortly followed by gasps and then more applause from the audience high above them to match Anakin's dramatic style.

“Patience!” Cin Drallig said as he advanced. “I’ll make a mistake, don’t force it. Probability alone tells you I will give you an opening if you wait long enough.”

The young Jedi retreated again. He dodged and parried, but the waiting was painful. Anakin wanted to attack, wanted to show the Jedi Master what he could do, wanted to dazzle and amaze the watching crowd above him, but the Battlemaster gave him no opening.

Fed up, Anakin countered one of his slashes and swung at the man. Cin Drallig flipped over him and used the Force to knock Anakin off of his feet.

“Awwwww,” the collective crowd groaned.

“You’re choosing not to learn!” he called.

There were at least one hundred students filling the three upper levels, pushing and shoving to get the best vantage point possible.

Anakin whirled around and used the Force to propel himself at incredible speeds back at the Jedi Master. He engaged, but quickly found himself back on the defensive.

“Wait for it, the mistake will come!” Cin taught.

Anakin waited. He parried a flurry of blows and dodged quickly as the blue blade nearly took off his arm at the shoulder. In a split second he had his chance.

Cin Drallig moved his pivot foot half-a-moment too soon and shifted his center of gravity half-a-moment too late. In that moment, Anakin counter-attacked.

The crowd above them cheered as he switched into offense and drove the Jedi Master back across the courtyard. Anakin put an extra flourish into his attack as he heard his name being chanted by his fellow Jedi.

“Don’t want to disappoint your adoring fans, do you? The Force forbid you look foolish in front of the masses?” Cin Drallig taunted.

The Jedi Battlemaster tried to sweep Anakin’s legs from under him, but Anakin leapt out of the way. Cin Drallig drove a shower of pebbles and dust into Anakin while he was in mid-leap. Anakin lost his focus and collapsed to the ground.

“Ego, adulation, praise, push it all away. If you best me in front of a million people or no one, you have still bested me. The accomplishment remains,” he said.

Master Yoda and Obi-Wan had joined them on the ground floor. Yoda nodded to the Jedi Battlemaster in respect, but resumed a tense discussion with Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan seemed to be practically pleading with the small Jedi Master. He frequently pointed to himself and to Anakin. Yoda turned to one side, but Obi-Wan continued to argue. They were too far for Anakin to fully hear the conversation, but one snippet reached his ears.

“Anakin deserves this,” Obi-Wan argued.

Cin Drallig shook his head. “A Jedi’s strength flows from the Force, not from your arms. The muscles in your body are just vessels through which you can channel the Force. Distinguish yourself using the Force and you may be given the world. But if you intertwine yourself with the Force, you will be accepted by the galaxy.”

The Jedi Master resumed his attack, but this time, Anakin felt fear creep into him. Cin Drallig had been holding back his true speed. His blue blade moved so quickly that it seemed to be a blue ball coming toward him instead of a man.

“See all these eyes on you, waiting to see what another fabled Chosen One is really made of and you can’t possibly fail in front of them,” Cin pressed again.

“Another?” Anakin repeated, horrified. The vision from the cave on Illium was fresh in his mind.

Anakin retreated; his fear was redoubled as he looked all around him. His eyes took all the people cheering and eagerly watching him. He couldn’t hope to counter the man’s quick swings. It was the same fear as when Aiya Rios pulled ahead of him during the great race on Tatooine. Then, he had inadvertently ripped the wing off of her Delta-7 starfighter.

Images flashed into his mind of Aiya and the race, then of just Aiya herself. She lay, helpless, on the floor. Begging, pleading for Anakin to stop hurting her. He shook his head roughly, but the image only shifted to Padme on the floor. Begging, pleading for Anakin to stop hurting her. Padme’s face was stained with tears as he raised a black gloved hand toward her. He heard babies screaming in the background, and then Padme’s screams added to it as that gloved hand wrapped around her throat.

“What...what are you seeing?” Cin Drallig asked.

His question snapped Anakin’s focus focused on the hilt of Cin Drallig’s lightsaber. He shut his eyes and threw all of his focus on that one item.

The crowd faded.

Master Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi faded.

The fountain faded.

Padme’s face faded.

Cin Drallig’s lightsaber clattered to the floor and the Jedi Master himself was hurled into a pillar. The pillar cracked and there was a crater in the floor leading from Anakin to the pillar.

Anakin’s eyes snapped open.

The entire courtyard was quiet.

Cin Drallig picked himself up and called his lightsaber back to him. He ignited it once again and beckoned to Anakin.

Anakin shook his head and put his blade back into the folds of his robe.

“I thank you for the lesson, Master. I think I’ve learned what I needed to,” he said.

Master Cin Drallig bowed deeply to the Knight. “You have indeed. The crowd no longer matters, your ego no longer matters, and where your legend lies no longer matters. All that matters is the Force.”

He bowed to Master Yoda and to Obi-Wan before limping out of the courtyard. There were many mutters and mumblings from the students above them.

Obi-Wan shook his hand. “It’s not often someone gets the better of Master Drallig. I believe he made it difficult for Master Yoda once or twice.”

Yoda chuckled. “Understands the Force, he does. Strong, he is.”

“Anakin, our fleet is moving out to Ithor to stop rebel incursions there. They’ve been raiding the shipping route near there and Master Fisto’s Task Force is tied up near Corellia. I’ll be in command of the fleet,” Obi-Wan said.

“Fleet command? But only admirals and Jedi Masters get such an honor,” Anakin observed.

Obi-Wan blushed a little.

“Master, he is not, no honor it is,” Yoda said. “Not enough Jedi, there are, to lead so many new clones and ships. A close eye, will I be keeping on you two.”

"It's only a small fleet anyway, Anakin. Only eleven capital ships and only three of them carry fighters. We won't be doing any heavy fighting, but the supply route must be kept clear. That is our primary goal," Obi-Wan said.

"It will be an honor to serve with you again," Anakin smiled.

"Oh you'll be doing more than that, my friend. My first order will be to place you in charge of all starfighters within the fleet. You'll still fly with your wing, but I want you to run all of the wings," Obi-Wan returned the smile.

Anakin was speechless. He tried to stammer out a thank you, but found that no words would come to him.

"Walk with us, you will," Yoda gestured down the hallway.

Anakin swallowed hard and walked with the two Jedi.

"Anakin, we're growing concerned about a number of things that we would like your input on," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin bowed slightly. "Of course I'd be glad to help in any way I can."

"Rift is growing, within the Jedi Order," Yoda began. "Those that place strong feelings on tradition and the Force and those that choose the quick and easy path."

"You enjoyed great success in the field and that has made you an interstellar figure. I think the audience you just had for a training session shows what kind of influence you wield with the students here. They look up to you, even as a padawan," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin only nodded. He wanted to feel that swell of pride, but he knew that being prideful would change nothing. He had to find a way to put that behind him now.

The aged Jedi Master limped with his cane. "For all the wrong reasons," Yoda said. "Center in the Force, not in conflict, a Jedi must. Seek wisdom, not excitement or glory."

"I think I see where you're going with this," Anakin groaned.

"No one is taking away from your accomplishments," Obi-Wan said. "Quite the opposite. We just want you to not...how do I phrase it?"

"Not celebrate?" Anakin asked.

"Feelings take over, they should not," Yoda said as they neared the hangar bay. "You will be strong with the Force when you are at peace. Accomplished with Cin Drallig, you did, when pushed pride out of your mind."

"Is it so wrong to feel even a little pride?" Anakin asked.

"Cloud your judgment, it does," Yoda said. "Deep commitment to the Force is required."

"We also know that your thoughts still dwell on Padme despite not seeing her," Obi-Wan said. "You only limit yourself when you divide your focus."

Yoda tapped his cane on the floor. "You are not one to lecture on attachments to others."

Obi-Wan looked at the floor sheepishly. The three stopped at the entrance to the hangar bay where a shuttle waited for them.

"To war, you must go. But your ally is the Force. Always there it is, do not ignore it. Be mindful of what you have learned and do not seek great power. Those that do, will never find it. Those that do not, will find that power seeks them," Yoda said.

"I'll try, Master Yoda. I really do want to show what a great Jedi I can be," Anakin bowed.

Obi-Wan placed a hand on Anakin's shoulder. "You have a good deal of work ahead of you, my friend. Go ahead of me, I will join you shortly."

Anakin bowed once more to the two Jedi and walked toward a nearby shuttle. As he walked, whispers followed and heads turned to look at him.

"Much trust, I place in you. A dangerous gamble, this is," Yoda said.

"If I don't elevate him, Palpatine will do it again without our approval. When he does, Anakin looks like a hero and we look like we're holding him back," Obi-Wan said.

"Complete the training, he must. When over the war is, see to it personally, I will," Yoda's face was set.

"I can train him, master," Obi-Wan said with an edge in his voice.

"Much training do you require as well, young one," Yoda replied. "Not enough time, there is."

Obi-Wan knelt beside Yoda. "The war can't last forever. Once it ends, he'll learn that he can be great in peace as well as war."

"Meaningless, greatness through war is," Yoda muttered.

On the shuttle ride, Obi-Wan closed his eyes and tried to meditate. He always found it difficult to do so with Anakin nearby. Instead of taking the next available shuttle, his friend had decided to wait for his master.

"Obi-Wan, what did Yoda mean when he said you weren't to lecture me on attachments?" Anakin asked.

"It's a very long story and we have a short shuttle ride to my flagship," he replied with his eyes still closed.

"I think we've been through enough together for you to tell me what this is all about," Anakin prodded.

"What we've done has nothing to do with her," Obi-Wan winced as soon as he said it.

"You can trust me, Obi-Wan," Anakin raised his right hand and grinned.

"Yes, there was such a time when I felt...attached...to someone. It was during the time when I had left the Jedi Order and I..."

Anakin's eyes grew wide. Obi-Wan cleared his throat loudly.

"Yes, I left the Order for a short time. After I had trained with Master Yoda, I was a padawan for Qui-Gon Jinn. One of our assignments got us involved in a civil war on Melida/Daan. The world had been at war with itself for so long that the two factions could not agree on what to call their planet so the Republic recognized both names," he began.

"There was a girl, Cerasi, who was a ranking leader of the younger faction. Her brother, Nield, was the real leader of their faction. I became enamored with her, their movement, and I stayed behind to fight with them. Qui-Gon disapproved and so I left the Order," he continued.

"What happened to her?" Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan turned to look out the window into space. The shuttle began to decelerate as they neared their docking station.



"They won their fight and the planet finally had peace, although at a terrible cost. Cerasi refused to carry arms any longer. She shunned the building of monuments to celebrate their victory and also voiced against tearing down the old monuments. She recognized the strength in remembering and even honoring her heritage, despite the war," he said.

"She believed you should work for peace, not fight and die for it. Her brother strongly disagreed and formed a 'New History' movement. He wanted to obliterate every shred of history prior to his victory. Every statue, every piece of currency, every city name, every scrap of paper on the entire planet," he paused.

"I'm guessing you and Cerasi didn't agree with that," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan smiled at his friend. "You could say that. Tensions rose and eventually a skirmish broke out at the Hall of Records between a New History Squad and a few loyalists. We both went there to try and stop any violence from breaking out. She died in my arms that night after a sniper took her from me."

It was silent in the shuttle for a few moments. "So of course Yoda's right when he said I'm not exactly the one to talk to you about attachments. Although, I think maybe he mentioned it for a reason. So I could tell you about the dangers, the heartache, the pain that I felt. Those that we love will leave us one day and move on to become one with the Force. It cannot be stopped."

Anakin said nothing.

"You feel for Padme, I knew it on Alderaan, I know it now. Anakin I must warn you, it will lead to suffering someday. If you fall in battle, she will feel it. If she dies, you will feel it. The Force, however, is everlasting," he said.

Anakin shifted in his seat.

"We're nearly here. Clear your mind, Anakin, you have six wings of pilots to command and they are looking to you for leadership and guidance. Remember what Master Yoda said and focus on the Force. I'll see you on the bridge," Obi-Wan unstrapped his harness and walked to the exit.

Anakin sat, still strapped in, for some time. He didn't "feel" for Padme, he madly loved her. She consumed his thoughts and enraptured his heart. His mind dwelled on the vision he had in the crystal cave on Illium.

*"This path you've chosen for yourself will only lead to the destruction of everyone around you,"* the sandy haired figure had said. Anakin shook his head, but another piece of that vision haunted him.

*"You will probably even welcome the darkness, and that's when you'll lose her forever,"* the phrase pounded in his head.

"Get out!" Anakin shouted and placed his head in his hands. He tried to meditate to clear his thoughts, but Padme remained. She was so beautiful, so determined, there was such fire within her.

He would never lose her.

"Commander?" a voice called.

Anakin looked up to see the shuttle pilot standing next to him.

"We've been docked for an hour now, is everything okay?" he asked.

Anakin straightened up and unstrapped his harness. "I was just meditating, that's all."

The pilot's face showed the questions he had in his mind. "Very well, sir. The *RSS Knight's Valor* will be departing soon. I imagine you'd like to be on the ship when it leaves?"

Anakin nodded politely and hurried off to take up his new command.

## Chapter XIV

"The Mandalorians are gone, long gone!" Padme exclaimed.

Tethys Aran waved his hand. "Yes, I know the legend already. Death, destruction, fear, Revan, end of life as we know it, et cetera. Trust me, this legend is true."

"The Mandos were tremendous warriors, but when Revan pressed them too hard, they put their faith in a handful of their finest minds to create an unstoppable doomsday weapon. Unfortunately they never got the chance to use it. I want you to find it for me," he continued.

"You're insane. I'm from Alderaan, I am *not* a Mandalorian!" Padme's hands tightened on the arms of the chair.

Tethys chuckled to himself. "After three thousand years, blood and family have become so intermixed that who can tell just by looking? Even I had myself tested just on the off-chance my great-great-great-great-grand-whatever had once been a Mando."

Khian sat up straighter. "How can you possibly suspect that she's a Mandalorian?"

"She's smart, cunning, survived an attack from a Sith Lord, is rather more aggressive than most females, and a rather strong sense of duty and loyalty. All traits the Mandos have," Tethys said.

"She's no more a Mandalorian than I am," Khian said with a grim face.

"Oh believe me," Tethys waved his arm. "We took that into consideration."

The door slid open and Drevin walked in with a hypo-syringe and a small computer. He set both down on the table before applying an antiseptic sealant to both of his hands.

Khian stood up quickly. "Absolutely not!"

Tethys shrugged his massive shoulders. "A single drop from each of you will suffice."

Padme didn't move. Her eyes remained locked with Tethys Aran. Was it possible? If she held the answer to such a revelation in her own blood, then wasn't it her duty to know?

"I'm a Planetary Senator, not a bounty hunter. I have duties to attend to," she insisted.

Tethys saw right through her. "Don't patronize me. Your duty is to the Republic and to the truth; I thought we covered that on Cerea? The weapon is real and I'm trying to secure it for the Republic. If you'd rather the rebels get their hands on it, that's fine by me. I get paid either way."

Silence flooded the room. Padme sat back in her chair and pressed the tips of her fingers together. She had to know the truth. She had to know who she really was.

Padme blew a tuft of hair out of her face. "Fine, one drop only."

Tethys motioned with one of his hands and Drevin held her arm to the table. Khian leapt toward them and pried her arm away. The high-pitched sound of charging blasters filled the air. Drevin's hands dropped to the table and two blasters popped out of his wrists where the hands used to be. Padme put a hand to her mouth when she saw Drevin's hands hit the table.

"Okay, I think the time to settle down has arrived. I'm afraid I don't have the time to clean blood off of the walls," Tethys said.

Padme looked up at her protector. "Khian, really, I want to do this. I need to know!"

Khian shook the hair out of his face. "Then I'm going first."

Tethys applauded with all four of his hands. "How noble!"

Drevin did not withdraw his blasters, but the hands crept along the table on their own. One hand dragged the hypo-syringe to Khian's outstretched hand. He didn't flinch when the syringe pricked him.

Padme shuddered in revulsion as both hands moved toward her. One held her wrist down while the other dragged the hypo-syringe along the steel surface. The hand flipped the syringe onto Padme's palm before pressing the only button on the device.

Padme winced as she felt a slight prick and a single drop of her blood was sucked into the syringe. Both of Drevin's hands dragged the syringe away toward the computer. One hand returned, dragging the antiseptic sealant with it.

"We are civilized, after all," Tethys smiled.

Padme covered her palm in the sealant. She flexed the hand a few times before pulling it back toward her. Drevin's expression hadn't changed. Rarely had Padme seen such a lethal look on a man's face as one blaster was trained on her, the other on Khian. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

"Stand down, Drevin. They are our guests after all," he smiled.

Drevin's face resumed its normal, jovial, appearance. The blasters vanished and the hands re-attached themselves to his wrists with an audible clicking noise. He flashed a "thumbs up" to Khian before he sat in front of the computer.

A moment later, he shook his head. Tethys sighed as he stood up from the table. "A shame, I had such high hopes. I suppose you'll just have to live with the knowledge that you're just a senator from Alderaan with breathtaking beauty."

He paused a moment and Khian cleared his throat.

"Oh, same to you, I suppose," Tethys remarked.

"So I'm of no use to you?" Padme asked.

Tethys leaned on the back of the chair. "Of course you're still useful, just not *tremendously* useful. You can still hunt the weapon down for the glory of the Galactic Republic."

Padme sat back in her chair and thought. If she reported this to the Republic and let the military take control, could they be trusted not to use it? If Insurgo was correct and Palpatine was not the man she thought...

"If I'm going to do this for you, I need to know what the weapon does," she said.

Tethys smiled. "That's the best part. The weapon has the ability to stop the rotation of a planet almost instantly."

Khian nearly fell out of his chair. "That's not possible," he breathed.

“Leave it to the Mandos to come up with the most brilliant of options. Why bother with a fleet, flight crews, supplies, spare parts, maintenance, all that expense, when you deploy this weapon and destroy the planet their government is on?” he laughed.

“You said it stopped the rotation of the planet, not destroyed it,” she said.

Tethys rolled his eyes and stroked his lekku. “My dear, what do you think happens when you direct enough energy at an object that has a mass of *five sextillion tons* and stop it from rotating? You don’t think that will rip the planet apart?”

Padme shook her head. “If I find this weapon, I’ll see to it that it is destroyed. No one person and no government should ever possess this much power. I certainly will not allow you to auction it off to the highest bidder.”

Tethys Aran stood up very slowly. He rose to his full height and towered over her. Khian put a hand on her arm. “Young lady, think very carefully on your situation. You’re on a planet that causes your sole protector to doubt himself at every turn. Your only contact to the rebels is dead and the Republic isn’t one hundred percent sure which side you’re on. I am your only link to getting off this rock and you want to destroy the one thing I’m looking for?”

Padme matches his stare and spoke with no hesitation. “That’s exactly what my mission is going to be.”

His fists tensed and he raised two of them in exasperation. “Well I hope the rebellion is more forgiving than the Republic...or me.

He pressed a button on his console four members of Tethys’s crew walked in, all carrying blaster rifles. Khian’s hand flew to a blaster at his side, but didn’t get much further than that.

“Padme Amidala. You and your protector...” Tethys gestured to Khian. His arm tightened on Padme’s arm while his other hand twitched near the blaster.

“...can leave!”

Padme looked at him skeptically. “You’ll just let us leave? I just said my mission was to stop you from obtaining your weapon and the biggest sale of your life and you’re okay with that?”

Tethys feigned shock. “My lady you wound me! It’s not good business to make corpses out of beautiful young ladies. You may go and may you live a long and meaningful life.”

He waved them out with all four arms. Khian pulled Padme by the arm and together they walked back toward the hangar bay.

“Now what?” Khian whispered as they passed Drevin Setts.

“We find a way to get off Ord Mantell. We have work to do,” she whispered back as Drevin waved joyfully at them.

“So we’re not going to the Republic?” he asked.

“You really think we can trust them to do the right thing? We’re not even sure the Republic authorities on this world won’t arrest us for being rebel collaborators,” she countered.

“What about trying to get a message back to Alderaan? Or Coruscant?” Khian asked.

Padme shook her head. “The weapon must be destroyed, nothing else matters.”

The hangar bay closed loudly behind them, causing Padme to jump. She stared out into the landscape and took a deep breath.

“So if the Republic is trying to kill us, how do we get out of here?” he asked.

“Our only option is the rebels,” she replied and began walking toward the nearest supply depot. It loomed on a hill in the distance and seemed to beckon to her.

“I don’t think they’ll be thrilled to see you either, considering what happened to their operative,” Khian said.

“I don’t plan on asking them for a ride,” Padme replied and pulled her hood up to block some of the wind.

“I’m so confused. What are you going to ask them?” Khian ran a hand through his hair.

She patted him on the shoulder. “Stowaways never ask for anything.”

The depot itself was a small city of nothing but warehouses containing military supplies of all shapes and sizes. The warehouses were ten feet high and laid out in a grid like pattern with wide avenues between the buildings.

Padme wasn’t surprised to see several holes in the old fence already there. Ord Mantell wasn’t known for law and order and the war had breathed new life into the black market. Twenty minutes later, she and Khian crouched against the wall of a warehouse and peeked around its corner.

“The arms deal is going down right now,” Padme whispered. “We have to find some way to sneak aboard that transport. Undoubtedly the rebels have a ship or two in orbit. Once we’re on the next leg of their journey, we’ll arrange transport through more legal channels.”

“This is way too easy,” Khian whispered. “Tethys let us go, the deal is going on within walking distance of his place. I’m telling you, this whole thing smells like a five hundred year old wookiee.”

“You have a better idea? I’m all ears,” Padme replied.

Khian gritted his teeth, but said nothing.

A few more minutes passed as they observed the rebels. “There’s a brief gap when the rebels go back into the depot to load up. No one is watching the transport. I figure we have sixty seconds to get on board without being seen,” Khian whispered.

Padme blew a lock of hair out of her face. Sixty seconds to cover two hundred meters and not be seen while sprinting because your life depended on it.

“Now!” she hissed and ran as fast as her legs would carry her. They crossed the first twenty-five meters and Padme felt confident they would make it. The next fifty meters tired her. Her legs ached and cried out with the next twenty-five meters.

“Down!” Khian shouted from behind her.

Instead of diving out of the way, Padme turned around. She saw the three Low Altitude Assault Transports heading directly for them.

Their cannons fired.

Padme screamed.

Anakin was having the time of his life. His focus on the Force was growing every day and he was now begging Obi-Wan for lessons instead of vice-versa. His thirst for knowledge grew and he was becoming the Jedi he hoped he would be. Now he could finally be the man that Padme would be proud of.

The lessons from his masters had struck home with Anakin Skywalker.

His Delta-7 *Aethersprite* nimbly picked its way around the rebel capital ships and he blasted three more fighters out of the stars. Evading the turbolasers from the large vessels was all too easy.

"Delta Wing, a group of starfighters has broken off from the main group. If they're escorting bombers, I'd like to see them smashed before they even scratch the paint on General Kenobi's flagship," Anakin called.

His radar showed twenty green dots peeling off and harassing the red dots that were off to one side. Anakin grinned as he squeezed the trigger, but not because of the glory of war. It was thrilling to command such fine pilots.

A transmission from Obi-Wan crackled over his headset. *"Anakin, I'm going to swing around to the far side and flank them. I'm leaving two ships here to hold their attention. Clear out any bombers in the area."*

Anakin keyed in his acknowledgment before opening his comm channel. "Charlie wing, stay with the two nearest frigates. Alpha and Bravo, you're with me. Let's clear out the trash!"

His two wings abruptly changed direction and soared toward the area where Obi-Wan's new attack would begin. They used the "Jedi Pincer" tactic Anakin had concocted in a previous battle. Alpha soared two kilometers higher than the rebels while Bravo flew two kilometers lower. They flew into the mass of starfighters at a forty-five degree angle and the carnage ensued.

Anakin's grin turned into a chuckle as his mass of fighters unleashed a devastating field of fire and rebel fighters and bombers exploded before them.

"Well done!" Obi-Wan said over the intercom to all the fighters. "Our bombers are launching now and we're moving in to end this. You may dock your fighters when you're ready, Anakin."

"You have made me proud this day. Head for home, the first round is on me!" Anakin called out and received so many raucous cheers in response that he had to turn off his headset.

Padme's scream pierced him from across the sector.

Anakin clutched at his heart and his fighter lurched sideways. He didn't just hear Padme's scream, he felt it beyond his body and bones. As clear as his focus was with Master Cin Drallig, there was nothing clearer in Anakin's mind than this. Padme's horrified face, her scream, the explosions all around her; everything about Padme was locked into Anakin's core. The call through the Force meant one thing and one thing only to him.

Anakin had heard Padme scream before. Together, they had gone through more than a few life-threatening situations. But this was different. She had called out to him and the Force had amplified her plea. Every Force-attuned fiber in his being that the Jedi had sharpened led him to one conclusion.

He had to get to Padme.

Anakin fired up his afterburner and blew past five of his pilots to land inside the carrier. His astromech droid yelled out a warning about overheating the engines, but Anakin ignored it. The instant his fighter hit the deck, he leapt out and began running to the bridge. The fighter crashed into the wall on the far side, but he used the Force to propel him four decks away by the time it came to a screeching stop.

“Captain, set a new course. Take me to Ord Mantell immediately,” Anakin ordered.

The captain of his fighter carrier, the *RSS Republic's Glory*, turned in his chair and smiled smugly.

“On whose authority?” he asked.

Anakin grabbed the captain by the front of his tunic and pulled him out of his chair. “The authority I have over your life, now move!”

The captain’s resolve faded as fast as the color from his face. “N...n...navigator, move us away from the battlefield. Set nav coordinates for Ord Mantell.”

Anakin moved to his usual spot on the bridge in front of the largest view port and waited. He was coming, if she could just hold out. Panic crept into his mind, but he shoved it away. The only thought in his mind was Padme.

“Why isn’t this bucket moving?” Anakin shouted across the bridge.

“Nav computer plotting the course now, sir,” the navigator timidly responded.

The captain touched Anakin on his shoulder. “General Kenobi for you, sir.”

Anakin ignored the officer for a moment. It took incredible effort to tear himself away. A holo-image of Obi-Wan waited at the communication station, his holo-foot tapping impatiently.

“Is there a party I wasn’t invited to?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Padme’s on Ord Mantell and her life is in danger. I have to get to her!” he replied.

“Anakin, we’re still mopping up here and we the fleet doesn’t have authorization to leave the area. Contact Master Fisto and ask him to task a ship to pick her up,” Obi-Wan reasoned.

He shook his head. “By the time the communication reaches him, he makes the decision to go, figures out which ship or ships to send, and they get underway it may be too late!”

“I cannot move the entire fleet until this action is finished,” Obi-Wan insisted.

“Then I’ll take a starfighter with a light-speed jump-ring and go myself,” Anakin declared.

Obi-Wan was silent for a moment.

“She’s in danger, Obi-Wan. Any minute we delay might be her last,” he pleaded.

Anakin’s eyes darted to the door leading back to the hangar bay when Obi-Wan didn’t answer right away.

“We’ll both go. I give you permission to take the *Republic's Glory* and head for Ord Mantell. I shall follow with the rest of the fleet as soon as I’m done here,” Obi-Wan nodded to him.

“What about Master Fisto’s orders about the fleet not leaving the area?” Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan’s smile turned into a grin. “What are friends for?”

Khian tackled Padme and the two collided into a warehouse door as the LAAT’s soared a few meters over them. The cannons from the low-flying vehicles erupted as they passed overhead. She rubbed her back and winced as Khian slowly stood back up. He had a gash in his head that matted the thick black hair. Padme looked at the wound and then the blood smear on the door in horror.

“Just another scar, add it to the list,” he said.

The rebels were firing back at the LAAT's, but their small rifles had little effect. Several of them were unloading much larger guns while the rest tried to get all of the cargo onboard.

“Damn, they're going to make a stand,” Khian swore. “I thought the Republic was collaborating with the arms sales?”

“Tethys sold us out! He's hoping we'll be killed in the crossfire!” Padme shouted as three LAAT's made another pass, firing as they went.

“Remind me to file a complaint with his customer service division!” Khian said over the noise of gunfire.

The rebel transport took several hits and Padme worried that they would never get off this world. The tri-pod mounted cannons the rebels had unloaded unleashed a vicious barrage that struck one LAAT and smoke poured from an engine.

All three ships set down in a nearby intersection of buildings. One landed on the roof and began deploying snipers. Troops poured out of the other two before the LAAT's took off again and began strafing the area.

Padme shook from the concussion as a rocket exploded nearby. Now she wondered if she would ever get off the planet alive. Khian covered her with his body, but it was only a matter of time before either the firepower from the ships or the blasts from the troops ended her life.

Khian pulled her to her feet. “We have to get out of here. We'll go back down the hill and get back to Tethys's hangar bay. Maybe we can stowaway with him or hotwire another ship; anything's better than this!” he shouted over another explosion.

Padme nodded. It was a long shot that Tethys was still in the solar system, but it was the only chance they had left. Before they ran, Khian took her hands in his and looked directly into her eyes. “I love you, Padme Amidala,” he said.

Padme was speechless. Anakin's face lingered in her mind, but this was the singular moment she had been hoping for with Khian. A lull in the fighting cued them to make their escape. She could only nod in response as a tear ran down her cheek.

Together, they took off at a dead run.

They didn't make it more than three steps.

Seeing two people run from a hiding place got the attention of both the Republic and the rebels. Rockets and blaster bolts landed all around the two. The blast from a near-miss propelled Khian into a depot's wall. Padme was blown sideways and landed back in the street, the wind knocked out of her.

She gasped for air and clutched at her sides. Padme stared through the dust and haze the explosions kicked up and saw Khian trying to get to his feet.

He was bleeding heavily from his forehead now and he coughed up blood onto the paved street. Khian managed to get to all fours and looked at Padme. Despite being on the other side of the street, his arm reached out for her. Khian's eyes rolled back into his head and he fell to the ground.

Padme tried to go to him, but her ribs, her legs, her head, everything hurt. Even breathing caused her to grimace in pain.

She rolled onto her back and stared up at the sky. Its light pink tinge seemed a pleasant sight to look at if it was the last thing she would ever see.



She also saw several Z-95 Headhunters soar overhead. She chuckled to herself at the thought of the overkill the Republic was using for such a small time raid on their supply depots.

One Headhunter made a daring landing right there in the avenue. Its wings scraped against the warehouse doors as they barely fit in between the depot buildings.

Padme assumed it must have been the concussion playing tricks with her mind, because she thought she saw someone leap out of the cockpit and land just next to her.

It almost looked like...

"Anakin..." her broken voice choked out.

Without missing a beat, he scooped her up in his arms and raced to the rebel transport. The Force obliterated the cannons guarding the entrance ramp and soldiers, rebel and Republic alike, flew into the air. Padme never felt any of the typical bumps or jarring movements associated with running through a combat zone. She felt perfectly at ease and let unconsciousness take her.

The roar of the Z-95 Headhunter's engine freed Khian from the grip of unconsciousness. His head throbbed and when he reached up to touch it, his entire hand came back red with blood. His entire left side hurt where the blast's shockwave had hit him. The other side hurt from hitting the building.

It hurt to breathe. It hurt to think about breathing.

Padme!

Khian quickly looked over at where she fell and his body made him regret such a fast and sharp movement. His physical pain was surpassed by emotional anguish when he saw someone scoop up Padme in his arms and sprint toward the rebel transport.

No, he didn't sprint. Normal people sprint. This man was a blur in the dust.

No, not a man, a Jedi.

Khian struggled to move, to crawl, to do anything to get to Padme, but the pain was too intense. He was able to turn himself just enough to see the Jedi explode through the rebels and board the transport.

He flopped onto his back and gave into the pain. He wanted to cry out in anguish and frustration. Ord Mantell had seen him lose another love, although this was not to death, but to something far worse. His fading vision gave him just enough to see the rebel transport take off and see the Jedi take his beloved away. The Jedi had cost him one love and now stole another from his heart while leaving him to die.

No, not just a Jedi.

Anakin Skywalker.

Palpatine fretted anxiously in the Chancellor's Executive Tower. He knew that his victories were making him overconfident and reckless. Every time he advanced the plan, he took greater risks. He was almost daring someone to catch on. But every risk yielded a greater reward. Every setback he faced brought him closer to total victory.

But time, once his ally, was now his enemy.

He continued pacing in his office until the holo-imager on his communicator alerted him to an incoming transmission.

Palpatine breathed a sigh of relief and slammed his hand on the activation key. “I trust you have good news?”

His face turned into a grimace when Master Yoda’s image appeared.

“Expecting someone else, you were?” he asked.

Palpatine had to expend some effort in twisting his face back into his practiced, diplomatic smile.

“Master Yoda, yes I was indeed. I’m eager for news from the front of course.” He didn’t exactly lie, but if anyone understood half-truths, it was a Jedi Master.

“Insisted we lead the fight, you did. Many, many Jedi, it has cost. If information on the war you seek, come to us, you should,” he smiled at the Chancellor.

Palpatine fought to keep the bile out of his throat.

“Was there something I could do for you,” he bluntly asked. “I am rather busy.”

Yoda’s ears perked up. “Made progress on the peace talks, you have?”

Palpatine silently cursed himself. Too many lies made it hard to keep track of them all.

“Very little, I’m afraid. The rebels do not seem eager to end the conflict,” he said.

“Interesting,” Yoda leaned on his cane. “Much progress, have I made.”

Palpatine’s eye twitched. “You don’t say.”

“Recommend another meeting of the Committee for Galactic Security, I do. Much to discuss, there is,” Yoda’s smile widened.

Palpatine had to fight to maintain his control. Did Yoda know? Was he going to expose Palpatine before the committee? Worse, was he really that close to achieving peace? What he needed was a distraction. Something so large that would divert this Jedi’s attention away from himself.

He needed Darth Maul to secure that damn weapon.

“You have been very busy,” Palpatine flashed his most practiced smile to try and appease the Jedi.

“Convene tomorrow, we should,” Yoda pressed.

“Quite impossible,” Palpatine dismissed. “My schedule will not allow the time.”

Yoda’s holo-image poked his holo-cane at Palpatine.

“Find the time, you will.”

## Chapter XV

Anakin knew he was far from safety, but his mind was focused as it never had been before.

Padme was hurt, but he didn’t know how badly. As hard as it was to take his mind away from her, Padme wasn’t the highest priority at the moment.

Two LAAT’s were trailing him. Anakin tried to wave them off, but the damage to the transport’s communication system was too great.

“Climb, climb” he coaxed the transport on as the engines groaned in protest. The LAAT’s fired at him, but they had to back down as Anakin pushed his borrowed ship into the stratosphere.

He breathed a sigh of relief and eased off on the strained vessel. He could finally spare a moment to go back and check on Padme.

She was resting on the floor of the cargo bay. Anakin winced when he saw the bruises on her arms and sides. A flash of anger rode over him like a wave. He wanted to go back down there and rip every soldier apart regardless of which side they were on for what they had done to her.

He shook his head and calmed himself. As Master Drallig had taught, hurting them would not help her. Anakin reached out into the Force and was grateful when he sensed no serious internal injuries on her. Despite the hellish firestorm she had gone through, she came away mostly unscathed.

Anakin took off his cloak, wrapped it into a tight bundle, and placed it under her head. She moaned softly as he did so and he held her hand in his. This was the first time Anakin had seen her in more than a year and she looked more beautiful than ever, despite her injuries.

A warning leapt to his consciousness and he raced back to the bridge. He strapped back in moments before the ship's alarms also sounded.

They had left the atmosphere and Anakin saw them heading straight toward three rebel frigates. The *RSS Republic's Glory* was already engaged and Anakin felt a sense of pride as he saw his starfighters pour out of the hangar bay.

His heart dropped when he saw the ship's massive turbolasers turn on him and open fire.

"Oh come on!" Anakin groaned. "My own ship?"

He turned the transport violently to one side and headed for the rebel frigates. With any luck, he could use their bulky frames as cover until he could think of a way out of this mess.

His luck turned sour when the rebels also began firing on him.

"By the Force!" he muttered and jerked the ship around again. He inverted the transport and maneuvered his way through the gauntlet of red and green laser blasts. His mind opened to the Force and his instincts guided him through the barrage with none of them finding their mark.

"This is pointless," he said. "I can't go to the Republic and I can't go to the rebels. When Obi-Wan shows up with the rest of the fleet, even I won't be able to dodge them forever."

He heard Padme groan from the back of the vessel and Anakin knew there was only one option left to him. He activated the ship's nav computer and began calculating a light-speed jump back to Alderaan. Padme would be safe on her own world.

With only seconds left, Anakin sat back and breathed a sigh of relief. The ship oriented itself toward Alderaan when the Force called out to him. He sat bolt upright and jerked the flight controls hard a heartbeat before Obi-Wan's fleet jumped into the system.

And the fleet had jumped directly in his path.

The nav computer finished its timing and Anakin's transport jumped into light-speed at a completely different trajectory than he intended. As the stars turned into star lines, he had no idea where they would end up.

Or how many pieces they would end up in.

“What was that?” Obi-Wan asked as his cruisers opened up a devastating barrage on the three rebel frigates orbiting Ord Mantell.

“We’re not too sure, sir. For split second, it seemed that there was some kind of ship there, but it jumped into hyperspace at almost the same instant we arrived,” the science officer stated.

“Could you get a read on it?” Obi-Wan asked.

The officer shook his head. “It was barely there long enough for us to even read if it was rebel or Republic.”

Obi-Wan sat and thought hard for a moment. He thought he felt...something, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was.

“Try to calculate its flight path. We’ll try to catch up to them after we finish here and pick up Anakin and Padme,” Obi-Wan ordered.

The ship nagged at his mind. Something wasn’t right.

The first thing Khian remembered was waking up in a bacta tank. He groggily blinked through the blue liquid to see several droids and medical personnel wandering between his tank and others around him. As he adjusted to his new environment, thoughts and memories erupted.

Attacked. Padme. Lost.

Skywalker...

Khian thrashed around the bacta tank in fury. The boy had played hero once again, but this time the hero was unstable and dangerous. Padme might actually be in greater danger now than ever before.

He pounded on the glass, despite the nagging pain he felt in his ribs and shoulders. A droid shuffled over to him, then turned and motioned to a doctor.

The doctor carried a tablet with him and examined it before looking at Khian. The doctor just shook his head and began to walk away.

Khian pounded on the tank again. The doctor turned back to Khian, looking very annoyed and held up three fingers to Khian before pointing to his tablet. When Khian again showed he didn’t understand by raising his arms -once again in pain- the doctor pressed the tablet against the glass. The data transferred to a readout display on the inside of Khian’s tank.

*Subject: Khian No-Last-Name*

*Injuries sustained during combat: Six broken ribs, one collapsed lung, severe laceration to head, various contusions, hair-line fracture to right clavicle.*

*Duration in bacta treatment: Twenty Hours*

*Time remaining: Three hours, fourteen minutes.*

Khian pushed back from the readout and tried to sigh, but the breathing tube made it difficult. He would lose an entire day trying to get back to Padme. He knew from previous experience that arguing with doctors was pointless. Once you get in the bacta tank, you couldn’t get out again until the computer’s timer elapsed.

Khian used those three hours to plan. He needed to get back to Padme.

And may the Force forgive anyone who got in his way.

The sky wasn't pink anymore, it was grey. Padme blinked her eyes hard to try and focus on the new sky. It was a steel grey with rivets and...did the sky have rivets? She didn't think it did, but thinking hurt too much. When she tried to sit up, her body strongly protested.

Padme settled for groaning.

Where was she? Vague flashes came back to her as she became more lucid. Rockets, running, fear, pain, and someone carrying her.

Who? She turned her head, but didn't see Khian. Her memory flashed again of a broken and bleeding body that had been slammed into a warehouse.

Padme's eyes watered at the thought and her grief overwhelmed her. Was he dead?

With grim determination, she managed to prop herself up on her elbows and look around. She was surrounded by cargo containers in the rebel transport. The sky outside was light, but not the light pink sky from Ord Mantell.

"I was starting to wonder when you would stop snoring," a voice called and her eyes lit up.

She turned just enough to see Anakin was sitting on top of a step-ladder leading up to the bridge behind them. He was grinning from ear to ear and just seeing him made Padme's heart thunder in her chest.

"I wasn't sure if I would ever see you again," she said.

"The Force would never allow us to be kept apart forever," he replied and hopped off of the ladder.

He had grown taller and his shoulders had broadened since she saw him last. His sandy colored hair hung around his face and his padawan's braid was gone. He looked physically tired, but energized at the same time at seeing her awake.

She knew at once that she would never want anything else but him.

"Where are we?" she croaked.

Anakin opened a small bottle and held her head tenderly while he poured water into her mouth. Her body gratefully accepted the cool liquid and every drop helped refresh her.

"I don't have the first idea. I had to make a rather unconventional maneuver to avoid greeting Obi-Wan by smashing into the bridge. He's rather proud of his flagship and I don't think he would like that," Anakin said.

Padme sat up a little more. "We're stranded?"

He shook his head sadly. "I can tinker with mechanics, but I have my limits when it comes to overhauling an interstellar transport. We suffered some hull damage from the fight on Ord Mantell and it got worse when I half-landed, half-crashed here. Worse still, our communications are shot.

"Khian!" she gasped. "Where's Khian? Did you get to him? Is he okay?"

Anakin's eyes narrowed and he folded his arms.

"He was right there with me, did you see him? I have to know if he's alive!"

Padme tried moving some more, but she winced and clutched at her side.

"I'm fine too," Anakin grumbled.

Padme's expression softened. "Oh Anakin, I'm sorry. It's just that Khian and I..." her voice caught in her throat. With Anakin here, Khian seemed so much farther away from her heart.

"I didn't see him. I was a little busy avoiding enemy fire while carrying you to safety," Anakin's face darkened.

Padme smiled at him. "I'm forever grateful, kind sir. Really Anakin, I'm so happy to see you again."

"I don't know how grateful you might be in a few years when we're still stuck here," he gestured around the transport.

"So you're saying we don't know where we are, no one else knows where we are, and we can't call for help or take off?" she asked.

"Now you can finally get away from the hustle and bustle of senatorial life," he smiled.

Padme was stunned. "How can you be so cheery?" she asked.

Anakin's smile held. "Because I'm with you, what else matters?"

She struggled to her feet. Everything was still sore, but from what she could tell, she was mostly un-injured. She turned around and quickly stumbled. She clutched at her side and gasped in pain.

Anakin ran to her and held her close. "One thing at a time," he laughed.

"It...hurts..." Padme said between gasps and placed his hand on her side.

Anakin closed his eyes for a moment. She felt a strange sensation, almost like an electrical tingling running through his hand to hers and from her hand to her side. The tingle continued through to her ribs, her chest, her neck, down to her legs, until her whole body was filled with the feeling.

She gasped suddenly and took her first deep breath since waking up. Padme looked at Anakin with amazement and could only stammer out a few, unintelligible words.

All of her pain was completely gone.

"You are a true Jedi," she said when her voice returned.

Anakin looked down at his hands. "Something about this place, this planet, it energizes me. I wish I could explain it better than that, but I feel so alive!"

They both slowly turned to look at the planet outside the ship. "Where in the stars are we?" she asked.

Together, they walked down the ramp to look upon their surroundings. The planet was completely barren. There wasn't a tree, a bush, any undergrowth, or even a blade of grass.

They were marooned on a dead planet.

There was atmosphere, and thunder rumbled in the distance, yet nothing grew. It was the definition of a wasteland. The one feature that stood out among the lifeless desert was the shimmer of a lake at the very edge of the horizon.

Padme shivered when the realization hit her. Anakin put his arm around her and she felt safe again. Being close to him seemed to realize a lifelong dream of being secure and never again facing the loneliness the darkness brought her.

Being with Anakin just felt right.

“We’ll rest here tonight, and then see what we can about tomorrow. Most of these crates contain weapons and armor, only two contain rations and water,” Anakin said.

She looked up at him and smiled, but this time he didn’t return it. He didn’t even look back at her. He continued to stare out at the planet’s surface with a pained expression on his face.

As though the planet itself was causing this pain.

“Gentlemen please! Bellowing at me will not help matters!”

After determining that Anakin and Padme had taken the rebel transport and escaped Ord Mantell, Khian and Obi-Wan Kenobi pored over various charts on the computer’s twin navigational terminals. Together, they scanned sector after sector, trying to determine just where Anakin and Padme had gone to.

“There have to be more sensor readings than this!” Khian shouted back to the science officer, despite his pleas. “Ships don’t just disappear!”

The timid science officer crept over to their station and called up the readings. “They were in our section of space for zero-point-zero-zero-two-three seconds. No computer in the galaxy can pull up very much from that!” he said before retreating back to his station.

Khian slammed his fist on the terminal and the science officer scurried away with a yelp. “She could be anywhere!”

“Easy Khian,” Obi-Wan soothed and Khian collapsed into a chair.

“Anywhere...” he repeated in a calmer voice.

“They could be only on a certain trajectory,” Obi-Wan reasoned. “It’s not like we have the whole galaxy to search through.”

At least he hoped so. Obi-Wan didn’t tell Khian that Anakin might have made a second jump through hyperspace. He also didn’t tell Khian was that it was equally possible that the ship had suffered so much damage from the fight that it might have broken up mid-jump.

“General Kenobi?” the science officer cautiously approached again.

“Yes, lieutenant?” he answered, too tired to correct the title.

The skinny little man scurried up to the terminal and called up his own projection. It displayed their section of the galaxy and also highlighted their current location. “Given the course heading and angle at which they jumped, I’ve estimated the search area.”

He tapped a few more buttons and a wide cone appeared on the screen starting with Ord Mantell and fanning outward.

“I’m afraid it covers sixty-eight cubic light years,” he mumbled before backing away.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Khian groaned.

The bridge was silent for a few moments as no one dared speak.

“Okay,” Khian broke the silence. “Assuming she’s out there, I think it might be best not to look at where they went.”

“I’m listening,” Obi-Wan said.

Khian leaned forward and turned off the terminal showing the hopeless search area. “We need to search for where they are headed.”

Obi-Wan put his hands down on the table. "Come again?"

"When we were with Tethys Aran, he told us..." Khian began.

"Tethys Aran? The arms dealer was here?" Obi-Wan cut him off.

"Dammit Jedi will you listen to me for once!" Khian abruptly shouted.

The bridge was silent again. This time, no one dared move.

Khian's eyes narrowed. "Your precious Jedi Master didn't listen to me the last time I was on Ord Mantell, his pathetic padawan wouldn't listen to me either. It's their fault something went wrong then and I won't let another moronic Jedi stop me this time!"

Obi-Wan's heart sank. Khian and Anakin loved the same woman. He knew, from experience, that this could only end in tremendous pain. Love, emotional attachment, attraction in general could have lethal consequences if not checked.

"I'll ignore the insult if you have something substantial to offer," he replied calmly.

Khian seemed to realize how far he had gone. He stood up a little straighter and his face showed his embarrassment. "Tethys wanted Padme to find a weapon. He was going to sell it to the highest bidder, but she refused to help. Knowing her like we do, she won't stop until she finds it first. If she is lost, she will look for that weapon instead of looking for us. If she can get to a Republic world, she'll alert the military and we'll be notified. Find the weapon, we find Padme."

"That's more ifs than I like to hear. What sort of weapon was this?" Obi-Wan asked.

Khian folded his arms. "What about Padme?"

"I can't begin to make a decision unless I have all the facts. What weapon was Tethys Aran looking for?" Obi-Wan pressed.

"Some kind of a doomsday weapon to be used against Revan," Khian shrugged his shoulders.

"Revan?" Obi-Wan dared to breathe the name. "Then it must be Mandalorian in origin."

"You know the Mandos?" Khian asked.

"Not really, but every Jedi is taught the tale of Revan. His story was both a mark of shame and a badge of pride for the Jedi Order," Obi-Wan said.

Khian sat back and put his face in his hands. "So how do we find a weapon of Mandalorian origin, when no one but the Mandos knows where to find it? How do we find Padme, now?"

"We find ourselves a Mandalorian," Obi-Wan said as realization dawned on him.

"I bet you keep one in your robe for just such an occasion?" Khian asked.

Obi-Wan's eyes lit up.

"Hey, why do you look like a troupe of Twi'lek charmers just walked in?" Khian asked.

Obi-Wan began calling up military rosters on the terminal. He scanned through several pages before slamming his hand down on one name in particular.

"Because I have met one before. He's the very reason you were called in to protect Padme in the first place," he grinned as a name and face appeared on the terminal.

"Jango Fett?" Khian asked.



“Yes!” Obi-Wan exclaimed. “He attacked us on Alderaan and tried to kill Senator Amidala in the lobby of a hotel. As I recall, he gave me a run for my money as well,” he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Khian peered at the record. “It shows here he’s on ‘Temporary Assignment’ to the Republic Navy, but it doesn’t say to which station or which ship he’s assigned to.”

Obi-Wan pulled on his beard and thought to himself.

“Then someone within the Republic must already know about the weapon. Why else would the only Mandalorian we can think of up and disappear like that?” Khian asked.

Obi-Wan stared out into space.

“Wait, wait, wait, how did a Republic soldier lead an attack against Padme?” Khian asked. “Better yet, how is it he wasn’t immediately discharged from the service and thrown in prison after you stopped him?”

Obi-Wan still said nothing.

“You mean to tell me he’s been in the service of the Republic since the attempt on her life? I don’t even see a letter of reprimand in his file!” Khian shouted.

“Someone covered up the aftermath of the attack,” Obi-Wan said. “The Republic’s citizens were so swept up in the attack itself that what happened to the assassins was overlooked, even by me.”

Khian raised an eyebrow. “You usually don’t miss details, especially about a man who tried to kill you.”

Obi-Wan focused hard. How had he missed this? Ever since he arrived on Coruscant from Alderaan he had completely forgotten what had happened to Jango Fett. He never reported his name to the Jedi Council, was never called upon to testify at a trial, and never gave a second thought to the man. To forget someone for a while was understandable given the shock of the attack, but for over a year?

What had happened? Obi-Wan’s mind backtracked to the attack, but that was difficult. The further from that event he got, the easier it was to think. Why was it so hard to remember a man who tried, and nearly succeeded, to kill him?

His decades of Jedi training could not cut through the haze in his mind. There was the attack, the trip to Coruscant, and then they had landed and met with a group of diplomats.

What else had happened?

“Remmick,” Khian bolted out of his seat.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow.

“Kentaru Remmick. He was this nut on Alderaan who hounded Padme with these ravings about the Republic. Only now it seems all of his claims may not have been so crazy,” Khian said.

“Go on,” Obi-Wan prodded.

Khian moved back to the terminal and began running searches. “Here, the records show he rambled on about something explosive he was searching for.”

Obi-Wan’s face fell. “That lead is so small a Jawa couldn’t hide behind it. You really expect someone like him to know the location of a Mandalorian super-weapon?”

Khian grabbed Obi-Wan’s arm and pulled him to the terminal.

“The week before he said that, he claimed the Republic was planning on destroying whole worlds with terror,” Khian pointed to a transcript.

“Key words are ‘with terror,’” Obi-Wan said.

Khian scanned the terminal again. “Four days before that, he claimed the Republic was snatching people off the street who disagreed with them. Now he’s gone without a trace. I was at his living quarters, Obi-Wan. The Republic did its job well.”

Obi-Wan stood up a little straighter. “You’re accusing the Republic of a lot.”

“Actually, Remmick is accusing and he was right about it all. You can’t deny that there were some protestors that were put down rather violently,” Khian said.

“Rioters that were out of control,” Obi-Wan replied.

Khian threw up his hands. “What about the Remmick’s claim the week prior that the Republic is also selling arms to the rebels?”

Obi-Wan stood still for a moment and thought.

“Jedi Kenobi, we saw it for ourselves on Ord Mantell. Sure, it was Tethys making the deal, but he admitted that someone high up in the Republic had not only authorized the sales, but arranged for the deal to take place with no risk to either party,” Khian insisted.

“Even a blind bantha can find the shrub once. He led you to Tethys, but Tethys seems to know more about it than one lone citizen,” Obi-Wan argued, but was less sure of his argument now.

“But what if, *what if* he’s right? We can’t afford to pass this up if it leads me to Padme,” he argued.

“And finding the weapon that can rip apart a planet by slowing its rotation, thereby endangering all worlds within the Republic?” Obi-Wan asked.

“That’s just a pleasant bonus,” Khian grinned. “Assuming the little bug is still alive and assuming we can find him.”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “That’s more assuming than I like to hear too.”

“Find him in our own time, we will,” Yoda’s holo-image said. “Decide how to use our resources best, the Council will.”

“Master Yoda, I’m sorry, but that just won’t do this time. We need to find Kentaru Remmick immediately. The threat to the Republic is just too great,” Obi-Wan said.

Yoda frowned at him from across the galaxy. “When my student, not as head-strong you were.”

Obi-Wan’s cheeks grew hot. “I apologize, Master, but this is our most desperate hour. If the rebels secure the weapon or, Force forbid, Darth Maul finds it...” his voice trailed off.

“If I may intrude, great Masters,” a voice called from beyond the holo-image of the council. Obi-Wan looked on as Chancellor Palpatine walked into the center circle in the Council Chambers and bowed deeply. He was flanked by his usual entourage of four Centurion Guards dressed in flowing blue robes and the High Speaker of the Republic.

“I have just heard, from very reliable sources, that we’ve discovered a weapon of exceptional power?” he inquired.

“That is true to some degree. We do not have its location, but the existence of such a weapon appears to be legitimate,” Master Windu said.

"I believe we have a lead, but I'm afraid it's a small one," Obi-Wan said and Palpatine turned to look at his holo-image.

"If there is something I can do to help secure this weapon for the Republic, please let me assist," Palpatine smiled pleasantly.

The Jedi Masters exchanged looks. "Chancellor Palpatine, if we do determine the location of the weapon, we intend to destroy it immediately."

Palpatine's face fell. "You cannot be serious."

The High Speaker stepped forward angrily. "We must be allowed to secure this weapon for our own uses. This could end the rebellion and save countless lives!"

Yoda rapped his cane on the floor. "Destroy one planet, ruin orbits of others. More lives lost. History, culture, all wiped away. Give such an order, you can?"

Palpatine stood straighter and turned to stare down the small Master. "I would give any order to preserve our beloved Republic. There is devastation on over a hundred worlds as we argue about this. If we find the leadership of the rebellion, I will be happy to obliterate it once and for all."

"And if my lead is being detained on Coruscant?" Obi-Wan asked.

The High Speaker whirled around. "That is outrageous!"

Mace Windu rose from his seat and the room fell quiet. The High Speaker backed away when he saw the flash in the Grand Master's eyes.

"The issue before the Council is a planet killing weapon, not speculation about vast conspiracies within the Republic. We will deal with one thing at a time, as we have always done, Jedi Kenobi," he said and Palpatine grinned.

Obi-Wan bowed in respect.

"Masters, please," Palpatine stepped forward again. "You cannot destroy this weapon. At the very least it is an artifact plucked from the grasp of history itself. It should be studied and recorded in the Jedi Archives. For heaven's sake this is practically three thousand years old! It should not be obliterated simply because of what it 'might' or 'could' do."

Master Windu sat down again and rubbed his chin in thought.

"Master Yoda, you yourself just said that history and culture should not be wiped away. Will the Jedi discriminate against this history?" Palpatine said each word slowly and deliberately.

The silence in the room was palpable. Across the galaxy, Obi-Wan and Khian held their breath.

"Assuming we can find such a destructive weapon, the Jedi will move to secure it first for study and historical archival. After that, we will see that it is destroyed," he said firmly.

Obi-Wan thought that Palpatine might have done cartwheels considering this decision, but he remained quite passive.

"I thank you for your wisdom, Grand Master Windu," Palpatine replied. "Jedi Kenobi? What was the name of the dissident you were searching for?"

"Remmick, Kentaru Remmick," Khian jumped in.

"I shall put forth all the resources of my administration to find this man for you," Palpatine smiled at Obi-Wan's holo-image.

As he turned to leave the room, Obi-Wan Kenobi was sure that he saw the Grand Centurion look around the Council Chambers with his eyes as though he were surveying the room.

## Chapter XVI

*“Citizens of the Galactic Republic! Supreme Chancellor Palpatine continues his crusade for safety and security of our way of life! His passage of the Military Conscription Act ensures our military will never falter.*

*“It is the civic duty of all citizens to preserve and defend our glorious Republic. Our dependency on clones will lessen as real people step up to take charge of the stability of their livelihoods. I call upon everyone to defend their homes, to defend their families, to defend our way of life!”*

*Chancellor Palpatine, seen here with Ardus Kaine, Tarvis Incom, and Rufaan Tigellinus, is on a whirlwind tour of the Core Worlds. The HoloNet News Network will be following him every step of the way, eager to see what he has in store for us in the future.*

Anakin watched the sky grow lighter as he sat on the ramp’s edge just inches from the planet’s barren surface. This planet troubled him.

It was an odd sensation, having an entire planet feel so awkward. It wasn’t a hostile feeling, yet he felt on alert. It wasn’t fear that he felt, yet he didn’t feel safe. Something about this world just didn’t sit right.

He heard Padme stirring behind him. She had slept most of the night peacefully enough, yet he could tell that something about this world haunted her as well. Not consciously, but in her dreams.

Anakin both wanted to venture out into the planet and to stay onboard at the same time. He felt compelled to go, yet wanted to stay with Padme. There was something in the lake just on the horizon, but again, he couldn’t quite tell what.

As barren as the planet was, there was no question in his mind that life was here.

With nothing to block his view, he could see all the way to the horizon. Yet he could also feel that something was looking back at him as well.

Padme crept up and wrapped herself around his right arm, resting her head against his shoulder.

“You’re up early,” she said as the sun began to peek over the horizon.

“I’m up still,” he corrected.

“You must be exhausted after what happened, why didn’t you sleep?” she asked.

Anakin continued to stare out at the landscape.

“This place is eerie,” she shivered. “And I’m starving.”

“You go ahead,” Anakin replied. “I’m not hungry.”

Padme looked at him carefully before walking back toward the crates of rations.

She returned with two ration bars and while she chewed on one gratefully, Anakin just kept his in his hand.

“So if breakfast is done, what’s the plan for today?” she asked.

“The lake,” Anakin simply said.

“Do you think there’s some drinkable water there? Or some better shelter? The metal in this transport might turn this into an oven during the day,” she said.

Anakin turned and looked at her for the first time. He placed a hand on her cheek. “I honestly don’t know what’s down there, but I have to go.”

“You mean we have to go,” Padme hooked her arms around his. “If I’m going to live here for the rest of my life, I’d like to know what’s around us.”

Anakin shrugged and offered her his arm. Padme blushed and together they took their first step onto the surface of the planet together.

The instant Anakin’s boot hit the surface, he felt a near-electrical current run through him. Reptilian hisses bombarded his ears and he jerked backward from the shock of the sensation. Padme held onto his arm and helped him stand upright.

“What was that?” she asked, astonished.

“The dark side...” Anakin gasped. “The dark side of the Force...”

Padme put a hand to her mouth and her eyes grew wide. Anakin remembered the last time she encountered the dark side, a Sith Lord with a double-bladed lightsaber nearly killed her.

“Darth Maul is here?” she asked breathlessly.

Anakin regained his footing and stood up straight, clutching at his chest. “No, no,” he breathed. “The entire planet is strong with the dark side!”

She looked at him in horror. “How is that even possible? The Force is with people, not worlds!”

“I think I understand a little more of what Master Drallig was telling me. The Force is with *everything*. I just never imagined a planet itself could *feel* like this,” he replied.

“Do you want to sit down?” Padme asked, but Anakin shook his head.

“The lake. Whatever is going on is down at the lake,” he began to slowly walk forward.

With each passing step, Anakin felt his strength renewed. He was soon walking briskly toward the canyon as the Force flowed through him.

Getting closer to the lake, a different noise reached Anakin’s ears. It took very little effort for him to feel the waterfall. He smiled as the Force moved with him as never before.

Padme gasped when they found the river that fed the lake. The waterfall’s drop was over four hundred meters from the cliff and the sight of it was breathtaking.

Even more fascinating was what waited for them when they approached the lake itself. The lake wasn’t spectacular, but the small island in the exact center of the lake was what held his interest.

“I’m getting tired of asking this, but what is that?” Padme asked.

Standing in the middle of the island in the middle of the lake was an enormous, black obelisk. Anakin admired the impressive structure. Even from this distance, it was a remarkable sight. He felt compelled to see it up close, to be near it, to...touch it.

“The water looks...well I don’t know, but I don’t think it is drinkable,” Padme observed.

Anakin looked down at the lake itself and saw she was right. The water looked perfectly fine, as blue and as pristine as any he had seen in his life. But something

about it just felt odd. It was too passive, too calm, to be a normal lake on a normal world. There were no waves or ripples. The water almost looked like glass.

"We've got to swim for it," he said, fixing his eyes back on the obelisk.

"Are you kidding? I don't need to be a biologist to tell you that something about that water isn't natural. There could be something that lives in that water and for all we know it might like how a senator tastes," she said nervously.

Anakin looked over at her and smiled. "You climbed into a Republic garrison, fought off assassins, survived an ambush on Ord Mantell, and a little swim scares you?"

"Anakin, something isn't right. There are no people, no animals, no plants on this entire planet, but there's a lake? A waterfall? Where did that monument come from? Who built it and why? Padme took a few steps back.

Anakin took a few steps toward the water's edge, but quickly dropped to one knee and put a hand to his forehead. "This lake..." he gasped. "...is strong with the Force. It is more concentrated here than anywhere else. I...I've never felt anything like it!"

Padme knelt beside him, but also looked at him quizzically. "You were at the Jedi Temple, surrounded by thousands of Force-attuned beings, in the most hallowed building known to the Jedi Order. Are you telling me this doesn't compare?"

Anakin's eyes opened wide. "I understand now. The building and the people don't matter; nothing matters at all except the Force itself."

"Anakin, I don't like it here. It feels...I don't know how it feels but I can't stay here," she said.

"Go back to the ship," he said. "I have to see that up close."

He turned to look at Padme and saw her eyes beginning to water. Her lip began to tremble. "I'll be fine," he whispered as he held her.

"I won't be alone again, not after I just found you!" she exclaimed.

Anakin felt torn. The lake and obelisk both beckoned to him, compelled him to remain, but his love for Padme was absolute.

He felt a rush of anger toward Padme. Why would she hold him back like this? What was she playing at, letting him get this close to something so potent, so powerful, and then telling him he had to leave just to be with her? This obelisk was something truly extraordinary that he may never experience again and she wanted to go pout in a broken down transport!

Padme looked up at him with tears streaming down her face and his heart plummeted. The anger evaporated and left him as quickly as it had come. His face that was twisted into a snarl of rage transformed into a smile and he stroked her cheek.

By the shore of the lake, with the waterfall roaring behind them, he kissed Padme with more love than he had ever felt before. This kiss evolved into a bond that they both knew could never be broken.

The sun was beginning its retreat through the sky as Anakin and Padme trekked back to their crashed transport. His arm was wrapped around her as they went, but his mind lingered on the lake. He continually looked over his shoulder. Something else was nagging him, but he couldn't figure out what it was.

"I was thinking we might at least try to fix the communications on the ship," Padme said.

Anakin's mind snapped back to her. "I don't think there's much chance of that," he answered.

"We can at least try, unless you can use the Force to somehow send a message to Obi-Wan," she replied and smiled.

"I don't think he would hear anything, even if I grew powerful enough to send my thoughts across solar systems. This planet would probably mask anything I tried," Anakin looked over his shoulder again. He knew now what had been bothering him.

Death had followed them from the lake.

"Well maybe we could..." Padme began, but Anakin held up a hand.

"When I say so, you run for the transport," he pointed to the ship that was only thirty meters away.

"Why? What is it?" she asked.

Anakin gestured behind them. "Something is stalking us."

Padme quickly glanced over her shoulder. "There's nothing there," she said.

"Get ready," his hand went to the lightsaber at his belt.

They continued their casual walk for a few more steps. Padme gritted her teeth and nodded to Anakin confidently.

"GO!" Anakin shouted and Padme sprinted toward the ship.

Anakin's lightsaber flashed to life and he swung upward quickly. He heard a snarl followed by a squeal as his golden blade made contact.

A lizard appeared in front of him and staggered to one side before falling over, a deep gash in its chest. The lizard itself was horrifying. Even on all fours, it was as tall as Anakin was, nearly two meters in height. The beast was three meters long with a cruel looking tail that added at least another meter to its already intimidating size.

Anakin instinctively slashed to his left and then rolled to his right. He narrowly avoided the jaws of another giant lizard that flashed into view. He used the Force to lift it into the air and hold it in place while he slid under it and stabbed upward.

Padme's screams echoed across the plain. She was nearly to the ship, but a third lizard galloped toward her. Anakin tapped into the Force and ran at incredible speeds, faster than he had ever gone on Iltum or on Coruscant. He leapt into the air and threw his lightsaber into the creature from behind, spearing it in the back.

It collapsed to the ground, its jaws a few feet from Padme's legs. She scrambled up the ramp and stared back at the corpse with wide eyes.

Anakin was only a moment or two behind her, his lightsaber still gleaming and his eyes surveying the landscape. "We should be okay now."

"Should'?" Padme gasped. "What *were* those things?"

Anakin shook his head. "Well I'm not a biologist, but they look like giant lizards with razor sharp claws and jaws strong enough to eat through our ship that can also make themselves almost completely invisible. Other than that? I don't have the first idea."

She slapped his shoulder. "You're hilarious."

Her face grew hard and determined. "Anakin, you cannot go back to the lake."

He couldn't hide the stunned expression on his face. "Why not?"

She pointed to the large lizards. "There are three good reasons right out there. Who knows how many of them are out there?"

He walked over to her. "We'll be perfectly fine here; they won't leave the lake again."

Her eyes were swimming with tears. "How can you be so sure?"

Anakin held her close to him. "Don't you trust me?"

"You know I do," she said.

"Then trust me now, like you've always trusted me, like you always will trust me. You'll never be alone again," Anakin said as he held her face in his hands.

"Never is an awfully long time," she said as she stared into his eyes.

Anakin kissed her passionately. He kissed her with every fiber of his being, with everything that he had, he poured it into that kiss. Her arms wrapped around him as his did around her. The setting sun outside the ramp dipped just below the horizon.

Neither Anakin nor Padme saw it.

A third and more distant moon had begun to rise before Anakin decided he could wait no longer. Padme had gone to sleep long before and he was certain that as long as she was in the ship, she was safe. He dressed quickly and stepped down the ramp.

Anakin sprinted all the way to the lake, leaving a dust trail behind him. He never once felt fatigued despite covering the distance in a few short minutes. Once he was at the water's edge, he stopped and stared.

The lake looked black in the night sky, with only the stars and the three moons shining off the surface to reveal its calm exterior. Anakin tried to push every conscious thought from his mind, sat down at the water's edge, and let his mind enter a tranquil trance.

His eyes snapped open a few moments later and he could feel the lizards approaching him. There were at least a dozen on land and perhaps fifty more in the water, all moving toward Anakin as he sat on the lake shore.

Yet Anakin did not fear them.

The creatures seemed docile, passive this time. They took on the behavior of domesticated pets, not vicious and untamed beasts. One ventured close enough to where Anakin could reach out with his hand and pet the lizard on its scaly head. The spines that ran from its neck to its tail were very sharp, but the animal showed no aggressive tendencies.

Anakin smiled.

He slowly stood and petted another lizard that approached him. He felt the dark side within the lizards and understood their behavior better now. They were able to use the Force to hide themselves almost entirely from anyone's vision that was not attuned to the Force themselves. Now that they knew he was a Force-attuned being, they respected him.

"Well this is more like it," he said to the lizards as more approached from the water.

They rose to the surface in a single line that led from Anakin directly to the island where the obelisk called to him. He nodded his head in thanks.

Carefully, he walked across the lizards' backs until he finally reached the island and the obelisk stood only a few meters away.



He was anxious enough to want to sprint over to it, but restrained himself. He walked over and began to study the monument. The words of Master Yoda rang out to him. The obelisk would still be there if he walked or ran. Patience, passive, be at peace and have a clear mind.

It was a unique monument. Anakin looked for cracks or flaws, but was amazed to see it was one piece of obsidian rock. He circled it and stared up at the peak of the obelisk that towered one hundred meters above him. All along the base, there were various markings Anakin had never seen before. They didn't even remotely resemble any language he thought of.

The moons moved across the sky as wandered around the obelisk repeatedly. He had worn a path in the soil until he paused in front of it.

"What is this..." he muttered to himself.

He sat cross-legged on the dirt in front of the great obelisk and simply let his mind go. The Force engulfed him almost immediately and Anakin gave away all control.

A great smile showed on his face as he let the Force take him.

A figure began to approach from the other side of the island. Anakin stood up quickly and tried to make out who it was in the darkness. Did Padme brave the lake after all? He squinted his eyes, but was unable to see the person's face clearly.

A second figure walked behind the first one and Anakin's hand went to his lightsaber. "Who are you?" he asked.

They did not reply. A third and fourth figure approached as well, all from the same direction. Although Anakin could not make out their faces, he recognized enough to know that this situation had drastically changed.

"Greetings, Lord Vader," they all bowed to him in deep respect.

Anakin did not relax his hand away from his belt. "You have me confused with someone else. I am a Jedi named Anakin Skywalker. I crashed on this planet and came to meditate. Do you live here? Do you know anything about this obelisk?" he asked.

Only one of them spoke, yet it echoed as if all four spoke at once. "We know many things, Lord Vader. We know that the Force brought you to this planet to help you on your journey."

"Again, you misunderstand. My name is..." but he was cut off.

"Your former identity is not important. What is important is where your journey ends," they said together.

Anakin tightened his grip on the hilt of his lightsaber. "I don't think I like your tone," he said.

"We meant no disrespect, Lord Vader. We are your guides to assist you on your journey through the Force," they replied.

"Why do you keep calling me that?" he asked.

"This planet is imbued with the Dark Side of the Force," they said and began gliding closer together. Anakin never saw their feet actually move.

"It was done so after a Sith Sorceress spent one hundred years building this obelisk so she might completely immerse herself in the Force. No matter how many of the original inhabitants of this planet she enslaved, no matter how hard they worked, she could only build one meter per year," they said.

“One hundred years to the day after they started, she used an ancient Sith ritual to unlock the secrets of the dark side and become the most powerful Sith of all time,” they continued.

Anakin’s hand relaxed only a fraction. “And did she learn this power?”

They all smiled at him. “She did. However, she drew upon the power of the Force so much that it overwhelmed her. She was not prepared, nor was she worthy, to receive the power the obelisk allowed.”

“It destroyed her and every living organism on the planet. Only her slaves survived the disaster,” they echoed.

“Where are these people?” Anakin asked.

The four paused for a moment, their shapes gliding closer together. “You killed three of them today because they were foolish and didn’t realize that Lord Vader had arrived. The dark side twisted and deformed them.”

Anakin swallowed hard, but couldn’t help but be intrigued. “Such power,” he breathed.

“Yes, Lord Vader. Such power could make you the greatest Sith Lord in all recorded history,” they continued gliding closer together until they almost overlapped one another.

Anakin ignored the mistaken name and asked the question he dared to. “How can I learn to gain such knowledge of the Force?”

The four shadowy figures merged into one being. The man approached with footsteps that echoed in Anakin’s heart. He stopped only a few feet away and his features became clear.

It was the same man that was in the crystal chamber on Illum.

There was no mistaking the same arrogant smirk, sandy colored hair, and confident posture that had haunted Anakin since he dropped into that chamber to obtain his crystal.

“You must abandon everything you know and love. The dark side does not tolerate duality in any being.”

“You?” Anakin’s voice nearly left him. “How did you get here?”

The figure laughed at him. “You are some piece of work. You are throwing away the teachings of Cin Drallig way too easily. Master Yoda told you to slow down, but here you are jumping at any chance to access more power.”

“How could you possibly know about any of that?” Anakin shouted, his voice echoed in his mind.

“C’mon, even I told you once before that this path you want will destroy *everyone* around you. How could that not resonate in that thick head of yours? Obi-Wan, Aiyra, the Jedi Council, even Padme will be completely lost to you because you’re too consumed with yourself to see the big picture,” he tapped his forehead in time with the last few words.

“But I can control it!” Anakin argued.

The figure laughed at him. “You think you control the Force? No my friend. Your mentors have all taught you the real truth. The Force controls you.”

“I’m getting sick of hearing you talk,” Anakin grumbled and ignited his golden lightsaber with a *snap-hiss*. “Why are you still following me?”

*“I never left you,”* the man said.

Anakin staggered back a few steps as though his words had physically slammed into him.

“What are you going to do, stab me again? Use your coveted blade in anger *again*? Look at yourself! Your desire for greatness is so overwhelming that you would kill me without a second thought,” he frowned at Anakin.

“That worked out real well on Illum, didn’t it? Obi-Wan would be ashamed to see you like this,” he said and every word hit home with Anakin. He looked down at his hands, gripping the lightsaber so tightly the hilt was leaving pressure marks.

“I mean really, what’s the point of it all, Anakin?” the man asked. “Why the obsession with obtaining power and being the greatest Jedi of all time, only to be surpassed by the next chump that comes along?”

Anakin opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to shout at the man, to tell him that being the greatest Jedi was all he ever wanted to be. That he wanted to do extraordinary things.

But his heart held him back. Anakin closed his eyes and breathed deeply. Flashes of what he had already done ran through his mind.

He extinguished the lightsaber and dropped it on the ground. “I already have enough power,” Anakin said softly.

“Then you are truly powerful,” the figure faded away.

“*And your path may yet be saved...*” echoed in Anakin’s mind.

Anakin’s eyes snapped open.

He was still sitting cross-legged on the ground.

His jaw dropped open when he saw that the obelisk was in ruins. Its tall pillar was lying in pieces all around him and the ancient Sith runes were worn away by the friction of time.

Anakin reached out and touched the faded runes, felt the -now- rough stone, and picked up several small fragments in his hands. He held them tenderly and clutched them to his chest. Tears streamed from his eyes as they fell back to the sandy island.

He stood up and shook the sand from his pants and cloak. His walk back to the water was slow and painful. The lizards poked their heads from the water and hissed at him. They did not form a bridge for him. The water itself, while still peaceful and flat, was black as the night sky.

With no hesitation, Anakin took a running leap that easily cleared the distance from the island to opposing shore.

The Force was at his command as was he at the Force’s.

He never felt so complete.

Anakin felt the starfighter coming before he saw it. The lone ship blazed through the sky almost out of control. Anakin could sense the pilot’s distress and fear. The man wasn’t injured, but his engines were failing after taking significant damage.

Anakin’s arms reached out and he tried to guide the wounded ship. He didn’t envy the landing the pilot would have, but at least he would be in one piece.

He ran back to the transport in a matter of moments to see Padme already awake and looking less than pleased. “Where did you go?” she asked, a look of worry etched on her face.

"Back to the obelisk," he grinned. "What happened there is a long story, but I have better news that I think you'll enjoy hearing."

Padme didn't return his smile. "Anakin, yesterday I told you my greatest fear was to be left alone and what did you do after a wonderful night? You left me alone."

"But Padme, something incredible has happened!" he protested.

"I don't care what happened!" her hands clenched into fists. "I want to trust you, but how could you go back to those ruins?"

Anakin opened his mouth to speak, but his mind caught up with him. "Ruins? You mean you never saw the obelisk?"

Padme still wasn't smiling. "I saw what I said I saw. Nothing more than a shattered piece of rubble."

He walked over and hugged her. She couldn't help but wrap her arms around him in return.

"Everything is going to change, I promise on my love for you," he said.

"I'm still mad at you," she said through a smile.

"You can't stay mad at me forever," he whispered.

"Forever is an awfully long time," she whispered back.

## Chapter XVII

Obi-Wan Kenobi frowned as he looked into the holding cell. When he had been told that Kentaru Remmick had been located on Coruscant, he thought it all seemed a little too coincidental.

Now his worst fears had been confirmed.

"As you can see, my young Jedi, his mind is quite gone. From what I've been told by the Republic Enforcement Squad that detained him, he was a danger to himself and others around him. They were hoping that bringing him to this facility would be better for him and for the people of Alderaan," Palpatine said.

Kentaru Remmick sat in a corner of the padded cell with his knees clutched to his chest. He rocked back and forth mumbling incoherently to himself while gnawing on his left shoe. Khian slammed his fist against the cell's window, hoping for any kind of reaction.

"We've come too close," he muttered. "Our one lead to find Padme sits in there and is essentially a stump."

Obi-Wan turned to the Supreme Chancellor. "Did the medical droids say what happened to him?"

Palpatine shook his head sadly. "Even Senator Amidala's records show that he was unstable long before he got to this state. They promise me that work will continue to determine how they can help this poor man."

"Not by accident, this is," a sad voice said.

The three of them whirled around to see Master Yoda walk into the hallway. The Jedi Master's face was grim and determined as he approached.

"What did you say?" Palpatine asked in a pointed voice.

"Eccentric, he may have been, but catatonic, he was not," Yoda said. "Hiding the truth, someone is."

"Are you saying someone messed with his brain?" Khian asked and Palpatine glanced at the security alarm.

Yoda only nodded sadly. "Our most precious asset, the mind is. Destroyed, his was, to keep the Republic from knowing his secrets."

Obi-Wan's eyes lit up. "So he does know where the weapon is kept!"

Palpatine's eye twitched.

"Leave me with him, you will," Yoda said. "Much time, will I need."

"This is not allowed by Republic Medical Statute. Only trained medical personnel can interact or treat this particular patient," Chancellor Palpatine stood between the small Jedi and the door to Remmick's cell. He frowned when he realized his error.

"Good," Yoda smiled. "Explain to them why you are stopping a Jedi aiding a citizen, you can."

"As you wish, Master Jedi. I only hope you can help this poor soul," Palpatine smiled down at the small Jedi.

Yoda's smile faded and the look of grim determination returned. Slowly, the Supreme Chancellor backed away before turning to leave the room, with Khian close behind.

Obi-Wan did not join them.

"Your thoughts are strong. Worry you, they do, to not respect my wishes," Master Yoda observed.

"Master Yoda, I must know something. I know as you do that this is no accident. That means that someone deliberately did this to him. Someone who is very strong in the ways of the Force," Obi-Wan replied.

Yoda said nothing, but his eyes lingered on the departing two figures.

"It is entirely possible that Darth Maul did this, but that would have been very risky. If he had been seen on a world in the Deep Core, then we would have pulled every Jedi around to contain him. The odds of him leaving Alderaan unhindered, let alone escaping back to the Outer Rim, would have been slim," he continued.

Yoda shook his head sadly. "Logic does not fail you, Obi-Wan Kenobi," he said.

Obi-Wan dared to even take a breath. "Then if we rule out the Sith, that leaves only the Jedi who did this."

"Always wise, you were, but rule out the Sith, we cannot," Yoda said. "One of my brightest students, you are. Priorities dictate we find the weapon that threatens the Republic. Find the Sith after, we will."

"But how could that be? How could there be another Sith, especially one we haven't yet seen?" Obi-Wan asked.

Yoda sighed. "Rule of Two, Darth Bane began. Naïve to believe this Sith has ignored it."

Obi-Wan began to speak again, but Yoda held up a small hand.

"Return to your ship, you will," Yoda ordered. "Trust I have that you will begin to assemble a fleet to pursue this weapon once I discover its location. Speed will be our ally and you will be key."

"Master Yoda, assembling and leading a fleet is the job for a Jedi Master. Are you suggesting that I..." he blushed when he realized what his ego had forced him to say.

Yoda smiled at him. "Lying, I would be, if I said the Council was not considering that. Assemble the fleet, you will. Command it, a Master of the Jedi Council, shall."

Obi-Wan bowed with respect before walking away. Just before the door, he turned and looked at Master Yoda.

"And Anakin?" he asked.

"Put our trust in the will of the Force that Jedi Skywalker will find his way to us," Yoda said.

Yoda limped into the room and set his cane down on the floor. Remmick didn't even acknowledge that he had entered the room. He simply continued to rock back and forth in his corner.

"Apologize, I must, for what has happened to you," Yoda said before sitting in front of the man.

"And for what I must do now."

Obi-Wan sat in his chair on the bridge onboard the *RSS Knight's Valor* compiling a list of nearby ships. He had never even seen such a fleet as the one Yoda had asked him to assemble. The weight of the responsibility of the logistics of this alone brought on a Hutt sized headache.

"This is the sort of thing Anakin would jump at," he muttered. "I do miss him; I hope he's staying out of trouble."

"Commander Kenobi, there is an incoming request for you to join an urgent conference," his communications officer said.

"Master Yoda?" he asked, once again ignoring the title.

"No, this comes directly from the Office of the Supreme Chancellor," the officer replied.

Obi-Wan's brow furrowed. He had never been contacted directly by Palpatine before. "I've got a bad feeling about this," he mumbled.

"Commander Kenobi, good, now all of our parties are here," Palpatine's holo-image said.

Also present was Masters Yoda and Windu, several other military officials, and one man in particular that Obi-Wan never expected to see.

"I think we all know Marshal Tarkin," Palpatine nodded toward the man.

Obi-Wan's hands tightened into fists, but said nothing.

"Master Yoda, you may begin," Palpatine said.

Obi-Wan was stunned to see how frail and small Yoda looked. Whatever had happened with Remmick had clearly taken its toll. The Jedi Master took several moments to gather himself.

"Knew more than was first believed, Mr. Remmick did," Yoda began, but seemed to struggle just in speaking.

"Not all Mandalorians were destroyed. Survived, some had. The knowledge of their weapon, also survived, but in the subconscious," he said.

"This is truly fascinating, but our Republic is at stake. Can we possibly avoid the history lesson?" Palpatine sighed.

Yoda's face turned hard, but he continued. "Mandalorians constructed this weapon, in fear of Revan. When lost, they were, so too was knowledge of the weapon. Only a select few were trusted with the history. Passed on to their descendants this was through neurotransmitter embedding process."

"Neurotransmitter embedding?" Obi-Wan repeated. "I'm afraid I'm at a loss."

Marshal Tarkin spoke up. "They found a way to hide the knowledge within molecules that travel between the neurons in the brain."

"Neurons are cells in the brain that send and receive information electrically. What sends the information from one neuron to the other are neurotransmitter molecules. Somehow, the Mandalorians figured out how to embed this knowledge into those molecules for all time," he continued.

The military officials looked to each other and shrugged.

"They hide the information of the weapon and its location in tiny cells in your head," Palpatine translated. "So where is it?"

All eyes turned to the small Jedi Master, who sat down in his chair. Obi-Wan thought the Jedi might collapse from the strain. He had never seen him look weaker and he was desperate to stop the proceedings and insist his mentor rest himself. Seeing him in this state was terrifying.

"What's going on?" Khian asked as he approached Obi-Wan.

"You just arrived for the best part," Obi-Wan said.

"To Rishi, you must go," Yoda said and everyone was silent. Khian scratched his head and furrowed his brow in thought.

Obi-Wan spoke up now. "That's near the Wild Space, isn't it?"

Yoda nodded. "Beyond Kamino, it is. Lost in the Rishi Maze."

Khian walked to a navigational terminal and began looking for the star system.

"The Rishi Maze is a vast area of space completely filled with planetary debris. It fills about half a parsec of space. Of course, it all makes sense now!" Khian said.

"The Mandos must have tested the weapon on the two planets nearby in the system. That's why there's so much debris, it's all the leftovers from when they destroyed the planets. The star system has been reduced to a smuggler's dream and a pilot's nightmare," he continued.

Palpatine nodded. "I am authorizing twelve hundred starships and two thousand Jedi Knights for this engagement. You must get underway at once."

Marshal Tarkin nodded back and began to stand up from his chair.

"A battle, you expect?" Yoda asked and Tarkin stopped, half-standing and half-sitting.

Palpatine nodded his head. "The rebels could find this weapon at any time. If we get there first, we'll need a large force to hold it. If we arrive to find them already there, we will need to dislodge them. Either way, a large force of arms is prudent."

Yoda waves his hand feebly to protest, but resigned himself to lying back in his chair. Obi-Wan thought he looked paler now than before.

Palpatine motioned to Tarkin, who fully rose and straightened his tunic.

"For that reason, I am assigning this to Marshal Tarkin. He will be in overall command and all Jedi will report to him," Palpatine said.

Yoda tried to stand, but could only manage to sit up straighter. "Told you did I, answer to the military, we do not. The Council will decide what is best."

"I'm sorry, Master Yoda, but we just don't have time to argue this. I am transmitting which Jedi are to be re-assigned and which ships will be heading to Rishi. I need them to assemble in the Roon Star System within one standard day," Marshal Tarkin said and he clasped his hands behind his back.

"I am glad to have the Chancellor's full support on this," his smile could have sent chills through a wampa in the middle of winter.

Obi-Wan saw Yoda try to protest, but the Jedi Master was simply too exhausted. It was Master Windu who took the cue from his friend and spoke up.

"Interesting how you have Chancellor Palpatine's full support for a military conflict that he just proposed," his deep voice echoed.

"We should not be quibbling over semantics at a time like this," Palpatine snapped.

"Wouldn't it be wiser to send a reconnaissance force first? Pulling so many starships to one mission may leave other systems vulnerable. If the rebels aren't at Rishi, then they might strike elsewhere. They could hit Coruscant again," Obi-Wan suggested and Yoda smiled.

Tarkin sneered at him. "As much as I appreciate your tactical advice, Jedi Kenobi, I suggest you keep your suggestions to yourself."

Obi-Wan fumed, but it was Palpatine who spoke up first. "The time for debate and for division is over."

Tarkin nodded to the Chancellor. "As you say, but I won't have people who believe in mystical nonsense preaching military advice to me," he turned back to Obi-Wan. "Where are you transmitting from anyway, Jedi Kenobi? Another hidden Jedi planet filled with weapons?"

Mace Windu stood up quickly and his finger pointed directly at Tarkin. "The media has twisted and distorted things beyond all belief. Yet no matter how much the wind howls, the mountain is still a mountain and cannot bend to it."

Palpatine grinned widely.

"As it is, my esteemed Jedi, I am in charge of the military for the Republic. I alone am responsible for the safety and security of four thousand populated star systems and their inhabitants. You will go, the ships will be reassigned, and the weapon will be secured. As an added bonus, we may at last witness the end to the Clone Wars. Does this sound like too much to ask of our guardians of peace and justice?" Palpatine smiled.

Obi-Wan waited for Yoda to take the lead in the debate, but the Jedi Master was simply too weary to carry on. He looked to Mace Windu, but even he seemed to accept the situation as it was. When a few, tense moments passed and no one spoke, it seemed that their silence was considered to be their consent.

"Excellent!" Chancellor Palpatine exclaimed. "Then perhaps peace is just around the corner. I hope to hear from you in two standard days, Marshal. I wish you the best of luck."

Palpatine's and Marshal Tarkin's faded a moment later, but before it did, Obi-Wan saw the Marshal's grin widen.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Khian echoed the thought that ran through Obi-Wan's mind.

"His injuries aren't too severe. The burns are the worst part, but he should be fine. To be honest, I thought he would have been conscious by now," Padme said.

Jango Fett's ship had crashed only a few kilometers from their own crash site. Anakin had carried the pilot from the craft back to their own transport. He was



pleasantly surprised to see that Padme had indeed cleaned up their ship in preparation for their guest.

He was also glad he could use the Force to keep Jango unconscious until they had a chance to talk.

"Padme, his ship is in pretty good condition. It won't fly without some work, but it's his nav computer I'm most interested in. With a few rough modifications, we might be able to use it in our own transport and get us out of here," he said.

"The nav computer from a starfighter is compatible with a transport of this size?" she asked.

Anakin nodded his head. "Thankfully, his astromech droid is in good shape as well. We use the droid as a liaison between his nav computer and our ship. I think all of us working together can get this rig back in orbit in no time."

Padme ran over and threw her arms around Anakin and kissed him deeply. "Don't get me wrong, I do want to spend the rest of my life with you. I just really didn't want to spend it here!"

"Then everything is okay?" he asked sheepishly.

Padme nodded. "Things couldn't be better. Well, they could, but only when we leave this place behind us."

Anakin laughed with Padme. He looked over at Jango and allowed him to wake. The pilot slowly began to stir, rubbing his head before looking around.

He sat bolt upright. "Where am I?" he demanded. "Who the blazes are you people?"

He shook his head quickly and focused his eyes on Anakin, then on Padme. "Oh swell, the last two people I wanted to see. Out of the frying pan and into the fire."

"Not the choice of words I would have used," Anakin said fiercely.

Jango stood up and stretched. "I don't suppose it would make a difference if I apologized for our misunderstanding on Alderaan."

Padme's eyes went wide. "That was you?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It wasn't personal."

Padme's hand balled into a fist, but Anakin spoke up. "The will of the Force brought us together and it wasn't so we could trade bruises."

Padme relaxed and leaned against a crate of blaster rifles. "I'm still not turning my back on you."

"Fair enough." Jango stood and stretched, wincing as he checked his various injuries

He quickly looked around, his head snapping back and forth. "Where's my armor? My helmet?"

"Back at the ship," Anakin replied. "Why?"

"You fool!" Jango hissed. "You would dare separate me from the only link to my heritage? My ancestry? I risked my life to get my hands on that!"

Anakin put his hands up. "Easy now. I didn't know that stuff was so important to you. We have to go back anyway for your droid."

"Important?" Jango echoed. "If someone pulled you out of a starfighter, but left your lightsaber behind, how good of a mood would you be in?"

"What did you mean when you said, 'out of the frying pan'? Who were you running from?" Padme asked.

Jango shrugged while he sipped on some water. "Who the blazes said I was running?"

Anakin folded his arms. "The blast points on your ship's engines and wings just magically appeared? Or maybe the designer put them there as an aesthetic choice?"

"What did you mean go back for my droid?" Jango ignored the question.

Anakin filled Jango in on their situation and brought him up to speed on his plan to escape.

"I also need to know is if we should expect any trouble waiting for us in orbit. This transport isn't exactly equipped for a fight," Anakin said.

When Jango just absently stared around the ship, Anakin decided to lean a little harder on him. "I can find out one way or the other."

Jango's eyes widened for just a moment before his steely resolve returned. "My mind has gone through a blender enough to last me a lifetime."

Anakin and Padme listened closely as Jango told them about how he received his transfer orders, his arrival on the *RSS Nocturne*, the imprisonment and torture by Major Issic, and his escape.

Padme's eyebrow arched slightly. "Major Issic? I came across his name when I was researching the source of the Jedi clones."

"Hell, well that doesn't surprise me. The ship was full of those devils. They ain't too bright, but they know which end of a lightsaber to point at you," Jango said.

"What was the creator of the Jedi clones doing with you?" Padme asked.

Jango only shrugged. "He insisted that I knew something deep in my brain about some super-weapon my people developed in the days of Revan. I didn't stick around to find out the details when he mentioned a Sith lord was on the way."

Anakin nearly slipped. "A Sith lord? Darth Maul?"

Jango rolled his eyes. "I didn't hang around and ask for an autograph. You really think a Mandalorian is interested in meeting a Sith? You and the major shared looks *and* brains."

Anakin blinked. "Come again?"

"Sure, same eyes, body type, and same sandy colored hair. You two could be brothers or something," Jango said, looking hard at Anakin now.

Anakin's heart leapt into his throat. Was it the man from his vision?

"You look a little green, Jedi," Jango laughed.

Padme walked to Anakin and looked at him worryingly. Anakin nodded back to her and stood up straight.

"We need to know where they're going," Anakin said to Jango.

"How the hell do I know?" Jango said.

"Issic's a Jedi! Or at least he was, I don't know for sure. He knows where the weapon is, believe me, he knows," Anakin replied.

"Let him have it. I ain't going near a Sith," Jango crossed his arms.

"Let him have access to the only true piece of Mandalorian real estate left in the galaxy? With all those computers, databanks, and historical recordings at his disposal?" Anakin shrugged. "Oh well, it's not my ancestry on the line."

"Haar'chak!" Jango swore in his own tongue.

Anakin closed the distance between him and Jango quickly and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"I have to know where that weapon is, *now!*" he said. "A Sith Lord is about to possess a weapon of power and I have to stop him."

"You think you can stop them? You're one Jedi!" Jango hissed.

"One grain of sand can tip the scales and I'm a big grain. Now tell me where they're going!" Anakin shook the Mandalorian.

"If I knew, I'd tell you!" Jango shouted. "Like I said before, Issic said it was somewhere deep in my noggin' and he nearly chewed me up trying to find it."

Anakin's eyes bore into Jango. He knew the information was buried in this man's mind and Anakin knew there was only one way to extract it.

"Anakin, stop!" Padme said and shook Anakin.

His eyes snapped forward and took a second to focus on Padme. "Why should I?" he asked.

"You're using the Force to probe another man's mind, I can tell," she said. "You have no right to invade him like that."

"But Issic and Darth Maul have that right?" he asked. "Open your eyes Padme. There are cases when the ends really do justify the means."

"That is *never* the case," she said with determination. "We're no better than rebels if we harm another for our own gain. Why don't we get his communications system too? With the help of his droid, we can get it running and contact the Republic. They can send a fleet and stop Darth Maul and Major Issic."

"And how long would that take?" Anakin rounded on her. "Hours? Days? No Padme, we have this opportunity and I am not going to let it slip from me. I have a chance to learn from Darth Maul again and I'm not going to pass it up!"

"The kid's right," Jango said. "Every minute is precious now. I won't resist, Jedi. All I ask is that you not go poking around too deep in there or make me think I'm a Mudcrutch."

Anakin began focusing back on Jango and probed into his mind. It was far easier this time with no resistance.

"Learn from a Sith?" Padme whispered.

A few hours later, their transport rocketed into the sky although it swayed more than a typical craft would have.

"This handles like a sick Bantha," Anakin muttered.

"Ever heard of the Rishi Maze?" Jango asked.

Anakin shook his head slowly, his focus not leaving the U-shaped controls.

"And you're that good to get us through that mess in one piece? In a half-busted flying brick that needs an astromech droid to keep you pointed in the right direction?" Jango pressed.

Anakin shot him a look. "There's no other pilot like me in the galaxy."

Jango put his feet up on the dash. "Yeah, sure. You may be a hotshot, but nothing prepares you for the Maze."

Anakin looked at him skeptically. "I thought you had never been there."

Jango stared out into space. "You hit on something while you were digging around in there. Faces, memories, my entire race laid out before me. I saw the Rishi Maze, what the weapon does, Revan, the First Mandalore, the sacking of Coruscant, I saw it all like I was there."

"You saw what the weapon is capable of?" Anakin jerked the controls again as they left the atmosphere and entered space. The astromech droid tied into half of the ship's systems whined in protest.

"I just hope you bring a lot of friends with you," Jango said and closed his eyes.

"What is this droid, anyway?" Anakin asked.

"That little one is R2-D2," Jango said. "I'd like to get some sleep now if the noble and wise Jedi is done bugging me. I've had two people dig through my brain with a scoop in the last twenty standard hours and I'd like to put the pieces back together again."

"Answer me one question before you head down below," Anakin said.

Jango paused for a moment. "What's on your mind?"

"Did you know the name of the planet we were nearly marooned on?" he asked.

Jango almost didn't answer. It was a long time before he was able to whisper out the answer. "Ambria, the planet's called Ambria."

Without another word, Jango climbed down the ladder and ducked out of sight.

"Okay R2, plot us a course to the Rishi Maze," Anakin patted the droid on the head.

He tried sitting down.

He tried lying down.

He tried pacing.

Khian tried everything he could think of to help his mind relax and go to sleep, but it was no help. All he could do was stare at the countdown clock and watch the time pass by until they would arrive at Rishi.

His mind kept wandering back to the same subject over and over, despite his efforts to focus on anything else. Khian took apart his three blaster pistols, cleaned them, and re-assembled them. He stopped when he saw the *Padme* he had scratched into the barrel of one of them.

He couldn't help but wonder if he would have to name a second blade after another woman he loved and lost.

Padme.

Khian's mind wandered away from her smile and her laugh long enough to think about who she was with. His heart wrestled with the idea of telling Obi-Wan everything he knew about Anakin's encounter on Cerea. All he had to do was show the Jedi his image recognition program and what Anakin and Darth Maul had talked about during their duel.

He was sure it would mean Anakin's expulsion from the Jedi Order and possibly imprisonment...or worse. On the one hand, nothing would make Khian happier than seeing Anakin in shackles. Padme would never forgive Anakin. She would turn to Khian and be his forever.

On the other hand, it might shatter Padme to the point where she may never be the same. If she knew Khian had discovered this and betrayed Anakin to the Order, she may never trust her bodyguard again.

He just couldn't risk losing her so telling Obi-Wan was out of the question. The best thing to do was to show Padme the data tapes in person. When she had the truth, then they could act on it.

Together.

But how long could he afford to wait? The longer she was with Anakin, the harder it would be on her. More than once, he thought of stealing a shuttle and racing off to find her. But Obi-Wan was right. If Anakin could find a way to get to Rishi, then being with Kenobi was the best way to get there.

Both he and Padme had a nose for trouble and the biggest hotspot in the galaxy would draw them like a magnet.

He clutched at his chest at the very mention of her name. His mind locked on her eyes, her laugh, the fire she had within her, anything and everything that was Padme Amidala.

Khian was lost to love and he refused to lose this love to anyone including Death himself.

## Chapter XVIII

Obi-Wan had tried to imagine what the Rishi Maze would look like. He attempted to wrap his mind around billions of kilometers worth of debris from two destroyed planets orbiting a third world. He then tried to factor in the fifteen hundred frigates, corvettes, destroyers, battle-cruisers, and seven massive *Revenge* class stellar-cruisers that would be trying to navigate their way through the Maze.

The Jedi Council had managed to re-assign twenty-one hundred Jedi Knights and Masters to join the fleet. This included two additional Jedi that joined him and Khian on the bridge.

One was Jedi Knight Verrin Notal. Obi-Wan sighed at the young man who was practically transferred from his knighting ceremony to his ship. His training, like many others, had been rushed because of the war. He began to wonder if Master Yoda was right about the Order as Verrin fidgeted nervously and constantly kept one hand near his lightsaber.

The second Jedi was none other than Cin Drallig himself. Although he was the senior Jedi, Cin bowed to Obi-Wan and left him in command of the ship.

"My place is in a classroom rapping knuckles, not commanding clone troopers," he reasoned.

Nothing Obi-Wan expected to see even came close to what awaited them when his ship dropped out of light speed.

The captain of the *RSS Knight's Valor* issued a flurry of orders and crewmen were running about the bridge as planetary debris floated all around them. A lesser man might have lost his mind just staring at the enormity of what awaited them. To see entire planets reduced to chunks ranging in size from marbles to cruisers was both sickening and awe-inspiring.

Obi-Wan could barely even see Rishi, a large speck in the distance.

"How long until we get through this madness?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Thirty-one point five hours present course and speed," Cin Drallig stared out into the swirling mass of destruction.

"We'll never make it," Verrin cried out. "There's no way anyone can get through an asteroid field fifteen trillion kilometers in size!"

Obi-Wan walked behind him and put a hand on his shoulder. "With the Force as our ally, we will get through this."

Their eyes turned to a small transport that collided with a chunk of planetary debris and exploded. The fireball was brief, but made the young Jedi's face turn a faint shade of green.

"Tell that to them," Verrin muttered.

Navigating through layer after layer of lethal debris nearly exhausted the Jedi by the time they reached one of the last planets in the Rishi system still intact. The bridge crew had rotated on ten-hour shifts, but hardly anyone slept knowing what was out there.

Cin Drallig staggered and leaned against a console, Obi-Wan had collapsed into his command chair and Verrin Notal had passed out long before from the strain this put on them.

"Marshal Tarkin is asking for a status check from all ships," his communications officer reported.

"Captain?" Obi-Wan gestured to the captain whose color had completely drained from her face.

She cleared her throat loudly. "We took three hits. We lost our second starboard engine and decks twenty through twenty-four on our port side, aft. We expended a lot of energy getting us here. I'd estimate we could last thirty minutes in a firefight if we had to. Even then, I'd like to keep our starboard side facing the rebs if they show up."

"We've beaten them to it at least," Obi-Wan nodded.

The communications officer sent the report to the flagship. Tarkin was onboard the *Revenge* itself, the prototype stellar-cruiser and the finest ship ever to leave the KDY shipyards.

"Will someone please wake up the baby?" Cin chuckled as he pointed to the prone figure of Verrin Notal.

Tarkin's holo-image appeared on the bridge as he addressed the fleet. "The fleet suffered an eight percent loss, far below what I was expecting. I want to pass on my appreciation to all the brave pilots who navigated us safely to our target. I know many of you are only clones, but you made me proud, nonetheless. Jedi Reconnaissance Teams will report to their landing bays and begin securing the weapon."

The image faded and Cin Drallig rolled his eyes. "We don't need glory or recognition. The Force is all we need."

"That's my cue," Khian said. "I want to be one of the first ones on that planet. Knowing Padme, they may already be there."

Obi-Wan nodded, but still felt slighted at the utter disregard for the one-hundred and twenty ships and their crews that had been lost simply by journeying here. How many would they lose on the return trip?

"Commander Kenobi, something's not right here," the captain called.

"Understatement of the year," Cin Drallig muttered as he walked with Obi-Wan over to the tactical display.

"What do you make of this?" the captain asked.

Obi-Wan peered at the sensor readings and glanced at the display. "It looks like there's a piece of debris orbiting the far side of the planet."

"How many chunks of rubble are in a geo-synchronous, non-decaying orbit over the only structure on the planet?" Cin Drallig asked.

"That's a ship," Obi-Wan said softly.

"And it isn't one of ours," the Jedi Battlemaster growled.

"How is it we didn't see it when we arrived?" Obi-Wan asked.

"There's far too much debris. We easily could have missed a smaller ship than this," the captain replied.

The captain tapped on the display and a series of scans reported back to them. "Sir, the recognition codes read as one of ours. The computer has identified the *RSS Nocturne*, a frigate of medium armament, but she's been heavily modified. With the changes they've made, I would say she's faster than anything we have here."

"Under whose command?" Obi-Wan demanded.

"It reads here as a Major Issic. Huh," the captain scratched her head. "I've never heard of a major being in charge of a ship that size before."

Warnings began to sound in Obi-Wan's mind. "My stars," he breathed.

"What is it, son?" Cin Drallig asked.

"I know who that is," Obi-Wan ran to the communications console.

"Who? Who is it?" Cin Drallig asked him.

"That man created the Jedi clones and I doubt he's alone. Darth Maul is on the planet and where the clone creator is, his Jedi clones must be as well," Obi-Wan replied.

He stared out the viewport in horror to see dropships carrying the first two hundred Jedi and Khian heading toward the surface.

"Get word to Tarkin, the Jedi are going right into a trap!" Obi-Wan exclaimed.

"Commander Kenobi, we have an urgent communicate coming *from* the Marshal. Rebel ships are coming through the debris field!" the communications officer's fear radiated across the bridge.

Obi-Wan's eyes widened as he saw a mass of red dots appear on the tactical display.

"Battle stations," he whispered.

Padme gasped and Anakin put his hands on his forehead in disbelief.

"Well there's a sight you don't often see," Jango put his hands behind his head, interlacing his fingers.

R2-D2, with wires running along his entire chassis, let out a low whistle.

The journey through the Rishi Maze had been nothing less than harrowing. Anakin had to summon every ounce of his ability with the Force to guide them safely and quickly through the enormous debris field. The little astromech droid calculated a forty hour trip using sub-light speeds.

Anakin got them there in less than half the time.

More than once, R2 screamed in protest as Anakin had to jerk the ship hard to one side or the other to narrowly avoid adding their wreckage to the Rishi Maze.

Now that they had arrived at Rishi itself, he wondered just what they were supposed to do.

"You want to squeeze us through all of that?" Jango asked, waving his hand at the viewscreen that was filled with turbolasers, missiles, torpedoes, and death.

"There are three thousand ships out there, how are they going to notice one more?" Anakin reasoned.

"If we don't fire any weapons, we might be able to pass undetected," Padme offered. "They'll probably be too busy worrying about the ships that *are* shooting at them."

"And if we pass along the rebel side, we might be okay," Anakin nodded his head.

Jango shook his head in disapproval. "I ain't basing my life on a lot of 'ifs'."

R2 let out a series of whistles and Anakin checked the tactical display.

"The Republic is outnumbered and beginning to lose ground. With all the rebel ships out there, I would say the rebs have put all of their eggs in this one basket," Jango said.

Padme put a hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Isn't there anything we can do to help them?"

Jango whirled around. "With what? This bucket is damn lucky to be flying at all. Our communications are shot, I doubt the weapons would even fire and if they did, you want to go into that with guns blazing? C'mon lady, what kind of moron are you?"

Anakin grabbed Jango by the front of his tunic. "Don't you ever, *ever* talk to her that way again or you'll find yourself testing how airtight that armor of yours is."

Jango took a compulsive glance at the airlock. "Okay, okay, ease up kid. I'm just looking for constructive ways to help and shooting off a few lasers before we're squashed like the bugs we are ain't exactly helpful."

"Our communications aren't quite dead. R2 has done enough work on it to get off one good transmission before it completely overloads," Padme offered.

Anakin sat back and thought as the battle raged ahead of them. He had two objectives now. If they destroyed the weapon, the rebels would have no prize to pursue and would have to retreat. However, it was so rare to see a rebel fleet of this size. If the rebels were crushed here and now, the war might be close to ending.

"We're going to the planet," he said, breaking the silence. "But we're not going alone."

Jango raised an eyebrow skeptically. "You got a fleet hiding in your back pocket?"

"Not exactly, but I have the Force, and the Force will bring a fleet to us," he said and stared up out of the viewport.

Padme and Jango's eyes followed.

"You've got to be joking," Jango said.

Padme wrapped her arms around Anakin. "He's not the joking type."

The situation was slowly getting out of hand. The rebels had brought a force larger than they had anticipated and the best the Republic could do was trade ship for ship.

Their best wasn't good enough.

"We've been ordered to join another eighty ships to try and reinforce our flank," the captain told Obi-Wan as another wave of turbolasers slammed into their side.

Obi-Wan and Cin Drallig were able to focus enough to keep most of the concussion missiles and proton torpedoes away, but the strain was taking its toll.



“They keep chipping away at that flank,” Master Drallig said. “We’re hemorrhaging ships as long as Tarkin keeps sending piecemeal reinforcements.”

Obi-Wan could only nod, his attention focused on keeping the *Knight’s Valor* safe from destruction.

“We’ve lost twenty percent of the fleet and the rebs keep coming. Tarkin’s coming to a tipping point. Either he has to pull out of Rishi, which is damn near impossible with this mess around us, or he needs to holler for some help,” Master Drallig said.

“I doubt a transmission will even get through the Rishi Maze,” Obi-Wan argued. “It’s entirely possible the Republic won’t know what happened here until the rebels drop the weapon on Coruscant and tear it apart.”

Cin Drallig opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. “Just in case, it’s been fun. You would have made an outstanding Jedi Master.”

Obi-Wan nodded at him in respect as the ship took its place to shore up the fleet’s crumbling flank. Three rebel frigates moved to their position and he braced himself as the firefight began.

His eyes widened and he whipped his head around at an unoccupied section of space.

“Captain! What is that?” he pointed out to the void.

“Are you mad, what are you looking at?” Cin Drallig asked, squinting his eyes.

“Something’s out there!” Obi-Wan said and ran to the sensor display terminal.

“Commander Kenobi, we’re receiving a transmission on your coded frequency,” the communications officer said.

“Patch it through!” Obi-Wan exclaimed, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Did you miss us?” Padme asked gleefully.

“Padme!” Obi-Wan cried out. “Not that I’m glad to hear your voice, but I hope my friend is somewhere there with you?”

“He’s a little pre-occupied at the moment trying to hold all of this together, but he wanted me to relay a message to you. He said the rebels should have learned on Illum to beware a ‘Jedi Blizzard’. I sure hope that means something to you because I don’t...” she said and her transmission abruptly ended.

Other bridge officers began glancing up at space and pointing as well. Cheers rang out among the crew and echoed throughout the ship as they saw what was approaching.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Obi-Wan muttered.

“By the Force...” Cin Drallig whispered in awe.

Anakin’s transport soared through space and sped past the bridge of the *Knight’s Valor* with its engines blazing white-hot. Every head on the bridge whipped around to see the small ship heading straight for the planet.

Every head turned back and gasps could be heard when they saw Anakin’s Fleet.

A giant mass of planetary debris from the Rishi Maze slammed into rebel ships across the battlefield. Chunks of the maze of all shapes and sizes collided with capital ships and explosions filled the heavens. Obi-Wan shielded his eyes as hundreds of ships were pulverized and fireballs erupted from their former enemies. The survivors scattered in all directions, some even ramming into each other in the massive confusion that ensued.

The explosions began to fade and the bridge crew erupted in cheers. The Republic fleet seized the opportunity to turn the tide and threw itself at the disorganized and crippled flank.

"We can turn it! We can turn their flank and roll it right up into the center! That padawan has just won the day for us!" the captain pulled up the tactical display.

"Captain," Obi-Wan said. "Pursue the rebel fleet, but do not fire on any ship that surrenders. You have the bridge. The Master and I have business on the planet's surface."

Cin Drallig nodded to Obi-Wan and together, they entered the turbolift and left the bridge.

"Did I mention he's *my* padawan?" Obi-Wan grinned.

Anakin had never felt more relieved than when he released his grip on the Force around the three hundred asteroids and collapsed on the deck. Padme rushed to him and threw her arms around him as he laid his head in her lap.

"If I have to do all that work just to get a little attention, then we need to have a serious talk about our relationship," he breathed.

Padme kissed his forehead and smoothed his hair.

"Not to interrupt this tender moment," Jango called from the pilot's chair. "But we're breaching the atmosphere. We should see the weapon within two minutes. That is assuming this bucket can survive the descent."

Anakin stared into Padme's eyes a moment longer before forcing himself to stand up and climb the ladder back up to the bridge.

"There are Jedi down there, I can feel it," he said. "Jedi clones as well, a lot of them. There's something else too, I can't quite..."

A dark presence entered his mind again. He felt it bore into him just as it had on Cerea. Then, he had been helpless to stop the rape of his being. Now, he was able to defend himself with ease.

"Darth Maul," he muttered. "I fought you almost to a stand-still on Cerea with almost no training. This time, things will be different."

*"Come to me, padawan. This time I will put the true power of the Force on display,"* the darkness answered before fading entirely.

Anakin shook his head and cleared his mind. Their transport broke through the clouds and what they saw took their breath away.

The weapon was part of a massive installation that spanned over three thousand square kilometers. Everywhere he looked, he saw one never-ending metal and concrete structure. Anakin's eyes widened as he stared at the enormous cannon that protruded like a great spike two kilometers into the air.

Padme put a hand to her mouth. "I never believed...well I mean I thought...but it is beyond all imagination."

Jango peered over the edge of the transport's dash. "Yep, it's big."

They soared over the complex once and Anakin could see different colored lightsabers flashing in the distance.

"I assume you want me to set us down with the rest of them?" Jango asked.

Anakin nodded. "They have to know more about what's going on than we do, but we're not here to fight. Can we identify some kind of central structure?"

Jango looked over his shoulder. "You plan on blowing it up from the inside? Some kind of a power relay overload?"

Anakin threw him a look. "What idiot would do that with a thousand starships in orbit all armed to the teeth?"

"Then why didn't the Republic just blast it when they got here?" Jango asked. "Why land Jedi at all and put them in harm's way?"

Anakin only chewed his lower lip in thought.

"If the Republic ain't going to destroy it, they must be here to use it and blow the rebellion to Rishi sized pieces," Jango said what Anakin was thinking.

"Not exactly the noblest thing our government could do," Padme mumbled.

"So then what do we do? Help secure it? Destroy it? What's the call?" Jango asked.

"Destroy it, no matter what. No one should have this much power. Not the rebels, not us, not the Sith, and not the Jedi," Padme answered with no hesitation.

Anakin remained silent.

"You're talking about wrecking my link to my people's past," Jango growled.

"And your people's past is threatening our future. I'm sorry Jango, but this facility must be destroyed. There simply is no other choice," Padme said sadly.

"The Mandalorian legacy *must* survive," he argued.

"It can survive in many other ways. You can't be the only Mandalorian in the galaxy. Raise a family, and tell your son or daughter the tales of your people, do anything other than allow this monstrosity to be used again. Above all, you especially don't want a Sith controlling a piece of your heritage." Padme said.

Jango clenched his teeth. "I'm bringing us around to land near the Jedi assembly area. Can you take the wheel for a bit? I'd like to arrive in style," he glanced over at Anakin.

Anakin only nodded and limply gripped the flight controls. Before climbing down the ladder into the cargo bay, Jango tapped Artoo-Detoo on its leg.

"Hey, I'm betting the kid would like to know where to land," he said and Artoo beeped before a set of coordinates flashed on Anakin's HUD.

Anakin's mind was racing, but not about the mission at hand.

Anakin knew exactly what he was capable of. Ambria had given him a glimpse, a mere taste, of what he might accomplish. With Darth Maul within his reach, he was ready to do what no Jedi or Sith could ever do or had ever done.

He was ready to make history.

Padme strapped herself into the co-pilot's seat next to him. "Something's on your mind, what is it?"

Anakin started laughing hysterically.

"What?" Padme asked. "What's so funny?"

Anakin wiped a tear away. "We have hundreds of Jedi clones below us, thousands of starships in orbit, everyone dying all around us in the most massive battle of our generation, we're on our way to stop a Dark Lord of the Sith from utilizing a weapon capable of stopping a planet's rotation, and we're flying with a man who tried to kill both you and me on Alderaan. You want to know what's on my mind? What *isn't* on my mind?"

As the transport began rattling its way along the final approach, Padme began laughing with him.

“You two are some of the strangest birds I’ve ever been around,” Jango remarked as he climbed back up the ladder to the bridge. Seeing him in his full Mandalorian armor for the first time was a little unsettling. It put a face to the civilization that had created this weapon. Padme shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

“We’re just enjoying our situation,” Anakin said as he banked the transport toward the landing area.

Jango clapped a gloved hand on Anakin’s shoulder. “You guys are my kind of crazy.”

Anakin sat the ship down near several other vessels not too far from where a group of Jedi were re-grouping away from the battle zone.

Jango drew both of his blaster pistols and cautiously walked down the ramp. Anakin followed with Padme close behind. The little astromech droid beeped and whistled as it also made its way down the transport, dragging a few wires along.

“Fine, but just don’t get in the way,” Jango gestured for the Artoo unit to join them.

They made their way to the other Jedi that were trying to shout over each other while standing near a computer terminal.

“Need a plan...”

“We’re badly outnumbered!”

“No communication from the fleet...”

Anakin strode up and peered over their shoulders. The tactical readout on the terminal did show a less than encouraging picture of their situation on the surface.

“I suppose my invitation to this party got lost,” Anakin smiled.

The other Jedi whirled around. Anakin had seen them before, but only once or twice. Most of them were younger Jedi who had been recently knighted. The fear on their faces was instantly replaced by relief and elation.

“The Chosen One!” one of them gasped and several of them clapped him on the shoulder or pumped his hand feverishly.

Jango rolled his eyes while Padme beamed at Anakin.

“Friends, don’t give in to fear,” Anakin said. “Reinforcements will be on the way. The fleet encountered a few...distractions from our rebel friends.”

“I’m sure you can slice through these Jedi clones with ease!” one of them said. He was practically bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet in excitement.

“Unfortunately, that’s not why I’m here. There’s something far worse than copies of your masters to worry about,” Anakin said calmly. “And I’m here to deal with that.”

They all began protesting at once, but Anakin held up his hands.

“Friends, you will be fine. Join your comrades and let not your hearts be troubled. Help is on the way, I promise you, but it will not be from me,” he said.

Seeing their downcast faces he added, “Can I go in there knowing you’ll make me proud?”

Their eyes lit up and each one of them nodded firmly.

“Padme!” someone shouted from behind the crowd of Jedi.

A man burst through the assembled Knights and nearly tackled her. He picked her up and spun her around several times before setting her back down on the ground.

Anakin gripped Padme by the arm and pulled her behind him before realizing just who was standing before them.

"Khian!" Padme shrieked and instinctively took a step toward him, but then checked herself.

She remained by Anakin's side, her arms clinging to his. The grin on Anakin's face grew as Khian's face fell.

"I was so scared that you were dead," she said softly.

Khian made a move toward her, but then checked himself as well. The desperate plea in his eyes was not being answered.

His face darkened as he tore his eyes away from Padme to look at her Jedi. His brow furrowed and his eyes burned into Anakin.

"I'm glad to see you survived your ordeal," Khian muttered, still locking eyes with Anakin.

"Anakin got me through a pretty tough scrape, but we have more work to do," Padme said and gestured to the facility.

"I think *he* can handle this all by himself," Khian said. "You don't need to be here."

Anakin's grip tightened on Padme's arm.

"I need to be here for this," Padme said. "I need to see it through to the end. The Republic, the rebels, the Sith, they all want this weapon. I'm going to make sure no one ever uses something like this against another world."

Khian looked down at her and wanted to say more, but Anakin cut him off.

"You heard the lady. She's not going anywhere," he said.

"And you'll be responsible for her safety? *You?*" Khian growled.

"I've done a better job than someone else did on Ord Mantell," Anakin retorted.

Khian scowled and the arm close to his blaster, *Padme*, twitched.

Padme screamed and Anakin turned to see the Jedi he had just inspired engaging at least a dozen Jedi clones. Not all of them were armed with lightsabers, but all of them fought viciously against the Knights of the Republic.

"Artoo, find us a way to some kind of a center for this complex. Some place where Darth Maul might be," Anakin moved aside as the astromech droid began working on the terminal.

"Padme, we can take the transport and get to the fleet. I can get you to safety," Khian pleaded.

"She said *no*," Anakin insisted.

Khian's face hardened with resolve. "Padme, there's something you need to know," he began and looked right at Anakin.

Anakin's eyes widened.

Jango stepped between them and rapidly fired both blasters at a Jedi clone of Master Ki-Adi-Mundi, hitting him seven times in the chest. The clone dropped only a few feet from them and Anakin flinched when he recognized the former master.

"Are we gonna talk or are we gonna go to work?" Jango asked and nudged the clone's body with his boot.

Artoo beeped an affirmative and a map with a route laid out appeared on the terminal.

"There's a large concentration of activity on the computers in this room," Khian said as he looked on.

"Darth Maul must be accessing information on this place. If he gets what he needs and gets away, he could re-build this on any planet in the Republic," Anakin said.

"And where he is, Major Issic is," Jango holstered his blasters.

Anakin turned to face them all. "Khian is right. No one else is going with me."

Padme's jaw dropped. Jango's hands balled into fists.

"Smart move," Khian smugly said.

"Listen here Jedi, Issic's got something coming to him and I don't mean your Order's sense of justice where he gets a slap on the wrist, a pat on the head, and a vacation at a minimum-security detention facility," Jango growled.

"Justice is justice," Anakin said. "The Order has dealt with him once before, they will deal with him once again."

"Typical," Khian muttered and Padme raised an eyebrow skeptically. "They did a fabulous job before, didn't they? Due to their actions, he's not free to help Darth Maul secure a planet-killing weapon. Oh wait, yes he is."

Jango looked at Anakin for a long moment. "Fine, Jedi. I also get to avoid the Sith and that suits me just fine. Remember this, you bring him back alive. No 'accidents' along the way, eh?"

Anakin shook hands with Jango Fett before turning to Padme. Their eyes locked and hers began to swim with tears. He put a finger under her chin and smiled at her.

"I'll be back after I save civilization as we know it," he said and kissed her.

Khian's hand flew to the blaster at his side for only a moment before he restrained himself.

Anakin turned, nodded to Khian, and walked toward the skirmish. Two clones cut down one of the young knights and charged Anakin.

His golden lightsaber was out for only a split-second before he cut the two down and continued his walk. Another used the Force on Anakin to try and push him back. Anakin answered in kind and the clone sailed into the air and over a wall.

The other Jedi cheered as he approached, but Anakin broke into a run and sprinted right past them toward the entrance of the complex.

Artoo let out a mournful whistle.

## Chapter XIX

*"Citizens of the Galactic Republic! I prefer addressing you directly on this day of days. While our brave soldiers are bringing us victory after victory across the galaxy, I wanted to take this moment to speak with you about a very serious matter."*

*"Our Jedi generals and commanders have done an adequate job of leading our forces thus far. However, we must ask ourselves: Aren't they best used during peacetime?"*

*"These 'Guardians of Peace and Justice' are wonderful mediators, but Coruscant has been raided, Chancellor Valorum killed, Neimodia sacked, Nubia blockaded, trillions of credits wasted, and countless millions of people killed."*

*"This was done on their watch."*

*"In response, I will be advancing many deserving members of our armed forces into positions previously held by the mysterious Jedi. The Jedi themselves have said they do not enjoy working with the military. I have been told that they consider themselves to be 'pawns of the military'. Well if defending us is too burdensome a task, I shall relieve them of it."*

*"Their devotion to their religion is clearly their priority. Let them sit in their temple, contemplating the meaning of the universe. I shall oblige them while employing professional soldiers to ensure that no one threatens our Republic ever again."*

Anakin was able to wind his way through the complex easily enough, but his journey was un-settling. He would have felt more comfortable fighting his way through the steel gray corridors than being able to jog along the route Artoo had drawn with no resistance. Around every corner, he fully expected to run into an army of Jedi clones. Not seeing anything at all was far worse and only ratcheted the tension in his mind.

Anakin came to a halt at the end of a corridor that fed into three other corridors that all looked exactly the same as the one he just came down. He cursed himself for not downloading the map into a tablet instead of just relying on his memory.

"Blast," he muttered. "A few signs wouldn't have killed the designers."

He tried to reach out to the Force, but he couldn't feel Darth Maul at all. He shoved away a sense of trepidation. A Jedi Knight does not panic; he would let the Force guide him as best it could.

Anakin turned and sprinted down a corridor hoping it was the right one. He turned a corner and ran headlong into a child, sending them both tumbling to the deck.

"Owww!" the boy shouted and rubbed his knee.

The boy wasn't much older than ten or twelve years old. He had been holding several digital tablets and a tool container which had fallen when they collided. Various tools of all shapes and sizes spilled into the hall. The boy was tall for his age, with gangly limbs to match. His shockingly blonde hair was matted and tangled.

"Sorry," Anakin mumbled as he picked himself up. "What are you doing in a warzone? Did you come down with the Jedi?"

The boy flashed a dark look at him before turning to pick up his tools.

"Ugh, you speak Basic," he fiddled with a small device attached to his belt.

"I'm trying to keep this place from being blown to bits. You would think putting up with the Rishi Maze would make my job interesting enough, but no! Your *Troch* isn't making this easier by slicing up my home!" he pointed to Anakin's lightsaber.

He looked at the boy quizzically before using the Force to pick up a few scattered tools and place them back in the tool container.

"You're an engineer?" Anakin asked sarcastically.

"Better than most," the boy sneered. "I can get in and out of places most others can't and I'm the best with a hydrosponder. I mostly just modify stuff. You know, make it better than it is now. But with all the shooting going on, all I get to do is fix stuff. Let me tell you, you guys have been making *kanricko* problems."

"You want to keep this place going?" Anakin asked.

The boy threw him a skeptical look. "Yah, of course! This is *Revan cyr'uut e ra'kta!*"

"I understood that one word, 'Revan'," Anakin scratched his head.

The boy rolled his eyes. "I got work to do, we're very busy down here."

Anakin looked around. "'We?'" he asked.

"Those of us that are left yeah," he replied and hoisted the tool container onto his back. "I got work to do, do you mind? *Se'Vakar!*"

"Yeah, hang on a second. Are you a Mandalorian?" he asked.

The boy rolled his eyes. "Wow, you figured that one out all by yourself?"

"This is incredible!" Anakin exclaimed. "Jango will be thrilled to meet more Mandos."

"Yeah, thrilling, whatever. *Se'Vakar!*" the boy insisted.

"Okay fine, but listen, I'm looking for a room with..." Anakin began.

The boy shook his head. "You're going to fight the Sith, no kidding. That's what Jedi and Sith do, they fight. Head down that corridor, take two rights, then a left. You should head up a ramp and when you see a large door, you found it. *Kadi!*"

Anakin had just enough time to say thank you before the boy was already moving on to his destination.

"Wait!" Anakin called. "Who are you?"

The boy shouted something over his shoulder, but he was too far away to make it out.

Padme paced back and forth outside their transport. Jango leaned against the hull, wary, but relaxed. The Jedi had carried the fight down an avenue and away from them. Khian kept looking at the door Anakin had gone into and fingering his blaster. Getting Padme off this world was Priority One, but how to convince her?

"I can't stand the waiting. We should be in there with him! We were there on Cerea, we should be there now," Padme stomped her foot.

"We should be in orbit," Khian muttered. "As far from any Jedi as possible."

"I agree with the lady," Jango said. "I'd much rather be in there wrapping my hands around Issic's throat than out here twiddling my thumbs."

"No!" Khian turned to face them. "No," he repeated more calmly. "We told Anakin we were staying here. What happens if he comes out and finds we're not here? He'll probably turn Issic over to the Jedi Order and then you've missed your chance to confront Issic."

Jango's hands tightened into fists before he leaned against the hull again. Padme continued pacing.

"Khian, you said you had something to tell me?" Padme recalled.

Time seemed to almost stand still for Khian. Dare he tell her in the middle of a war? Telling her now might frighten her enough to get her on the transport and away from Anakin altogether. But he couldn't be sure that she wouldn't run after the traitor and be lost to Khian forever. A cold sweat broke out on his forehead. The truth was a double-edged sword that could help or pierce him.

No, he would tell her the truth about Anakin once they were off the planet, away from him forever. He couldn't take the chance that he might push them together with the truth.



The roar of engines high overhead saved Khian from having to answer. Khian saw a standard Republic shuttle sail over them and settle a handful of meters away. He shielded his eyes from the debris that was kicked up by the blast.

A ramp lowered and Obi-Wan Kenobi exited with another Jedi just behind him. The two Jedi hurried to join Khian, Padme, and Jango by their transport.

"Where is Anakin?" Obi-Wan asked.

All Padme had to do was point at the facility and the other Jedi rolled his eyes.

"That boy has no patience! Master Yoda was right, he's moving too fast. A lot of them are moving too damn fast!" he said.

"Cin, Anakin knows what he is doing," Obi-Wan insisted.

Khian snorted angrily.

"You three need to get back into orbit and away from here. More Jedi will be landing, but it isn't completely safe yet," Obi-Wan turned to the three companions.

Padme folded her arms. "I'm not leaving without Anakin."

Jango folded his arms. "I'm not leaving without Issic."

Khian looked at Padme mournfully. "I'm the only voice of reason here."

"We don't have time for this," Cin Drallig nudged Obi-Wan. "Darth Maul isn't going to wait forever. If he escapes..."

"You all must promise me you..." Obi-Wan began.

"...won't move," they all finished together.

Obi-Wan chuckled for a moment before he and the Jedi Battlemaster sprinted toward the facility's entrance.

"I'm gettin' real sick of hearin' that," Jango said and leaned against the hull again.

Anakin jogged down the hallway the child had indicated, but along the way his mind was wrapped around one terrible thought.

He couldn't sense Darth Maul at all.

Anakin was confused. Was it possible that he had escaped? Had he come all this way only to leave empty-handed? The idea that this entire journey had been wasted did nothing to settle his mind.

His heart began racing at the prospect that he may never have a chance like this again. After leaving Ambria, one thought had occupied Anakin's mind. It had driven him almost to the point of madness. It caused him to lie to Padme. It was his obsession, it gnawed at him, and this one thought was his entire life to this point.

He had to find Darth Maul, nothing else mattered. Then his obsession could be turned into reality.

Anakin reached out to the Force over and over again, but the darkness had simply vanished. It stymied him until a sudden thought struck him.

*"Ethan is waiting for you."*

Anakin came to a sudden stop in the middle of the corridor.

He shut his eyes tight and shook his head. The voice had echoed in his mind and flashes of his vision came to him. The man who had prophesized the loss of everyone around him haunted Anakin's inner eye.

*"Ethan is waiting for you."*

"Get out, get out!" he shouted and dropped his lightsaber.

Anakin dropped to his knees and balled his hands into fists. He raised his fists to his head and shook back and forth. The sandy haired man was there, haunting him, tormenting him, filling every corner of his mind. As strong as his obsession was, this vision obliterated it.

As quickly as it came, it was gone.

Anakin picked up his lightsaber and looked around nervously. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Whatever had happened, it was over and his obsession had returned.

He continued walking until he came to a large door. This door was unlike any Anakin had ever seen before. It was engraved with strange markings around its border and the door itself was at least three times taller than he was. A simple keypad stood between him and Darth Maul.

Anakin pressed the largest button on the keypad. The door opened and Anakin saw Obi-Wan's smiling face waiting for him.

"Took you long enough," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin did not return the smile. "Well you know how it goes. Strange planet, lousy sense of direction, clones to kill; I had a whole to-do list to go through."

Obi-Wan flinched for a moment, and then gestured to the room inside. "Come, we have much to do."

Anakin walked into the room and couldn't help but be impressed. The control room was thirty meters tall and at least fifty meters in both length and width. One wall held a giant computer access terminal that spanned half the wall's size. There were two ramps, one at each end of the room, leading up to a second floor. All around them were numerous control stations that would have occupied one hundred Mandalorian technicians. Now, only a few astromech droids wandered from terminal to terminal. Several of them stayed at the large station, accessing data.

Together, they stood in front of the large terminal and Anakin observed many green progress bars that were nearly completed. "Looks like you're just about done here," Anakin observed.

"Very close," Obi-Wan said. "Then we can all go home."

"You're not leaving," Anakin replied sadly.

Obi-Wan's hand flew to his lightsaber, but he wasn't fast enough. Anakin's golden blade pierced his chest and came out through his back.

Obi-Wan slumped to the floor lifelessly.

"Your perversions of the Force sicken me," Anakin said, rising to his full height. "Come down and let's finish what we started."

From the second level, Darth Maul smiled, with Ethan Organa at his side.

Anakin and Ethan locked eyes. For both of them, memories began flooding their minds of the visions they had about the other. Ethan's eyes widened in recognition and Anakin's brow furrowed as the realization dawned on him.

"You! I'll see to it you never mock me again!" Ethan shouted.

"I won't let it happen. You've always been wrong!" Anakin called back, pointing his lightsaber directly at Ethan.

"It's not possible that you've met before. What's going on here?" Darth Maul asked. He turned and faced Ethan, his face twisted in confusion. "Speak!"

“This...Jedi...has haunted my nightmares, but he will do so no longer after you fulfill your part of the bargain. He will be the first to feel the Daetan’s return,” Ethan said with a lethal tone in his voice.

Anakin recoiled. “I haven’t done anything of the sort! You were on Illium, you were on Ambria, and you are the one who’s been haunting me!”

Darth Maul smiled, revealing his pointed teeth. “The Force has invested quite an interest in you two.”

Anakin shook his head and pointed at Darth Maul. “I don’t care. I’m not here for him, I’m here for you.”

“You are strong in the Force,” Darth Maul’s smile widened. “You truly are the one I’ve been searching for these long years. With proper training and control, you could become my apprentice.”

Ethan’s eyes widened. “No!” he shouted. “You swore to me that once I was rejoined with the Force that I would become your acolyte!”

Darth Maul chuckled. “Well there is room for one, but two have sent in their applications. Worthy candidates both, whom do I choose?”

Anakin’s face darkened. “I’m not joining you. I will not gain what I seek by turning to the dark side.”

Darth Maul cocked his head to one side. “That remains to be seen,”

The Dark Lord of the Sith clapped his hands together once. “Let’s have an audition! The one who survives shall join me and help me usher in a new age for the galaxy.”

Ethan’s face fell. “You know very well I don’t stand a chance. He has the Force as his ally and I would be cut down in moments.”

Darth Maul turned to Ethan and placed both hands on his shoulders. “Ethan, you have done well for me. You broke into the Jedi Temple to steal the genetic material to clone the Jedi. You arranged to meet with Tethys Aran, you stole a magnificent starship, and you brought me this magnificent weapon so that my master can crush his enemies. I redeem you and return you to the Force.”

They both closed their eyes and were very still after Darth Maul put his hands on Ethan’s shoulders.

Ethan opened one eye slowly. “That’s it? I was expecting...”

“What do you want, fireworks? You’ve been rejoined with the Force! Now, deal with this Jedi and embrace your destiny,” Darth Maul said.

Ethan Organa turned to look at Anakin and smiled. This smile revealed his joy, his rapture, and his eagerness to end Anakin Skywalker’s life. It was the smile of Death itself.

He walked down the ramp and ignited his lightsaber.

Anakin’s eyes widened when he saw the same golden blade light up the room.

“See anything you like?” Ethan cackled. “You’re a copycat, Anakin, a mere carbon copy of the original Daetan. As you know, a copy is never as good as the original.”

Anakin motioned with his arm and every droid in the room slammed against the wall on the far side. Sparks flew and broken parts flew into the air.

“Willing to bet your life on that?” he asked.

Ethan was halfway down the ramp before the door to the massive room opened. Obi-Wan Kenobi walked in with Cin Drallig. They both looked at the dead Obi-Wan clone on the floor and the real Obi-Wan looked at Anakin skeptically.

"It's not my fault they keep sending clones of you!" Anakin grinned.

"Leave this place, Jedi," Darth Maul growled. "You are interrupting a private party and I have no place for amateurs."

Obi-Wan and Cin Drallig spaced themselves apart and ignited their lightsabers. "This ends here," Obi-Wan said.

Darth Maul sighed sarcastically. "Fools are always most eager to embrace death."

He looked at Ethan, who had frozen in place on the ramp. "You two run along and play while I have a few words with our guests."

Ethan's lethal grin returned and he resumed his walk down the ramp. Darth Maul flipped himself off the second floor and landed lightly in front of the two Jedi.

With dual *snap-hiss* sounds, his long hilt produced two red blades like a quarterstaff. He turned his full attention to Obi-Wan and Cin Drallig.

The smile faded from his face.

At nearly the same time, on opposite sides of the room, Ethan and Darth Maul swung their blades at their respective opponents and the duel began.

If anyone could wear out a path in concrete, Khian was sure Padme could. Her heels clicked rhythmically as she walked back and forth along the same piece of ground. Her precise timing was almost hypnotic.

Numerous other shuttles had landed nearby with Jedi Knights and Masters pouring out of them. They all raced toward the battlefield, ignoring the three companions.

"You're going to drive me mad with that racket," Jango grumbled.

Padme shrugged her shoulders, but didn't stop pacing.

Khian laughed. "She's never been one to sit still for anything."

"I can't stand it anymore," Padme said. "It's been ages since they went in there and even longer since Anakin went in. Something must have happened to them."

"It's a big place, Padme. Maybe your pretty boy got lost," Khian said.

Padme stopped pacing.

Khian and Jango looked at her, startled by the silence. "I'm going in after them," Padme said and began walking toward the complex.

Khian gripped her by the shoulder. "And do what, exactly?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I have to be there. I have to be with Anakin," Padme replied.

He balled his hands into fists angrily. "Anakin!" he said in disgust. "*Anakin!* I'm sick and tired of hearing about Anakin!"

Padme looked at him with hurt eyes. "I love him," she muttered.

Khian's eye twitched in rage. "Him? You love him? He's nothing more than a power-hungry, over-ambitious, *Jedi!*" Khian spat the last word.

"They're no different than the Sith, all they want is power and to rule the galaxy. Nothing less will satisfy them!" he continued.

"Khian, they're guardians of peace. They don't want power or to rule, they just want everyone to live in peace and harmony," Padme said.

He threw up his hands in disgust. "Peace according to whom? From whose point of view? They have planets hidden from the Republic, a secret training program on

Coruscant, and are involved in all levels of government. It's *their* way of peace and harmony or *no* way at all. How can you put your trust in that?"

Padme looked at him with hurt eyes. "Anakin is your friend; you fought side-by-side, what is going on here?"

Khian took both her hands in his and took a deep breath. "The Jedi...Anakin...he's not what you think. He's after more than..."

He had to stop himself. The pain of what he had learned was just too much for him to bear and a lone tear rolled down the scar on his cheek. Khian had to turn away, he couldn't stand to look at her eyes anymore. Those eyes that once held such fire now pained him.

It was Padme who showed true strength. "Khian, it's okay," she soothed him. "I'm sure that everything is going to be okay. Whatever you think of Anakin, he's our best hope to defeat the Sith and end this war."

Khian only nodded his head.

"Everything can end right here and now. The rebel fleet will be routed, the clone Jedi gone forever, and we can get back to our lives. Please, help me help Anakin," she pleaded.

Khian turned from her.

"Please," she said softly.

"If you insist on going in there, I will follow. However, once this is done and the galaxy is saved from complete annihilation and we're all far away from here, you and I need to have a serious talk," he said.

Jango twirled his blaster pistols into their holsters. "'Bout damn time!"

Nothing Anakin had ever anticipated could have prepared him for fighting a mirror of himself. Ethan's dueling technique put Anakin quickly back on his heels. He had to think and act quickly just to keep up with his adversary. Despite not using a lightsaber for a long time, Ethan showed no rustiness at all.

The sandy-haired Daetan of Alderaan was also using the Force to his advantage, keeping Anakin off-balance and not allowing him to center himself. The two golden blades clashed relentlessly and Anakin was being pushed to his limits.

The temptation to glance over at the other duel where his friend, Obi-Wan Kenobi, was also fighting for his life was unbearable. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw flashes of blue against red, Jedi against Sith. His worry grew as he saw Darth Maul holding his own against two incredible Jedi duelists.

It took a very close swipe from Ethan's lightsaber to rock Anakin back to reality.

"Your death will be my re-birth," Ethan snarled. "The Force is with the Daetan now and the Daetan will reap destruction upon the galaxy!"

"The Daetan needs to shut his mouth," Anakin retorted and thrust his hand out. Ethan was flung backward with the Force, but before Anakin could pursue, Ethan had already flipped himself behind Anakin and he swung again.

Ethan showed no sign of being slowed by Anakin's attack and his lightsaber technique increased in speed. Anakin was fending off his attacks, but sweat dripped from his head and neck. He was the blink of an eye ahead of Ethan and that time was diminishing.

"I'm just warming up! Once I settle back into how I used to be, you'll be the first victim of my vengeance upon the entire Jedi Order," Ethan said.

"If your plan is to talk us to death, I believe it," Anakin grunted.

A large amount of wrecked droid debris flew at them, causing Ethan to jump back. Anakin dropped to the floor and looked back at the other duel in the room. It was Obi-Wan who had launched the parts at Darth Maul. The Dark Lord nimbly dodged and the cluster of broken droids and flown beyond to break up Anakin's duel.

Ethan let loose a primal yell and a bubble of blue light expanded away from him in all directions. Everything that touched the light was completely obliterated. The droid parts disintegrated and the bubble kept expanding. Several computer consoles and a few small crates got caught in its path and they vaporized.

Anakin shut his eyes tightly as the light shot toward him. He was backed toward a corner and the light continued to press in on him. He drew upon the Force to hold his death at bay until Ethan collapsed and gasped for air.

Anakin opened one eye, then the other, and then looked directly at the Daetan. His hand waved at the air and Ethan slammed into a wall with a sickening crunch. He charged Ethan, but hesitated when he was within striking distance.

"I don't want to kill you," he muttered and extended a hand to his opponent. "We have no reason to fight each other."

"I have every reason to hate the Jedi," Ethan panted and smacked his hand away. "They took the Force from me and ruined my life. Do you know what it is like to have everything in the palm of your hand? To be on your way to be the greatest Jedi of all time, only to have it ripped away from you?"

Anakin nodded. "But you cannot have the Force stripped from you. The Force is all around us, it always has been, it always will be. There is so much more to the Force than raw power and emotion. It cannot be taken from any living being because every living being is part of the Force."

Ethan said nothing, but Anakin saw the thoughts resonate within him.

"You felt the Force long before this, didn't you?" he asked. "You knew it was still there, waiting for you."

Ethan again said nothing. For a moment, the only sound was that of the other duel taking place behind them. Anakin looked over at Cin Drallig and Obi-Wan engaged in combat with the Sith Lord.

"They taught me that. They taught me the meaning of friendship and of family. You will have glory, you will have victory, but you will have no legacy. No one to celebrate it with you, no one to tell these stories of glory with. I have Padme, Khian, Obi-Wan, padawans, hopefuls, shipmates, fellow pilots, and I will, one day, have a family," Anakin said proudly.

Ethan stared at the floor.

"All you will have is him," Anakin gestured to Darth Maul. "The one who's been lying to you since Day One. He never returned you to the Force, you did that yourself. Now, return to the light side. Embrace what you've been missing and fill that hole in your heart."

Ethan shook his head angrily. He leapt up and slashed at Anakin again. "The Jedi will never forgive me for what I did. I'm not just a lost cause, I'm a lost soul."

Anakin blocked and parried every move Ethan made. His opponent moved slower now, less sure of himself. His face showed the twisted conflict that raged within him.

“The Sith are lost for all time, but only because they choose to be. They chose to embrace their anger, hate, and bitterness. But they do not hate the Jedi, they hate themselves for what they have become. Do you want to follow that path, Ethan? Do you want the rest of your life to be nothing but hate?” Anakin asked.

Ethan’s eyes watered and he gripped the lightsaber in his hands. The conflict within him was almost tangible. Anakin seized on that conflict and pressed ahead.

“There is always a way back, but I can only teach you and show you the way. You must be the one who chooses to learn and follow the path. Your legacy is your choice,” he said and struck Ethan’s blade so hard that his opponent’s lightsaber shut down and clattered to the floor.

Ethan Organa dropped to his knees. He covered his face in his hands and openly wept.

A warning pierced Anakin’s mind and both he and Ethan looked up. They looked over together and heard Darth Maul laughing while he duelled.

Cin Drallig’s blue blade was moving so fast that Anakin’s eyes could scarcely keep up. He was looking at the Jedi Battlemaster at his finest. He was drawing upon the Force to enhance his movements to extreme levels. He worked in perfect coordination with Obi-Wan Kenobi and together they drove the Sith Lord back against a wall.

It wasn’t enough.

Darth Maul thrust out a hand and Obi-Wan sailed into a wall, hitting it head first. The Sith Lord then leapt into the air and savagely kicked Cin Drallig in the back. The Jedi Master crashed into the wall Darth Maul had just been backed against. He quickly turned, showing a bloodied nose, and parried a slash to his legs.

But the slash never came.

Darth Maul grinned at the feint and turned his lightsaber to hit Cin Drallig in his side above the waist. The Jedi cried out in pain, but thrust his hand toward the blade. He used the Force to prevent the blade from moving deeper into his torso and slicing him in half. Darth Maul grunted heavily and tried to drive the blade completely through his opponent. The Jedi Master also grunted from the exertion and the Force caused a stalemate with lethal consequences.

With Artoo leading the way, the three companions were able to make their way through the facility. They moved cautiously, unsure of just what lay around any corner.

“You sure you can’t get scan through these walls?” Khian asked.

Artoo beeped back a series of negative responses and Jango laughed deeply. “A rough translation would be that he can’t do it beyond ten meters and he suggests you drop the subject altogether.”

“Someone programmed a little spunk in this droid,” Padme patted Artoo on the droid’s rotating dome.

They continued walking until Khian began to lose all sense of time. He fidgeted nervously every time Padme even mentioned Anakin’s name. Being on the same

planet with someone who wanted to learn from a Sith was pushing him to the brink of madness.

Artoo began trilling a warning. "Multiple inbounds, ten meters and closing." Jango interpreted.

"What do we do now?" Khian asked and drew one of his blaster pistols.

Padme opened the nearest door, grabbed both him and Jango by the arm and dragged them into the room with Artoo rolling behind them.

The door slid shut and Padme pressed her ear to the door. She heard several sets of footsteps move down the hallway and she sighed with relief as they continued moving past their hiding place.

"What if that was your pretty boy?" Khian asked.

Padme shook her head. "That's not Anakin, I can tell."

Khian raised an eyebrow skeptically. "I don't think Jango would put much stock into women's intuition."

Jango said nothing, but looked beyond Padme.

Khian turned around and he and Padme stared in awe.

They had come into an enormous armory and vehicle storage bay. The walls were covered by racks Mandalorian armor, weapons, rifles, vibroblades, and other instruments of death.

Ahead of them in the bay were various vehicles, but most of them had been stripped and down to their axles. Parts and wheels lay scattered across the bay.

"There are more of you? Geez I can't catch a break," a tall and gangly boy said.

He crawled out from under an odd looking armored personnel carrier and he was covered in various smudges and stains. The carrier was covered in gray paint that matched the walls perfectly. It was not only the most complete vehicle in the bay, but the fiercest as well.

"Who the blazes are you?" Jango drew his blaster pistols and Khian instinctively moved in front of Padme.

"Ease off there," Padme pushed down on Jango's arms. "I don't think a child will pose too much of a threat."

The boy cocked his head to one side and folded his greasy arms. "Lady, you'd be surprised what a Mandalorian 'child' can do. Especially when his friends and family are threatened," he said with a tone of sarcasm.

Jango slowly took off his helmet. "You're a Mandalorian?" he asked breathlessly.

"Why is that always such a surprise to everyone?" the boy blew a tuft of shockingly blonde hair away from his smudged face.

"What are you doing on this planet?" Padme asked as Jango looked at the child with a sense of awe mixed with intense curiosity.

"Waiting, like all the others," he replied.

"Waiting for what?" Khian stepped forward.

"*Mand'alor*," the boy said with a heavy accent.

They stared back at him blankly.

"We're all waiting for one who would claim the title of *Mand'alor* to step forward and take the legacy for his own. Until then, we keep this place running so when the *Mand'alor* appears, he can use the weapon to destroy *Revan nyn ures adenn*," he said.

Both Padme and Khian turned to look at Jango.



The child scoffed. "Please, if he were the Mand'alor, he would have earned my respect and my undying loyalty the instant he walked into the room and commanded me to fight alongside him to the death or to the *kote* of our people...whichever comes first," he winked.

"We're waiting?" Padme asked, looking around the large bay. "Who's we?"

The boy put his hands on his hips. "Lady, have you seen the size of this place? It is thirty-two hundred square kilometers of pure Mandalorian power. We're around, just not around here. I run this section and there are forty-two others who keep this place going."

"Let's knock off the 'lady' and 'child'," Khian said. "What's your name?"

"Most people just call me Boba," he said.

Padme stepped forward and regained her diplomatic posture. "My name is Padme Amidala, this is my protector Khian, and this is Commander Jango Fett."

Jango got down on one knee to look the boy in the eye. "I've never met another of my kind before."

"Jango...oh yeah, you're the one that other guy talked about," he said.

Padme's eyes lit up. "Did you see Anakin?"

Boba shrugged. "Tall guy? Lightsaber? Thinks he knows everything?"

"I like this kid," Khian chuckled.

Padme clapped her hands together. "Thank the Force he's okay!"

Khian cracked his knuckles.

"Whoa wait a second; I never said that he was okay. I just saw the guy. He ran off to fight some Sith guy a little ways from here," Boba said.

Khian walked up to the massive carrier and whistled. "I've never seen anything like this before. Comprehensive armor plating at different levels, overhauled engine, and are there four different gun sizes on this?"

"*Taung's Return* has five different gun sizes," Boba smiled. "This thing will take out anything those *runi* clones can throw at me and keep on singing a happy tune."

"Taung?" Jango asked.

Boba looked at the commander skeptically. "You sure you're one of us? You don't seem to know your history like one of us would."

Jango flushed angrily and looked at the ground. "Let's just say I've been deprived."

An uneasy silence settled in.

"Is that what this is for? You're going to go fight?" Jango asked, changing the subject.

Boba shrugged. "You gotta do what you gotta do. They keep ripping up the place; I'm going to rip them up. Simple as that."

Padme's eyes lit up. Khian immediately knew what was on her mind and rushed to her side.

"Padme, no, don't even think about it!"

She nodded her head and her eyes widened. "We can take this and help against Darth Maul!" she said.

Khian laughed. "This thing is a child's toy to him. You remember what Obi-Wan did to that Armored Land Cruiser back on Alderaan?"

Padme's mind wandered back to when she, Anakin, and Obi-Wan had broken into General Tarkin's cloning facility in the city of Aldera. It had been too easy for the Jedi Knight to rip apart the giant machine.

"But this is different. We know Darth Maul is facing off against three Jedi. If we can distract him, even for a handful of moments, the Jedi might take him down. If they do that, this war just might end! For sure the Jedi cloning threat would be over," Padme reasoned.

Jango put a hand on Khian's shoulder. "She's got a point, mate. This thing is a Mandalorian's dream come true. If we even get off a handful of shots, Anakin might finish the job."

Khian looked hopefully to Boba. Fighting the Sith would go in the opposite direction of where Boba wanted to go. If anyone could object to this reckless course of action, it would be him.

Boba shrugged his shoulders. "That's assuming this bucket will even run."

## Chapter XX

Ethan had never felt so incredible before. No, incredible wasn't the right word. Incredible didn't even begin to describe his state of being. He felt *renewed* as if he had taken his first drink to satisfy years of un-ending thirst.

Memories that hadn't surfaced in nearly a decade now flooded Ethan's mind. Lying beneath the clear skies of Alderaan as a young boy, he could clearly see the face of his first love. She was smiling and giggling as Ethan used his newfound Force abilities to lift her into a tree to pick the last fruit of the season.

It was that moment that caught the attention of Master Mace Windu who had witnessed it while discussing politics with Ethan's father. The Jedi Master immediately pulled Ethan aside for a full evaluation. Ethan chuckled as he remembered feeling frightened as the tall and dark man loomed over him, asking and then demanding that he expand his abilities.

*"I'm not asking for much, I just want to see what you're capable of when you're not trying to impress a girl,"* he smiled at Ethan.

That smile widened when Ethan focused on the same tree once again. Before his eyes, in a matter of minutes, the tree went through its yearly cycle of life. The leaves turned golden, and then red, then brown, then fell to the ground all at once. The tree's bark grayed as it would during the winter months, then turned a healthy brown. Buds appeared on the branches, and then sprouted new leaves which grew green and lush. Pearly white flowers blossomed in an explosion of color that drew a gasp from the learned Jedi. A buzz filled the air as hundreds of flying caedils raced toward the tree, causing Mace Windu to dive out of the way. They raced quickly from flower to flower, pollenating the entire tree before the swarm of caedils flew away as fast as they had come. Ethan giggled as Mace picked himself up off the ground only to see the entire flowers drop to the ground to be replaced by the fruit of the season. Vibrant blue orbs sprouted and the branches low with the weight of the fruit. The sweet smell of their nectar hung heavy in the air.

*"How about when I'm trying to impress a Jedi?"* Ethan smirked.

His early days at the Jedi Academy on Coruscant sped quickly before his mind's eye. Jedi Masters of all ranks and honors recognized and encouraged the ability he coveted. He was ushered from class to class by Master Yoda and Master Windu, often skipping lessons that were deemed "beneath" him. Under their guidance, his talent flourished.

Ethan would duel with knights far older than he and best them without breaking a sweat. He would sit with masters and teach *them* about the Force. He was hailed by the Jedi Council as a true Chosen One, someone who would lead the Jedi Order in ways never before thought possible.

Then, the disaster on Ord Mantell.

He saw Alanna and remembered his love for her. The ever-suspicious bodyguard that hounded her and never let them have a moment's peace together. The rage he felt at her assassin and how he had manipulated the Force itself to level an entire city block just to kill him. The sorrow, the pain, the agony that gnawed at him as he mourned her death weighed heavily on him. Ethan remembered being on the run, constantly dodging into filthy sewers or blind alleys to avoid the Jedi that had been sent to bring him home and face justice. The look on his father's face after Ethan had run home, looking for sanctuary, had brought on a new level of pain. It also paled in comparison to how he felt when his father summoned the Jedi to Alderaan to take custody of his son.

Ethan's father...the face was etched in his mind.

The wrinkled brow, the manicured beard, the kind eyes, Ethan could recall every detail of Bail Organa's face. His broad shoulders and firm handshake demanded respect from anyone he met. Bail's tone of voice however, commanded respect. It was solid, confident, and never wavered once he was decided on something. One ambassador had called it the "Voice of Aldera" and the nickname had stuck.

Ethan's entire life prior to the Quieting Ritual was laid out before him. Memories that he had denied himself and exiled to the furthest corner of his mind had resurfaced. They had been freed from the prison he, himself, had created.

The Force was indeed with the Crown Prince of Alderaan, but only because he *chose* to embrace it once more. His anger and bitterness toward the Jedi was the cause of his isolation for so long, not the Quieting Ritual the Jedi had imposed.

His tear-filled eyes looked up at Anakin. This man was never his enemy; he was his way to salvation and his reunion with the Force.

*"I free you, Ethan Organa,"* the voice from his vision echoed in his mind.

Ethan was whole again.

He had been lied to, led astray with false promises, and responsible for the deaths of millions of innocent people. There was only one reason for this and only one course of action to take. The Daetan stood and ignited his lightsaber. He nodded at Anakin in respect and leapt across the entire room. A savage battle-cry erupted from his lungs as he sailed through the air to strike at Darth Maul.

Darth Maul's face showed a hint of total surprise before he snarled at Ethan. He pulled his lightsaber away from Cin Drallig's side and parried Ethan's strike. Master Drallig groaned and collapsed to the ground.

Anakin raced to Obi-Wan and grabbed the shaken Jedi by the shoulders.

“Ethan’s buying us time; get Master Drallig out of here!” Anakin said and used the Force to pull the wounded Jedi toward them.

“But...you... what about you?” Obi-Wan shook his head roughly. He winced when his hand touched a large bruise forming on his forehead.

“He’s going to get himself killed. I can’t let that happen!” Anakin said and pushed Obi-Wan toward Cin Drallig’s prone form.

Obi-Wan looked down at the unconscious Jedi and then back up at Anakin. He nodded slowly and reached out to shake Anakin’s hand.

Anakin grabbed it and pulled Obi-Wan in, embracing his friend. “Be well,” he whispered.

“May the Force be with you,” Obi-Wan replied before breaking the embrace and picking up Cin Drallig. The Jedi Master moaned in agony as he was hoisted onto Obi-Wan’s back.

Anakin took a deep breath and ignited his lightsaber. He had to move quickly to prevent the one death he could not afford to witness. That meant fighting someone he never wanted.

He turned to see that he was completely alone.

The Force guided his mind and he felt the two still locked in combat. The duel had forced them out of this room altogether. Anakin raced through a narrow hallway and onto a large, outdoor landing platform. He squinted as the sun shined down upon him again.

The area was large enough to hold four transports and had a bridge leading away from the platform and led to another part of the facility. The bridge crossed over a river that was being channeled into the facility for cooling and powering purposes.

The river was nearly a thousand meters below.

Anakin spotted Ethan and Darth Maul instantly. He smiled as he could see that Ethan was clearly giving Darth Maul all he could handle in this duel. He felt a sense of pride as if Ethan was his own padawan performing well in a test. That smile faded when he remembered that should Darth Maul be killed, his knowledge dies with him. Using the Force, he propelled himself into the fray, his golden blade matching Ethan’s.

The two “Chosen Ones” united in combat against their common foe. Ethan and Anakin could easily have been mistaken for twins. Their dueling styles were similar, strategies were similar, and the two golden blades moved seamlessly with each other.

Darth Maul snarled, yet he was forced to retreat toward the bridge. Anakin slashed and caught a piece of Darth Maul’s duster, shearing it away. The piece of leather slid across the platform and fluttered a thousand meters down to the river.

The Sith Lord growled again and glanced over his shoulder as he was backed closer to the edge. His dual blades caught both Ethan’s and Anakin’s lightsaber and he pushed away hard, causing them to stagger backward.

Darth Maul shut off his lightsaber and used the Force to throw the hilt at Anakin. The long metal object slammed into his stomach, knocking the wind from him. At the same time, he leapt into the air and kicked Ethan in the face.

Ethan staggered backwards and dropped his lightsaber to the ground. Darth Maul pulled his own lightsaber back to him with the Force, ignited it, and slammed it into Ethan’s chest.

Ethan Organa slumped to his knees. He stared at Anakin for a moment and a small smile grew on his face. His body completely faded away and only empty clothes fell to the floor.

"NO!" Anakin screamed, his voice echoing off the steep walls.

He expected Darth Maul, a master of the dark side, to grin or perhaps even laugh. A Sith Lord should take pride in a kill like this and revel in the death he caused. Instead, he closed his lightsaber and shook his head sadly.

"Misguided fool," he muttered. "The Daetan was useful, in his own way. A pity, a waste, a truly pathetic figure."

Anakin stood, catching his breath. "He was to be admired for what he did. Ethan's redemption is complete. I wish he didn't have to die. He was a part of me that I never knew existed."

Darth Maul eyed Anakin carefully. "You knew from the beginning that he would not survive a duel with me," he said.

Anakin hung his head now and also closed down his lightsaber, yet said nothing.

The Sith lord grinned. "I can feel it now; you didn't *want* him to succeed."

"I told Obi-Wan I didn't want to let him get himself killed, but I wasn't talking about Ethan. You and I have unfinished business together, let's focus on that instead," Anakin said.

"Mourning period over so soon?" Darth Maul taunted.

Anakin's face flushed. "There will be a time for mourning, but it won't be now. Time is running short and I have to get what I came for."

Darth Maul grinned. "I know exactly why you're here, but I like to hear you say it. Admit it, to me and to yourself, just why you're here."

Anakin opened his mouth, but couldn't quite bring himself to say what had occupied his thoughts since he had left Ambria.

Darth Maul began circling the Jedi Knight. "Let me tell you why you are *not* here. You did not come to Rishi to save the Republic fleet. You merely saw the rebel fleet as an obstacle to overcome to reach your goal. You did not come here to destroy the Mandalorian weapon, despite what your girl thinks. The weapon is just a setting for what you need. You certainly did not come here to kill me and you didn't come here just to save poor Ethan Organa. He was just another obstacle to you, nothing more. Eliminating all those possibilities, why are you here, *padawan*?"

Anakin swallowed hard. "I've learned a great deal about the Force. My knowledge grew with the Jedi on Coruscant, but I know that there is more to learn about the Force than they are willing to teach. Ambria showed me that the Sith have knowledge as well. I want to know it all; I want to know everything about the Force, regardless of who is giving the lesson."

"Say it, Jedi," Darth Maul sneered.

"I have learned much, but I must know more. I *need* to know more," he said.

"Say it!" Darth Maul shouted. "Why did you come to Rishi, the home of the greatest Mandalorian weapon in existence?"

Anakin closed his eyes and spoke the words that echoed in his heart.

"To learn about the Force from you."

"How cute, the little *padawan* wants to play with the big boys," Darth Maul grinned. "Do you expect to meditate with me and contemplate how why we can't all be happy and joyous?"

"The Jedi are a source of great power, I recognize that and you must as well," Anakin said.

"In their own, twisted, way," Darth Maul conceded.

"I also recognize that the Sith are a source of great power. Something that has been denied to me until recently," Anakin slowly walked toward Darth Maul.

"I want to know more," he said.

"No," Darth Maul answered simply.

Anakin's hands shook with frustration. He didn't have time to play games when other Jedi might show up at a moment's notice.

"No, you want what everyone wants. You want more power. Somewhere along the way, you got a taste of true power and you want more," Darth Maul said.

"Knowledge is power. The Jedi and the Sith deny themselves the other side of the circle, not realizing that the circle is what makes life complete," Anakin said.

"Then you wish to turn to the dark side and join us?" Darth Maul said. "Do you think it is just that easy to throw down years of Jedi teachings and simply declare it such as that?"

Anakin shook his head. "I will never turn to the dark side. I simply wish to learn that which the Jedi won't teach."

He took a deep breath and confessed his true goal. "I will be the first to cross the divide between light and dark. I will know both, understand both, as we must know and understand the light and darkness within ourselves. However, neither light nor dark will take me."

Darth Maul closed his eyes for a moment. "You've been to Ambria," he said slowly. "It makes sense now; you visited the Animam and tasted the sweetness of power."

Anakin's hands stopped shaking. "Animam?"

Darth Maul began circling Anakin again as a predator would its prey. "The Animam is a Sith monument, a window into your very being. Long ago, on Ambria, a Sith Sorceress constructed such a device."

Anakin interrupted. "I know this story already, I had a vision as I meditated in front of it. Four men told me about how she wasn't prepared for the power she drew upon."

"I wasn't finished," Darth Maul snapped. "Over time, four Sith lords came to visit and eventually die on Ambria including the great Darth Bane."

Anakin's eyes widened.

"You must be a rare one indeed to be visited by such greatness," Darth Maul said.

"The Sith are hardly great," Anakin countered.

"Great ones are great regardless of which side history says they are on," Darth Maul said and Anakin arched an eyebrow. He had heard that before and now it resonated with him.

"Are you sure you want to learn about this power that the sorceress tried, and failed, to summon? Wouldn't you rather revel in the power of friends and listen to boring lectures?" Darth Maul asked, still circling him.

“There’s more to life than what you know, *padawan*,” Darth Maul said. “More to life, more to power, more to the Force itself. Learn from me, emulate me, and perhaps you can be the greatest of us all.”

Anakin’s eyes lit up. “The greatest of us all,” he echoed.

Darth Maul grinned and ignited both sides of his lightsaber while behind Anakin. “All you have to do, is unlock what you have within you. The power awaits you, Anakin. And then Padme will truly love you and never wish to leave the side of someone so powerful.”

Anakin’s golden blade ignited and he pointed it at the red blade of the dark lord. The wind whipped through his sandy hair as he rose to his full height.

“Tell me more,” he whispered.

Padme paced furiously back and forth. At times she would pause and tap her toe on the metal floor, only to resume pacing again.

“Well?” she asked for the fifth time.

“Well, what?” Khian stuck his head out from underneath the armored vehicle for the fifth time.

Padme glared at him.

Khian rolled his eyes and went back to work under the great machine.

“*Taung’s Return* was kind of thrown together only in the last few hours,” Boba stuck his head out of a viewport. “Lucky for me Jango and Khian came along or else I might have missed the action altogether.”

He grinned and pulled his head back inside the vehicle and continued working. A handful of moments later, he called out to Khian.

“Fuel line set?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t take it off-roading, but I think we’ll get by,” Khian grunted and wheeled himself out from under the massive machine.

Boba fired up the engine and revved it a few times. “A few more minutes and I think we’ll be ready to go.”

Khian stood and wiped a large grease mark from his forehead.

“Padme,” he said and paused to take a deep breath. “There’s something you need to know about Anakin. It’s not going to be easy...”

Even at the mention of his name, her eyes grew soft and she smiled. When he saw that, his hands balled into fists.

“I did some looking into his duel on Cerea,” his voice broke and he couldn’t bear to look at her hopeful expression any longer. He turned away and leaned his head against the *Taung’s Return*.

“Khian, it’s okay. You are the closest friend I have in the galaxy. If you can’t talk to me, who can you talk to?” she asked.

“Friend,” he muttered. “I thought Anakin was my friend. I had hopes that you and I would be more than just friends. I guess I was wrong about a lot of things. Hell, my whole world seems inside out.”

She put a hand on his shoulder. Her touch made him jump, despite it being so gentle.

“I’m still here, right here beside you. That hasn’t changed and I don’t plan on it changing,” Padme said. Her voice was firm, yet there was such kindness to it.

Khian turned, his eyes watering. "Change happens all the time. Even to people you thought you knew," he whispered.

"What are you saying?" Padme asked and stepped closer to him.

"Let's get this beast moving!" Boba called out. "We have a date with a Sith Lord and I don't want to keep him waiting!"

"You heard the kid," he muttered and walked quickly to the back so he could climb inside the armored vehicle.

Padme sighed, but followed him. For a moment, Khian almost lost all control of his emotions. He desperately tried to hold his resolve, but as she sat next to him, he couldn't stop a single tear from falling to the deck-plate.

"Khian, take the gun on the left, Padme on the right!" Jango shouted back to them over the roar of the engine.

"Will it take us long to get to Anakin?" she shouted back.

Boba's head peeked up over the headrest and he smiled. "Not the way we're going!"

Anakin's lesson with Darth Maul proved to be just as frustrating as with the Jedi, only this was more painful.

He slammed into a wall and resumed his *en garde* stance, but didn't charge back in. Darth Maul was breathing heavier from the exertion.

"Anger, emotion, hate, they fuel you," Darth Maul said. "They are a part of who you are. Fight with your heart, not just your head. It beats within you for a reason. Use it!"

Anakin shook his head to clear the cloudiness he felt from the impact. "You want me to give in and lose myself to anger. I won't do that!"

"It's not giving in, *padawan*. This is about embracing that which you already have within you. Why deny and suppress your natural self when you can feel such power from those emotions?" Darth Maul asked.

Anakin shook the rubble out of his hair, but said nothing.

"I know what is in your thoughts. You want to be the greatest starfighter pilot ever, the greatest duelist ever, the greatest Jedi ever. You want to be feared and respected by the masses as no one has ever before," Darth Maul continued.

Anakin stretched and felt his shoulder pop.

"Do you really think Padme will love someone who sits on a cushy chair all day contemplating how the galaxy works? Or someone who shapes the galaxy itself?" he grinned broadly.

Anakin stopped in mid-stretch.

"She's drawn to men of action, *padawan*," he hissed.

Anakin charged him, yelling as he ran. Before the Sith could ready himself, Anakin kicked him in the stomach, and swung directly at his head.

The blow staggered the Sith Lord, but he quickly regained his composure and blocked Anakin's furious attack. For the first time, Anakin saw real fear on Darth Maul's face. Anakin grinned as he pressed the attack further.

The power he felt was a fine narcotic, the anger he breathed in stimulated him. Darth Maul fell further back, almost to the bridge. He wasn't toying with Anakin any longer; he was truly fighting for his life.



“You are fighting better than the Jedi Temple Battlemaster did, stronger than your friend, give yourself to the dark side and take your destiny in hand!” Darth Maul said.

“NO!” Anakin screamed. The cry echoed across the bridge and the ground itself began to shake. Cracks appeared in the high walls and whole sections of concrete broke away and crashed to the platform.

Darth Maul broke off the duel and backed onto the bridge.

“What is wrong with you?” he raged. “I show you a path to *glory* and you don’t take it? I am handing you the galaxy on a platter and you deny me?”

Anakin recovered from his rage and drew his breath in ragged gasps. “What exactly are you offering?” he asked, saying each word slowly.

“The Sith leadership has been promised to me. Join with me! Together, we can rule the Force and ensure that you will be the greatest Force user of either Sith or Jedi that will ever be!” Darth Maul extended his hand.

“Someone promised this to you?” Anakin’s heart pounded, but not from the physical exertion of the duel.

His mind raced with possibilities. Was there someone more powerful than Darth Maul? Someone who possessed more knowledge of the Force than the Zabrak standing in front of him?

“That’s not your concern. You have an offer on the table, young Skywalker. I can make you the greatest Jedi to ever grace the galaxy now and for all time,” Darth Maul extended his hand again.

Anakin’s eyes lit up with wonder. “How? How can you promise that I will be the greatest Jedi in the past and future?”

Darth Maul’s eyes glinted. They locked with Anakin and he immediately understood. An odd mixture of horror and delight crossed his mind. Do the ends really justify the means?

There was a tremendous explosion that made Anakin dive for cover. A giant armored land cruiser leapt out from a hole in the wall and came to a screeching halt facing Darth Maul. The machine was painted in the same gray color of the walls and had a T-like glass covering the front. Anakin saw the smiling faces of Boba and Jango waving at him.

“NO!” Anakin yelled and raced toward them as massive cannons opened fire on the Dark Lord of the Sith.

## Chapter XXI

Everything seemed to move very slowly for Anakin Skywalker. He ran toward the armored beast, but his feet moved like they were made out of durasteel. He watched blaster bolt after blaster bolt sail toward his connection to immortality, but they seemed to just drift lazily toward Darth Maul. A flamethrower spewed fire toward Anakin’s opponent, but it seemed to crawl through the air. Four scorpion-like droids glided out of the vehicle and reached for Darth Maul with pincers that crackled with electricity.

The only one moving normally was the Sith Lord himself.

He sneered at the interruption and still had enough time to ignite both ends of his lightsaber, brace himself, and then swat the droids away as if they were annoying insects. He deflected the blaster bolts and one slammed into the bridge. He sprinted away from the jet of fire in plenty of time. He dodged another series of bolts and then deflected another into the floor just under the enormous metRogan monster.

Even the explosions seemed to move as slowly as Anakin did. He could see the bottom of the platform crumble from the blast. The firing stopped as the cruiser began to slide toward the edge, teetering dangerously close to plummeting one thousand meters to the river below. Once the guns fell silent, everything sped back up for Anakin.

He raced to the cruiser and pounded on its hull.

“Are you crazy? Do you realize what you’ve done?” he shouted.

The cruiser continued its slide and when Anakin heard Padme’s scream come from inside, his heart froze in his chest. He grabbed hold of the front corner and tried to pull, but he saw a hand from the glass waving him away. Anakin backed away in time to see two large pipes extend out from the right side of the cruiser.

Two grappling hooks shot out of the pipes and crashed into the wall above the hole they created. They pierced the concrete and durasteel to stop the metal hulk from sliding entirely off the edge. As it was, the armored cruiser was already halfway to falling off the platform.

Darth Maul’s grin faded and he stumbled slightly, leaning on the bridge’s railing for support. He stared back up at the metRogan beast and there was no look of teasing, fun, or amusement in his eyes. His eyes held a burning fire of rage and hatred that Anakin had never seen in a humanoid before.

Several bolts flew away from the front of the vehicle.

A few more ripped away from the left side.

Still more were pulled apart from the right side.

The fuel line ripped from underneath, spilling its contents.

“Get out!” Anakin pounded desperately on the hull before another bolt from the machine hit him on the shoulder. He whirled around to face Darth Maul.

“Stop!” he shouted and thrust out with the Force. Darth Maul staggered back against the opposite railing, but didn’t go down.

Anakin walked with a singular purpose toward the Dark Lord, but he put his lightsaber on his belt instead of igniting it. Every step was deliberate; every breath he took was focused. One thought occupied his mind as the air itself crackled around him.

Anakin wanted to kill that bastard.

He heard a loud clanking and turned his head just enough to see a gangly boy, Jango Fett, and Padme crawl out of the cruiser. Padme was shouting to someone inside, but Anakin could only hear her as a distant echo in his mind.

Pure hatred burned within him like a star’s fiery furnace. Anakin felt that anger well up inside his stomach and grow into a darkness that twisted everything it touched with a malevolent purpose.

The fire within him radiated toward Darth Maul. The concrete floor of the platform cracked and splintered. Darth Maul’s eyes widened and he scrambled to get

out of the way, but his weakened state only allowed him to stagger toward the section of bridge that was already broken by the explosion.

The Dark Lord of the Sith cried out in pain as a narrow strip of flesh was torn from his leg. He clutched his arm as another strip was pulled off. His cries turned to shrieks as strips from his hip, chest, and even his face were torn away and dropped off the bridge.

"You piece of slime. You wanted me to embrace true power? You wanted to see a real Chosen One at his finest? I'll rip you apart one piece at a time until not even your bones remain," Anakin said, but this voice was far different.

Darth Maul's breathing came in ragged gasps. He reached into a pocket in his vest and pulled out a thermal detonator. A small grin emerged on his bleeding face as he activated it.

"Then...it...begins," he panted and tossed it toward the armored cruiser.

Using the Force, Darth Maul had propelled the detonator toward the cruiser so fast that Anakin didn't have time to react. It only triggered a small explosion, but the spilled fuel caught on fire. One of the tether lines snapped and the cruiser slipped even further over the edge.

Anakin's blood ran cold when he saw Khian scramble out of the flaming wreckage, but he had nowhere to go. The side he came out on was tilted down and he clung to the door frame, the river raging a thousand meters below.

He looked at Anakin for only a moment and then jumped into the air. The fire reached the fuel tank a moment later and the cruiser exploded. The force of the blast slammed into Khian while still in mid-air and shot him toward the bridge.

Anakin's instincts took over and he raced to the edge. He threw himself flat onto his stomach and slid until he was halfway off the bridge. He thrust out his arm and grabbed Khian's wrist in time to hold him dangling above nothingness. Khian tried reaching up with his free arm, but he grimaced and let his arm drop.

The blast also threw Boba, Jango, and Padme back toward the hole they had made in the wall when they intervened. Padme was unconscious and Anakin's heart thudded in his chest. Jango reached over and put two fingers on her neck. He flashed a "thumbs up" to Anakin before he pulled her off the platform and through the hole.

Anakin heaved a sigh of relief and looked down at Khian. The relief sank into the pit of his stomach when he saw Khian's face was brimming with tears. These tears weren't from the burns he had suffered. They came after he watched Padme being pulled away. The realization dawned on Anakin and his face shook with rage.

Khian loved Padme. Deeply.

Khian loved his Padme. Deeply.

Khian's tear-stained face looked back at Anakin and the two understood each other perfectly.

Anakin's face slowly twisted with rage as the truth dawned on him.

"She'll never miss you," Anakin said, every word dripping with his anger.

When Anakin stood up from the bridge, Darth Maul had already fled. He walked slowly away from the crumbling bridge and felt the rage within him subside just as slowly. Over a dozen young Jedi poured through the opening, lightsabers at the ready.

One wave from Anakin to stand down was all it took. They looked at his battle-hardened face with reverence.

The young knights moved to one side or the other to allow Anakin the padawan to pass and then fell in line behind him. Anakin regarded them only casually. He didn't pause when he passed the spot where Ethan had earned his redemption. Only one thought was on his mind.

Padme.

Anakin walked back into the large computer room, half-destroyed and strewn with debris and wreckage. He didn't glance at the spot where Cin Drallig was nearly killed.

Padme.

More Jedi joined Anakin's company as they walked back down the hallway where he had literally bumped into Boba. They didn't say a word to him and he didn't even acknowledge their presence. There were no cheers, no celebrations, accolades.

Padme.

He left the main door and walked toward the landing area where a large number of transports had come since he had landed his damaged ship. Padme lay near a Republic shuttle with two medical droids around her.

Outside the facility, Jedi were cheering and embracing over their victory. The younger ones were dancing with each other and even some of the older knights had joined the jubilation. When Anakin approached with his troupe of Jedi followers, there was an initial roar from the crowd. The noise faded when Anakin's resolve didn't break. He pushed past them and went directly for Padme.

Jango and Boba were there, small bandages on their arms and chest. "She'll be okay; she hit her head, but..." Jango began.

Anakin held up one finger to silence him and dropped to his knees beside her.

"Padme," he breathed and his hand caressed her forehead. She was cool to the touch, but he knew in his heart that she would be okay.

"You flirt with danger more than with me," he whispered and kissed her still lips.

"Where's Khian?" Jango asked.

Anakin only shook his head sadly. Jango put an arm around Boba and they bowed their heads together in silence.

"He was a valiant warrior. I didn't know him long, but he was very dedicated to her. I'm sure he will be missed," Jango said.

Anakin ignored his remark. He turned to the thirty young Jedi that had gathered around him. "We're leaving Rishi. The fighting is done, the planet is secure."

Without a word, the Jedi all walked toward their transports. The two medical droids moved Padme onto a repulsorlift medical-bed and moved her to a medical shuttle. Anakin turned to the two Mandalorians.

"What will you do now?" he asked.

Jango looked down at Boba. "Well, the commanding officer I was assigned to is dead. As far as the Republic knows, I probably died in the battle. I think Boba and I will just disappear for a while. We have a lot to teach each other. I don't know much about my people and he doesn't know anything about the galaxy."

They clasped hands and Anakin nodded to Boba before he walked toward Padme's shuttle. As the shuttle ascended and began to pull away from the landing area, Anakin looked down to see every Jedi was standing perfectly still, staring back at his shuttle.

As he held Padme's hand and the shuttle broke through the atmosphere, Anakin tried to collect his thoughts. He had everything he wanted now. He had incredible power, he had achieved legendary status among his peers, and he had Padme for all time.

He had it all and he was sure that he had not even been tempted by the dark side.

Obi-Wan met him at the landing bay. He had a large bandage around his head and another around his ribs. He walked with a limp, but the smile on his face was more noticeable.

"The rebel fleet is routed, the Jedi clones mostly destroyed, but Darth Maul escaped," Anakin reported as he came down the ramp.

Obi-Wan smiled even more as he clapped Anakin on the shoulder. "Oh well let's not dwell on the little things."

"Master Drallig?" Anakin asked hopefully.

"Critical, but stable for the time being," Obi-Wan said. "There is small hope that he may yet survive the duel."

Anakin only nodded in response.

"Khian?" Obi-Wan asked, his tone indicated he already knew the answer.

"A...casualty of war," Anakin searched for the words.

Now Obi-Wan nodded slowly. "I'm sure you did everything you could. Your duel with Darth Maul must have exhausted you."

Padme's medibed floated by and Anakin stopped the droids from carrying her on. His hands cradled her cheeks as he leaned down and whispered in her ear.

Anakin motioned for the droids to proceed. His eyes followed her every centimeter of the way until she was out of sight.

"You love her," Obi-Wan said flatly.

"More than life itself," Anakin replied, his eyes lingering on the hallway they took her through.

"Anakin, the Jedi Council will..." Obi-Wan began.

"The Council can shove it out an airlock," he muttered.

Obi-Wan's eyes widened.

"You heard me," Anakin turned to face his friend. "I love that girl. We're going to be married and raise a family. This isn't an exercise or a theory, it's going to happen. If the Council has a problem with that, they can take it up with me."

"Anakin, Master Yoda has always cautioned about attachment. It can lead to loss and the loss will lead to fear, sorrow, and anger," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin rubbed some dirt from his face. "You fell in love. You defied the Jedi and left the Order to be with the one you loved. Did *you* turn to the dark side and go on a rampage? Master Ki-Adi-Mundi has *more than one* wife and was on the blasted Council!"

"Times are changing, my friend," Anakin put a hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder.

"Those Jedi down there are flush with new ideas and new ways of thinking. They don't have decades to waste on meditating. They can feel and love and embrace emotion and not be the rigid zombies that the Jedi have always been. There's absolutely nothing wrong with what we're doing."

Obi-Wan said nothing, but he didn't look away.

"Yes, I am rather tired. Think on this, Obi-Wan. Things are going to change forever in the Jedi Order now that the war is ending. I'm going to see to it that things change. You and I? We're on the ground floor of a whole new beginning," Anakin said before walking out of the landing bay.

"This news is most...disturbing," Darth Sidious's hand gripped his cane tightly. Lord Maul was afraid of this reaction. His master almost never shouted or revealed his true anger.

When he was quiet like this, it made the anxiety far worse.

"There can be no doubt?" Darth Maul asked.

"Moff Tarkin is absolutely sure," Darth Sidious sighed heavily.

Darth Maul was still on bended knee. He refused to move even to look at his master until he was given leave to do so. Consequences of not following proper protocol could be dire.

"The weapon is useless then," he conceded.

"It draws entirely too much power and would take decades to properly establish on a world. By the time it would be built and ready to fire, whoever we wanted to destroy might have already surrendered or been crushed through more conventional means. Not to mention the differing orbits of the planets and if a moon or vessel got in the way..." Darth Sidious shook his head.

Darth Maul's knee ached, but he said nothing.

"The logistics are just too difficult," his master said and sat in his chair.

"Perhaps I could try..." Darth Maul began, but paid for his insubordination.

His legs bent backward under him. They were being pulled behind his back and toward his head until they were ripped from his lower torso entirely. His black blood sprayed onto the floor as he rolled around in agony, shrieking, wishing for death to take him.

Darth Maul blinked his eyes and he was back on bended knee, his legs still attached. There was no blood on the floor, no wounds inflicted.

"The mind is a powerful weapon, my foolish apprentice. Now I allow you to rise and speak your mind," his master said slowly. There was danger underneath every word he spoke.

"The weapon is indeed useless on Rishi itself. Constructing it on another world is equally worthless. However, if we were to make it a mobile weapon...I ask you, Master, why slow the planet's rotation when destroying it outright will work just as well?" Darth Maul proposed.

His master did not reply. Darth Maul took the silence as a sign to continue. "We have a weapon that uses extraordinary energy to slow a planet's rotation. If we used less energy and focused the beam, we could annihilate the planet instead. Less energy and a focused beam means it will be smaller, and therefore, mobile."

Darth Sidious's face curled with his smile. "Can it be done?"

Darth Maul bowed slightly. "I will see to it, my master. This weapon will serve us."

"Very soon now, I will have everything and have it for all time," he said in soft yet powerful words. "I am Chancellor, but the Senate can still oppose me. I have

sown the seeds of discord among the Jedi and the populace, but I must move quickly or they will rise up against me. When I cannot be removed, then you shall have leadership of the Sith.”

“The Jedi will not stand for a permanent ruler nor will they abide my existence,” Darth Maul instinctively touched his scarred face.

His master’s eyes locked on him. “That almost sounds like the Jedi are plotting treason against the Republic.”

“They could threaten to overthrow you after you were just legitimately elected by the good people of the Republic,” Darth Maul grinned.

“I came to that very conclusion eight years ago,” Darth Sidious’s eyes gleamed.

Yoda sighed heavily as he leaned on his cane and stared out his window. Age was only beginning to catch up with him, but his physical state wasn’t his biggest concern at the moment.

“Losing control, we are,” he said softly.

“This war put us all on a slippery slope. I still believe we can recover, but it will take time and effort. I do not believe that time will be our friend,” Mace Windu replied.

“We cannot un-knight these...children...and send them back to the academy. It has never been done before in the history of the Order,” Kit Fisto added, blinking his large obsidian eyes.

Yoda sighed again. Silence settled heavily on the three Jedi Masters until it filled the room like a dark cloud.

“Warned you, did I,” Yoda finally said. “Too fast, we trained, all in the name of saving the Republic. Now, young and reckless they have become.”

“Skywalker is among that group. We cannot deny his power, yet we all agreed that the ends justified the means,” Kit Fisto said.

“That was when the Grand Centurion lead us to believe the rebellion would tear not just the Republic, but the Order itself apart. The attack on Illium proved that Skywalker had great power and that we were threatened. Now it turns out the rebellion might have been a paper tiger. Many of their ships were never completed and some were never started,” he continued.

Mace Windu leaned on the window. “Either Republic Intelligence grossly overestimated the size and scope of the rebellion...”

“Lied to, we were,” Yoda finished with a heavy voice.

The two other masters turned to look down at him. “Deliberately?” Kit Fisto asked.

“You make it sound official,” Mace Windu said with wide eyes.

“Long have I suspected that the Sith was more involved than we knew,” Yoda began. “Rose from obscurity, he did. Obtained power over all armies and ships, he did. Now, facing us as Supreme Chancellor, he is.”

“You’re talking about Palpatine,” Mace Windu said.

Yoda nodded slowly.

Kit Fisto’s face turned pale.

“How can you be so sure?” Mace Windu asked.

"Not certain am I, only suspicions I have," Yoda said. "But moved quickly, he has. Much like our young Jedi, much like Skywalker. Accept what has happened, we do. But prepare for the future, we must."

"I agree. We need to implement harsher training on our new knights and I think that should include a ban on padawans for the time being. They're just barely away from being padawans themselves. Until they are properly trained, they should not spread their...enthusiasm...to others," Mace Windu said.

Kit Fisto nodded in agreement. "We can accept them, but we must slow them down."

"And Palpatine?" Mace Windu asked.

"Deal with him, I will," Yoda nodded.

Together, the three Jedi Masters and leaders of the High Council looked out the window as Anakin Skywalker waved and pumped his fist as he walked along his victory procession.

The crowd screamed in delight as he raised Padme's hand with his own.

## Epilogue

*"This is Oreana T'riek reporting live from the biggest party in the galaxy! The single largest victory in the Clone Wars has been won by the military and the people of Coruscant simply refuse to stop celebrating."*

*"Chancellor Palpatine has declared a week-long holiday has been declared on the Queen of the Core with several trillion citizens reveling in this signature victory. Chants of 'We Want An-a-kin' rang out from city block to city block with everyone wanting to see the greatest hero of our time."*

*"I was with Chancellor Palpatine during his Proclamation to the people. Afterward, he pulled me aside for an exclusive statement."*

*"While the victory was phenomenal, it hardly signifies the end of this rebellion. While the flame of insurrection has been doused, there are flare-ups across the galaxy. Our military experts have convinced me that our security measures must stay in place. Curfews will remain in effect and security checkpoints will be enforced to the strictest measure of the law."*

*"The Senate believes this threat to be over. Believe me when I say we have only just begun to see the impact of this war on our civilization. As a result, I will be restructuring sector commands so that the Moffs have more direct control than before. This will bypass a great deal of red tape that clogs up the halls of the Galactic Senate. Stability will return to the Republic, I swear it."*

*"Celebrate, Coruscant! This is Oreana T'riek wishing you a happy, and safe, evening."*

Padme had never felt so elated in her entire life. The adrenaline rush from the victory procession mixed with Anakin's love made her dizzy with happiness. She closed the door to her apartment on Coruscant and leaned against the door, smiling and giggling to herself.



She put her tablet down on the small table in the entry hall, kicked off her heels, and walked to her home's integrated computer panel. She turned on music that had a little beat to it and half-danced into the kitchen.

She moved with the beat as she poured herself a glass of Bantha milk and walked into her living room. Her head was nodding along with the music and she hummed to herself. Today was a perfect day.

Padme screamed when she saw the shapes of three people waiting for her. The glass tumbled from her hand, spilling blue milk onto her feet and the cup itself shattering on the carpet.

"I understand you had quite a party, but we were starting to wonder if you would ever come home," one man smiled. He had kind eyes, yet his graying hair and manicured beard instantly revealed his identity.

"Viceroy Organa!" Padme could barely breathe out the name before she bowed before the ruler of her planet and one of its Galactic Senators.

The man who had startled her was also instantly recognizable. His white hair was pulled back tightly behind him. The numerous scars crisscrossed his face and he did not smile at all.

"What brings Jedi Master Rahm Kota into my humble apartment at this time of night?" she asked.

He didn't respond, but nodded toward the third individual. This woman was familiar to her, but Padme couldn't put a name to the face.

The woman shook red hair out of her face and laughed. It was a soft, almost musical laugh that warmed Padme even though her feet were chilled. "It's okay, Padme. I've done a fairly good job of keeping a low profile. Master Kota, would you please help our esteemed senator with that little mess before her carpet becomes ruined?"

Master Kota nodded and closed his eyes. The glass reassembled back into Padme's hand with no cracks or flaws in it. The milk completely evaporated from the carpet.

"We have something we would like to discuss with you," the woman smiled and motioned for Padme to sit.

Bail Organa and the woman shared on a couch while Rahm Kota settled himself on the floor, ignoring the other chair in the room. Padme sat down slowly, not taking her eyes off of the woman. She had seen her before, but her mind couldn't quite remember where. Her red hair was so vibrant and her eyes held a fiery spirit Padme could understand.

Viceroy Organa spoke first. "Padme, we've noticed a disturbing trend within the Republic. You have already learned about arms shipments going 'missing' and ending up in rebel hands, but we have learned far more. We have gone well beyond the tip of the iceberg."

"The rebels were pushed into the war. There was no treaty signed by them, there were no meetings of System Regents plotting war against the Republic, and no massive grievances that the Outer Rim held against the Core Worlds," he continued.

Padme held up her hand. "But the files I found on Cerea?" she asked.

"Fabricated," Bail Organa shook his head.

"The Outer Rim has never been happy with the Core Worlds," she said.

"But never enough to go to war. Minor disagreements, class warfare, nothing more than that until the Clone Wars broke out," Organa replied.

"The clones themselves? They were being fabricated on so many worlds, including ours," she said.

Rahm Kota growled under his breath.

"They were planted. The worlds that created them were as ignorant about their existence as you were on Alderaan. However, once war was declared by the Republic, they had no choice but to use them to defend themselves against our aggression," Organa said.

"You see Padme," the woman said. "The Clone Wars was a lie accepted by trillions of citizens. It will go down in history as a horrific and glorious victory by the Republic over a group of evil rebels bent on destroying the galaxy. Only a few know the truth."

Padme crossed her arms. The woman's grandiose way of speaking stuck with her. She had heard talk like that before, but Padme couldn't quite place where. "When I went to Chancellor Valorum about the war's origin with nothing more than Korro's word, I was practically laughed out of the room. What proof do you have of what you're saying?"

"Whispers, rumors, a few insiders who know more than we do," Bail Organa shrugged.

Padme's hard expression didn't change.

"You know from your own experience that more is going on here than any of us know. All we want is what you want. The truth," Master Kota said.

"Why do I feel like I'm about to be volunteered?" Padme asked.

Bail Organa leaned forward. "We have it on good authority that you will be named to replace Palpatine as the other Galactic Senator from Alderaan. Working with me, we can determine what is truly going on and end any corruption we find."

Padme's arms fell to her sides. "Me? Work with you? The Viceroy?" she sputtered.

He chuckled softly. "I'm not the mythical figure you make me out to be. We'll get along just fine."

"Padme, we need you. Twice now you have led investigations that have changed the fabric of the Republic itself. We're asking you to help the Republic one more time. Aid us in our cause and if we find nothing, we find nothing. But if we are correct, we will all need to work together to save our Republic from itself," the woman said.

Padme's eyes widened. "I know who you are. I recognize your tone from a speech you gave on Chandrila."

Master Kota tapped a communicator three times and gestured to his companions. The three of them rose and walked toward the door.

"Before I forget, I wanted to extend my personal condolences on your loss. I knew Khian only by reputation, but I understand he was very devoted to you. I think you would such loyalty is hard to find," Viceroy Organa waved before they walked out of the apartment.

Before the door slid shut, Mon Mothma smiled at her.

"Khian?" Padme asked blankly.