

IN WHICH SERIES

BACK FROM THE FUTURE
EPISODE VI
THE CLONE WARS

A Story by Ariel Sojourner

Back From the Future: Episode VI The Clone Wars

by Ariel_Sojourner

A Star Wars Fanfic

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Contents

Summary	1
Chapter 1	3
<i>In Which Captain Rex is Deeply Troubled and Having a Very Hard Month</i>	
Chapter 2	20
<i>In Which Luke Unilaterally Declares That The War is Over and Vader Backs Him Up On That</i>	
Chapter 3	36
<i>In Which Ahsoka Observes and Learns Some Important Lessons</i>	
Chapter 4	56
<i>In Which Luke Starts Arresting People and the Council Engages In The Jedi Equivalent of Panicking</i>	
Chapter 5	73
<i>In Which Proof of the Sith's Treachery is Confirmed and There is an Exodus of Clones</i>	
Chapter 6	91
<i>In Which Vader Plots Murder and Obi-Wan Despairs for his Force Lineage</i>	
Chapter 7	109
<i>In Which Luke Plays Matchmaker and Padme Shares Some Important News with Anakin</i>	
Chapter 8	127
<i>In Which Obi-Wan Finishes a Long Overdue Conversation</i>	

Chapter 9	142
<i>In Which Vader is Haunted and Luke Is Done Playing the Long Game</i>	
Chapter 10	158
<i>In Which Anakin is Frequently Interrupted and Padme's Furniture is Appropriated</i>	
Chapter 11	172
<i>In Which the Sith is Unmasked at a Terrible Cost</i>	
Chapter 12	191
<i>In Which the Jedi Discover Things Will Never Be the Same Again</i>	
Chapter 13	210
<i>In Which Promises are Made and Kept</i>	
Chapter 14	230
<i>In Which Our Heroes Epically Fail at Communication But Succeed in Making a Difference</i>	
Chapter 15	248
<i>In Which There is a Great Deal of Sand and Anakin Has Several Unexpected Meetings</i>	
Chapter 16	264
<i>In Which Obi-Wan Reluctantly Attends a Dinner and Justice is Served</i>	
Chapter 17	281
<i>In Which Anakin Hears What He Should Have Heard a Long Time Ago and Obi-Wan Drops the Mic</i>	
Chapter 18	299
<i>In Which Words Fail Obi-Wan and Mace Decides It's Time to Take a Vacation</i>	

Chapter 19314
*In Which Luke Comes Full Circle and Decides to Chart his Own
Destiny*

Chapter 20 332
In Which They Lived, Happily

Chapter 21341
*In Which Padme Plans for the Nubian Day of Family and Artoo
Hijacks a Ship and Spams Vader's Inbox*



Summary

In which Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader travel back in time together to the Clone Wars era, have amazing adventures, and save the galaxy.



CHAPTER 1

In Which Captain Rex is Deeply Troubled and Having a Very Hard Month

I.

Captain Rex could see the flash of lightsabers in the distance and hear the screams of dying clones. Jedi General Pong Krell slashed into everyone he could find, killing Republic troopers indiscriminately. The whole *kriffing* mission had gone south the second General Skywalker has been recalled from the field. If Dogma hadn't found out that Krell had destroyed the transmitter, he wasn't sure what would have happened.

The 501st had to get to the capital city and Fives still wanted the go ahead for his plan to attack the supply ship in orbit before the troops were committed to another suicide mission. Instead of doing that, they were watching their Jedi General betray them after forcing the clones to kill their own brothers from the 212th! They needed to get back into the fight or the whole campaign would be lost, but as good as the 501st was they couldn't take on

a Jedi.

Good soldiers follow orders. That was all that kept pounding through Rex's head with every beat of his heart as his men were slaughtered around him. *Good soldiers follow orders, good soldiers follow orders, good soldiers follow orders, goodsoldiersfolloworders, goodsoldiersfollow—goodsoldiers—goodso—*

And then it wasn't brothers screaming, it was *Krell*. A flash of red illuminated the ever present darkness of Umbara.

"Sith, *SITH!*" Tup yelled in warning.

Rex peered through the darkness anxiously. He could hear the ominous low hum of a saber, see it blood red against the night. He could barely make out who was wielding it. It looked like a towering black shadow, its edges illuminated by Krell's sabers as Krell desperately fought back. There was a glint of armor and a hint of cloth that could be a cloak. It wasn't the witch Ventress and it wasn't Count Dooku. Rex didn't recognize him which meant there was a new player on the field. Rex groaned internally; just what they needed when they didn't have General Skywalker with them! The Sith gave no quarter; he hacked and slashed and Krell lost one saber and then an arm.

"What do we do, Captain?" Fives called out from where he was braced against a nearby tree. "Do we defend Krell? Do we stop the fight? I thought Krell was working *with* the Separatists!"

Krell was the enemy and the Sith were also the enemy. Good soldiers fought the enemy. Rex brought his guns to the ready.

"No wait, Captain!" an unfamiliar voice called out. The troopers as one whirled around weapons raised and ready to fire. There before them stood a Jedi, green lightsaber in his hand but angled low, not in an attack position. He was human and young, but obviously knighted wearing no braid or beads.

"Sir?" Rex asked cautiously, not lowering his blasters.

The Jedi moved forward putting his weapon away which had all the men relaxing a little. "Pong Krell has fallen to the Dark side and has declared his allegiance to the Sith Master behind the war. He has chosen his fate. We will leave him to it." He watched

the lightsaber fight (torture really at this point) for a moment and then turned his attention squarely back to Rex. “I think you and your men have a plan to take out the supply ship in orbit, Captain. We should help the wounded and move quickly to see it done.”

The clones looked at each other, bewildered. “You-you’re just going to leave General Krell to the Sith?” Hardcase asked.

“Sir, I will need to see some identification and confirm command codes before we move forward,” Captain Rex demanded.

“Of course, Captain,” the Jedi stepped closer and handed over his code cylinders. Rex pulled out his scanner and verified them. The Jedi had full access and even had General Skywalker’s personal confirmation codes authorizing him to take command of the 501st. The only name given for this new Jedi was Luke. No last name was provided. He had heard of General Krell before Umbara but he hadn’t heard of any Jedi general or commander going by the name Luke. Perhaps that was a good thing, Rex thought, given how Krell turned out to be a kriffing murderous skrag.

“General Skywalker sent you, sir?” Rex asked with growing hope.

In the distance, a gurgling scream signaled the violent and bloody end of Fallen Jedi Master Pong Krell.

“Yes, Captain,” Luke said looking past Rex towards the shadow of the Sith standing over the mutilated body. “General Skywalker sent me.”

II.

There were several uneasy moments as their new Jedi General introduced the Sith known as Vader to the 501st. It was beyond unnerving to watch the dark man stand there, breathing audibly. Rex didn’t really understand what was going on. Why wasn’t their new General attacking the Sith? And he very clearly *was* a Sith,

there was no doubt about that!

They all watched as Vader used the Force to lift the mangled body and bits and pieces that were once Pong Krell and throw them towards one of the flesh eating plants to be devoured. Seeing the gruesome sight, Rex couldn't help but think that perhaps there may be worse things in the galaxy than Krell. Luke then asked Rex to lead them back to the airbase so he could help pilot the Umbaran aircraft up to the supply ship in orbit and they were on the move. Both Vader and Luke helped carry the wounded with them.

It made for an interesting reception when they arrived back on the base, but seeing that neither the Jedi nor the Sith were apparently keen on ordering anyone around, Rex was quick to take command and assure the men that Luke had been sent by General Skywalker and Krell was taken care of and would no longer be a threat.

"I understand that the General sent him, but who's the other guy?" Appo wondered quietly after examining the code cylinders himself just to be sure.

"I don't know, but he has a red lightsaber and he stopped Krell from killing any more of us," Rex replied back.

Luke brought the injured to Kix and asked after the other wounded from Krell's horrible trick of turning brother against brother. Kix gave his report after casting a sideways glance towards Rex. Vader meanwhile was examining the Umbaran aircraft. He even took off his black cape and crawled underneath it to poke at the engine.

A blast in the distance caught everyone's attention. With the transmitter still not operational and insurgents likely to attack, they needed to act. Luke told Rex to defend the airbase as best he could while he took one of the fighters up to destroy the supply ship in orbit. Hardcase protested, not wanting to lose out on flying the mission when he and Jesse and Fives had the most experience with the craft.

"They have a point, young one," Vader intoned coming to

stand behind Luke, towering over him. “The configuration on the Umbaran craft is entirely unique.”

“You have more ground tactical experience than I have, Father. I can lead the air attack with their help while you handle the insurgents and the missiles.”

“I do not like the idea of separating, son. You are unfamiliar with the particulars of this campaign.”

Rex gaped as the two debated. *Son? Father? Young one?* He looked from one Force user to another. His brothers stood beside him just as shocked.

“I don’t see the resemblance,” Hardcase whispered loudly. Fives groaned and Jesse elbowed Hardcase to shut him up.

Luke looked over at them and grinned. Surprisingly, it made him look years younger. “We may not look alike but I still think we have something in common, Hardcase, was it?”

“Yes sir,” he responded, coming to attention.

Luke waved away the formality and turned back to Vader. “I *am* going, Father. You deal with the insurgents. I’ll deal with the supply ship. We have a timetable to keep, remember?”

III.

Captain Rex didn’t quite know how his life had come to this. His Jedi General turned out to be a treasonous murderer and now he had a Sith... *Father* commanding the 501st. The greatest irony was that Vader made a better commander and general than Krell, a fact that was evident within moments of him taking command.

He ensured the wounded from the 501st and the 212th had sufficient supplies to be cared for. He rearranged the troop shifts Krell had insisted upon and required that everyone receive enough rack time. Troopers who had been ordered to stack ammunition and perform other largely useless tasks were relieved of their duties with a direction to rest and then report to Captain

Rex for more sensible assignments afterwards. Vader then proceeded to personally help repair the sabotaged transmitter.

“Are you *sure* he’s a Sith?” Kix asked Rex skeptically.

“He used a red saber and he took down Krell with extreme prejudice,” Rex responded for the tenth time. “What else could he be?”

“But our new General called him father. I though Jedi didn’t, y’know, *have* fathers or families.” Kix scowled. “Certainly not fathers who are Sith. And Sith are Separatists, right? If he’s a Sith, then why is he helping the Republic?”

“Krell was a Jedi and he was working for the Separatists. Vader must be a Sith who is working with the Republic,” Tup suggested.

Rex hadn’t thought about that. It made as much sense as anything did lately.

“Are we sure, are we *really sure* that General Skywalker sent them?” Dogma challenged nervously.

Rex swallowed a sigh and handed over his datapad and let Dogma inspect the records and command codes himself. Dogma still looked worried though. He had been twitchy since he discovered the sabotaged transmitter and that Krell was behind the orders to have brothers kill brothers. He wasn’t the only one, but Dogma had always been wound tight. Now he looked like he was one bad scare away from a total breakdown. Rex almost wanted to join him. He reminded himself to have Kix take a look at Dogma as soon as possible. They were all in the habit of taking stimulants when even their engineered bodies could not keep up with the pace of the war and that could aggravate anyone’s mental well being after time.

Suddenly from above, the sky lightened through the rolling clouds. “They did it!” Echo cheered.

“But did they get out in time?” Kix wondered.

“They did,” Vader’s voice assured them from behind, startling them. They turned and saw him standing, his mask tilted towards the sky. “They all did. I can feel it.”

IV.

Three of the four ships returned intact, Hardcase riding with Luke. Both of them were suffering from treatable burns. Hardcase had saved the mission from failure when the ray shields had blocked their attack, but Luke would not let him sacrifice himself. He had used the Force to push the Umbaran ordinance to the reactor even as he yanked Hardcase to safety after Hardcase had gotten the missile past the shields.

Vader was not pleased to find his son injured and hovered like a great black bird over its one chick until the medics had time to treat him. Jesse and Fives braced themselves to be blamed for the Jedi's injuries, but Vader had simply thanked them for looking out for Luke and suggested that they spend more time in a flight simulator because having ground troops able to fly fighters in a pinch was not a bad thing.

With the transmitter repaired, news came in that the capital city had been taken by General Kenobi's forces. Gunships were coming to take them to the capital to continue the offensive. It was a relief to hear they hadn't failed, but still Rex felt exhausted, battered, and bruised. All Rex could think of was the waste of lives, of Krell's blatant disregard for them as living sentient beings, let alone as soldiers.

If they weren't of any value as men and not of any value as soldiers, what place was there for them in this galaxy with or without the war? What if Krell wasn't the only Jedi who felt that way? He knew that most people regarded him and his brothers as property, as expendable. One day the war would end and then where would they be? And before the war ended, was this all he could look forward to? The captain looked to his brothers and saw his own fear and uncertainty mirrored in their eyes. What was the point of it all?

Luke approached and Rex and the others drew to attention. "General, what's the word?" Rex asked.

"At ease. And it's not General, it's just Luke," the Jedi insisted.

“I’ve commanded a fighter squadron in my time, but that’s all, so no need for titles. We have new orders. The troopers from the 212th that are not injured or don’t want to stay with their injured comrades will rejoin their battalion in the capital and deliver our report to General Kenobi. The 501st and those of the 212th that are staying with us are leaving Umbara for Honoghr and we will treat the rest of the injured on our way.”

“*Honoghr*? I didn’t hear of any Separatist attacks in that sector,” Echo wondered aloud. He looked over at Fives who shook his head sharply. He hadn’t heard anything either.

“We’re going to prevent the attack. We have reason to believe there will be Separatist forces there soon. We plan to catch them before any damage can be done.” Luke looked from one man’s face to another. Even without the Force, he could see each of them as the unique individuals they really were. Imperial propaganda had twisted the truth about these brave men and the Rebel Alliance was equally misguided about the reality of the GAR. They were men with just as many rights as any natural born sentient being. They were owed a say in their own future.

“If you would rather not come, if you would rather be working with a Jedi you know and trust, I understand. If you would rather have someone more experienced in ground combat lead you, I respect that. You have *every right* to question me after what has happened here. I can assign command of the 501st to General Kenobi until General Skywalker returns if that’s what you want.”

Rex wasn’t sure he had heard right. He looked to Fives who stood just as stunned next to him. Yep, he had heard right. If it were possible for the universe to give them a Jedi the opposite of Krell, then that is what they clearly had. Rex could work with someone like that. Luke would treat the men well; he had saved Hardcase at risk to himself and believed in leading from the front like General Skywalker, General Kenobi and Commander Tano. The fact that he had a Sith for a father was unfortunate but no one was perfect and it was something Rex could deal with.

“Uh... Gener- I mean, uh, sir, no one is saying– the 501st is

loyal and we *never* shirk from a mission,” Rex was quick to interject. “No one is refusing to go.” He looked at the troopers surrounding him. “Right, men?”

“Yes sir!” the chorused, snapping to attention.

“I don’t doubt your loyalty or the loyalty of your men, Captain. The hardest thing a good soldier must be able to do is to say ‘no’ in the face of an order that is wrong. The best soldiers also know when to correct those above them in the chain of command, to offer solutions that save lives not waste them.” Luke looked to Dogma and then at Fives for a moment, meeting each of their eyes in turn and then glanced back to Captain Rex. “Thank you for giving us a chance to earn your trust. My father and I will do what we can to continue to deserve it.”

V.

As they come out of hyperspace near Honoghr, alarms blare. There is pitch battle between several smaller Republic cruisers and a Separatist battleship. Luke scrambles with the other pilots to offer support to the cruisers. Vader takes the role usually reserved for Admiral Yularan (who was still with rest of the fleet in orbit at Umbara) and has Commander Appo direct their three capital ships– the *Resolute*, the *Dauntless*, and the *Pioneer* –to focus on protection of the planet. Vader also orders that whatever troopers are trained in slicing be brought to the bridge immediately.

Rex comms several men from different platoons, two on the *Resolute*, the rest on the other two ships, five in total. When Vader sees Gin and Uni, he hands them a code cylinder and tells them they are Separatists codes and they as the newly Named Hack Squad are to coordinate with their squad mates on the other ships and start slicing the enemy’s systems to take control of their ships.

Rex watches the battle on the holoscreens, but Vader prefers

to stand close to the transparisteel viewport, masked helmet unerringly tilted to follow the distant zipping shapes of the fighters and bombers, as if tracking his son's presence. Things seem to be going well at first, the fighters are covering the damaged cruisers with no losses when suddenly it all goes to hell.

The Separatist ship takes heavy damage and is in a low orbit when one of the Republic cruisers loses its reactor containment explosively and proceeds to collide with the Separatist ship. Vader calls for a calculation of the trajectory. Appo reports that the ships will likely crash on the planet unless the Separatists manage to maintain power and altitude.

Vader turns to the troops busy slicing into the Separatists code. "Can you get us control of that ship?" he asks with deadly quiet tone in his voice.

Gin looks up, looks to Rex, and then steels his spine. "Sir, I can't guarantee that. They must have one of those advanced tactical droids in command, it's slowing us down."

Vader strides over to the comms officer. "Get me Black Leader." Luke's voice responds promptly over the link. "Black Leader, go."

"The ships will crash on the planet's surface. The slice is proving problematic."

"Blast! Is there nothing we can do? If it was one of our ships, we could bolster their orbit physically with the cruisers or even one of the destroyers, but unless the Separatists plan to stop fighting—"

Vader's hands clench into fists. "The planet will take the brunt of it and the damage will be catastrophic."

There is a long pause. "Father, what about the Force? We could lift the ship, together."

Vader is silent for a long moment. "Together," he says turning back towards the viewport. "Get clear of the battle."

Rex and Appo exchange a glance. Could the Force do that? They had both seen Jedi lift rocks and droids and all manner of wreckage, but an *entire* ship?

What is clearly Luke's fighter swoops out of path of enemy fire and the bridge crew stills. The very atmosphere seems to change. Rex half expects his ears to pop but they don't; his skin prickles instead. Clones are not capable of being Force sensitive but clearly there is *something* going on and for once he can *feel* it.

Vader's breathing never hitches, never speeds up, it continues on its ponderous pace. He reaches for his son and together they stretch out with the Force, with their feelings (Vader with his frustration and anger and Luke with his determination and desire to protect the innocent below on the planet).

In one voice and with one mind they say **MOVE**.

Rex watches, eyes shifting between the viewport and the stream of data on the holoscreens around the bridge. At first nothing seems to happen and then, *then* slowly but with growing speed the Separatist ship begins to move into a higher orbit.

"Z minus 12, Z minus 11.5," one of the bridge lieutenants murmurs. "Z minus 11, Z minus 10, she's... she's *rising*."

Appo orders the other cruisers to get clear and tells the fighters to see what escape pods they can tractor with them as they move away from the Separatist ship. When the lieutenant announces they have the ship in orbit and stable, the bridge crew audibly sighs in relief. Their efforts are completed not a moment too soon: the Separatist ship explodes, but it is now high enough above the planet that the debris can be dealt with without harm to the planet below.

VI.

Vader sat cross legged on the bed, watching as Luke paced back and forth across the length of the room. Vader thought the day had gone rather well. The Noghri and their world were protected from planetwide environmental catastrophe and could not be enslaved. The Separatist ship was destroyed with only a few casualties suffered from the exploding Republic cruiser.

They had taken on the surviving troopers and added the two remaining cruisers to their little fleet.

Luke did not agree with his father's assessment. Their efforts to use the Separatists codes his father had recalled from his past did not work. Slicing took too long to get the desired effect in battle. If it hadn't been for the two of them working together to lift the ship...

Luke felt a bit giddy remembering of how that felt. It was the same feeling he had gotten the first time he threaded the Needle in his skyhopper, but better. He knew that nothing was impossible with the Force.

Yoda had lifted his entire X-Wing.

Vader had moved AT-ATs with a wave of his hand.

Together he and Vader had been inadvertently flung back in time together and despite changing the past, they still existed, not wiped out by temporal paradoxes.

Today they had lifted the Separatist battleship out of the gravity well of the planet using the Force.

At first it was tricky, running his Force sense in tandem with his father. Vader was shadow and smoke, burnt embers and icy black cold, his powers grasping and treacherous. Luke wasn't sure how his Force sense appeared to Vader, but initially working together felt like being buried under a dune or being lost in a vicious sand storm. Then somehow, something had *clicked* into place between them and they were guiding the power together to lift the ship.

Vader didn't think Luke realized the magnitude of what they had accomplished together. When his son had suggested they use the Force, Vader thought the planet a lost cause, an unfortunate consequence of the Clone Wars they were too late to prevent. Then Luke's strength had poured into him with a feeling of power as pure and refreshing as water, cool and clear and sparkling with sunlight. Vader had worried at first that his own Darkness would simply seize and feast upon the power shared, but there seemed to be a never ending stream of it from Luke, a

determination and strength without bounds.

It was enough, it was *more* than enough, and the ship had moved.

Luke now spoke honestly about his concerns for their plans. He was not the military genius his father was. He had never commanded troops at this level or *any level* outside his Rebellion fighter squadron, but he knew that using the codes and slicers was not going to be enough. If they were to defeat Palpatine, they had to *stop* the war, not win it. The Separatists were commanded by a Sith and Vader could certainly play the part to give them the advantage they needed.

Vader was aghast at the very suggestion. "I am *not* a *Separatist*!" he shouted.

"But you could *pretend* to be one," Luke entreated. "You said Sith and Dark side users commanded even over the Trade Federation and other corporate heads. You could go in using the codes you have and shut them down," Luke reasoned quickly. "Look, we agreed that facing the Emperor head on is not going to prevent the atrocities that happened or the collapse of the Republic. We have to find a different way than just fighting."

(When they had arrived in the past, Luke had been unwilling to take Vader at his word about the state of the Republic and the Jedi Order. However, after a few days of watching the holonet, reading uncensored information on the Jedi Order, and seeing the damage Krell had done to the troopers Luke quickly changed his mind.

Working with the Jedi Order wasn't going to fix things any more than confronting Palpatine would stop the war.

In return, Vader conceded that he had no real desire to exterminate the Order, (he had done so once believing Palpatine's lies and had no desire to be fooled into doing so again). And while he hadn't yet said it to his son, he wasn't even that interested in Luke Falling to the Dark side anymore. His son made it clear that he wasn't going to leave him. They only had each other here in the past. That was enough for Vader. Since Luke was no longer

interested in joining the Order after learning the truth, if the Order would stay away from him and his family, then Vader would let them live.

And Luke was very much *not interested* in how the Order operated. No attachment? Marriage, friendship, family and children forbidden? To say nothing of the Order's habit of only taking toddlers as students and the fact that the Republic itself was not the shining beacon that Leia always claimed it was, (Luke already had his doubts, he grew up in Hutt occupied space after all); Luke figured the Order was hardly likely to recognize or embrace him as a fellow Jedi, old and barely trained as he was with a Sith Lord as a father. It would just have to be him and his father putting things right on their own.)

Vader grumbled, but finally agreed with his son's plan.

Luke was careful not to roll his eyes. Of all the things for his father to be sensitive about! Being considered a Separatist could hardly be as bad as being the right hand of the Emperor and a Sith Lord for the last 20 years!

VII.

The 501st was used to receiving orders to join battles in progress, systems or supply lines to protect. Now their orders were of an entirely different nature. Luke and Vader seemed to know ahead of time where the Separatists were going to be and what systems were in trouble before the Separatists even arrived. Echo combed through intelligence briefings and dispatches but could not find where they were getting their information from. They certainly had not received any comms, running silent since leaving Umbara.

Luke then met privately with the medical staff. This caused a flurry of activity which led to Kix and Quick arranging a medical appointment for every single clone as soon as possible for some reason.

The newly formed Hack Squad under Gin and the aptly named Slice were kept even busier. Vader had them working on something that could take down battle droids though what use it would be if it had to be input at the source computer, Rex didn't know, but they were working on it. Luke had them and any other trooper with marginal code and slicing skills hacking the Trade Federation, Techno Union, Banking Clan, and Corporate Guilds. When Rex questioned what they were doing, they showed him. It didn't make much sense to him; all it appeared they were doing was copying contracts, trade agreements, banking information, and loan documents from dozens of worlds and then placing a flag of some kind on the files copied before backing quickly out of the system.

In between all of this, Vader took off in a shuttle alone and then a day or so later Luke announced which system they were traveling to. They arrived to find Vader in charge of the Separatist fleet, (and wasn't that a kick in the head when they saw him at the head of the enemy fleet!) After a moment of gut wrenching panic and believing themselves to be betrayed once again, Vader immediately surrendered and send a message to the planetary government so they could work together to take out whatever portion of the Separatist fleet Vader did not have under his control.

What could have been a nasty fire fight turned into a mop up action and the system was liberated with little effort.

The first time Luke and Vader pulled that trick, Rex had to take a moment and find a quiet corner to sit down for a few minutes. The second and third times it was still jarring but it got a little easier. Luke had already proven himself trustworthy and vouched for his father. It was becoming more and more evident that Vader was on their side and given how terrifying he could be, Rex was very thankful for that.

When the truth came out about the chips in their heads, the deliberate genetic defect accelerating their aging and messing with their bodies, and the codes that were supposedly on their

inhibitor chips that could switch them into nothing more than battle droids, Rex didn't know which way was up anymore. Kix had delivered the news in his usual matter of fact manner but it was clear even he was shaken by what he'd found.

Dogma and several other troopers had to be sedated and confined for their own safety when the news broke. Tup's surgery to remove the chip in his brain nearly killed him. It seemed like the nightmare that had started on Umbara when General Skywalker had left them had never let up.

But Luke and Vader never faltered. They had a fix and they would see each and every clone brother healed. One by one, each trooper was treated. After the last of the men had been cleared, Luke met with Rex, (his father a constant dark shadow behind him) and announced that three of their number were Force sensitive and if they wished, he would be happy to train them.

After several moments of stunned silence, Rex could only manage, "Is-is this some sort of a-a joke, sir?"

"No, Captain. Three troopers are Force sensitive. They can learn the ways of the Force," Luke assured him happily.

"Who? Who is-?"

"Troopers Fives, Chatterbox, and Hardcase," Luke said rocking on his heels, visibly pleased with the news. Rex obviously wasn't responding with the same joy that Luke was feeling and the young Jedi's face fell and grew sympathetic. "I'm sorry you're not Force sensitive, Captain. I don't know why some of you are Force sensitive and some of you are not. It's not a bad thing. They don't have to learn if they don't want to," he was quick say.

"I don't think the Captain is worried about that, young one," Vader interrupted.

Luke looked from his father to Rex and nodded. "I'll give you some time to consider what is best for your men. I'll let you tell them yourself. If you have any questions, just let us know."

After they left, Rex pressed his hand to his temple and felt along the healed cut that proved the chip was out of his head,

that his thoughts were his own. It had barely been a month, but *everything* had changed. He had thought he was still trapped in the never ending darkness of Umbara, but maybe, just maybe dawn was breaking.

He flicked on the comm and called for Fives, Hardcase and Chatterbox to join him. Force Sensitive clones.

He laughed hysterically under his breath.

Just when he thought the life of a brother couldn't get any stranger.



CHAPTER 2

In Which Luke Unilaterally Declares That The War is Over and Vader Backs Him Up On That

VIII.

They cannot avoid the Order and the rest of the Grand Army of the Republic indefinitely, but their first run in with another Jedi could have gone a *bit* better.

Master Kit Fisto is scouting for intelligence on the enemy when he passes through what *should* be an active battle front. Instead he finds only peace. He lands his ship where some Republic forces are encamped and follows the helpful directions of the troopers to the Jedi in charge.

Master Fisto is confused and disturbed by the young Knight he does not recognize. (The Knight doesn't even know his name, *him*, a member of the Jedi High Council). He grows even more disturbed when the dark masked behemoth shows up behind the young Jedi, a black sun of icy cold fire in the Force. He ignites his lightsaber without thinking, but neither the Jedi, who intro-

duced himself as Luke, nor the masked man in black react.

“What are you doing?” Luke asks as if Kit is the one behaving oddly. He looks back at the dark shadow behind him. “What’s he doing?”

“Members of the Order do not attack without provocation,” the masked man says with barely veiled hate.

“Sir,” an ARC trooper interjects, pleading for calm. “Vader is not a hostile.”

“We aren’t *hostile*,” Luke echoes. “We were just talking. Why’re you preparing to fight?”

“He is a Sith,” Master Fisto announces. The words slip out before he can consciously think of them, but he knows it is true. Usually Sith are hidden in the Force but this man makes no effort to conceal the very storm of his presence. The Jedi Master looks at the troopers, most of whom are still working around the camp; they haven’t even halted in their duties to take in the strange face off! “He’s a Sith! Why have you let a Sith into your camp?”

“Yes, he’s Sith, but that doesn’t mean you can just *kill him*. Jedi use the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack. We’re all on the same side here,” Luke says.

Vader makes a sound that without his mask would definitely be a snort of derision. Luke rolls his eyes in exasperation, turning away from Kit and his weapon. “No, really Father, we are *nomi-nally* on the same side.”

“If we are on the same side son, tell Master Fisto to put his blade down and focus on his vaunted Jedi knowledge for a moment. I won’t have him accidentally hurting you or I will tear him limb from limb.”

“Sir, *please* put the blade down,” the clone begs. “We’re almost done with mopping up and we really don’t want another fire-fight to break out. The people of this system have been through enough and we promised them peace.”

Kit finds himself lowering his weapon despite himself. “What are you talking about?” he finally manages to sputter. “If you really are a Jedi, you would not call this– this *thing*–”

“Hey!” Luke yells, affronted.

“–father! This is an active battlefield. Separatists hold the system. He is a Sith. There is no peace!”

Luke’s eyes narrow in obvious irritation. “Jedi can have fathers, depending on their species. *I* have a father. Being a Sith or a Jedi doesn’t mean people don’t have fathers and he is a *person*, not a thing! And yes, there is peace. This system is no longer part of the war, and it is not going to start being part of the war again just because you showed up, so put down your weapon.”

Kit wants to object, wants to fight, but no one is drawing a weapon – not the clones, not Luke, not even the Sith! He is being lectured by some Force wielding *boy* about what it means to be a Jedi!

He is also the only one in the entire camp preparing to act with violence.

He pushes down his dismay and takes a few steps back and disengages his weapon.

Luke’s ire vanishes. “Do you need anything further before you leave, Master Fisto? Supplies? Fuel?”

“I-I was instructed to scout the area before the fleet is sent in to–”

Vader cuts him off. “There is nothing to scout. As my son says, there is peace and order here. You are disrupting things. Leave. *Now.*”

The Jedi Master feels the Force stir around his throat, as if fingers are reaching out to strangle him. Instinctively he raises a hand to try and brush them away.

“No need for choking, Father,” Luke scolds. “Master Fisto understands. He’s going.”

Kit takes another step back and the tightening around his throat eases. He takes another and then another, and retreats back to his ship.

“Travel safely. May the Force be with you,” Luke calls after him with a parting wave.

Kit climbs into his fighter and hurriedly takes flight. He needs

to report this situation to the Council *immediately*.

IX.

The war isn't *really* over. However, Luke doesn't let that stop him from declaring peace. Luke takes to heart one of Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru's favorite sayings (one that used to have him groaning as a kid), and employs it as his strategy in dealing with the madness of the Clone Wars. They used to say *if you keep telling yourself something is true, it becomes true*.

(Granted, his aunt and uncle were talking about having fun while doing his chores, but Luke is nothing if not adaptable).

The war is over because Luke says it is *and* Vader agrees with him.

It is amazing what they can accomplish together with that belief alone.

Vader and Luke have a good system going. Vader shows up and takes control of whatever Separatist Fleet he can get his hands on by virtue of the fact that he is a terrifying tall Sith and he has the red lightsaber to prove it. Battle droids being battle droids just go along with it and then Vader reprograms as many as he can and blows the rest up. Vader then contacts the 501st and whatever additional Republic troops Luke manages to take command of while their usual Jedi officers are away, (the Order is stretched thin after all), and together they declare peace.

Vader doesn't like to admit it, but wherever he plays at being a Separatist Sith, (it makes his stomach turn every time; Kix frequently tries to prescribe him something for the nausea), he actually enjoys spending time with the simple battle droids. He wants to hate them. Hate comes easy to him after all, but even with their restrictive programming and short life spans the droids have such character and personality. They are funny. They may not be organic, but Vader thinks they too deserve better than their lot.

The local planetary leaders are a bit bewildered by all of this, to say the least. Those who have been forcibly invaded by the Separatists are just stunned. "The Dark One isn't killing us," they whisper to one another. "The droids have gotten rid of their weapons and are now rebuilding our homes and replanting crops. The Dark One and the Jedi want to know if they can borrow some swoop bikes and go racing. What is *happening* here?"

The planets that joined with the Separatists on moral grounds find Luke, (a product of his Tatooine upbringing and his years with the Rebel Alliance) a *much* more than sympathetic ear to their concerns of Republic corruption. He promises to get them in touch with trustworthy people and have their concerns addressed. He urges them to keep pushing for reforms. When they worry about the Separatists coming back and how their planets will survive during wartime, Luke reaches out to the Neutral Systems leader Duchess Satine for help.

("How do you know this Duchess will be willing to help us?" Luke asks his father.

"She is a notorious pacifist, even in the face of her own life being threatened, but she is willing to listen to the right Jedi."

Luke crosses his arms over his chest. "And just who is the *right Jedi*?"

"Obi-Wan managed to talk her around on occasion. On most other occasions she had the upper hand," Vader explains. He then adds, "They loved each other and Obi-Wan admitted to her once he would leave the Order to marry her if she asked him."

Luke goggles in disbelief and then a slow delighted smile spreads across his face. "Obi-Wan Kenobi, *General* of the Clone Wars in love with a *pacifist Duchess*?"

Vader feels a small evil thrill of pleasure. His soft-hearted son will no doubt engage in relentless matchmaking much to the despair and embarrassment of his former Master. Revenge is sweet.

"Once you establish that our goals are to stop the war, not fight nor win it, you will have her and over a thousand systems as allies to our cause.")

At first the Duchess seems unwilling to take Luke seriously. When he does manage to convince her that he really is suing for peace, regardless of what the Republic or Order's positions are, she is cautiously optimistic. She does have to admit that financially the League of Neutral Systems is on the brink of collapse. Being deliberately cut off from galactic commerce by the guilds and federations (who are making a killing bank rolling both sides of the war), is leading to more and more neutral systems being dragged into the war. Luke assures her that he can help with money if she can help providing political support and a willingness to trade outside of Federation treaty. She doesn't ask how he plans to accomplish this and Luke doesn't explain, but a deal is struck.

The Trade Federation, Banking Clans, Corporate Guilds, and Techno Union ilk suddenly find all their valuables vanishing. Growing up on Tatooine, taking from the Hutts was frequently the difference between life and death. In the Rebellion, nothing went to waste and stealing from the Empire was a necessity.

"Why blow it up when we can take it from them and sell it back to them for a profit?" Luke argues to Vader, who wants to protest the inherent lawlessness of the theft, but finds he can't and gets Hack Squad in on the plan.

The Duchess is right, declaring peace is expensive work, but there is no reason why they cannot rob from the war profiteers to feed the poor and subsidize peace.

X.

Peace is breaking out across the Outer Rim. Duchess Satine's League of Neutral Systems has somehow received a lifeline of capital. Trade is beginning to flourish without Federation control or involvement and without use of the Black Market. People are starting to think they don't need the Separatists *or* the Republic.

Supreme Chancellor Palpatine cannot have that.

He sends Senator Padme Amidala into the mix, sure that with her earnest wish for peace and her loyalty to the Republic, he can uncover whatever new player is upsetting his carefully constructed plans. Once he knows who is behind these talks of peace he can then pin Amidala's untimely and sudden death on them.

Vader gets one inkling that Padme is on her way and goes into stealth mode. (He does have stealth mode. *No shut up, he does!* Just because he is nearly 7 feet tall and has distinctive breathing doesn't mean he cannot do stealth). He still hovers protectively near Luke, but now from a distance.

He cannot bear to see her see her, or worse, to have *her* see *him*.

After everything that happened, everything he did... He plans to never ever cross her path again. So long as she is alive, that will have to be enough.

XI.

Padme had met many Jedi during her life, but Luke had to be one of the stranger ones because her first impression of him was that he was so... *ordinary*. There didn't seem to be anything very special about him. He didn't have that air of power around him that members of the High Council did. He didn't radiate danger or have that battle ready edge that sometimes seemed to burn through Anakin. He didn't command in that stated solemn voice of all knowing Jedi wisdom. Padme would have thought him just another young man, untested and untried, if it wasn't for that look in his eyes and the words he spoke.

He declared peace in the middle of a war zone, and people *believed* it and put down their weapons. He demanded freedom and respect for all, and he would fight to make it so. He spoke of the love and caring he had for his troopers and his father, (a Jedi with a father? If his father was here, she never saw him). Most

surprising of all for a Jedi, he expressed his feelings openly and without guilt or shame.

Padme wondered if someday Anakin would ever be able to speak of his love for her that way, to anyone, without feeling like he was betraying Obi-Wan or the Order just by doing so. After only a brief time together, Luke had her support. She couldn't wait for Anakin to meet him.

She was sure they would get along.

XII.

Vader was not stalking. He *wasn't*! Padme had settled in for the night after she and Luke shared dinner and Vader just wanted to make sure there was no assassination attempts or kidnappings or explosions to disturb her rest. He would just stay here in the gardens and enjoy the quiet evening. The fact that he was under her window, (Which was open! Why wasn't it locked? Anyone could come in! Threepio was not useful as protection at *all*!) was purely coincidence.

It was a comfortable spot though, and there was room for Luke to sit when he came out to join him. He hadn't told Luke about his mother, but Luke just *knew*.

In the dark no one could see Luke lean against his father's shoulder.

In the dark no one could see Vader leaning back.

XIII.

Luke is all earnestness when meeting Senator Amidala. He doesn't know ahead of time that she is his mother, (Vader still cannot bear to share details with him other than to chokingly confess to his son that she was his whole universe), but Luke isn't an idiot. He is intuitive and very powerful in the Force and

within minutes of meeting the Senator from Naboo he puts two and two together.

When he realizes who she is, Luke finds himself entranced. She is amazing and beautiful; everything he ever imagined his mother to be. He desperately wants to impress her somehow, gain her approval. He is quick to show her all they have accomplished in bringing peace to previously war-torn systems. But even in his eagerness, Luke doesn't give her all the details of what is going on with the clones (the chip, the genetic manipulation, that some are capable of using the Force, that he and his father have effectively kidnapped the entire 501st), but he does argue strongly that they be granted the same rights as any other sentient and be considered free men.

Vader shadows them both and not so secretly foils whatever nonsense Palpatine has cooked up for their meet and greet event with extreme prejudice.

"That noise, don't we need to investigate?" she asks Luke as the ground rocks from distant shock waves as Vader "defuses" some explosives.

"No, Senator, everything is fine," Luke assures her as they tour the newly reconstructed space port. "My father has all of the security measures well in hand. Now, what can Naboo do to ensure the sentient rights of the clones are honored now that the war is over? Do you think you could arrange a meeting between me and the Supreme Chancellor in the future?"

XIV.

Padme returns to Coruscant and reports to the Senate that peace has broken out and then sponsors a bill for clone rights. The Supreme Chancellor has to fake being happy about the whole thing and try and desperately spin it to his advantage, but he is not sure how. All his plans hinged upon warfare and victory at all costs. Now there are stories that people that were at each

other's throats (or thoraxes or their species equivalent), only a few weeks before are putting down their weapons, refusing to fight. His "allies" are getting poorer by the minute. His plans to kill Amidala were once again thwarted. There's even a rumor going around that the assassin, Ventress has vanished.

The constant Dark side high of mass slaughter on a galactic scale has dropped to a mere trickle.

Palpatine is feeling his age again. He plasters a look of geniality on his face as he listens to Padme while inside he fumes.

Padme praises the Jedi's efforts publicly over the holonet and describes how their Knights are reaching out to the League of Neutral Systems, ending the war, and working on reconstruction and rebuilding the galaxy.

Upon learning of the news report during a Council meeting, Obi-Wan looks at Yoda and Mace, baffled. *Reconstruction? What reconstruction?* What Jedi is making peace with Sith backed Separatists and rebuilding? With what *money*? Is this about that weird report Master Fisto has filed recently about the unknown Jedi working with a Sith Lord or the rumors flooding the holonet about the war being over? What about the exhausted Knights and Masters returning from the Outer Rim after finding out they simply weren't needed to fight anymore?

The Jedi Council doesn't quite know what to make of Padme's report.

"Tell no one of this we will," Yoda says. "In turmoil the Force is. No longer merely clouded but raging like a storm. Investigate we will."

At the Chancellor's suggestion, the Council orders Anakin (who was going stir crazy on Coruscant since being recalled from Umbara), to travel with the Senator and join up with Obi-Wan to verify the reconstruction rumors and the League's involvement in the same. The Chancellor insists the mission remain a secret and the Council agrees with him.

These so-called peace efforts are likely a plot by the Separatists to catch the Republic off guard.

XV.

Ventress was enjoying herself. She hadn't known she *could* enjoy herself. She had been angry and desperate and fighting the galaxy for so long that she didn't even recognize the feeling. It wasn't until Luke smiled at her and asked her if she was having fun that it dawned on her. She nearly snapped back a reply, (it reminded her of Kenobi's needling) until she caught herself and realized he genuinely meant it. He wanted her to be having fun and she looked around and found that she was.

Ventress relished every minute of undermining Dooku and his Master. She was being freely taught all manner of new Force techniques and wasn't required to grovel or prove herself before some dark master or mindlessly obey some holier-than-thou-council. She wasn't afraid of being stabbed in the back any longer. Vader would have the decency to stab her in the face if he wanted to and Luke didn't seem interested in either redeeming her or condemning her. She could just... enjoy.

She had thought it was some sort of ploy to begin with, a trick or a test. But the Force proved that Luke was telling the truth. Dooku planned to betray her because Sidious was a xenophobic, bigoted, misogynistic, power mad *skrag*. She was getting too strong, too powerful, and Dooku was planning to toss her out with the garbage to keep his own position. Betraying them first before they could see her dead, and leaving the Separatists high and dry was a balm to her soul.

Ventress also found joy in the new opportunities her alliance with Vader and Luke provided her. There was a deep satisfaction in making the Trade Federation cronies cry when she destroyed their ships and stole from them. She loved pretending to conquer systems only to join in and declare peace at the last minute when Luke arrived with the Republic fleet. She was even having fun ~~torturing~~ training the Force sensitive clones.

She had resources, power, and a way to truly take revenge on Dooku and his master. Life couldn't be better.

And speaking of taking revenge...

XVI.

Grievous thought the little Jedi was easy pickings. Ventress had warned him about the Jedi, but as expected, he was no match for Grievous. Short and puny, his lightsaber hardly worthy of seizing as one of his many trophies. But then the Jedi *moved* and Grievous realized this one was going for the kill. His opponent had no desire to capture him, but this wasn't a revenge killing either. There was no buried anger making him sloppy. There were no fancy flourishes with his lightsaber. The Jedi just wanted him dead.

Suddenly two of his limbs were on the ground, and oh, look, another one, and was that a clone with one of his trophy lightsabers?

No, *wait*—!

XVII.

With the Umbara mopping up action finally over, Ahsoka along with two squad, hurries to catch up with her Master and the 501st. She and the men spend days hopping from system to system, trying to reach them as they crisscross the Mid and Outer Rim, refusing to answer even encrypted comms. Finally she finds them on some planet in the midst of "peace operations" of all things!

Commander Appo provides her with a status report when she finally enters orbit. Luke is on the ground helping the locals and waiting for his father to finish blowing up the rest of the Separatist base that cannot be re-purposed for the inhabitants. Ventress is taking care of destroying the fleet in system.

The Commander's report makes *no sense* so Ahsoka takes a gunship and some men and heads for the planet surface. As luck

would have it, she land just as Luke hands General Grievous his head and his arms on a platter.

(Vader is on his way to the scene, *very, very upset* that his son had to face Grievous alone, and is taking it out on everyone who gets in his way, as evidenced by the large explosions in the distance getting ever closer and closer).

Luke, his three clone apprentices, and the rest of the clone squads are battered and bruised from the fight but no one has died. Luke picks up Grievous' lightsabers and is all for giving them to Fives, Hardcase, and Chatterbox so they can be used for good again.

Ahsoka doesn't know what to make of any of this. She is used to arriving into the middle of a fire fight, but nothing she has seen before prepares her for what she now finds.

She is faced with a Jedi she's never seen before. She doesn't know this Luke, dressed in black, not wearing *any armor*—

(—much to the constant despair of the troopers not to mention his father.

“I don't need armor, Father.”

“Do not argue with me. Put it on NOW or I will put it on you myself!”

Vader wonders if this would be what raising Luke from a baby would have been like.

Luke obliges, but constantly loses his armor as soon as he can. It is restrictive. He can't see how anyone can move in the stuff. The clones just gather it up where they find it since they know Vader will be demanding his son wear it again as soon as he comes back from reprogramming battle droids into sanitation workers or whatever the hell he is doing—)

—and she cannot see her Master *anywhere*!

Luke is very pleased to meet a Jedi apprentice, (hopefully this meeting will be better than the one with Master Fisto, that had been disappointing). He doesn't hesitate to greet her and immediately asks her if she thinks re-purposing Grievous' lightsabers is acceptable. You know, so Fives, Chatterbox, and Hardcase can

start training? Maybe it is a bit creepy and irreverent? he wonders. But then, there has been a war and lightsabers can't just be harvested from thin air like water, after all. What does she think? he asks her earnestly.

Ahsoka just looks at the clones and then at Luke, and then at the clones and then at the explosions behind Luke, (Vader is getting closer), and then at Luke.

"What?" she asks plaintively.

"Commander Tano!" Rex calls as he hurries over to greet her. "Good to see you, sir!"

"Rex," she says, relieved at last to see a familiar face. "What's going on? Who *is* this guy? Where is Master Skywalker? Commander Appo said something about— Wait, is that— is that *Grievous*? *All of him*? Is he *dead*?"

"Yes, he's dead sir," he reports proudly, nudging one of the many arms littering the ground with his boot.

While Ahsoka talks to the Captain, Luke wastes no time going over and meeting the troopers traveling with Ahsoka and finding out their names. He calls out, "Rex, we need to begin processing the new troopers, get them through medical and get their chips out as soon as we can so they can join the reconstruction teams."

"What is he talking about?" Ahsoka demands in a harsh whisper.

"The chips and the gene stuff. Luke fixed whatever the Kaminoans did to us and now Fives is a Jedi!" Jesse exclaims, overhearing her and answering her question. "Go on Fives, show 'em what you can do."

The other clones call out their encouragement. Fives closes his eyes, *breathes*, and levitates one of Grievous' arms into the air. It hovers, defying gravity, until a shock wave from a nearby Vader- related explosion causes him to lose focus.

Ahsoka's jaw drops. *Since when were clones Force sensitive?* She shakes herself and tries to take control of the situation, the way her Master would.

"Okay, everyone just *stop*! Just *stop* for a second! I get that Gre-

vious is dead and-and Fives can *use the Force* now, *somehow*, but we can get to all of that later. We need to be worried about the fact that something is coming this way and it is likely going to try and *blow* us up. Does anyone care about that?"

"Nothing to worry about, Commander," Rex is quick to assure her. "Vader is just taking care of the rest of the Separatists so the planet can go about its peaceful business. Luke, sir, I think we should have Kix put some bacta on those bruises before your father gets here."

(In Rex's mind, keeping Luke safe is of paramount concern. Vader is practically a force of nature, (pun very much intended). The only thing that keeps Vader on an even keel and with a focused direction to vent his black rage is Luke, and even that varies from day to day. Rex can manage the situation though. He isn't sure why, but Vader's obsessive behavior when it comes to his son's well-being seems vaguely familiar.)

"Nothing to worry about? *Nothing to worry about?!*" Ahsoka repeats, voice rising stridently. "Will someone tell me where my Master is and explain what the *hell* is going on here?!"

And then Vader shows up and Ahsoka nearly swallows her tongue at the sight of him.

Vader only has eyes for his son, furious that Luke faced Grievous without him; Grievous shouldn't have even BEEN here! When Ventress returns, he is going to *strangle* her!

He rushes over to his son, taking hold of his shoulders, examining him from head to toe. "You are hurt! Where is Kix? Why haven't you been treated yet?"

"Father, it's fine. Everyone is fine. We took care of Grievous ourselves. You didn't need to rush back."

Vader looks around and takes in what is left of Grievous. A fierce pride swells up inside him. His son has defeated that cobbled together lunatic. Vader blinks. A lunatic who murdered dozens of Jedi! "What were you *thinking* facing him? He could have *killed* you!" he yells at Luke.

"No one was killed, Father. We are all fine. Fives, Chatterbox,

Hardcase and I handled it and look! More lightsabers! We can move forward on training now.”

Ahsoka has grabbed hold of Rex’s arm. Her mind is going light-years per minute. *Sith. That’s a Sith. That’s a very, very, VERY large and very powerful Sith. Why is no one doing anything about the Sith?! He feels like a black hole of darkness, pain, and-and burning. Where is her Master? Why is there a Sith here? Is anyone else feeling him? Feeling this? Anyone? ANYONE?!*

Hardcase comes over to stand beside her and pats her carefully on the shoulder, trying to be comforting. “I know, Commander. Wild and crazy doesn’t begin to cover Vader. The amount of damage he can do is just beautiful. He’s taken down more clankers than anyone, but don’t worry!” he assures her. “No matter what you feel through the Force, Vader’s a mush mellon on the inside, especially about his son. Hey,” he says suddenly. “Do you think we get to pick our own lightsaber color? Do you think I can have two like you do?”

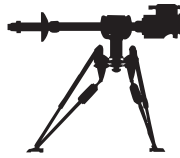
Ahsoka feels the urgent need to comm Obi-Wan. Hell, she feels the need to comm Anakin wherever he is, and ask for some help (because he certainly isn’t *here*).

She needs some sanity and she needs it *now*.

XVIII.

Anakin stills so suddenly, Obi-Wan nearly runs into him. “What is it?”

Anakin just shudders. “Nothing, just felt something really *weird* in the Force.”



CHAPTER 3

In Which Ahsoka Observes and Learns Some Important Lessons

XIX.

Palpatine sends Cade Bane to hunt down and kill the rogue Jedi making peace of all things. He can't have Jedi making peace. He is passively aggressively getting everyone to believe the Jedi are behind the war to gain power while simultaneously using the war to kill them off one by one.

Given his past victories against the Order, Palpatine is sure Bane won't fail.

Bane fails and fails miserably in his mission for several reasons that Palpatine with all his vaunted foresight cannot foresee. First, Luke is experienced in dealing with bounty hunters. They have hunted Han for years and sometimes they were also chasing Luke due to the enormous bounty Vader put on his head. Luke has faced some of the galaxy's best bounty hunters and is prepared for all of Bane's tricks.

(“Vader put a bounty on your head?” Fives asks incredulously.

Before Luke can explain, Vader cuts in defensively, “I needed to find my son quickly and at the time he had unwisely chosen to surround himself with unscrupulous rebels and criminals.”

Luke huffs. “My friends are not criminals.”

Even with his mask on it is clear that Vader is giving him a Look.

Luke stubbornly refuses to back down. “Leia says that rebelling against an illegal government is not a crime. It is the duty of every sentient to fight tyranny especially if the tyrant is running the government.”

“I should—should *ground* you for saying such treasonous lies! You sound like a-a Separatist!”

“Father, you are pretending to be a Separatist *right now!*”

“Do not get in between them when they start talking politics,” Rex advises Ahsoka firmly, as she nervously fingers her lightsabers as the argument grows more heated. “Sometimes I don’t think even they know what side they are on other than on the same side together, whatever side *that* is.”)

Second, Bane fails because Vader no longer cares about waiting to attack the enemy or giving fair warning. Bane came to kill his son. Bane has nearly killed Ahsoka and Padme before. Bane is now dead meat.

Third, Bane didn’t expect Force sensitive clones, battle trained, unpredictable and very protective of their new teacher. They may not be skilled yet at saber play, but the three clone brothers move in sync with each other and with speed and vicious strength that would impress accomplished Jedi.

(Vader wants Luke to take away Hardcase’s second lightsaber. He’s going to stab the wrong person if he is not careful. He’s going to *stab* Luke and then Vader cannot be held responsible for what he will do. Luke resolves to ask Ahsoka for help with Hardcase’s obsession with having two lightsabers as soon as she stops looking at him like she wants to hit him.)

Fourth, Bane also didn’t expect Ventress.

Bane ends up very, very dead.

XX.

Ahsoka had spent the last few days watching as patiently as she could and she still wasn't sure what was going on. Right now she sat a few meters away from where Luke was teaching Fives, Hardcase, and Chatterbox some basic blocks and strikes with their new lightsabers. There was just something *off* about the whole thing.

(Ahsoka had already noticed that Luke didn't bother to change the intensity of his lightsaber when practicing so that it would burn but not maim or kill. Luke practiced with a full powered blade and his students followed suit. Ahsoka had never seen any Jedi train at full strength with a fellow Jedi, let alone an apprentice. When she tentatively asked if there was any reason why he trained at full power, Luke looked surprised and chagrined. He turned his lightsaber over and over in his gloved palm.

"I could only forge and cut one crystal when I built my lightsaber," he admitted. "Without the other two crystals, I can't adjust the blade. I've only ever practiced with a full intensity blade. It's habit."

"You fabricated and cut your own crystal?" she asked in shock. Luke gave her a half smile and nodded. Ahsoka was bewildered. She knew of no Jedi who had gone through the trouble, who even knew how! Kyber was obtainable on Jedha, on Ilium. Only Sith used synthetic crystals.)

It wasn't until the lesson was over that day that she realized what was bothering her about watching Luke train (other than the fact that he trained at full power, had taken three students at the same time, and they were all adults and clones). Luke made no reference to any of the classical forms or terms when teaching. He did not teach his students any of the katas or forms. From what she had observed over the past few days, Luke's idea

of training was intense physical exercise.

Luke thought saber practice meant attacking when you were busy doing something else or throwing things at you with the Force to see how many pieces you could cut it into before said object fell to the ground.

And Ahsoka thought Master Skywalker was unconventional!

Vader would watch Luke training but sparred with Ventress. Ventress jumped and swirled around Vader with her weapons sizzling. Vader's style was brutal and punishing. He never failed to put her down and put her down hard when they fought. Still Ventress came back for more, throwing herself at Vader with a will.

Luke also trained with Ventress. They would surprise attack each other with their sabers at random times during the day and night, much to Ahsoka's shock and dismay the first three times it happened in front of her: once over breakfast, once on a gunship on their way back from a meeting with the local Prefect, and once in the middle of the night. (Kix told Ahsoka that the first time it happened, Vader nearly killed Ventress for attacking Luke, grabbing her with the Force and nearly choking her until Luke got him to stop. Ahsoka could easily believe it.)

It was Luke's lack of any disciplined form that had Ahsoka baffled as to just how he had defeated Grievous. If she hadn't seen his body with her own eyes and only saw Luke training, she would never have believed he was skilled enough to beat the General. He used none of the flourishes that Knights and Masters were known for. He didn't fight like Vader at all, so whoever taught him, it wasn't his own father. He was lightning quick and acrobatic, but rough and unpolished in his moves.

It took days of watching before Ahsoka began to figure it out. It was the Force. Luke would open his entire awareness to the Force every time he picked up his saber. There was not a strike or parry he made that wasn't guided by the Force. For all Ventress was more traditionally trained, muscle memory finely honed, she couldn't defeat him. Luke's strength in the Force was undeni-

able. After watching him fight, Ahsoka was sure he was rooted in the Light, synthetic crystal or no.

Ahsoka never saw Luke or Vader draw sabers on each other for any reason.

Ever.

XXI.

When Luke asks Ahsoka to help show Hardcase some of the basics of Jar’Kai, Ahsoka is torn. Hardcase is so eager to learn. Hardcase is also physically an adult and a clone. She is just a Padawan. She has no right to teach him! Only the Order gets to decide who learns Jedi skills.

Luke looks at her with such sad disappointment when she hesitates, and Hardcase is just so excited, she squirms in discomfort at her own thoughts. She thinks to herself “What would Skyguy do?” and she has her answer.

Anakin would train clone troopers in a heartbeat, the Council and the Code be damned.

She takes up her weapons and begins her lesson. Chatterbox, Luke, and Fives listen in intently. She tries to ignore what feels like disapproval from Vader as she shows her reverse grip technique.

Honestly, he is as bad as her master! Anakin hates her technique too, always grumbling about it, though at least he has stopped trying to get her to change it.

She finishes her lesson by imparting to Hardcase the same bit of wisdom Anakin passed on to her: “Now the most important thing to remember is your lightsaber is your life. Don’t lose it!”

Luke shakes his head and interrupts. “A lightsaber is a tool. An incredibly useful tool, but just a tool. If you lose your lightsaber, pick up a blaster. If you lose your blaster, pick up a rock or a stick. If there is no rock or a stick, you always have the Force with you to defend yourself and others. Never forget, you are more

than just your weapon. You are more than your lightsaber. You are a person, Hardcase; *that* is the most important thing to remember.”

XXII.

After saving the Noghri, at Luke's request, Vader made a list of planets, places, and conflicts during the Clone Wars where things had happened outside of the sieges and campaigns. The events on the list involved environmental disasters, famines, slavery or slave trading, and other criminal activities that the Republic Judiciary, the Jedi Order, and the GAR either deliberately overlooked (for strategic or for Sith manipulation reasons) or hadn't know about until it was too late to do anything. The list was very, very long.

Luke didn't know it but much of this list Vader cribbed not from Jedi briefings (because back then all Jedi briefings were only about the war or why Anakin Skywalker had done something un- befitting the Order), but from things Padme had told him or said in passing. At the time, Vader listened to his wife, but pushed all thoughts aside of rushing to the rescue to focus on the war and the “greater good” as a “good Jedi” should. Years later, Vader had gone over in his mind every moment he had ever spent with Padme, every conversation, every glimpse of her fair features. It was a kind of mental torture to do it, but Vader had turned it into a type of meditation, self- flagellating. The pain and hurt of it fueled his powers and his will to get through each and every day.

The unintended side effect of this was he could recall many of the humanitarian disasters of the Clone Wars.

When Vader handed Luke the list (subsequently dubbed the Datapad of Disasters), he asked his son *why* he wanted to know about these disasters when Vader had already briefed Luke on all the major battles and campaigns of the war to date. Luke replied

that based on what Vader had told him of Palpatine's rise to power, among the many problems they had to tackle was the horrible PR problem the Jedi Order had. Why wouldn't the galaxy think the Order was to blame for everything when they were leading armies all over the galaxy shooting up the places that weren't already on fire, or suffering from drought, cataclysm, pirates, and/or slavers.

Vader crossed his arms over his chest after hearing that careful explanation. "Very nicely said, young one, but that is *not* your real reason. Your plans for robbing the corporate and banking guilds blind and ensuring that we control all the war debts incurred by the Republic and Separatists are a better use of our time and resources. Tell me the truth."

Luke was quiet as he ran his hand over the list. "A Jedi isn't supposed to crave adventure," he admitted at last, "but Biggs and I used to imagine what we would do if we had a ship of our own and had the credits to do anything. We used to talk about adventuring from system to system being heroes. With a ship we could have done so much for the Underground. We could've struck a real blow against the Hutts. It was silly, but..." He looked up. "We have three capital ships and several cruisers. We have star fighters and an entire battalion and more troops working with us every day. We know what is going to happen before it happens. We have a working mechanical knowledge 20 years more advanced than exists now. If we're really going to do this, if we are going to change the future, I want to do more than fight Palpatine. I know a Jedi is not supposed to want excitement, but..." his son shrugged with a self deprecating laugh, "I'm reckless, I know."

Vader was silent for a long, long moment. How could he admit to Luke that he and Kitster had had the same dreams, made the same plans (he hadn't thought about Kitster in years, was he still alive?) But now thinking about it, thinking about the slavers and the other atrocities and disasters on the list he felt a savage hunger rise within him. Luke was *right*. They could crush the filth in

the galaxy now. They had the resources and the foreknowledge. He could already see the orbital bombardment raining down on the Zygerrians in his mind's eye.

"It will be some days before the campaign on Felucia will begin again. I suggest we start with the Tradoshan hunting islands where they kill sentients for sport," Vader said. "I will instruct Commander Appo to calculate the hyperspace route."

Vader saw no reason why he shouldn't encourage his son's plans. Whomever (*Obi-Wan, it must have been Obi-Wan*, Vader thought savagely, *trying to make sure Luke didn't turn out like his father!*) had told Luke he was reckless or implied he was selfish for wanting to help people in need deserved to be killed. Vader consoled himself with the fact that he had killed his old Master already and with the fact that with Luke by his side he could work to counteract such Jedi nonsense.

XXIII.

Luke and Vader vacillate about when they can just go and confront Palpatine. They frequently argue whether it is time to go and kill him, especially now that it is clear that he is behind most of the attempts on Padme's life when she is sent out on Senate missions. But given that everyone still likes the Supreme Chancellor and not enough clones are free, they usually calm each other down and decide not to risk it until they are certain they can not only beat him but take his plans down with him.

Sometimes Vader argues that they should leave some of Palpatine's plans intact. The Republic was a corrupt bloated beast, he reminds Luke. The Jedi Order easily fell prey to the Sith and are in need of reforms. The Empire wasn't *all* bad, Vader reasons. They had some very nice capital ships after all. There is nothing wrong with making people stop fighting and making a mess of the galaxy by the use of military might. People don't seem to listen any other way. The Senate was just so *useless!*

Luke usually stops what he is doing when Vader starts ruminating fondly about the Empire and grabs his father by the arm and suggests they go flying or racing or, *oh, look Father, have you seen a ship of this model in this condition before?*

Luke is not interested in ruling the galaxy. Luke is pretty sure that if Vader really thinks about it, Vader knows that *Vader* is not interested in ruling the galaxy either. He won't enjoy it at all, Luke is certain about that. His father is happiest, (loosely defining the word) when he can protect the people he loves, when he can take action in the face of the things that threaten the people he loves, and when he can be open and accepted for being who he is.

Luke also knows after meeting his mother that she wouldn't appreciate being given the galaxy to rule by her future Sith husband either.

(Vader claims that Padme would be wonderful as Empress. She could be made to see the wisdom of it, and she would be such a wise and strong ruler. Hearing that, Luke breaks out the big guns and suggest the two of them soup up a starfighter with future technology).

As much as the Republic has serious problems, (Sith infestation being one of them, along with slavery, corruption, apathy for the needs of sentients...) Emperors are the problem, *not* the solution.

Luke frequently wishes Leia was here. She was the persuasive one. She would know what to do.

But then again, Luke thinks with a sigh, Leia's idea of persuading Vader to see sense would probably involve her trying to kill him.

XXIV.

After every mission the 501st has engaged in while under Luke

and Vader's command, Luke makes sure they all have some R&R. Luke has learned the hard lesson of patience with the loss of his hand. He insists they wait before rushing off to the next crisis and grumbling, Vader agrees if only because Luke's idea of resting isn't something he actively loathes.

Luke doesn't suggest solitary meditative retreats the way the Order used to, (which is a good thing because Vader has no interest in such pursuits now or ever and Luke only meditates while doing handstands for some reason—which is not a technique that Vader is familiar with but to each their own). Instead, Luke wants to go out and explore whatever planet they are on with his father. Luke is obsessed with visiting any and every source of water they can find- rivers, lakes, ponds, oceans. They go racing or flying. They tinker together. They spend nights stargazing out in the wilds.

Sometimes Vader will even share a few stories of places he has seen in the galaxy.

Luke's students convince him in turn to go out and enjoy the nightlife with them. The troopers grow especially insistent when they realize Luke is pretty awesome at Karaoke. (Tatooine's music scene was always decades behind the rest of the galaxy and heavily Hutt influenced so now Luke is on the cutting edge at last). When Ahsoka rejoins the 501st, they start inviting her too.

The troopers also try and talk Luke and Ahsoka into getting some ink and there, Vader puts his foot down. Neither his son nor his Padawan are getting tattoos.

Ahsoka, who didn't even want a tattoo in the first place, (her markings are more than enough, thank you very much!) almost wants to get one now that Vader has forbidden it, just to spite the Sith. Before she can open her mouth to tell Vader off for his high handed ways, Luke grins mischievously and asks, "What? Don't you think I would look good with the Rebel Alliance symbol tattooed on my face? Jesse looks good wearing the Republic Cog."

"You are not as funny as you think you are."

"I'm an adult. You can't *actually* stop me from getting a tattoo,

you know,” Luke says with obviously fake nonchalance.

“Just try me, young one.”

XXV.

Slowing down, taking time, and enjoying the galaxy is a novelty for the troopers. They have never had so many days “off” between campaigns since the war began (not that clones ever had a day off even before the war started). There is still danger and fire fights, but now the troopers are also taking care of criminals, stopping slavers, and war profiteers and there have been few casualties in the last month. Kix is positively cheerful.

Rex is preparing to submit reports on active Battalion numbers for the month and realizes that between this ten day and the last there has not been a single death. Not one. The system has been taken, the Separatist forces routed, Grievous is dead, and not one of his brothers has died.

Rex isn't sure why, but when he realizes that it feels like someone has punched him in the throat. He cannot breath, his eyes burn and he chokes.

No one has died.

In the quiet of his quarters, Rex curls his body over the report and sobs.

XXVI.

After Ahsoka got over her shock of this weird Jedi working with a Sith, Force sensitive clones, Ventress helping the Republic, (“I am not *helping* anyone, let alone the wretched *Republic!*” Ventress denied stridently), the death of Grievous, the only thought in her mind was *if they could just find and capture Dooku, the war could be won.*

When she shared this plan aloud with Luke, he just shook

his head. Grievous and Dooku were not behind the war, he explained. They were not responsible for starting the war and creating the clones. There was no real way to win until the Sith Master was destroyed. The best they could do until then was to stop the fighting.

Even if Ahsoka could believe Luke about the war and the Sith Master, Dooku was still a threat. Couldn't Ventress or Vader just lead them to him if they were *truly* on their side? (She still had her doubts). If they were helping the Jedi, couldn't Luke just *make* them do it?

"We already took care of Dooku," Luke said off handily when she brought it up. "He isn't a problem."

"What? *How?*" Ahsoka demanded. "Did you take him prisoner? Is he *dead*?"

"Oh, no. He is on Serenno rethinking his life."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?"

Vader suddenly loomed, seeming larger than life. Ahsoka took a step back. For a Sith with a Force presence as powerful as an open reactor core and with an audible breathing problem, he could be very sneaky when he wanted to be. She constantly found him hovering nearby, just out of the corner of her eye, stalking her, though he kept a respectable distance, (usually).

"It means he *won't* be a problem," the Sith said with the certainty of death.

XXVII.

Vader had taken great pleasure in hunting down and facing Dooku with Luke by his side. Vader had had no qualms about killing Dooku a second time, but Luke had a better idea to throw Palpatine off his game. While Luke engaged Dooku with his saber, Vader simply pressed and pressed until he invaded Dooku's mind with image after image of the future, relishing in the mental torture he was inflicting as the Count physically stag-

gered. Vader showed the Count losing his hands to Skywalker and then losing his head. He showed Dooku the very moment that his future self realized he was only ever kept alive by Sidious as a tool to use in engineering Anakin Skywalker's downfall. He showed Dooku how the Imperial War Machine would raze Serenno to the ground, how all mention of Dooku's name, achievements, and impact was censored and destroyed from every source in the galaxy.

He made Dooku see how all of his so called achievements and sacrifices and power plays amounted to nothing in the end. Dooku himself was nothing. He would not be remembered. Palpatine had used him as a stepping stone for his own rise to power and as a useful foil in gaining the apprentice he *really* wanted. Vader revealed to Dooku the futile waste of his own life, his talents, name, reputation, and ideals. He shoved the unvarnished truth down Dooku's throat and made him swallow.

Dooku faltered. Luke lowered his blade. Dooku tried to deny it but in the face of Vader's power and Luke's compassionate gaze he could not. The Force would not allow him to hide from his future. The old Sith railed, had tried to strike out with all of his hatred and anger, but after his blows were easily blocked by the young Jedi he fell to his knees, beaten.

Luke stood over him and calmly explained what would happen next. The Count would provide all Separatist codes, fleet positions, and classified intel to Vader. He would give them access to the federation, banking, and corporate slush funds. He would then take his ship and retreat to Serenno. He would take no further part in the war in any fashion. He would not communicate further with his Master. Dooku would tend to his planet and his people and leave Sidious to them. He could go in peace only if he would live in peace. Luke offered him his parole and Dooku nodded and climbed slowly to his feet, looking as if he had aged a decade.

The galaxy had not heard from Yan Dooku, Count of Serenno since.

XXVIII.

“Well, *fine* then! If Dooku isn’t a problem, then let’s focus on hunting down the Sith Master,” Ahsoka said, backing away from Vader.

Luke said nothing in reply, continuing to watch Chatterbox spar with Hardcase.

The Force prodded Ahsoka sharply and it suddenly dawned on her. “You know who he is,” she breathed. “*You know!* How do you know? Who is it? Where is he?” Ashoka demanded.

“Where he has done and can still do the most damage to every being in this galaxy,” Luke said sadly. “You can see it if you stop and be still. That’s why he started this war and created the clones. That’s why he wants it to keep going on no matter what. You will only know when you are calm and at peace. All the pieces are in front of you. Stop and *think*,” he counseled her.

“You won’t tell me? What kind of Jedi *are* you? Are you working with him? Is that what this is?” Ahsoka said furiously.

“No, *never*,” Luke denied. “But to defeat him you cannot play his game. None of us can, Jedi, Sith, clone, Separatist, Loyalist, civilian or soldier. You lose a battle and he wins. You are victorious in battle and he still wins. The war is his game. The only way to defeat him is to *stop playing*.”

XXIX.

The 501st liked to speculate and gossip about Luke and Vader. Rex would sometimes try and shut down the rumors because he prided himself on the running of a professional outfit, but even he has wondered just who and how and why?

Lots of theories were bandied about, each more absurd than the last. Bets were laid. Ventress ran a book, (and wasn’t that just as weird, working with Ventress! When Luke first brought her back with him after haring off on some solo mission that had

Vader reacting with massive Separatist destruction, Rex thought everything was going to blow up in their faces, but instead she had stayed around and helped!) The best odds were on Luke and Vader being estranged and recently reconciled royalty from a warrior empire somewhere beyond the reaches of Wild Space. After they found out they were father and son, they fled to this galaxy to make a life together. Fives suggested that theory, Echo even put together a presentation to prove their story, and both of them would spend a good hour arguing why it makes sense to anyone they could corner. Fives may be Force sensitive but he and Echo hadn't changed one bit.

Chatterbox disagreed. When Ventress pressed him for his bet he placed his credits on the table and said, "Time travel from the future."

Howls of laughter greeted his wager. Ventress took his credits with a sly smile. Everyone agreed that Chatterbox wasn't going to be winning the pool.

XXX.

The 501st will be heading out of the system soon. The latest local government they have liberated from the grips of the Separatist is in contact with Duchess Satine and the other neutral and non aligned worlds. The only boon that Luke demands from the freed system is that they recognize formally that the clones are sentient beings with the same rights and freedoms guaranteed to any other sentient being in Republic space. The government quickly agrees, relieved to be out of the war without having to give up their resources or land to the hungry Republic war machine.

Ventress is off infecting battle droids with whatever virus Vader and Hack Squad have cooked up that will cause the droids to start thinking on their own. Ventress has serious doubts about the plan, but she is looking forward to her other mission: rob-

bing the federation, guilds, and clans blind.

Ignoring all Republic comm traffic and certainly not seeking direction from the Jedi Council, they consider star charts and the Datapad of Disasters that Vader has created, trying to decide where to go next.

Ahsoka suggests that they split up to cover as much of the front lines as possible. Vader can go infiltrate Separatist planets. Luke can lead the clones in battle. She can take a few squads and do some recon. Chatterbox, Hardcase and Fives can lead their own squads. When Ventress comes back she can work with Master Aayla or Master Fisto to undermine the Separatist from the inside.

Luke points out that Ahsoka has just suggested they work towards the Sith's strategy. Divide the opposition up so they are easier to confuse, mislead, and conquer. Luke also refuses to just let his students go off and fight in a war without support and reminds Ahsoka that Ventress is highly unlikely to work with the Order.

Then there is Vader.

It will be a cold day on Mustafar before Vader campaigns across the galaxy far from his son. Vader makes this terrifying clear.

Ahsoka does not suggest it again.

Luke points at the charts and suddenly says, "Kamino. We should make our way there." Rex and Ahsoka are surprised. Why go to Kamino?

"We can stop the chips at their source," Luke explains, warming to the idea the more he talks about it. "We can free all of the clones there, all the children, all the young men and get them resettled on one of the neutral worlds. We can stop all future cloning. We can also go to all of the medical stations and ensure that any clone that passes through one of the stations at least has their chip removed. Then every clone can be given a choice to stay in the GAR or muster out to make lives on the neutral planets."

Ahsoka cannot believe what she is hearing. “You are going to *stop* clone production? Let the troops muster out? You can’t just let them—” There is a violent spike in the Force. Ahsoka trails off suddenly, biting her lip hard. She looks over at Captain Rex and Fives and Jesse and Chatterbox and Echo and the others clones standing around listening. Their faces, previously so open, look more like they have been carved in stone. The Force feels harsh against her nerves.

Had she just said that? Had she just thought that the clones shouldn’t be given a choice?

“Let them what?” Luke asks quietly, prompting her to continue. “Let them choose? Let them decide for themselves if they want to serve and fight and die?”

“Of course they should have the right to choose, but there’s a war. We’re in the middle of a war! The droids already outnumber us,” she says, thinking of all the battles she and her Master have been in. *What if the clones weren’t there? How are they going to win the war without them?*

“There is no more war. The war only existed to serve the Sith Master,” Luke reminds her firmly. “And even if there was still a war, who are you to decide that these men must be bred to fight and die as property of the Republic?”

She swallows. They need the clones to fight. She knows that down to her bones. They can’t do this without the clones. There is still a war on no matter what Luke says or how many times he says it. He just doesn’t *understand*. How can they possibly win if they don’t have the clones?

“You can’t have it both ways,” she argues, trying to make him see sense. “If there is no war, then you should tell us who the Sith Master is and we should go arrest him now.”

“No, *you* can’t have it both ways,” he counters. “If these men are nothing more than property, then the Order and the Republic are no better than slavers. If these men are sentient beings then they have the right to freedom and a right to chose their own future. Whether there is a war or not doesn’t change that fact. And

even if you want to justify this slavery as some sort of necessary evil for some greater good to continue the fight, we dare not confront the Sith Master while the troopers can be forced and compelled to violence against their will,” Luke reminds her sharply.

Ahsoka has never felt so small and ashamed in her life. She cannot meet the eyes of the troopers, men she has fought back to back with for years now. She never thought of them as slaves or as property. But then she never thought of them as free natural born either, she admits to herself.

She tries to release her feelings into the Force. She has to convince Luke, make him see that he can’t just go rushing off and freeing the clones. It will be chaos.

“There are two million clones out in the field,” Ahsoka tells him. “Taking out their chips and healing them all will take a huge amount of time and while that happens, the Separatists will still be fighting and killing people. What you want to do will cripple and destroy the Republic. I don’t like what is happening to the clones. You’re right, it is slavery. I hate slavery, but we *have* to do what is best for the Republic. Once we win the war, then we can help the clones.”

Luke shakes his head. “It is the innocent and the most vulnerable that should always be the highest priority of any Jedi at all times, not perpetuating or protecting the existence of any government or organization.”

“It *is* our highest priority!” she snaps back.

Luke simply raises an eyebrow at that claim. “Then if it is a Jedi’s highest priority, we should go to Kamino.”

She throws her hands up in the air in frustration. How can she make him see that this is just crazy? No matter how wrong it is to leave the clones where they are, there is no way they can try and fix things right now! It will be disastrous!

“How are you even going to do this, then? Traveling to Kamino isn’t going to be enough. The Kaminoans aren’t just going to stop making clones because *you* say so. What about the other battalions of clones all over the Mid Rim, the Outer Rim, on Corus-

cant? What about *their* chips? If this Sith Master is masterminding the whole war not just leading the Separatist as you claim, how are you even going to manage to do all this without him finding out and stopping you?" she asks impatiently. "You are just *one person*. You're not even really a Jedi! You can't just *decide* to do this all on your own!"

"Send a message to your Jedi Master then," Vader rumbles suddenly. She jumps at the sound of his voice. "Send a message to your precious High Council. We have slicers who can actually secure the message from spying eyes and ears. Tell them about the chips and the genetic tampering and provide them the proof we have gathered. Tell them all the details of the carnage of Krell. Tell them about the Sith Master, about Grievous' death, and Ventriss' actions. Tell them the war is *over* and we are freeing the clones. We will see what the Order does and who is really a Jedi."

"You don't think they will do anything, do you?" she demands, crossing her arms over her chest indignantly. "You're a *Sith*. You don't care for anything but power and destruction anyway. What do you know about it? We are Jedi. If I tell the Council they will find a better way to—"

"The Order will do as much for the clones as they do about the slaves kept by the Hutts, about Senator Free Tal turning a blind eye to the slavery on Ryloth, about lost Jedi younglings hunted for sport, about the planets and systems starving under corporate blockade," he sneers back at her. "They will do *nothing*."

"You're twisting things! Both of you are. It is wartime. The Order can only do so much and without the clones—"

"You are *not listening*, young one. War. Peace. It makes no difference. At the end of the day no matter how much it pontificates about compassion, the Order won't do anything to help the clones or anyone else because that would be *caring* about someone. Attachment is forbidden by your precious Order and the suffering and death of individuals are simply not a priority. The Order will always sacrifice people for its precious Republic, for the greater good, even abandoning their own for political

expediency and to safeguard their precious traditions. *The Order doesn't care!* Not about you, not about the clones, not about slaves, not about anyone! Their fatalistic dogma demands that you accept suffering and disorder in the galaxy as natural and rejoice when those you love die. There is nothing *less natural!*"

"You're wrong," she insists weakly in the face of his anger. "That's not how it is. They do care. They will do what's right. If I tell them, they will find a better way."

"Send your message and we will see," he says darkly.



CHAPTER 4

In Which Luke Starts Arresting People and the Council Engages In The Jedi Equivalent of Panicking

XXXI.

The chip was out of Fives' head. He was no longer aging faster than normal. He was no longer fighting what seemed to be a never-ending series of battles with no end in sight. He had his brothers and his batch mate Echo by his side. He now received a monthly stipend of credits to spend on anything he wanted. *Anything!* Maybe soon, if he wanted to, he could choose to muster out and be guaranteed citizenship and rights. The Kaminoans and the Senate would only be reclaiming him as property if they managed to get through both Luke and Vader and Fives didn't see that happening. It was as good a guarantee as a clone could hope for.

Most important of all, he had the Force.

Learning he was Force sensitive was the most amazing thing

that could ever have happened to him. Fives highest expectation in life before the Umbara campaign was becoming an ARC trooper and surviving long enough to win the war, but now... now there was so many possibilities open to him. He could be a Jedi Knight and take care of his brothers in ways no other clone ever had before. He had a connection to a power that allowed him to do so much good and protect so many people. (He sometimes agonized over the thought that if not for the genetic manipulation, he could have known of this power sooner. Maybe he could have saved Cutup and Hevy and Droidbait. His batch brothers who made up Domino Squad could still be alive).

It was a tremendous honor and an immense undertaking. He was so very fortunate and he would do everything in his power to ensure his gift would help his brothers in any way possible.

XXXII.

Hardcase loved being Force sensitive.

He had always been twitchier and more excitable and talkative than his brothers. The Force felt exactly the same times a thousand. He felt energized, raring to go. In a fight he could move faster, think faster, and hit harder. But the best part about the Force was the lightsabers. Don't get him wrong, Hardcase loved his Z-6 Rotary Blaster Cannon. (He had been put on report more than once for not returning it to the armory after a fire fight and keeping it next to his bunk. It had only accidentally gone off that *one time*. No one was hurt!) Opening up on a squad of Clankers with his cannon was a joy, but a lightsaber, now that was EPIC. And not just one, Luke said he could have two, TWO LIGHTSABERS. Just thinking about what he could do with them made him take both weapons in his hands, ready to throw himself into a fight. Commander Tano had joined them recently and *she* used two lightsabers and she was going to show him how to reign burning slicing death on the Seppies. He couldn't wait!

XXXIII.

Chatterbox hadn't had much to say in his short life. There didn't seem to be much point in speaking when his purpose was to fight, defend, and die for the Republic. What did talking have to do with any of that? Nothing, talking had nothing to do with his life, so why bother?

When the Jedi Luke had reached out and fixed whatever it was that the Kaminoans had done that left the clones burning through their life spans as fast as possible, Chatterbox felt the strangest sensation course through him. When Luke lifted his hands away, he found he could still feel it and it had a sound. It hummed through his bones like it was meant to be there.

Working and training to use the Force made the hum louder, until it was more like a voice inside him. If he listened to it, he would know what to do. Chatterbox was *very good* at listening. So while Hardcase pushed himself to learn how to wield his lightsabers with greater and greater skill and Fives trained to be an even more deadly warrior, leader, and defender, Chatterbox listened to the Force tell him things about his brothers, about whatever planet they were on, about Luke and Vader, about who and what they were, and where and more importantly *when* they were from, about the truth of who was behind the war.

Fives preferred to sit cross legged in meditation to listen to the Force, like Commander Tano did. Hardcase enjoyed the moving meditation that Vader would engage in, lightsaber in hand, thrusting and parrying, repeating the same simple pattern over and over again. Chatterbox chose to join Luke upside down. When his body was perfectly in balance, every muscle engaged, the Force would sing and Chatterbox would listen, and listen, and listen.

XXXIV.

Vader hates being back in time. Vader hates being back on the front line of a war that was a total and complete waste of lives and resources. Vader hates watching the Council make the same stupid mistakes and cling to the same Code as before. Vader hates knowing that somewhere, out in the galaxy, Anakin Skywalker is living and fighting under orders from the Republic and the Council oblivious to it all. Anakin Skywalker who is too weak to stop any of this, too weak to see himself careening towards the destruction of everyone and everything he holds dear.

Vader hates so much that it feels like he is still on fire, flesh cooking, nerves screaming. It fills him and still, *still* more than two decades later he doesn't know what to do with all of it. The hate seems never-ending. It burns and burns and *nothing helps!* Not the Force, not "letting go," not using the Dark side, not destroying Separatist bases and slaughtering slavers or going after war profiteers, not the dream of killing the Emperor, not knowing Padme is alive, not having his troops at his side, not seeing Ahsoka, young and innocent.

Nothing helps!

And then... and then his son is suddenly by his side suggesting they go do something or see something or sometimes just to sit with him in silence. The storm inside him calms and the burning fades and he can think again.

Vader has not told Luke all the details of his past, all the monstrous things he has done but Luke *must* know, must sense it through the Force. He is a Sith. He cut off his own son's hand, beat him black and blue, and had every intention of delivering him into service, (*slavery*, a voice whispers mournfully) to the Emperor.

Despite knowing all of this, for some reason Luke stays with him.

Vader asked, (well, screamed really) at Luke once when they were arguing: *why?!* Why stay, why bother? Anakin Skywalker is

alive. Luke can go to him if he wants his precious Jedi father.

Doesn't Luke know by now that Vader is not going to change, he is not going to suddenly un-Fall, or be nice, or be good? This is who and what he is! Can't Luke see it? If he can, why does he stay?

"Because you are my father, my family," Luke says, hand reaching out but never actually touching,

never actually connecting. "Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten."

It is an old Tatooine proverb. Half hope, half prayer because it is nothing more than a fantasy, a lie people tell themselves in the face of ugly reality. Families get left behind and lost all the time on Tatooine, but the poor people of that wretched dust ball still say such nonsense.

His mother used to say it.

Luke is acting like it could be true.

XXXV.

Hardcase thought they should have cloaks or capes. They were Jedi apprentices, after all. All clones who lived through their first battle had the right to mark their armor, decorated it with colors and individual images that meant something unique to them or their squad or company.

Jedi often wore brown cloaks when not in active combat. Vader wore this amazing black armor weave cape. Hardcase felt that he and his fellow Jedi clone apprentices should wear some of their armor, (Luke was right, it was *hard* to fight and jump run in full armor) and some sort of cape or cloak, but certainly *not brown*. Perhaps blue for him and Fives, and yellow or gold for Chatterbox. When he suggested it to Luke, he told Hardcase to head for the market and use the Battalion's credit chip to make the purchase. Luke also asked if Hardcase would buy him a dark brown cloak.

Hardcase argued that brown was *so boring*. Was Luke sure he didn't want blue or green? Luke shook his head. Hardcase went shopping and found a brown cloak with dark blue lining for Luke. It was the only one they had in brown. Really!

XXXVI.

Ahsoka was trying to find a quite place to sit and meditate on the *Dauntless*. Her message to Anakin and the Council had been composed and encrypted and sent. They were on their way to Kamino via two medical stations and now was a good time to sit and think and deal with her anxieties before they could fester.

The only problem was she didn't recall it being so difficult to find someplace quiet to meditate outside her quarters before! Everywhere she turned there was an excited hum of activity. In one of her usual sparring spaces she found a number of clones with various gaming machines hooked up to the holonet, engaged in a rowdy multi-player fantasy adventure game.

She tried the lounge that Master Kenobi jokingly called the Archive on the ship, only to find an intense face off between two clones over a dejarik board. From the silently watching audience and a basket of fresh blum fruit (she hadn't seen blum fruit since the war began, where had they even *found any?*) resting in a place of honor on a table nearby, this was obviously a high stakes competition that had been going on for hours and was now down to the final two contenders fighting for the prize.

She thought she had finally found a quiet space and settled down to meditate when a sour sound of gurgling echoed around the storage room. It sounded like someone was killing some poor creature. She rose to her feet and rounded a corner and found a trooper and his tsunghi horn peering at a propped up data pad, trying to play music. He looked up abashedly when he realized she was standing there and he blushed.

"Sorry, Commander," he said. "My squad said if I practiced

anymore in our quarters they would space me and my horn. I am getting better though. Do you want to hear me play the first measure?" he offered eager for an audience.

"No, no it's fine, I'll find somewhere else. You stay here," she replied quickly backing away. "Good luck with your practicing."

She finally ended up in an out of the way corner of the auxiliary docking bay, next to a small viewport. She slipped into meditation and was able to center herself in the Force.

Ahsoka wasn't sure how long it was before she was interrupted, but suddenly she was aware of a clone trooper sitting nearby, leaning against the viewport transparisteel. She blinked. She didn't recognize him or the number on his shirt. He was in the same garb they made all the clones wear who were in long term medical care.

"Does it help?" he asked, seeing that her eyes were opened.

"Does what help?"

He gestured with one hand towards her. "Meditating. Does it help?"

"Well, yes," she answered a bit confused. "It allows me to focus on my connection to the Force and release my emotions and become calm."

"Huh," was the only response she received.

Ahsoka looked him over again. While he did not look visibly injured, he didn't look at all well. He had dark circles under his eyes and bruises on his face, marring his ink. "Do you need me to call medical? Should you even be out of medical quarters?"

"I'm allowed to walk around now. Besides, they have me watched," he said pointing behind her. She turned and there was a mouse droid hovering a few meters away, rocking on its wheels. "I asked because you seemed anxious before. You passed by me three times earlier today and now you seem calm."

"What's your name?"

"Dogma."

"Dogma, do you want to try meditating? I could show you if you want," she offered.

“No, I don’t have the Force. They took the chip out and untangled what was in me,” he tapped against his temple with his knuckles, “but I don’t have it.”

“You don’t have to be Force sensitive to meditate. Lots of people do it to help them think or feel better.”

He let out a short bark of laughter. “I don’t think it will help me.”

“C’mon, you can trust me. It will help.”

Dogma’s eyes flashed and his face stretched into a tight painful grimace which only someone being very kind would call a smile. “I don’t trust anyone but my brothers. Not even myself. *Especially* not myself.”

Ahsoka sat back a little at that pronouncement.

“That’s why I followed you. You looked uncertain, but now you’re not.”

“Meditation allows a Jedi to find peace and balance, to detach ourselves from our emotions and think critically and clearly. Things have changed a lot in the past days. I needed to let it all go.”

“So do you trust yourself again?” he asked, watching her carefully, (watching to see if she would lie, she realized).

She sighed and looked out at the passing flow of hyperspace, drawing her knees to her chest. “I don’t know,” she said honestly. “I thought I was so sure of what my purpose was, what we have been doing in this war, but now I am not so certain we have been doing what is right and that’s not good at all.”

Dogma shook his head. “There is nothing wrong with being uncertain. I used to be certain,” he told her. “I used to follow orders and obey. Everything was by the book. I would have done anything my commanders or generals asked of me. I was loyal. I never questioned. I was a *good solidier*. That’s how I earned my Name.” He looked down at his palms. “The general had us kill clones, did you know that? Krell told us there had been a message that the enemy was wearing our armor, but there was no transmission, he destroyed the transmitter. And it wasn’t ene-

mies in our uniforms, it was brothers. I remember the three I shot. I remember them, the ones I killed. But the worst part is I think— I think that even if I *had* known that they were brothers and not enemies and if he'd ordered me to, I still would have shot them. I would have shot them because *orders are orders*."

He grasped his head in his hands, his voice strangled and desperate. "And then—and then they took the chip out. The chip in our heads. Tup, it nearly killed Tup. He's still in medical, learning how to make his arm move and how to talk again. But the chips *weren't on*. They weren't on making me *do* anything or *think* anything. It was all me on Umbara. *I* killed my brothers. Me. I killed them." He took several sharp breaths between clenched teeth and then forced his hands back down with visible effort. "There's nothing wrong with not being sure," he insisted.

She rested her chin on her knees, shaken by his words. Ahsoka struggled to find something to say and clutched onto the earliest lessons she had been taught. "A Jedi Knight *can't* be uncertain. We must always exercise perfect unclouded judgment. If I can't trust my judgment then how can I know what to do, what is right?"

Dogma rubbed his fist against the scar at his temple. "I trust Tup and Fives and Jesse and Captain Rex. If they tell me to pick up my blaster and fight and kill," he swallowed hard, "I will. They are my brothers. I can trust them. I think you need to find someone that cares for *you* that you can trust."

She hummed under breath, turning the thought over in her mind. There was a squeak behind her and the mouse droid twittered. Dogma rose to his feet.

"Maybe I'll try meditation next time, Commander," he offered and followed the droid out of the docking bay. She gave him a wan smile and then turned back to the viewport.

She had a lot to think about.

XXXVII.

They stop by two medical stations on their way to Kamino. In both cases they find the Kaminoans in charge unwilling to let them treat the clones and fix their genetic defect or remove the chips. Rex and the men are hesitant to just attack the Kaminoan doctors, their training to follow orders is strong, but Fives finds he has no such qualms. He pulls a lightsaber on one of them.

Luke, having given this some thought and having broached the subject as a hypothetical when having his regular secured comm call with Duchess Satine, threatens to arrest the Kaminoans on charges of slavery, kidnapping, murder for “deactivating” non conforming clones, violation of sentient rights, the Convention Against Child Soldiers, and battery.

The Kaminoans are dismissive of him. They say that no court will convict them, they are too important to the war.

Luke replies, “What war? We have peace now, haven’t you heard?”

Captain Rex whispers, “He may have a point, sir. Judiciary is not going to prosecute.”

“There is always the court of public opinion,” Luke reminds him.

“Trusting to the media and the easily lead public will not be necessary,” Vader says. “Because of intergalactic security and under the Justice During Wartime Act as amended by the last session of the Senate, a trial can be delayed until all normal galactic relations resume, which will be *at least* two years. Until then, I know of several places where such prisoners can be kept... *undisturbed*.”

The Kaminoans finally begin to look worried.

“Problem solved!” Luke says with a smile as he slaps binders on the Kaminoans.

XXXVIII.

The clone medics manning the stations are stunned by what news the 501st brings with them, but they are quick to adapt. Kix takes over, processing brothers through surgery as fast as he can.

When Luke presents the possibility of freedom and choices to the injured but recovering troopers, he is met with stunned silence. They don't believe him. Rex and all the brothers of the 501st fan out and go and talk one on one with the healing clones and try and convince them this is real.

In the end it takes Hardcase drawing his lightsabers for an impromptu demonstration against Chatterbox and Fives levitating a medical droid before the truth starts to sink in.

XXXIX.

A shiny named Flare and a pilot named Kickback both prove to be Force sensitive. Since the 501st is not headed for open combat and they are both on the mend, Luke invites them to go with them and learn more about the Force. It isn't an order, Luke is very clear on that. He is *not* ordering them. They get to choose and they can change their minds.

Flare is overwhelmed. He isn't sure what to do or say. He has only been in one fire fight in his life and he nearly died. But he looks at the Jedi dressed all in black with the kindest eyes he has ever seen and over the Jedi's shoulder, he sees three brothers wearing lightsabers, armor, and cloaks.

The excitable one is nodding and using combat hand signals to urge Flare to join them. Flare takes a deep breath and agrees.

Kickback has flown with Jedi before. If training with the Force gives him the ability to fly like General Skywalker, he is ready to start training yesterday. He literally jumps out of bed and nearly re-injures himself in the process.

XL.

When they reach Kamino, Master Shaak Ti initially greets them in a welcoming manner until she senses the Force presence of Vader. She draws her lightsaber but Luke steps between them both, urging calm. It is Ahsoka's presence that causes her to initially lower her weapon and it is Luke's explanation of why they were there and the danger they had discovered that convinces her to put away her saber and listen. Shaak Ti wants to take the matter immediately to the Council and to the Supreme Chancellor. Vader flatly refuses. Things nearly dissolve into violence again until Luke implores her to acknowledge what he senses within her, the conflict between her obedience to the Order and the Republic and her feelings and attachments to the clones she trains.

"There is no conflict and you are mistaken if you believe me to be attached," Shaak Ti says firmly. "Whatever claims you may have, they must wait or be brought before the Council to be resolved."

"There is nothing to resolve," Luke argues. "The production of clones must stop. The young clones must be allowed to age slowly and naturally in freedom."

"It is your attachment to the clones that is clouding your judgment, young Knight. You forget that the Order takes its direction from the Supreme Chancellor. We are at war and to protect the Republic our mission involves leading the clones into battle. For the greater good—"

And Vader uses the Force to pull her lightsaber into his hands and pushes past her, heading unerringly towards where the clone DNA and genetic template sequence is kept.

Shaak Ti is shocked. She turns to Ahsoka. "They cannot do this!"

But it is a moot point. They can and they do.

They proceed through the rest of the clone facility, arresting the staff as they go. Master Ti, they confine to her quarters under

guard. The bounty hunters on training duty offer no fight, (they're not being paid to) and Hack Squad gets to work ensuring that all pending payments for future clone batches from the Republic never make it to Kaminoan coffers. Without money, the cloners will not be willing to grow any new clones even if they have the means to do so.

With so many clones to treat, anyone with Force sensitive training who is willing to help is pressed into service. Luke shepherds the others through the delicate technique, teaching them by example. It is Flare and Kickback's first use of the Force. Even Vader, who's Force touch feels like a desert storm, helps heal the clones.

XLI.

They find fourteen Force sensitive clones on Kamino. Six of them are children, two just barely toddlers.

"Are we going to take them to the Temple?" Ahsoka asks.

"Why?" Luke says, baffled at the very thought. "They have brothers and should stay with them. We're going to let them grow up and age normally and their own brothers can train them and with them if they want."

Hardcase is thrilled with the news. "I can have apprentices! I'm going to teach them everything I know!"

Fives dryly suggests they need to finish their own training because otherwise there won't be much for Hardcase to teach in the first place.

Hardcase knows that it may be a few years but that doesn't mean they can't start early.

XLII.

Much later, when the time comes to face Palpatine, Fives,

Hardcase and Chatterbox insist they wanted to come, (well, Chatterbox isn't really the insisting type, but he has his brothers' backs). Flare and Kickback and some of the other newly discovered Force sensitive troopers traveling with them want to come as well, but only the three of them are trained enough and when they demand that they be there in the name of all of their brothers, Luke agrees.

When they confront him at last, Palpatine doesn't realize the clones are Force sensitive. His overconfidence is his weakness. He screams at them to execute Order 66 and kill the Jedi who has come to arrest him and it fills Fives with a fierce joy to say "No," and punch him in the face.

His fist hits Palpatine's jaw with a satisfying crack and the Supreme Chancellor falls back with a stunned cry.

The fight is long from over and there will be blood shed before the end, but when Fives is old and what is left of his hair is white, *this* will still be the story that all of the children want him to tell over and over again: the story of the time he punched Supreme Chancellor Sheev Palpatine, Grand Sith Master Sidious in the face and knocked him on his ass.

XLIII.

Master Plo Koon receives Ahsoka's coded message and reads it before he even finishes dressing for the day. He immediately calls his clone medic and Commander Wolffe to meet him in the medical quarters and tells them to start scanning everyone for a bio-implanted chip in their brains. When the medics find proof of the chips just where Ahsoka's message says, Master Plo orders them to be removed immediately. He then asks if one of the clones will volunteer for him to try and figure out how to repair their genetic defect via the Force.

Commander Wolffe volunteers without question, not even really understanding what is going on but trusting his General.

Plo meditates and reaches for the Force, but despite his skills and powers he cannot find or figure out quite how to do it and Ahsoka's report is very vague as to the details. Her message came through slicer channels that he was unaware of and untraceable. Nevertheless, he knows that he must find this Jedi, Luke. His troopers' lives are at risk. The lives of every Jedi in the field leading the clones are at risk.

Plo is supposed to be patrolling previously liberated planets, but things have been quite for days. There has been some disturbing intelligence reports of unspecified problems with the droid armies coming from Separatist space but nothing confirmed. He orders his medics to keep working and perform surgery on every single clone and as soon as the Wolf Pack is cleared through medical, he takes them and a small cruiser to trace the message and to find Ahsoka.

XLIV.

Upon reading Ahsoka's message, Master Yoda finds he cannot catch his breath. His whole chest aches. He fumbles for his cane. He needs to meditate. He needs to call his fellow Councilors. The Force feels— He needs to— he needs to— he can't *breathe*—

“*General? General? Are you all right? Fry, call the medic! Get the medic, now!*”

XLV.

When Anakin reads the message he, to put it mildly, freaks. Obi-Wan and Anakin were supposed to find out about the Separatist plot of reconstruction and locate this mysterious Sith and Jedi pair with Padme's help. Ahsoka was *supposed* to be safe and out of the line of fire with the 501st.

Now it turns out that his Padawan and his Battalion are under

the command of the rogue Jedi and Sith!

Anakin is very nearly panicking as he rereads the message a third time. He trusts Ahsoka to tell him the truth. (There are none of their pre-arranged hidden code words to show she wrote the message under duress. The message came from her, he can feel it.) The intelligence in her report turns the whole universe upside down and his thoughts race uncontrollably.

Grievous is dead and Dooku is out of the picture!

Krell was killing troopers and Fell to the Dark side.

A Jedi let a Sith kill Master Krell.

Sith are working *for* the Republic!

The Jedi is a heretic!

A Sith as a *father*?

The 501st is safe!

The 501st had slave chips in them!

Ventress is helping them defeat the Separatists? *Ventress*?

There are *Force sensitive clones*!

Peace is happening!

The war is just a Sith ploy? All of it? All those lives, all the work and energy, and blood and sweat and tears was for nothing? *Nothing*?

They know who the Sith Master is. That thought burns through him. *They know who the Sith Master is*. This could finally be ending. *The war could end*.

Anakin doesn't realize it but every item in their quarters not bolted to a bulkhead is visibly trembling due to his uncontrolled feelings. Anakin turns to Obi-Wan. "What do we do? Can we figure out where she sent the message from? We need to get to Ahsoka *now*!"

She is surrounded by Sith and heretical Jedi, but Grievous is dead and they know who the Sith Master is and he needs to check on his men and, and, and—!

Obi-Wan needs to sit down. He also needs some tea spiked liberally with Correlian brandy. Hells, he just needs some brandy. Grievous is supposedly dead. Someone is teaching Force sensi-

tive clones. Master Pong Krell has Fallen to the Dark side, (and why hadn't *his* men returning from that friendly fire incident on Umbara mentioned *that* little fact in their report?), a Sith has a Jedi son, the war really is a Sith plot, (Dooku had been telling the truth and Obi-Wan hadn't believed it, he could kick himself for being so foolish), the Sith Master is known... it is all too much.

His comm is beeping urgently. He is sure there are several Council members trying to reach him. He is not going to answer. The channel is probably not secure anyway.

Anakin is leaking emotion all over the place in a way he hasn't done since he first came to the Temple. Obi-Wan privately admits he is not very far behind him. He needs brandy and then he needs to apparently sit on Anakin until he calms down.

Maybe he should wake up Padme in her cabin and have her help?

No, no, first, brandy.



CHAPTER 5

In Which Proof of the Sith's Treachery is Confirmed and There is an Exodus of Clones

XLVI.

99 isn't sure what is going on when the 501st arrives at Kamino. Is there another invasion or attack? If there is, he will fight with his brothers to defend them and their home, even if he is injured like last time. He is a soldier!

But then one of the older cadets runs into the barracks and yells that the Jedi is *arresting* Master Ti and the Kaminoans! Brothers rush past 99 as he staggers along behind them as fast as he can go.

He rounds a corner to try and catch up and he is nearly bowled over by armored troopers. 99 looks up and he sees Fives and Echo and there behind them, is that *Flare*? Didn't he just ship out to the 317th Battalion?

99 knows all of his brothers on sight, but he has never seen a brother dressed like Fives! He is wearing his ARC Trooper armor,

but not all of it. He is wearing a blue sleeveless hooded cloak and at his waist is not just a blaster but a *lightsaber*!

"F-Fives!" 99 stammers, out of breath, "What's going on?"

"99, we were looking for you," Fives tells him with a smile.

"You were?" he answers incredulously.

"Yes, come and meet Luke. We told him all about you and he wants to be sure you were there to hear the news."

And so 99 follows them and when he meets Luke surrounded by a sea of troopers and cadets, he doesn't know what to say. Luke offers him a seat, (a seat!) up in front so he can hear and see clearly, then everyone quiets to listen as Luke explains why they are here and what they have discovered.

Upon hearing the news, 99's first concern is the others. He looks around anxiously at his brothers, who look shocked and angry and amazed in turns by what they are hearing, but they are not speaking. Then it dawns on him: they are all looking *to him* to speak to the Jedi because the Jedi asked *for him* to be there personally. "W-what about the Kaminoans and the Republic and the war?" he manages to say.

"The Kaminoans involved in the cloning have been arrested for breaking Republic laws. The war is over and each and every one of you belong to yourselves. You are not property of the Republic or the Kaminoans or the Order or anyone else. Those troopers that want to help with reconstruction, mopping up, and work with Jedi tracking down slavers and criminals as part of the GAR can do so if they choose to. Those that want to do other things, to have other jobs can do so. For those cadets and troopers that want to learn different skills, we will try to give them opportunities to learn what they want to learn just like any other citizen of the Republic. Those clones that are Force sensitive can choose to learn to use their gifts."

"*Force sensitive?!*" the shocked exclamation comes from the back, starting a round of noisy chatter from the cadets.

"Will you let me help you?" Luke asks 99, ignoring the rising clamor of voices.

99 rubs his hands against his maintenance uniform and nods. Luke reaches out and places a gentle hand against his chest, the other by his right temple. 99 stiffens.

"It doesn't hurt," Echo is quick to assure him.

He tries to relax as he feels an unfamiliar tingle go through him. The brothers go quiet around him as Luke uses the Force. When he takes his hands away, 99 looks down at his short legs. He looks the same; he hasn't been magically given a body to match his brothers, but inside he feels... *something*. Something that previously felt twisted and knotted inside him has been smoothed away. He doesn't hurt. His body no longer aches. He feels... *strong*.

He presses his hands against his chest and looks up at the Jedi. "What is it? What did you do?" he wonders aloud. "It feels... *different*, warm."

Luke smiles, blue eyes shining. "It's the Force. You're Force sensitive just like Fives, and Hardcase, Chatterbox, Flare, and Kickback. Just like me and all the other Jedi."

"I *told* you so," Fives said elbowing Echo in the ribs. "Jesse, pay up!" he yells over his shoulder. Jesse groans in the background.

"You mean, you mean, I can – like a *real Jedi*!?" he marvels in disbelief.

Luke laughs now. "Not *like* a real Jedi, *as* a real Jedi. Come on," he says, reaching out to help 99 rise. "The chip is deactivated and the medics will remove it soon, but to help all the clones on the planet we need every Force sensitive we have working to fix the genetic defect. If you're willing, it's time to start your training."

XLVII.

The six youngest brothers who prove to be Force sensitive, 99 gathers to him like chicks under a birds' wing. The ones mature enough to understand quiver with excitement. Loops pipes up suddenly, asking when they can train with lightsabers. Mouse

says he wants a cape, a purple one. Rather than calming them down Hardcase pulls out his two sabers and lets them carefully hold them. They eagerly ask where he got them and Hardcase proceeds to act out for them in gory detail the death and dismemberment of General Grievous, complete with sound effects.

When the little ones start asking Hardcase if they can ignite the lightsabers or if there is time for some practice, Hardcase raises one brow and gestures to 99. "Ask your squad leader, not me."

Eager eyes look up at him pleadingly.

99 looks at Hardcase who just winks back at him. 99 thinks hard and then leans forward and whispers, "I think the training hall on the 4th level is free."

XLVIII.

Luke offers to take 99 with the 501st proper, to continue his training. 99 shakes his head no. His place is with the cadets, helping them like always. They are going to new worlds to be free and *someone* has to look out for them, make sure that squads stay together, that young cadets and older cadets have support and can find their Names and their Way. And then there are the clones still growing in their tubes. Their chips have been deactivated, to be removed once they are born, but someone has stay with them to fix their genetic defect. Someone who can feel the Force has to be there when they are decanted to make sure they know who and what they are and all they can be.

99 can do that. 99 can do that better than anyone.

"I'm a clone solider," tells Luke proudly. "We don't run from tough jobs."

XLIX.

Gin and Mal are grim faced when they bring the news to Luke.

They have sliced through the base code embedded in the chips at long last. Luke and Vader gather up Ahsoka, Rex, Fives, Appo, Chatterbox, Kix, and Hardcase and together they enter the room where Hack Squad has been working. There, on the holoscreen are Orders 1 through 100 written out in glowing letters.

They read them in stunned silence.

Fives starts swearing and doesn't stop for a solid minute. Finally he snarls, "Like we're nothing but droids, fleshy droids! They even have deactivation orders for us. Just say the word and we swallow our own blasters or they wipe us of everything that makes us who we are!"

Appo leans over and braces his hands on his knees, gulping deep breaths of air, trying not to be sick. Kix hovers over him, concerned. "I'm okay, I'm okay," he mutters.

Ahsoka shakes her head in disbelief, hands coming up to cover her mouth in shock. Luke had claimed the chips could be used to control the clones but she'd never imagined the scope of the programming. She hadn't really believed him. "What are we going to do? It's too big. It's too much. These *orders*... Who? Why?"

"There are 2 million of us out in the field, spread all over the galaxy. Commander Tano is right. How are we going to get these *kriffing* chips out of everyone in time before we're triggered?" Hardcase asks.

Vader moves forward to stand over Mal. "Is there any record on site explaining how the Orders can be stopped once triggered?"

"Nothing that we've found, sir, but we'll keep looking."

Vader looks back over towards his son. Without speaking, they both have the same thought. Sidious will keep such information close at hand, sharing it with no one. His need for control so absolutely he and he alone will know the orders, how to trigger them, and most importantly how to stop them. If they want a universal kill switch for the chips they will have to go to Coruscant and take it from him.

If Palpatine finds out what they are doing, he can do much

worse than Order 66.

Luke takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, reaching out to the Force. There are no answers, the future seems balanced on a knife's edge, the path forward razor thin, disaster and darkness on every side.

"Is there any sign that the Kaminoans know what's happening outside of the labs?" Luke asks Gin who is monitoring comms.

"Nothing. Ever since the Separatist attack, they've cordoned off the whole cloning facility from the rest of Tipoca City. Everything's running separate from the rest of the planet for security reasons- power, holonet, comms, security, infrastructure. They don't even know we're here other than to pick up new troopers and other supplies."

"We need to leave as soon as possible, leave no trace that we were here before the rest of the planet realizes what we've done," Luke says, trying to remember the best way to bug out of a base under the Empire's nose from his time with the Rebel Alliance. He has done it enough times, they should be able to do it here. "Those with the Force will heal as many as we can as fast as we can and leave the surgery to be done en route. Sabotage and wipe everything and I mean *everything*. There shouldn't be so much as a boot print proving that we were ever here. We vanish. Commander Appo, get started on arranging transport. Echo, set timer charges. We're sinking the labs as soon as we are clear of the system."

L.

It takes long hours to process the thousands of clones on Kamino (they don't dare bring compromised clones into the fleet now that they know the full scope of the orders embedded in the chips), but what is bothering Ahsoka the most is that Master Ti is *not helping*. She is sitting confined in her quarters with written materials proving what has been done to the clones laid out

before her. She has read the reports. Ahsoka herself has shown her a copy of the chip encrypted orders they found (only for the information to be confiscated by Vader soon after, it being too risky to be floating around where still compromised clones could be triggered). Kix even took time away from medical and transport to meet with her and show her the proof, the danger, and the damage and she is *still* refusing to help and insist the matter must be brought before the Council and the Supreme Chancellor before any action is taken.

Ahsoka has long looked up to Master Ti. While species doesn't matter in the Order, she cannot deny that she feels a level of familiarity and kinship with the older Togruta, wanting to be like her when she is knighted—poised, confident, and strong. To discover that when faced with the truth and people in desperate need she refuses to act without direction from the Council first is hard to swallow.

Ahsoka understands sometimes that the larger mission must come first, (Master Obi-Wan was fond of pointing that out and did so frequently), but she remembers the farmers on Felucia being harassed by that *sleemo* Hondo. Even when Obi-Wan protested that they couldn't stay and help the farmers against the pirates, he still helped with the defenses and with driving the pirates off when push came to shove. He didn't just sit in a corner and meditate while there were people to save and protect right in front of him!

She is disheartened, especially when she sees the look of cool disappointment on Shaak Ti's face, as if *Ahsoka* is the one who is acting improperly. It hurts to see, but then she thinks of her master. *Anakin* would want to help just like he did on Felucia. If he were here, Anakin would be healing the clones as fast as possible. He wouldn't leave the clones compromised. Not only was it a risk to the war effort and the security of the galaxy, it was just plain wrong! Anakin would agree with what she was doing.

She holds onto that thought as the littlest clones, barely walking are shepherded towards her, one by one, to be healed.

LI.

Captain Rex isn't quite sure what they are going to do with all the half trained troopers and teenagers and children and toddlers and babies. There are babies! Baby brothers! He doesn't know anything about taking care of babies! And there are another thousand still growing in cloning tubes not ready to be decanted for another few months. And they are going to grow so slowly! What are they going to do with all of them if they are going to grow up like natural born people? Who will teach them? *What* will they teach them? Where will they go? Who will take care of them? They need to get off planet! They need to secure the lab and—

“Captain Rex, sir?” Fives says stopping him in the midst of his pacing.

“Fives,” Rex responds, coming to a halt. (He hadn't even realized he was doing that!) “Did you need something? Is there a problem with the treatment?” he asks trying to focus.

“No,” Fives says, shaking his head, not able to put into words yet how he knew that he had to come and see his commanding officer. “I just... Sir, we *will* find a way to protect our brothers. We'll find a way to keep them safe together,” he assures him. Fives reaches out and places a hand on the shoulder of his superior officer, a man he has looked up to and tried to emulate. Captain Rex has always been supportive of his men in the face of death and destruction. This time, the Force whispers to him, Fives needs to be strong for Rex. “We have the time and the means to see this through, I'm sure of it.”

Rex has known Fives since he was a shiny on his first big mission. He has watched him advance to being an ARC Trooper and shared many campaigns with him, not the least of which Umbara. He hadn't expected Fives to come into his own so quickly though. For a brief moment, Rex can almost see a future where brothers are generals and admirals and he thinks Fives will be one of the finest ever.

He takes a deep breath and nods, clasping Five's shoulder back. "You're right. We're the best damn army this galaxy has ever seen. We'll find a way."

LII.

Vader has the 501st take command of every hyperspace capable Republic ship present at Kamino. It is still barely enough. They load the growing clones into every spare berth and space they have available to begin their exodus without alerting the rest of the planet.

When Plo Koon arrives through the Rishi Maze, he approaches the system cautiously. He sees General Skywalker's fleet stationed innocently in orbit as if they were just there to pick up a new graduating class of clone troopers. But Master Plo knows better. Something is afoot.

"Commander Wolffe, scan for Commander Tano's comm signature and isolate it so we have a secure channel without alerting the planet," he orders.

It takes several long moments, the encryption more complicated than usual, and then the holo image of Ahsoka flickers into being.

While attachment is forbidden by the Code, Plo cannot deny a feeling of relief to see her well. Her message had contained enough codes to prove she was not being held against her will or writing under duress, but he admits privately to himself he was worried for her. He pushes those feelings aside and tries to focus. It is true? he asks. The control chips, the deliberate genetic tampering? And if it is, can it be fixed?

Ahsoka insists that it is true and then turns to address someone outside of the holocam's view. She tells him that she will join him on his ship and travel with him back to the 104th Battalion with all of the proof she has gathered. She informs him that she has mastered the technique of genetic Force manipulation and

has the medical protocols for the most efficient and least damaging way to go about chip removal. She will teach him and the medical staff everything they need to know.

"I would be most pleased to learn, little 'Soka, but what about the Jedi, Luke and the Sith, Vader?

And Ventress? Are they here? And what about the clones still maturing on the planet and the Kaminoans?"

Ahsoka looks at him, more serious than he has ever seen her. "Master Plo, do you trust me?"

He is taken aback by her question, but the answer is easy nevertheless. "Yes, I do. But this must be investigated immediately. We must find out who compromised the clones and what Master Sifo-Dyas knew and did and why and on who's authority. We must speak with the Kaminoans and find out—"

"No," she cuts him off, eyes wide and anxious. "We have decrypted the programming on the chips. I've seen it. The chips are so much more dangerous than we first believed. Retreat from the system. I will join you with Master Ti as soon as we are done here. *Do not* alert the planetary government or the Council or anyone."

"Ahsoka," he begins.

"Please, Master," she begs. "It's not safe. You don't know what the chips are capable of. Millions may die or worse. Trust me, please."

He has never seen her so shaken; the Force trembles around him. He looked at his men, silently watching him from around the bridge. "We shall do as you ask, Ahsoka. I look forward to seeing you in person soon."

Relief visible on her face she bows, low and formal. "Thank you, Master."

LIII.

Before she leaves Kamino, Ahsoka says goodbye.

Captain Rex walks with her part of the way through the now deserted hallways of the only home he has ever known. There's been a distance between them that there never was before. She knows part of it comes from the horrors he faced on Umbara, horrors that still gripped clones like Dogma tight. She also knows that part of it comes from what she herself has said when Luke first suggested they come to Kamino to free the clones.

As if Force sensitive and somehow reading her mind, Rex stops suddenly and visibly steeling himself, turns to face her. "Commander, I just want you to know that even with a choice, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I'm a solider, and a good one. I'm proud to serve with my brothers and you and the General. I wouldn't leave you and General Skywalker to face this— this war on your own and I know the 501st feels the same. We're ready to stay and fight, no matter what, all the way to the end of the line."

She smiles in bittersweet amazement. Here she is trying to gain enough courage to speak and he beats her to it. She wants to tell him that she is sorry for what she said, but the words stick in her throat. Finally all she can manage to tell him is that, "I will let Master Skywalker know."

"Good," he says, nodding, "good."

Ahsoka has the very un-Jedi like desire to hug him tight. She suddenly feels that it will be some time before she sees him again and she finds herself... *missing* him even with him standing right beside her.

She blames Luke for putting these thoughts into her head. *Him and his heretical ways.*

Unaware of her struggles, Rex plows on. "It's just that... do you think that— I mean, General Ti didn't seem to believe us about the chips and the orders. She... wouldn't help. But, General Koon, General Kenobi, and General Skywalker, you'll talk to them, show them what we found? The 104th and the 212th and all the others, the Jedi will help them, right, sir?"

He asks with such fear in his eyes that Ahsoka feels her heart clench. He is *afraid* of her, of the other Jedi, of what they might

do, what they might undo. Ahsoka wants to reassure him that everything will be fine, but she is just a Padawan. What can she do if the Council decide otherwise like Master Ti?

But then look at what Luke has accomplished with the 501st without the Order. Can she do less having seen what she has seen, learned what she has learned?

Anakin would agree with what she is doing, she reminds herself again, and she can trust her master's judgment.

With determination she meets Rex's gaze and nods. She will fight for them, Ahsoka tells him and she is sure that Anakin will too. Overwhelmed, Rex comes to attention and salutes, wishing her safe travels.

LIV.

Hardcase promises Ahsoka the next time he sees her, he will duel her and beat her so she better watch out! She smirks back and tells him to "bring it on," because she's looking forward to wiping the floor with him.

Fives says "May the Force be with you," with such pride and formality that she cannot help but smile. He is as much a Jedi as she, Ahsoka realizes. It doesn't matter the course of his life or his lack of Temple training. Fives is a Jedi too.

Chatterbox waves her a two fingered salute, which for him is practically gushing and verbose. She jokes back that he should try meditating right side up and save his poor head the blood rushing headache that follows.

Vader gives Shaak Ti's lightsaber into her custody. The troopers traveling with her take Master Ti aboard the shuttle. She turns to Luke and to Vader. She isn't sure what to say. It has only been a handful of weeks, but it feels like a lifetime; she has seen and done *so much*, the galaxy feels fundamentally changed.

"Pass on what you have learned," Luke tells her. "May the Force be with you always."

"I will, and may the Force be with you too." she echoes and then looks toward the dark shadow of the Sith that is always looming over Luke.

Vader's mask is as impenetrable as always, but she can *feel* his eyes on her. He says nothing, but he inclines his head to her in a shocking sign of respect.

She finds herself bowing back.

LV.

Ahsoka gives Master Ti her lightsaber back as their shuttle reaches Master Plo's cruiser. She can feel from the shift in the deck plates that they have already reentered hyperspace as soon as they docked. She breathes a sigh of relief. Master Plo still trusts her. She hurries towards the bridge and wordlessly hands over her datapad, already on and opened to the file detailing the encrypted orders stored on the chip in every compromised clone's brain. Master Ti is fast on her heels.

Master Plo looks down at the list and grows very still.

Ahsoka has spent weeks around Vader and his black burning cold Force sense, but what she senses from Master Plo in these moments while not even close to the same, still causes her mon-trals to tingle in warning.

"Master Koon, I *must* speak with you immediately," Shaak Ti insists. "We must warn the Kaminoans and try and stop the ships before they leave the system. They have planed some sort of sabotage to the cloning labs. The command codes have been compromised. We must contact the Council and bring this matter before them and the Senate as soon as possible. If we don't—"

Plo holds up his hand to stop the flow of words. "We should speak in private, Master," he informs her gravely.

"They cannot do this," Shaak Ti exclaims when they are finally behind closed doors. "We need the clones if we are to win the war. We have no right to make such decisions without input from

the Council and the Senate. *That man is not a Jedi.* He works with *Sith*.”

Plo sits down across from her and taps the datapad with one finger.

“Have you read this?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t change our mandate or our purpose. We cannot afford to be clouded by emotion and attachment. Master Sifo-Dyas ordered the clones and authorized those chips, foreseeing their need in this war. He was known for his gift of foresight. Padawan Tano and those rogue Force users have no authority to simply countermand the will of the Council and Senate and undermine if not destroy the entire war effort.”

“When did the Jedi Order start to care more about obeying orders and winning wars than doing what was fundamentally right? When did we start down that path?” he asks.

Her eyes widen in surprise. “You mean you agree with Padawan Tano?”

“We are guilty of sacrificing innocents for expedience. Better to fight with clones than with soldiers drafted from the Republic’s general population, is that it? Better to win at any cost in the face of our enemy no matter what? It becomes so convenient to wage war in this fashion. The cost is only ever discussed in credits and there is no thought to stopping the bloodshed,” he replies bluntly. “We are now confronted with the truth of our actions and the consequences of them. We have perpetuated slavery, a hallmark of the Sith Empires of long past, and now the very beings we have treated as weapons can with a word be turned against us and every sentient being in the galaxy. The Jedi Order has never been in more danger from enemies outside of itself and from crumbling from within. These chips are an abomination against the Force.”

“But this Luke is not a member of the Jedi Order. His father is Dark, some fallen Jedi Shadow who broke the Code and had a *child* of all things. To put our trust in such beings is folly!”

“That they uncovered this information does not invalidate it

or make it false. Our troops are compromised and they, and the Order and every being in the galaxy is at risk. If for no other reason than that, we must act to remove the chips now and without alerting anyone for the safety of all.”

He stood, taking the datapad with him, locking it securely. “Search your feelings, Master. Consider, and when you are prepared to help us help our troops, you are welcome to join us.”

LVI.

“General Skywalker didn’t send you to Umbara, did he?” Rex asked from the open doorway to Luke’s makeshift workspace off of the bridge of the *Dauntless*. Luke was looking over the records they had pulled from the Kaminoan database and trying to figure out where the younger generations of clones could be safely settled.

Luke started for a moment and then the familiar mask of Jedi impassivity fell over his features. It looked wrong on him, Rex thought. Forced and unpracticed.

“I have the Jedi and GAR codes, Captain. You’ve seen them,” he replied.

Rex came further into the room. “Yes, and I still haven’t figured out *how* you have them, but that doesn’t change the fact that he didn’t send you to take command on Umbara. There was no way General Skywalker could have known what was going on with Krell.”

“The Force brought us to Umbara and General Skywalker *did* send us, in a way. I haven’t lied to you, Captain. It’s just...” he shrugged helplessly, “any more details and you’d think I was insane.”

Rex snorted. “I *already* think you’re insane, sir. Insane commanders are the norm for the 501st.”

“We didn’t come to use you,” Luke said softly, staring down at his one gloved hand.

"*That* I know," Rex said with a nod. "You came here to rescue us."

The Jedi looked up. "If you wish me to step down, my father and I will take a shuttle and leave and you can comm Master Koon and—"

Rex sighed. "Sir, with all due respect, shut up. You have the codes to be in command and unlike our last temporary commander, all you have done since you arrived is to try and protect us and stop the war. There are still well over a million clones fighting and dying out in the galaxy who could be triggered in an instant and become no better than droids. My brothers and I are a threat to you, to the Jedi, and to the Republic. We've been compromised from the beginning just like you said. As an officer in the Grand Army of the Republic and according to every shred of military code and protocol I have drilled into my head, my duty is clear. The 501st remains at your command."

Luke visibly sagged in relief, Jedi mask slipping and gratitude evident in his eyes. "Well, that's good news because I need all the help I can get to figure this out," he said gesturing to the datapads and flimsi littering the workspace.

Rex took a seat opposite him. "Then let's get to work, sir."

"By the way," Luke offered casually. "This doesn't mean I'm giving you any hints for Ventress' betting pool. If you want to risk your credits betting on my father and I, that's up to you, is that understood, Captain?" he asked, eyes shining with mischief.

"Understood," Rex said, fighting to keep a smile off his face.

LVII.

Luke feels it in the Force. Something is wrong with Master Yoda. Their fleet is traveling through hyperspace and quarters are tight as they try and work out where the clones can safely set up new home bases. (And of course, the clones want to set up *bases* as their homes, not towns or villages. They were already

meeting together and planning out defenses and layouts, and debating the best way to secure the perimeter in a variety of different planetary environments). But even with so much work to be done, Luke knows he needs to take a shuttle and go to Master Yoda as soon as he can.

Vader does not want to go see the green troll, nor does he want Luke anywhere near him. He doesn't even know how Luke knows who Yoda is unless... *he's alive?* Yoda's alive in the future and taught Luke the ways of the Force? Luke trained under that—*that goblin* and his fatalistic anti-attachment drive!

Vader thinks back to Luke's training methods with his own clone students. The diminutive Jedi Master had obviously gone entirely senile in old age and he along with the Rebel Alliance, the Princess, that smuggler, and *Kenobi*, were clearly responsible for his son's strange and unorthodox mix of heretical, wacky, but sometimes dogmatic beliefs about the Force.

Vader boils with rage.

Obviously Yoda had perpetuated Obi-Wan's lies about Vader murdering Anakin Skywalker. Thank the Force Luke left his training early before he could be turned into an unfeeling weapon for the Jedi Order's revenge!

Luke does *not* appreciate his father thinking it was a good thing that Vader tortured his friends until Luke came to Bespin and tells him so.

"Son, if you go to him to help him, he will only berate you for feeling attached and sentimental towards him. He will not return your feelings; he is incapable of doing so."

"I don't limit who I care about based on whether they return my feelings, Father. I *am* going. You do not have to see him." There was no question in Luke's mind that his father would be coming with him, but Vader didn't have to meet with Yoda as well. It would probably be safer for everyone involved if Vader stayed on the cruiser nearby.

"I am not letting you meet with him without me," Vader says waving his finger at Luke, reading his son's intent loud and clear.

“He won’t hurt me.”

“He *will*,” Vader insists darkly. “He will consider you a heretic, a child born that should never have existed in the first place. He will see a student trained too old, a danger to him and his precious Order. He will look at you and see nothing good and I won’t have it. He has *no right* to judge!”

The Force hints there may be some truth to what his father says, (the Force whispers that this is an old and hidden wound his father still carries, the cause of which Luke cannot begin to fathom), but for Luke there is still no choice. “He is my teacher,” he says sadly. “I *must* go to him. I promised to return and finish my training.”

“You made no such promise to him in this time!”

Luke shrugs. “It’s not like there is any future to return to anymore. And you said it yourself, I am not a Jedi yet.”

Vader shakes his head. “Son, you are more of a Jedi than any other being I have ever met. And if he does not see it when you meet with him, I will *make* him see it. ”



CHAPTER 6

In Which Vader Plots Murder and Obi-Wan Despairs for his Force Lineage

LVIII.

Vader believed himself to be a remarkably tolerant and patient person for a Sith Lord, especially in the face of time traveling into his past. He'd had lots of practice in developing his patience over the last few years, almost as if the Force was preparing him for this very eventuality. Vader already tolerated the fact that his son was a Rebel traitor, and surrounded himself with unscrupulous friends and criminals. He showed tremendous patience with his son's Jedi leanings without insisting he Fall to the Dark side. He could deal with Luke's soft hearted desire to save innocent people who more often than not were the cause of their own misfortunes. What he could not and would not tolerate was Yoda in his son's life, especially as his Jedi Master!

Obi-Wan was one thing, but Yoda? It was not to be borne!

As they traveled to where Yoda and the 41st Battalion was stationed, Vader contemplated murder. With his illness, Yoda would

be vulnerable. Vader could take him.

The only problem with this course of action was Luke.

His compassionate son would no doubt be deeply upset when Vader murdered Yoda. Vader could admit to himself he didn't want to make his son unhappy. He resolved that he would stay his hand and his blade and refrain from murdering the muppet if, and only if, Yoda kept a civil tongue in his head. One clawed toe out of line, one rude comment to Luke or about Luke who was selflessly saving the entire wretched Order and the rest of the Force forsaken galaxy, and Vader was going to smother Yoda with a pillow, doing the deed up close and personal.

Yoda didn't even deserve death by Force choking.

Smothering was probably too merciful, Vader ruminated darkly, but that would probably be the least traumatic for his son to witness. Maybe he could lock Luke in a closet while killing and spare him the sight?

Luckily for Vader (who really didn't want to upset his son), and Luke, (who probably would not have enjoyed being shoved in a closet nor the death of his teacher), Yoda stayed unconscious for their entire visit and so Vader was able to further demonstrate his enormous capacity for patience and consideration for his fellow sentients by not murdering him.

On the return trip back to the 501st, Vader was much calmer. Luke was happy he helped heal Yoda. Vader didn't have to deal with Luke's disappointed face staring at him sadly (worse than Padme's doe brown, sad eyes and pouty lip, worse even than that!), and they had freed the 41st from enslavement via the chips in their brains.

All in all, a successful mission. He could always kill Yoda later.

LIX.

Yoda woke. He did not expect to, but he did.

He was ready to embrace the Force. He had felt that death was

approaching him, growing ever closer, when suddenly Master Windu left his siege in the Outer Rim to help heal him. He felt the healing strength of the Force pour into him like water poured onto a parched field. It revitalized him with Light unclouded by the Dark side. He sensed warmth and compassion, but he also felt a distant shadow of darkness. That was to be expected when Jedi acted on attachment instead of letting such things go.

Mace healing him was a level attachment he did not expect from his former Padawan. Force healing between Master and Padawan was usually limited to times during training, the Master aiding the student. Yoda did not expect any of his old apprentices still living to travel so far just for him or to still have a strong enough training bond remaining to know that he was in need.

That Mace traveled so far in wartime spoke of fear and a lack of faith in the Force. The war had obviously affected his former Padawan more than he admitted, Yoda considered. He would have to counsel him to meditate and let go of his attachment.

But when Yoda opened his eyes, it was not the medic or Master Windu at his side.

It was Commander Gree.

Gree had experienced a bizarre few days. His General nearly died on him and then another Jedi appeared with a tall dark bodyguard to heal him before the Commander could even figure out who to comm without starting a galactic panic that the Grand Master and High Councilor of the Jedi Order was dying. After healing Yoda, Luke had proceeded to do something with the Force to repair some sort of genetic aging defect all the clones suffered from and then proceeded to advise the medics to remove a bio implant inhibitor chip that none of them had even knew was in their heads. The medics, Pip and Quin, had verified both were real and both were deliberate and could potentially compromise the entire GAR and leave them vulnerable to enemy attack! After clearing the entire battalion, it then turned out Cooker was Force sensitive and the Jedi offered to train him.

Train a clone brother to be a Jedi!

Yoda was now awake and Gree had no idea how to even explain what had happened, but he was a member of the 41st Battalion, the best of the best, so he gave his report without hesitation.

Yoda was flabbergasted, his ears rising to near vertical as he listened to the events of the past few days.

Commander Gree then asked if it was true, if the war was ending and asked if the Jedi knew of the chips in their heads before now.

Yoda shook his head. "Many more important things to deal with first, Commander. Master Windu, I must speak with. Where is he?" Yoda requested, wanting to know how the other Jedi Master could have let this all happen (the rogue Jedi and the Sith had come and gone while he was unconscious!) Obviously there were serious security problems and Padawan Tano wasn't exaggerating when she reported Vader and Luke had access codes and Republic and Jedi intelligence. How could they have such information?

Gree was not happy with being brushed off. He was a good soldier. He had never disobeyed an order. He had given the Republic and his Jedi commanders his all. But the news of the chips and the deliberate defect and now the fact that clones could be Force sensitive was too big of news to ignore.

Usually when he thought such thoughts, Gree heard a voice inside him reminding him that *good soldiers followed orders* but this time, this time, there was no such voice. He could only feel a rising disquiet inside him.

"Master Windu isn't here, General," Gree answered curtly.

"Healed me then, which Jedi? Commanding this base, which Master is?"

"The young Jedi, Luke healed you, sir. He and Vader and the other clone troopers who can use the Force, they healed everyone on the base. There have been no other Jedi here since your collapse, sir."

LX.

Anakin and Obi-Wan don't dare communicate about the substance of Ahsoka's message over any of the regular channels. The only word from the Council on the matter by way of Master Windu is that the report is top secret until the Council can meet in person and verify the truth. Master Windu further directs all Councilors out in the field to *discreetly* begin investigating, disabling, and removing the chips from as many clones as they can, just in case.

Anakin doesn't need to wait for Master Windu to verify the truth for him. He trusts his Padawan and goes to speak to Wort, the 212th's medic as soon as he can.

Anakin also shares Ahsoka's message with Padme and tells her, "Don't tell Obi-Wan I showed you this." Padme promises to keep it a secret and reads the message, eyes growing wider and wider with every word she reads.

Obi-Wan makes sure to pull Padme aside in private later on after he has managed to calm Anakin down somewhat. Obi-Wan lets her read a copy of Ahsoka's message and tells her, "Don't tell anyone I showed this to you."

Padme nods seriously, trying not to smile.

Obi-Wan must sense something though, because he sighs and covers his face with his hands. "Anakin already showed you, didn't he?" he groans.

LXI.

Anakin is tearing apart his starfighter for for what must be the fourth time in the last year alone when Obi-Wan tracks him down. He stands, arms crossed and waits for Anakin to come out from under the fighter.

Obi-Wan waits and waits. Anakin doesn't come out.

Finally losing patience, Obi-Wan crouches down and peers underneath the hull. “Anakin,” he calls.

Anakin remains intent on whatever intricate piece of engineering he is engrossed with.

Obi-Wan sighs; he should have guessed. His former Padawan is deep in his version of meditation, singularly focused on one physical task, blocking everything else out. Obi-Wan supposes he should be happy that Anakin is trying to find his center after his near panic reading Ahsoka’s message, but he needs to talk to Anakin and he knows from long experience that waiting for him to come out of his meditative (near fugue) state on his own may take hours.

He reaches out and nudges Anakin gently in the leg. “Anakin, we need to talk.”

“Hmm?” Anakin manages, concentration never breaking.

“Come back for a few minutes, come on,” Obi-Wan entreats. “I have news of Ahsoka.”

As if being splashed with cold water, Anakin jerks violently and nearly bangs his head against the hull. He blinks rapidly and then contorts his body to see Obi-Wan blocking his light. “Ahsoka?” he asks.

Obi-Wan holds out his hand to help Anakin roll out from under his ship. Anakin sits up and rubs a grease stained hand through his hair, heedless of the mess and disorder he is causing. “Ahsoka?” he says again. Obi-Wan tsked under his breath and reaches out to stop Anakin from going further and smearing oil all over his face in his still half-dazed state. He has never seen another Jedi lose themselves so completely and deeply in the Force as he has his former Padawan, not even Master Yoda, but after so many years together, he knows how to bring Anakin around.

“We have word from Master Koon and the 104th. He has her and evidence to support her report. He will be meeting with us soon.”

Anakin takes several deep breaths and nods. “She’s safe. Good, good.” He looks up sharply. “What about my men? What about

the 501st?"

"We've had no word. Master Plo's message was light on details for security reasons. And speaking of security, two things. First, I thought Master Windu made it *very clear* that Ahsoka's message wasn't to be shared with anyone—"

"I didn't share it!" Anakin denies hotly. Obi-Wan gives him a Look at his obvious falsehood. "And even if I did, so did you, don't deny it!" he snaps back mulishly. "Besides, Senator Amidala is the one who told us about the rogue Jedi and the Sith in the first place. She can keep a secret."

Caught out, Obi-Wan decides to let that point lie, "—and second, we've talked about this, Anakin. If you intend to engage in Force focus meditation, the main docking bay is not a safe place to do so. You go too deep," he scolds gently. "You should meditate in quarters."

"It's not the same without something for my hands to do," Anakin mutters the familiar complaint, "And as a courtesy to your *delicate sensibilities*, I've not brought any of my projects into your room since you've been generous enough to share."

Obi-Wan shakes his head in fond exasperation. "Always ready with an excuse," he says in a *sotto* voice, rising to his feet. Anakin hauls himself up as well and sways suddenly, causing his former Master to grab hold of him in alarm.

"Anakin?" he asks worriedly.

"I'm fine," Anakin insists, waving him away, but Obi-Wan refuses to go far.

"How much sleep have you gotten recently?"

"I don't know. How many stims have you taken this week?" Anakin counters snarikly, but it doesn't cover how weary he sounds.

Obi-Wan doesn't bother to answer. Anakin can guess since he has probably taken more than a few himself. Even with the frantic pace of the war slowing, it has been over two long years and there are still battles to be fought and systems to liberate. The days and weeks have begun to blur together. "We have several

hours until the 104th arrives. I think some rack time will do us both some good.”

LXII.

When Anakin finally meets up with his Padawan, he does everything he can to make sure that he speaks with her privately first while Obi-Wan is busy. Obi-Wan very much looks like he wants to be involved in the conversation, but Plo claims his attention and Anakin uses the time to pull Ahsoka aside.

Ahsoka tries to summarize the last few weeks to her Master and finds that when she says everything aloud it sounds beyond belief. She is almost glad that Master Obi-Wan and Master Plo are not there so she can speak freely. Ahsoka’s Master is many things, but Code bound is not one of them. He may teach her the Code, parrot the same words that Obi-Wan frequently must remind Anakin of, but she is not so blind that she doesn’t realize that Anakin’s teaching style is very much “do as I say, not as I do” when it comes to Order doctrine.

(She knows this is not because Anakin expects her to be held to a different standard than himself. No, it’s because he is trying to ensure she does not struggle with her place in the Order as Anakin visibly struggles. She is well aware that the Council is always watching her Master, following his every move and criticizing his every choice in a way they don’t for any other Jedi in the Order that she knows of. Ahsoka still doesn’t know why her Master is singled out for this type of treatment, but there are rumors. Even before she was assigned to be his Padawan, she had heard the rumors about him. Now after nearly two years together while there is much she does not know of his past, she does know he is trying to protect her from censure and harm. Instead of feeling frustrated that her Master does not trust her as she usually would, she suddenly views the situation in a new light. He protects her not because he thinks she cannot do for herself, but

because cares (*love, it's love* something whispers), and is trying to show it as best he can.)

Anakin listens carefully to her story and then asks what are for Anakin the most important questions: Is she all right? Are Rex and the men all right? Is the war really going to end? Ahsoka's answer is yes to all three questions and then she asks the question that Rex needed her to ask:

"Will you help them, Master?"

Just as she knew he would, he responds without pause or hesitation.

"Of course, Padawan. You just need to show me how."

LXIII.

Ahsoka takes Anakin's hands in hers and leads him to place one of them over Commander Cody's heart and the other to Cody's right temple. She reaches out through the Force and twines her Force sense first with her Master and then guides him to the snarl, the tangled knot of Cody's genetics and the connections between the implanted chip and the organic tissue. She shows Anakin how to ever so gently tug at the tangle and smooth it down with careful strokes. The mechanic in Anakin quickly grasps how to disconnect the chip from the surrounding tissue, making it easier for surgical removal without damage. Anakin opens his eyes and inhales sharply.

"See?" Ahsoka asks. Anakin nods. Obi-Wan watches intently, hand coming up to stroke his beard, deep in thought.

Anakin looks to Cody. "How does it feel, Commander? Any pain?"

Cody shakes his head. "No sir. All good." He then steps over to be checked over by Wort and the rest of the medical staff.

"Want to try again?" she asks Anakin. "It takes a few times to get a feel for it."

Plo agrees they should try it again. Ahsoka worked through

nearly a quarter of the 104th before Plo had grasped the technique. She now guides Anakin through the process with Boil, Crys, Wooley, and then with Waxer. Anakin stops after healing Waxer. That had felt different.

"You feel it too, huh?" Ahsoka is grinning. "He's Force sensitive."

"*What?!*" Anakin, Waxer, Boil, Obi-Wan, and the a good section of the rest of the 212th present and listening in all exclaim at the same time.

"You're Force sensitive. If you want, we can start training you to use the Force just like Boost and Vir of the 104th," Ahsoka says cheerfully, like she is not just suggesting a total departure from Order doctrine. "The more Jedi we have trained, the faster we can help heal and free the troopers."

Anakin starts to grin as his mind fills with the possibilities.

"Now wait just a minute!" Obi-Wan says, looking a bit panicky between her and Plo. "They are too old. We don't have the authority to make such a decision."

"Too old?" Anakin scoffs. "Waxer, how old are you?"

Waxer blinks and manages, "A-almost five years, sir."

"That's the perfect age to start training to be a Jedi. I started when I was much older," Anakin confides to Waxer, "And I turned out just fine."

"*Anakin!*" Obi-Wan scolds in frantic exasperation. "You—"

"I did! I did turn out just fine," Anakin shoots back.

"I would say better than fine, Skyguy," Ahsoka chimes in playfully.

Anakin points to Ahsoka. "There! See? *Better* than fine. More like awesome. Waxer will be too, a credit to his teachers."

"Anakin, enough! Master Plo," Obi-Wan turns to his fellow councilor, looking for an ally in the face of Anakin and Ahsoka's familiar unorthodox madness. "Remedying the fact that our troopers are compromised is one thing, but training Force sensitives who were never raised in the Temple is quite another. We cannot simply make this decision on our own."

"We cannot risk discussing this over normal channels with the Council," Plo counters. "Besides, Anakin and Ahsoka have a fair point. They are the perfect age to begin training and the more trained clones we have the faster we can heal the troopers, save their lives, and prevent them from being used for evil. I am not gifted in foresight as some Jedi Masters are, but I believe that this is the right path."

"General Kenobi?" Waxer interrupts carefully. "I would like the chance. I won't let you down, sir."

"Waxer, that is not the point..." Obi-Wan begins, but trails off when he sees the look of profound disappointment and hurt on Waxer's face, quickly masked, but not quickly enough. Boil doesn't bother to hide the anger growing in his eyes as he glares daggers at Obi-Wan.

"A Jedi must have the deepest commitment," Anakin says quietly, no longer teasing. "It is a hard life. I think... I think out of all the beings in the galaxy, no one is more prepared to make that commitment and serve with honor than a clone trooper of the GAR. Do you doubt Waxer? Do you doubt any of our men?"

"No!" Obi-Wan says quickly and Waxer and the other troopers listening in brighten visibly. He sighs. "No. I see I am outnumbered and out argued," he concedes ruefully. "Commander Cody?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Make arrangements to the training schedule so that all Force sensitive members of the 212th and the 104th have sufficient time to train with one of us as long as the fleets travel together."

"Yes, sir!"

LXIV.

With careful sliced messages and comms, the 501st manages to find several potential resettlement worlds for the clone cadets and their brother guardians. Negotiations have been intricate

and tense even with the willingness of reconstruction worlds and the League of Neutral Systems to recognize the sentience and legal rights of the clones.

There is just one problem, they need a place to store the still maturing clones, one thousand in total, still in incubators. Many planetary systems have outlawed cloning which further complicates things. They also need a place that does not have the potential to be an active war zone if things flare up between the Separatists and the Republic despite their best efforts. Vader meets privately with Luke and they consider system after system based on Vader's knowledge of the Clone Wars, as altered by the very fact that Luke and Vader have been actively changing the course of history. After careful consideration and much debate and discussion, the decision is made.

They will beg the aid of Mandalore itself.

LXV.

It turns out there are three troopers from the 212th that are Force sensitive- Waxer, Shocks, and one of the bridge officers, Ollie. When Ahsoka is in charge of training she decides to mimic Luke and has them jump running around the ship or whatever planet they are on while she randomly tries to attack them.

("Where did you learn *that* training technique?" Anakin asks incredulously after watching her use the Force to throw things at the dodging clones who are darting around the docking bay, jump running over stairs and railings.

Sithspit! Ahsoka thinks frantically for a convincing story, but seeing her Master's raised brow answers truthfully. "This is how Luke trains his students."

"*Really?*" he asks, drawing out the word. His mind is alight with new ways to train his Padawan. She can practically see it in his eyes. Ahsoka groans internally. "And what else did this rogue Jedi teach you?"

“He didn’t teach me anything, Master,” she says, all innocence. “I just observed so I could report his methods to the Council.”

“All right then, what else did you *observe* of his training methods and techniques?” Anakin demands crossing his arms over his chest, not fooled by her big eyes for an instant.

She hangs her head and resigns herself to sneak lightsaber attacks from her Master in the near future. She totally blames Luke for this.)

When it is Anakin’s turn to lead the clones in Force training, he has Ahsoka loan out her sabers and sometimes manages to steal Obi-Wan’s and takes them through basic stances and techniques best for the combat clones face every day.

When it is Obi-Wan’s scheduled turn, he generally finds a way to avoid the duty, passing it on to Ahsoka, but when Anakin starts stealing his lightsaber, Obi-Wan is forced to join in if he wants his saber back.

Obi-Wan decides that the best contribution he can bring to the clones’ training is to impart Jedi philosophy to the clones. They listen quietly while he takes them through the Code and doctrine and the rules and principles of being a Jedi. They listen too quietly. He looks over his shoulder and catches out of the corner of his eye Anakin’s look of utter over-dramatized boredom while Ahsoka desperately tries not to laugh at her Master’s face. “Do you mind?” He snaps at them.

“Yes, yes I do mind!” Anakin retorts. “This is sparring time. We may see combat any day now when we make planetfall. We need to focus on what is important.”

“This is important, Anakin. Any being who wishes to be part of the Order must learn and abide by the rules.”

“Who says they are going to be part of the Order?” Ahsoka asks quietly cutting off the brewing argument sharply. Both men turn to regard her in surprise.

“They are training to be Jedi at *your* insistence, Padawan,” Obi-Wan reminds her.

“Training to be Jedi, yes. But they are not part of the Order.

They have their own family, they have their brothers. That's not going to change so all they really need to know is this," she says counting each lesson off on her hand as she goes. "The Force is a Jedi's strongest weapon and steadfast ally; your lightsaber is not your life, it's just a very useful tool; the best way to tell the Light side from the Dark side is to stop, take a breath, and let yourself be calm and at peace; and last but not least, a Jedi's highest priority is to protect and defend the innocent and the most vulnerable from suffering and death under any and all circumstances, no matter what anyone else says." Seeing the stunned look on the Masters' faces, she realizes what she has just said and hurriedly adds, "Well, that's what *Luke* said."

Anakin looks at her with bewildered, but visible pride. His Padawan is growing into his kind of Jedi. He is almost looking forward to meeting this Luke with his crash course on how to be a Jedi, now that both Padme and Ahsoka have vouched for him, (even though he has made off with his men and his ships, the thief!)

"Well said, Padawan." Anakin turns to the clones who are listening much more intently. "Remember *that*. That's what is really important."

Obi-Wan inwardly groans. First his Master and then his Padawan and now his Grand Padawan. His lineage seems doomed to produce one maverick Jedi after another. Somehow he just knows he is going to end up spending the rest of his life running interference between Anakin and Ahsoka and the Council.

LXVI.

Barriss Offee is a Padawan on the edge of knighthood. Her Master has recommended her for the trials, but for now she is on the battlefield. When she is not fighting and watching troops and civilians die in a war that doesn't seem to end, she is in triage, healing as much as she can. Her Master instructs her to finish es-

corting the injured to a medical facility and then to travel to Coruscant for her final trials. If she passes, she will be knighted and will be assigned her own battalion and return to the front lines.

It is while she on the transport to one of the medical facilities for clone troopers that she first hears the rumors being whispered about. *The war is over, they say. Jedi are working with reformed Sith to stop the war. Grievous is dead and Dooku has vanished. Troopers that were once enslaved are free. Kamino has gone silent; the cadets have vanished. There are no more new troopers.*

When she arrives at the medical base, her patients are whisked away and the commander of the base, a clone medic named Patch, seems unusually cautious around her. She asks to speak to the Kaminoan doctor and finds that he is not present. She demands to know what is going on and Commander Patch relents and explains everything in a torrent of words.

When he is done with his explanation, Barriss asks him to bring her all the files, the medical charts, the samples taken, even the security holo recordings of surgery and the Force techniques he describes. He and his staff hurry to do so. Before she can finish reviewing the records in detail, a trooper comes in to tell her that Master Unduli has commed and Barriss is to contact her immediately and explain why she has been delayed. She looks up and realizes she is hours overdue.

Patch and the others are silent, watchful and tense as they wait for her answer. She gives the trooper her gratitude for passing on the message and then asks Patch to provide her the more detailed medical scans and the genetic profile of the clones so she can begin to figure out how to use the Force to heal the problem, to mend another living being at the genetic level. He lets out an explosive sigh of relief and eagerly complies. While they have been able to remove the chip from all the clones passing through the station, without a Jedi, the genetic fix was proving more challenging.

A month later, while Barriss Offee is using her commandeered transport and a crew of troopers and medics to travel a rotating

circuit from medical station to medical station healing clones, her name is placed on the Missing in Action list at the Jedi Temple.

LXVII.

When Vader and Luke spend some time stargazing late into the night, they don't typically talk about their former present (now lost future). But on one night when the sky was particularly clear, Luke could make out Tatoo I and II in the sky and felt a twinge of depression. Vader, his Force sense wrapped tightly around his son more often than not, noticed the sudden shift in Luke feelings and asked what was the matter. Luke sighed and flopped back onto the grass.

"I was thinking about how before we came back to this time, we had just rescued Han from Jabba and now that we're in the past he's still alive!" Luke complained.

It took a moment for Vader to parse out Luke's meaning but once he did he exclaimed, "Jabba is dead?"

"Uh-huh. We blew up his sail barge with him and his cronies onboard and fed the rest of his men to the Sarlacc. I made sure that the slaves back at his palace were in touch with the Underground so I'm sure they managed to get out. But I just realized that I am going to have to do it all over again."

Vader's vocoder didn't translate laughter very well but Luke got the idea. "What's so funny?" he asked his father.

"I don't see any problem with having a chance to kill Jabba twice. We should make plans to do it soon. I am sure some of the troopers would be happy to help us."

"I didn't think of that," Luke said propping himself up on his elbows. "Leia strangled him to death last time with a chain. I didn't get to see it though."

Vader found himself in the strange position of envying the Princess of Alderaan. He almost wished she was here so he could

congratulate her personally even if that meant she'd try to kill him on sight as was her wont. "A fitting end," he praised, remembering the old Tatooine slave legends and folklore with something other than bitterness for once, "but I am sure we can plan something even better for the Hutt. How did you manage it last time? His palace is a fortress."

Luke told the tale of how his rebel friends and his droids snuck in as best they could to rescue the spice smuggler Solo. "Then I showed up, forced Jabba to grant me an audience by choking his guards and mind tricking his major domo. I demanded he free my friends. When that didn't work, I used the Force to pull a blaster from a nearby holster to shoot him."

"Why not use your lightsaber?" Vader asked, thoroughly engrossed in the story Luke was telling.

"I didn't have it with me."

"You entered his palace *unarmed*?!" Vader yelled, standing up suddenly.

"The place was full of weapons. I had the Force," Luke argued, a bit surprised in the face of his father's unexpected anger.

"That was insanely risky, young one! We are *not* doing that again when we go to Tatooine. What happened next? You obviously did not manage to shoot him in his palace."

"No, he dropped me into his death pit and tried to feed me to his pet rancor. Did you know he has a trap door right in front of his throne slab? *That* was a surprise. When that didn't work he ordered our execution and threw me into the Sarlacc pit."

If it wasn't for his respiration being managed by cybernetics, Vader was certain that his heart and lungs would have seized. As it was, he wheezed and coughed. "You— He—"

Luke sat up and reached out a hand to Vader, worried. "Father, we won," he reminded him quickly. "He's dead." Luke scowled, remembering. "He *was* dead. He's alive now, but he will be dead again very soon. Let's go back to base and we can work on a plan."

"I will work on the plan to kill him, young one," Vader man-

aged at last. “You are not allowed to plan *anything*.”

“It worked though,” Luke muttered getting to his feet and following after his father. “The six of us managed *just fine* to rescue Han and take him down. I don’t see why I can’t help plan.”

“No, son. Just... no.”



CHAPTER 7

In Which Luke Plays Matchmaker and Padme Shares Some Important News with Anakin

LXVIII.

The meeting with the Duchess of Mandalore was going better than Luke expected. From all his father had told him about her and his own conversations with her, he was prepared for a knock down drag out philosophical fight at the very suggestion that any clones would reside on her planet. But upon meeting him and 99 on Mandalore and hearing of their need to find a place to house the incubators filled with still maturing clone babies so they could live free lives and not a life of military servitude, Satine Kryze saw an opportunity to further the cause of peace. She would not allow the cadets or the troopers a home base in her system, (they were trained as soldiers and knew nothing else), but housing the cloning tubes containing a batch unborn brothers, that she could agree to. She even warmly suggested that some of her people would be happy to adopt the babies into

loving families once they were decanted.

“Begging your pardon, Duchess, but the little ones already have a family that loves them. We brothers will raise them. They are ours to take care of,” 99 said earnestly.

The Duchess nodded in understanding. “Very well, we will arrange a safe place for the incubators and you, 99 may stay along with a team of your brothers willing to serve as caretakers and guardians only. But choose your guardians carefully; Mandalore will not have soldiers occupying its lands for any reason.”

99 fidgeted and looked anxiously at Luke who smiled encouragingly and gestured for him to answer. “We’re all soldiers, ma’am. We don’t know anything else. That’s what we’re bred for. I know I don’t look like much,” he said with a self deprecating shrug, “but I’m a soldier too. I don’t want to mislead you. I’ll fight to defend my brothers if need be, so- so if that’s a problem with us staying here, then I-it’s better we talk about it now.”

Satine sat back and thought seriously about his words for a long moment. “I don’t doubt your willingness to defend your brothers, but Mandalore has fought long and hard to find peace. Warriors and their ways are not welcome here,” she declared firmly. 99 seemed to visibly shrink at her words. “However,” she continued, her tone softening, “Pacifism does *not* mean we are without defenses despite what *some* people may think. You have been honest with us and integrity counts for much among our people. If you and your fellow caretakers pledge to defend using only the tools and non lethal weapons we provide you with and no others, and you chose among your number those who have not seen battle in the wars, Mandalore will welcome your presence.”

99 brightened and nodded in agreement. “Understood, ma’am.”

“Then we have an accord,” the Duchess proclaimed with a smile. “I hope that both of you will join me for lunch as honored guests of peace. I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss your reconstruction efforts and your future plans for the GAR in

peacetime in more detail.”

“We would be most happy to do so, Duchess” Luke replied, accepting with a bow which 99 was quick to mimic.

To say the Duchess was pleased would be an understatement. She enjoyed working with this particular Jedi. Luke was more than just verbally committed to peace, he acted upon it. While he was not a pacifist, he insisted on ending the war as soon as possible regardless of what the Senate authorized. “Wonderful,” she said, rising to her feet. “It is a refreshing change,” she remarked, arching one brow, “to enjoy a visit from Jedi that does not begin or end with violence. I hope this will be the new norm for all your future visits to our planet.”

LXIX.

Several hours later, when Duchess Satine found herself dangling precariously from a roof in an effort to escape assassination, she realized she had spoken too soon.

Why is it that every time Jedi are around I end up nearly dying? she silently fumed as she struggled to keep her grip.

She couldn't see, but the Duchess could still hear the sounds of fighting on the roof and—and *was that a lighstaber?* Was he using a *lightsaber* to dispatch those off world assassins masquerading as Death Watch? She gritted her teeth. He had brought his lightsaber to her planet! How *dare* he? When Satine got back up there she was going to— to— to do *something* to him! This was so typical! He fought while she dangled! Well, she was just going to rescue *herself* and then give him such a piece of her mind!

He reached out and aided by the Force, lifted Satine back onto the roof. As soon as she was up and standing safe, without another thought she let her hand fly and struck him with a resounding slap to the face.

“OBI-WAN KENOBI! HOW *DARE* YOU SMUGGLE YOUR WEAPON ONTO—”

Luke stared back at her, cheek red, blinking in shock in the face of her violent assault.

"Oh, *kriffing hell!*" she gasped before she could stop herself. She covered her mouth with both her hands, absolutely mortified.

Luke reached up with one hand to gently and gingerly investigate his cheek where she had struck him.

"I must apologize," she said hurriedly. "Luke, I am so sorry! I thought, I mean, I heard..." Her hands fluttered, reaching out for him and then pulling back and then reaching out again.

Luke couldn't help himself, he started to laugh.

"It's not funny," she said indignantly. "It's not funny! You— you brought a lightsaber onto—!"

Even doubled over with laughter, Luke still managed to raise his weapon to her eyes. It was stun staff, heavily modified, but the noise it made when activated sounded suspiciously like a lightsaber.

Satine opened and closed her mouth. "I— I—," she finally sputtered. She didn't know what to say, her face flushed pink with embarrassment.

Luke waved his hand weakly as he struggled to catch his breath. "Don't— don't worry Duchess. I consider it a high compliment to be mistaken for Obi-Wan Kenobi. I've known him since I was small."

"I struck you," she said. "Are you hurt? I—"

"No, no, I'm fine," Luke assured her with a smile as he sat down on the roof ledge. "So tell me, do your meetings with Obi-Wan frequently end in danger and near death?" he inquired with mock seriousness.

"Not frequently, always," she moaned, sitting down next to him heavily. "For a man of peace he seems bound and determined to fight and kill his way through any and every situation. All conflicts are solved through brute force. And they call him the Negotiator! He is the most violent alleged peace keeper I have ever met. Do you know that the last time he was here, he—"

Luke couldn't help it, he started laughing again.

"Now *really!*" Satine said, miffed. "This is hardly a laughing matter. You don't know how he is!"

"Oh, I know a little," Luke replied. "He's secretive—"

"Yes!" she agreed in visible relief that he saw what she saw, "Yes, *exactly.*"

"—always twisting things, never telling you the whole truth—"

"Never!"

"But he also used to secretly buy me used skyhopper parts," Luke confided to her, remembering the past with obvious affection. "And when I would get into trouble with the Hutt goons, he would bail me out with me never the wiser. He made friends with all the large animals he could find. He even named them! He was the first person to teach me about the Force and to tell me something about my father, though it wasn't the whole truth." Luke looked down at his one gloved hand. "I've been angry with him," he admitted softly. "He kept things from me, but... he also sacrificed what little he had to keep me safe and alive."

"Then *why* doesn't he realize that what he is doing is wrong?" she asked him urgently, hands gesturing for emphasis as she spoke. "Why is he fighting in this horrible pointless war? Why can't he see what it is doing to him and to his Order? Why won't he stop and see there are other choices?"

"I think he will," Luke countered gently. "I think once he knows there are other choices, he will stop fighting. The war is coming to an end, thanks in large part to you. When this is all over, I think many things will be different, including him."

Satine snorted. "It will take a miracle," she declared dismissively, standing and brushing the dust off her clothes.

We've already had a miracle, Luke wanted to say, but instead all he said as he rose and offered her his arm was "Have hope, Duchess."

LXX.

Upon learning she was pregnant, Padme had been half scared, half joyous. She knew that Anakin would be thrilled. (She hoped that having a baby would actually prevent him from adopting the entire 501st when the war stopped. It was a small hope, but it existed. And the war was stopping. It was only a matter of time now.

Satine kept her updated on Luke's work with the League of Neutral Systems. She and other Loyalist Senators were tireless in continuing the call for peace and they were finally making progress. Even as the Republic continued to drown in debt and austerity measures were being passed left and right, somehow, more and more systems previously under constant siege and civil war were now laying down arms. In exchange, those systems were receiving free trade, reconstruction funds, and support from the League. Padme now had an excuse to travel from system to system with her husband and Obi-Wan, investigating League relief efforts under the guise of hunting down information on Vader and Luke for the Supreme Chancellor.)

Anakin had held her with such care when she told him the news, and then in typical Anakin fashion began to worry. Had she seen a medic? Weren't there certain foods that expectant mothers should be eating or not be eating? Vitamins! Was she getting vitamins? What about hydration?

Padme had stopped him with a laugh and said she would muddle through and reminded him it would still be months before the birth.

That wasn't good enough for Anakin. People died in childbirth, he insisted, which made Padme smile because it was such a Outer Rim thing to say. This was the Republic after all. Next Anakin would be suggesting superstitions to ensure the baby was born healthy!

He asked if he should get Wort, the 212th medic, to look her over now. Maybe he could invent a reason for her to go on board

the *Twilight* after he reprogrammed the medic droid for prenatal and maternity care.

She reminded him that he could hardly just take her to receive treatment if they planned to keep it a secret, especially on Obi-Wan's flagship, the *Negotiator*. Padme then asked if he wanted to talk about what they were going to do once the baby was born. But Anakin brushed aside all thoughts about what their future might hold. He would not budge on the issue of a check up. She wasn't sure why her health was such a concern to him, but she relented. Happily, he insisted that she leave it to him to get her the discrete and appropriate care she needed.

What followed in the coming months were a series of haphazard and clandestine arrangements that had Padme treated by reputable medics of a variety of species in very shabby clinics set up in makeshift camps or poor neighborhoods on a half a dozen different worlds. Anakin would stride into the clinics to join her for as many of the appointments as he could (less and less as time went on). He often came right off the battlefield with remaining Separatist forces or pirates or whomever the Jedi Generals were fighting that day. Even when he couldn't make it to many appointments in her second trimester, he still somehow managed to arrange for her care. All she had to do was show the japor snippet he had given her all those years ago, and she was treated without question. How her husband had found discrete medical care through a network of seemingly random doctors across the galaxy that all recognized a Tatooine symbol, Padme couldn't fathom, but somehow he had. It must be a Jedi thing, she finally concluded.

When he could make her prenatal appointments, Anakin brought a datapad with him and took notes. He watched and listened with laser focus as they discovered that it was not one baby, but two, that Padme needed more folic acid in her diet, that they were having a boy and a girl, that Padme needed to get more rest, and other various suggestions of how to handle the birth and parenthood.

Padme wasn't *quite* sure that Anakin truly understood that the Mon Calamari medic's advice on water pressure on newborn babies' lungs wasn't really applicable for their species. And she worried her husband didn't realize that it wasn't *actually* necessary to invest in broad spectrum light fixtures above the crib as the Sullustan medic suggested. Anakin simply patted her hand gently when she tried to tell him so and continued to take notes. She did find the Wookie suggestion of a baby sling useful, though (even if she didn't plan to hang the babies from any tree branches). Anakin had already gifted her with several slings made out of beautiful patterned fabrics. She found his care and attention adorable but also exasperating. Didn't he realize that women had babies every day on Naboo and Coruscant without any trouble at all?

What was he so worried about?

LXXI.

Lying in her bunk during ship's night, staring into the darkness of her small quarters, Ahsoka was unable to sleep. There was only one person to blame for her insomnia: Luke. It was *his* fault that she couldn't sleep and her thoughts were whirling about making it impossible for her to rest.

The problem was that ever since she had returned from her sojourn with the 501st, she just couldn't stop *seeing* things and it was driving her crazy (and no, she didn't mean *seeing* things, seeing things). She was noticing things that she never noticed before. Things that previously seemed unremarkable about day to day life now seemed strange or odd and it was all his fault.

For example, she had gone looking for a spot to meditate on the *Negotiator* and had no problem finding a quiet space. She settled down to center herself and then her eyes popped open. They were still hours away from their destination. There was unlikely to be much of a battle when they arrived since they were

escorting Senator Amidala to speak with local governments engaged in reconstruction, (and to unofficially to meet up with as many clone units scattered throughout the Outer and Mid Rim as they could).

So, where *was* everybody?

Why weren't the men playing games or holding contests or arguing about how to cook rare fruit (those blum fruit thumbprint cookies had been divine, who knew clones could bake?) Why weren't they even spending time practicing the tsungi horn, she thought with no small amount of dread?

She sprang to her feet and spent the rest of the afternoon spying on what the troops were up to. Ahsoka found them checking inventory and weapons and listening to the radio. A few were playing card games quietly, not wagering anything because they didn't really *have* anything to bet with. In the mess hall, they sat and ate their standard field rations with a low hum of conversation. Why weren't they doing anything for fun?

Ahsoka shook herself. Fun wasn't important. They were an army. Like their Jedi commanders, the clones knew the importance of focus and accepted the fact that they didn't need material things. (Her mind unhelpfully reminded her of the model ship and posters she recalled once seeing through a open door in her Master's quarters; she still couldn't believe Master Kenobi let Anakin have those things).

Ahsoka forced herself to stop spying and turn around. She marched back to her meditation spot and sat, but she couldn't forget what she had seen.

The strangeness didn't stop there, though.

Ahsoka was used to Anakin and Obi-Wan bickering. It was part and parcel of her day, to see them snap and tease at each other. It was just... now she felt something was *missing* from their interactions. They would needle each other, knowing all the points where the other was vulnerable. She could hear the fondness underlying the complaints. She could feel in the Force how closely they were tied to each other, relied upon each other.

But when they were done arguing, that was it. There was nothing else and Ahsoka couldn't stop feeling that *something* was missing between them.

She kept watching them, and then she suddenly thought back to Luke and Vader. They would tease and argue, but afterwards they would go out flying together or tinker on a project together, connecting with each other as father and son.

That was what her mind kept expecting to see between Anakin and Obi-Wan, she realized. That was what felt off. She was expecting them to act like—like *family* when, of course, they weren't family. The Order itself was family and the only one any Jedi needed. Her Master and Master Obi-Wan certainly knew that! What Luke and Vader had was against the Code and dangerous, she reminded herself sternly.

But that didn't stop her from feeling a deep well of regret seeing the distance Anakin and Obi-Wan deliberately kept between each other.

It got worse.

When Master Plo left with Master Ti and the 104th to support Master Windu, all Ahsoka could think about was how much she wanted to hug him and thank him profusely for all he had done. He had trusted her, believed in her, and it meant everything to her. She had hugged him before, after saving him from the *Malevolence's* ion cannon and buzz droids, but she was younger then, still green. Now, she offered him a respectful bow, but it just wasn't the same. He was the first Jedi she had ever met and a bow seemed a poor substitute for her regard and affection for him. For one wild moment she wished she could be as daring as Hardcase was when, for a bet, he grabbed Ventress in a hug before she headed off to Separatist space. She had squawked in dismay and eeled herself out of his grip, but she hadn't killed him, (she had just demanded sixty percent of his winnings).

Then there was *whatever* was going on between Senator Amidala, her Master, and Obi-Wan.

When she spent time with Senator Amidala (who Master Ke-

nobi had told her in no uncertain terms was *not* to be told about anything to do with the clones or her report or Kamino or Luke or Vader- he said this to her while glaring pointedly at Anakin), she could *swear* the woman was glowing and seemed to light up even brighter whenever her Master came into the same room.

Now Skyguy was total dork when he tried to flirt on a mission (as Ahsoka knew from painful experience), and of course he wasn't flirting with the Senator but... but he was strangely *dotting* on her for them being just friends. He would bring her pillows and cups of herbal non-caffeinated tea (a fact he announced loudly every time he delivered her a cup), and then he would stand there, watching her sip her tea, and leak *happiness* into the Force. Then he would leave just as suddenly as he arrived.

Then, as if drawn by some unexplained disturbance, Master Kenobi would inexorably stick his head into Padme's office and peer at both of them inscrutably, as if expecting to find something quite different than what he saw them doing. He always left grumpy for some reason. Ahsoka just couldn't figure it out but she couldn't ignore it either as she would have in the past. Now the memories circled in her mind, refusing to let her sleep.

When they met with a compromised clone unit or another battalion, Master Kenobi would meet with their Jedi commanders. Meanwhile, she and Anakin would confer with their medic (if they had one), and start healing the troopers. Ahsoka hadn't paid too much attention to it before, but now she saw how much Anakin enjoyed talking and spending time with the men. She had thought it was just the 501st that he was so familiar and personable with since they worked together. But no, she realized, even with clone troopers he had never met, her Master would ask their Names and joke with them and just be at ease around them in a way that she had never noticed before. She's never seen him act that way with other Jedi from the Temple.

It was maddening! She couldn't stop seeing strange things that before she considered so ordinary and normal. Ahsoka wasn't

even sure what she was supposed to do about any of this... this... *stuff!* Should she say something? To who? What *could* she say? She couldn't admit to these thoughts and-and feelings, whatever they were! (*Attachment, it's attachment*, something whispered nervously inside her). She would just be told to meditate and let go of her emotions and focus on her purpose.

(Dogma said that it was all right to be uncertain, that she should trust someone who cared about her. The Force said, *Anakin, Anakin*).

In aggravation, she rolled face down on her bunk and stifled a growl into her pillow. It was all Luke's fault for putting these ideas into her head.

LXXII.

There had been reports of an assassination attempt on Duchess Satine, luckily foiled by the Jedi. The holonet was abuzz with rumors. The Separatist advance in the Mid Rim was falling apart and what was left of their scattered and mostly leaderless forces would soon retreat to the Outer Rim. Padme knew it was nearly time. She needed to get back to the Core, get back to Courscant, and sue for peace. There had never been a better time to push for an end to this devastating conflict.

The only problem was that her husband didn't want her to go.

And if she was being honest, she didn't want to leave him.

Being together these past months had spoiled her. While they were cautious to never be overly familiar together and keep matters strictly professional, Padme enjoyed the luxury of actually living and working together with Anakin.

He had been worryingly on edge as the war dragged through its second long bloody year, so much so that she was growing more and more concerned about his well being if the fighting continued for much longer. Jedi were not invincible, no matter what the holonet said. So many had died on Geonosis and

so many more had fallen in the war. While Anakin was a consummate warrior, a Jedi of enormous skill, and very, very good at fighting (and *killing*, her heart reminded her), she feared he couldn't continue on indefinitely without reaching a breaking point. The ebbing of the war and the time they had spent traveling together had given him a chance to find something else to focus on. Her newly discovered pregnancy was proving to be a wonderful distraction, as was the mission to help and free the clones. At his core, Anakin was a protector, a maker, a flyer, and a truly loyal and loving man. Padme was so glad that he had a chance to just be those things for once.

She was very concerned that with her leaving, Anakin would fall back onto old coping mechanisms when faced with the drudgery and horror of war, but she could see a light at the end of this very long tunnel. If Padme could just get a cease fire in place, Anakin could come home and finally heal and they could figure out the rest of their lives together.

Padme wasn't quite sure what that life would look like or where home would be. She knew that Anakin would not leave Ahsoka half trained nor leave Obi-Wan to face the war without him. She understood duty even though she didn't know what the future held in store for any of them.

There was one particular thing she was quite sure of though: if she stayed on board the *Negotiator* much longer without a serious wardrobe adjustment, someone was going to figure out she was pregnant.

No, best that she left now. First to Alderaan to meet with Bail, then into the reconstruction zone in the Mid Rim, and then on to Coruscant and to end this war once and for all.

LXXIII.

"Any further news from Mandalore?" Anakin asked, sitting down heavily on his bunk, starting the process of peeling off his

gauntlets and pulling off his boots. The Separatists armies may have been falling apart at the seams, but there still were enough would-be generals and admirals to stir up trouble along with those using the war as a reason to seize power in various systems.

Obi-Wan, his tired features lit blue by the holoscreen on in front of him, shook his head distractedly as he continued to peruse the latest intelligence reports.

“What about the 501st? Any update on their position?”

“The last news we have was that they protected the Togruta colony at Kiros from Zygerrian attack. There is some evidence to suggest they headed straight for Zygerria thereafter, even though I was not aware of it being a Separatist stronghold,” Obi-Wan said, scrolling through the data.

“Zygerrians?” Anakin exclaimed, somehow finding a reserve of energy, jumping up. He nearly tripped over his own feet as he moved to lean over Obi-Wan’s shoulder and peer at the screen himself. “What are those slavers doing? Don’t tell me that scum have joined the Separatists!”

“It’s all right, Anakin,” Obi-Wan assured him, turning in his seat to face the other Jedi. “Master Koth reports that the colonists are untouched and safe. No one appears to have been taken.”

“No one was taken *this* time,” Anakin said visibly seething. “Those sick, twisted monsters.” Anakin, not for the first time in the past months, wished he was with his men. What he wouldn’t give to be killing that slaver scum right now. “They’re only on the move again because of the Separatist. They know with the war we’re spread too thin to keep them in check. Is Master Koth joining the 501st? Is he also in pursuit?” he demanded.

“No, he’s taken his men to support Master Billaba on Mygeeto.”

“Mygeeto? *Again?*” Anakin said, frustration more and more evident as he began to pace the room. “This will be what, the third time? What about her troops? Any word that they’ve been cleared of the chips?”

“She’s only just come out of her coma and was assigned to a new battalion, but I believe Master Windu cleared them first.”

Anakin clicked his tongue in disgust. “Already back on the battlefield. I hope at least someone had the decency to inform her that Grievous is dead after what he did to her and her men on Haruun Kal.”

“That information is classified by order of the Council,” Obi-Wan reminded him. “His death remains unverified and therefore not for public knowledge.”

“That’s pure poodoo, and you know it. It *should* be made public!” Anakin declared hotly, turning sharply on his heel, moving like a caged animal. “Ahsoka saw it with her own eyes. The Senate still insists he’s alive when her word, the word of a Jedi, should be good enough for anyone.”

“She is a Padawan Learner and she was with the 501st at the time, and the 501st has not checked in with the Order since Umbara and the loss of Master Krell. The Order has covered for them with the Senate so they haven’t been declared AWOL but—”

“They can’t be blamed for that! Krell used them as canon fodder. He had them murder their own brothers, your own men confirmed it. He *deserved* to die,” Anakin argued.

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan began carefully.

“No, it’s the truth. You can’t *possibly* think—!”

Obi-Wan stood and stopped his former Padawan from taking another step, hands on his shoulders. “Anakin, take a breath. It’s all right. The men are all right,” he insisted firmly. He waited until Anakin did as he instructed, starting to calm down. “I do not blame the men for what happened to Krell. They were misused and betrayed and could hardly stop the likes of this Vader. You need to let this go and focus on what we need to accomplish now,” he urged gently.

“It isn’t just Krell,” Anakin said, his jaw clenched. “It’s the whole war! Why won’t the Senate see that Grievous is dead and Dooku has vanished and *do something*? We’ve got no coherent strategy. We go from planet to planet and fight the same fights

over and over again. There are no more new clone troopers. We have to finish this with the men we have left and what Jedi we have left before we're outnumbered so badly that the galaxy descends into chaos! And what if it's true, Obi-Wan? Ahsoka's report— what if—what if fighting this war has been a-a mistake, just a giant Sith plot like the rogue Jedi said?" he asked desperately.

"Something as big as this war did not come about because of one person. No one person is that strong, that influential, Sith Master or no. The Council would have sensed it," he told Anakin, radiating calm and certainty. "This conflict was years in the making and there are many causes and because of that it does not have an easy solution. What *is* clear is that if we hadn't taken up arms and led the clones, then millions would have suffered, starved, been enslaved, or killed. The Republic would have crumbled and we have a duty to protect and defend the Republic. Fighting was our *only* choice."

But even as he said those words, trying to convince Anakin of the rightness of fighting the war, of what they had and were doing, Obi-Wan doubted. He and Master Plo had been talking and planning at length about the intelligence Ahsoka had brought with her, about what it meant about the Order's past, present, and future. But he couldn't share those doubts or those plans with his former student, not now when things were so tenuous in the Senate with the loss of the cloning labs, (a classified fact kept off of the holonet, but such a secret could not be kept for long). When things were more settled, when Anakin was calmer, they would talk and sort things out. For now Anakin needed to keep his focus, needed to keep his fighting edge in battle and not question or doubt or despair. The Order needed him too much on the battlefield, a figurehead for the Republic and the Jedi— the Hero With No Fear.

Anakin relaxed, reassured by his Master's words. "You're right. You're right, as always," he said pulling away and sitting heavily down on his bunk, the fire that drove him banked for now. "We just need to take care of our troops and then find and face this

Sith Master and it will be worth it. This will all be worth it.”

Obi-Wan bit his lip, but said nothing.

Later, Obi-Wan promised himself, pushing aside a twinge of guilt. Later, we will have time to really talk and I can help Anakin through this.

Obi-Wan tried to ignore the fact that he'd been making the same promise for over two years now. But maybe if the war really was ending, he could finally make good on it at last. But for now, the Grand Army of the Republic needed its star General to lead it through the war's final chapters and hold the galaxy together.

“Do you think you can sleep? Should I call Wort?” he asked.

Anakin shook his head. “Don't worry about me. I'm fine,” he assured Obi-Wan. “I'm fine.”

LXXIV.

Anakin dreams and when he wakes, he barely makes it to the 'fresher before he vomits. He heaves until there is nothing more than bile coming out of him, his body twisting and shuddering, betraying itself.

Obi-Wan waves his hand over the light switch and Anakin flinches as the 'fresher light comes on.

“Anakin?” Obi-Wan asks from the doorway.

He manages to raise his head and wipe the back of his mouth on his hand. “I-I'm all right. I'll just clean up and mediate and then go to sleep. It's nothing.”

It is a testament to how many harrowing campaigns they have both seen, how hard they have pushed their bodies and minds, and just how well Anakin knows Obi-Wan, that his former Master doesn't press. Obi-Wan backs away, closing the door behind him, leaving Anakin to rinse his mouth out and then fall to his knees on the cold floor.

The images of the dream still appear before his mind's eye in bright, lurid color: Padme bleeding and crying, begging him to

help her, the children, screaming–

Oh Force, he thinks to himself, squeezing his eyes shut. *Not again. Please, please, not again.*



CHAPTER 8

In Which Obi-Wan Finishes a Long Overdue Conversation

LXXV.

Resettling the clone cadets rescued from Kamino and those clone troopers who, because of illness or injury, were not returning to active combat duty was a logistical nightmare. Bail and Padme had spent several days combing through dozens of separate files, trying to figure out how to divide up the different maturity groups (not age groups, when the oldest clone still alive was barely 12 years old) between several systems who had indicated their willingness to accept the clones as refugees until a home planet or moon could be found for them.

They were still struggling when Dorme entered with a new report, this one from the clone representative currently staying on Mandalore of all places. Bail hadn't known that the clones even *had* a representative or that Duchess Satine would deign to have troopers on her planet.

The report, however, made it very clear that not only was there a clone representative (named 99 of all things), he knew what he was doing, and obviously had a team of planning geniuses helping him. The report outlined division of the cadets and troopers into squads, platoons, companies, battalions, brigades, and divisions, not nuclear family or clan groupings. Older clones and troopers were grouped with less physically mature cadets. Each active member of the GAR was assigned a corresponding “home” platoon based on their military record, their decanting date, whether they were of the same batch production, and training and combat history. Clone batch brothers, field partners, and clone squads formed during basic training were maintained but also integrated with cadets and non-combat clones.

99 and his team had laid it all out with military precision with supporting data. The report showed how resettlement on three, four, or even five worlds could be handled with frequent communication and travel between the different systems. It was the most comprehensive humanitarian resettlement plan Bail had ever seen and he had been part of the Senate subcommittee on refugee rights for years.

“This is— this is amazing,” Bail finally said.

“As General Skywalker is fond of saying, there has never been a more well trained and superb army in the history of the galaxy than the clone army. These men are truly remarkable,” Padme commented with a smile.

Bail thought for a long moment. “Do you think some of them might be looking for jobs in the private sector?”

LXXVI.

Boil watched Waxer come and go from Jedi training (Jedi training for a clone! It still boggled the mind!), and every time he did, a feeling of disquiet rose within him. Waxer was never eager to go train. He was never brimming with enthusiasm for what

he learned when he came back. When the other brothers they bunked with in the barracks asked him what it was like, whether he was learning to deflect blaster bolts with a lightsaber, and when he would be getting his own lightsaber, Waxer would just chuckle and make a joke and change the subject. Sometimes Boil thought he caught Waxer just looking so... so sad.

It was really beginning to bother Boil. Had the Jedi told him he couldn't talk about the training? Was Jedi training something horrible? General Kenobi hadn't wanted to train Waxer or any of the other brothers? (And Boil didn't like thinking ill of General Kenobi; he was a good General, but he hadn't wanted to train Waxer in something that could save his life and others on the battle field and it made Boil furious). Was General Kenobi being too hard on all the clone troopers or treating them poorly? Was it the age thing that General Skywalker had argued with General Kenobi about, like being old made you somehow... *tainted* or stupid or unable to learn about the Force? Was it because Waxer was a clone and not natural born? Whatever it was, it was like an itch Boil couldn't scratch, a thorn caught in his thermals under his armor, and he was getting sick of it.

One night, after lights out he got out of his bunk and crouched down next to where Waxer lay. He poked his brother in the head twice until Waxer opened his eyes with a sleepy noise.

"Why are you always so miserable when you're training to be a Jedi?" he whispered sharply.

Waxer just blinked at him for a long moment. "Huh? Boil-?"

Boil poked him again. "You. Are. Miserable. Does it hurt to use the Force? Is General Kenobi refusing to teach you or being harsh or unreasonable? Is it hard? Is there something bad about it? Tell me!"

Waxer propped himself up. "Shh, no it is fine. General Kenobi is a fine teacher, so are the others."

"Then why aren't you happy? This could save your life. This could save everyone's life. You could live through this war and— and afterwards be a Jedi. You have a future!"

Waxer looked away. Waxer had an opportunity and refused to see it. Why was he acting this way? It made Boil want to punch something.

“How can I be happy to have this—this ability when the rest of our squad doesn’t, when *you* don’t?” Waxer asked back in a harsh whisper. “We are in this war together. You don’t have it and General Kenobi was saying that attachment and caring for other people or having brothers as a Jedi was dangerous and wrong, and I don’t want to be so different from you that we can’t be squad mates anymore!”

Boil sat back on his heels for a moment, but only a moment. “You *kriffing* moron!” he swore quietly. “You think I care about that? You think any of us care about this crazy Jedi rule or are jealous or upset? *You can use the Force!* You can protect us. You could lead us someday. A brother leading us! And why couldn’t I still be your squad mate? I’ve put up with you so far! I’d like to see *anyone* tell me I couldn’t be your brother anymore, General or no! You have a chance, Waxer, a chance to be something more!”

“And what’s wrong with who we are? I don’t care what the rest of the Republic thinks. We are the best damn soldiers the galaxy has ever seen! I don’t need the Force to be proud of that.”

“Your future—”

“What future?” Waxer scoffed. “General Skywalker and Commander Tano believe in us Force clones yes, but the rest of the Jedi Order? You heard General Kenobi. They won’t want us at their fancy Temple, not unless we follow their rules. Just look at Krell, look at what he did to us, to the 501st. Plus, we’re still property remember? I’m a clone. The fact that I have the Force isn’t going to change that.”

“We’re not property anymore,” a voice piped up in the dark, a bunk away. Boil turned around quickly, eyes narrowed trying to make out who it was.

“Who asked you, Crys?”

“If you two are going to talk loud enough to wake us all, we

may as well all talk,” Crys shot back. “And it’s true. I heard the Generals talking about it. Commander Tano was at Kamino. There’s a Jedi who went there to free all the troopers and cadets. The 501st was with him. Haven’t you heard the rumors? He stopped them from growing more clones and vanished with all of the little ones. They say he *arrested* General Ti and the Kami-noans. I heard it from Sketch who’s with the 104th and saw it himself.”

“That’s a load of bantha poodoo,” Gearshift snarled from the other side of Waxer, sitting up in his bunk. “There’s *no way* a Jedi arrested another Jedi and if something had happened to shut Kamino down it would be all over the news.”

“Shows what you know!” Boil said hotly, “On Umbara, a Jedi let that *skrag* Krell get sabered and fed to a flesh eating plant after tricking us into fighting the 501st and no one heard about it!”

“Did you *see* Krell get killed?” Gearshift retorted.

“I didn’t, but Captain Rex did. I heard the report myself,” Boil said, daring the other clone to dispute the word of the captain, “*and* I saw the Jedi who let it happen.”

“See, it’s true,” Crys said eagerly. “It isn’t just having the Force, we’ll all have a future soon.”

“Huh, only if we live long enough in this damn war,” Wooly muttered from where he slept face down on his bunk. He raised a hand to rub the tiny scar where his chip had been removed. “At least we aren’t going to die of old age and can’t be turned into droids anymore. Oh, no. Instead we get to live a long, long time conquering and re-conquering the same *kriffing* planets over and over again.”

“Look, as much as I appreciate all the help, I was trying to have a private conversation with Waxer here,” Boil finally snapped. “Can I get back to that please and you all shut up and stay out of it?”

Muttering greeted his demand, but the brothers backed off and rolled over to give the two of them some privacy. It was a total illusion. Everyone could still hear everything, but they all

tried to give each other the appearance of privacy as much as they could.

Boil huffed and turned back to Waxer who was side eyeing him. After several long silent moments, punctuated by a few clearly fake snores from parts of the dark barracks, Boil poked Waxer one more time. "You have the Force, you laser brain and I am dumb enough that I am not going anywhere. You're stuck with me. I'm happy about it so you just Be! Happy!"

"This is you happy?" Waxer asked with a small smile.

"Positively ecstatic," Boil growled at him and then climbed back up to his bunk and laid down.

LXXVII.

Luke didn't miss the future so much as he missed the people. Leia's loss was akin to losing his hand all over again, it was a wound that bled, (despite the fact that any crush he harbored for her had long since faded in the face of Leia and Han's infamous never-ending courtship where he was frequently used by both of them to make the other jealous). He missed Leia's fiery strength and certainty. If she were here, he just knew that she would have given every Jedi General a run for their money while simultaneously teaming up with Senators Padme Amidala, Bail Organa, young Mon Mothma, and the Duchess Satine, reforming the Republic through sheer force of will.

He missed Han's gruff kindness and teasing. He was a smuggler and an opportunist, but one only had to see Chewie by his side to know that Han would sacrifice a great many things to do what was right.

He wished Chewie was here; he would get along so well with the clone brothers and he gave the very best hugs.

Luke sometimes caught himself calling for Artoo to help him with something only to find that the astromech was just not there. Flying his borrowed fighter was not the same without his

droid partner. Luke missed Threepio's anxious flutter as he would shuffle around, arranging things for everyone else's comfort. He wanted to fly with Rogue Squadron again—Wedge and the others. He wondered what their lives would be like in this new future he and his father were building. He worried sometimes at the arrogance of what they were attempting, choosing to change the entire galaxy, and whether he was preventing those he loved and cared about from even existing.

He realized shortly after they arrived in the past and were not wiped out by temporal paradoxes, that he would never see them again and that hurt. It hurt like a hand was squeezing his heart inside his chest. The grief was a physical thing. It hurt to know that there was no Rebellion to return home to and even if he lived long enough to see them all again, they would not be the same people as the friends he loved.

Luke pushed the pain away, focused on what he could do in the here and now. He had gotten past loss before by working on the next challenge, the next obstacle, and he would do it again. But seeing Yoda (someone he knew from the future), lying still and small in medical quarters had brought up a surge of renewed grief. His father had been right; waiting for Yoda to wake up, to talk to him, was a futile exercise. This being was not his teacher. His teacher was lost to him like everyone else.

Even with his father beside him, with the clones, and his parents and a Jedi Order alive and well, Luke couldn't shake the bone deep fear that if he lived through to the end of this, he would be alone.

LXXVIII.

Masters Plo Koon and Obi-Wan Kenobi had been conferring with each other on and off for months, pouring over the materials and reports Ahsoka had brought back with her from Kamino. The more they reviewed the information together against the

other evidence the Council had gathered at the beginning of the war, the more questions they had regarding the creation of the clones and who was behind the chip programming.

Obi-Wan inwardly cursed the fact that the immediate need for Jedi on the battlefield after the first Battle for Geonosis had meant his investigation just prior to the start of the Clone Wars had been left untouched, leads and information now two years cold. If only he had not gotten caught up in warfare, he could have explored further. He could have looked into what Dooku had told him of a Sith Master working from inside the Republic and why Jango Fett, the template for their Republic armies somehow fought and stood at the side of Dooku on Geonosis.

It was a foolish regret, he reminded himself. They had lost so many Jedi when the war started, there had been no choice but to leave off his probe into who was behind the assassination attempts on Senator Amidala to protect the Republic and its citizens.

"We're going round in circles, Master Plo," Obi-Wan said, rubbing his eyes tiredly, "And we make planet fall to join Master Secura on Felucia tomorrow. I think we need to sleep."

"Hmm, Felucia is where it was reported that Master Sifo-Dyas met his death during critical negotiations," he remarked. "Perhaps there will be time for some investigation."

"You think there may have been some other cause for his death?" Obi-Wan asked.

Plo interlaced his fingers together and sat back in his seat. "I do not know, but the only information we have states that it was Master Sifo-Dyas who requested the Kaminoans start creating an army for the Republic over ten years ago."

"Master Sifo-Dyas was said to be capable of reliable precognition."

"Yes, and he was also a friend of Count Dooku."

"Perhaps it's time that you and I do some investigating and let the younger Jedi lead the armies for a time," Obi-Wan suggested. "You can follow Master Sifo-Dyas' trail."

"And what will you be following?" Plo asked.

"I think it's time I finished my conversation with my grand-master, don't you?"

LXXIX.

As was now his custom these last months, Dooku sat at his desk at dusk, thinking and gazing out at his family estate. As the sun started to dip below the horizon line, he sighed and reached out to take hold of a second glass.

"Will you join me for a drink, Master Kenobi?" he asked, raising the empty glass as he turned around to face the Jedi Master.

A blue lightsaber illuminated the office. "I think I will pass, Count," Obi-Wan said, all politeness.

Dooku huffed. "Put away your weapon. There is no need for it here."

"I prefer to be prepared in case you choose to attack me with lightning. You understand," he responded with a placid smile.

"I have no intention of attacking you. I have given my parole in this war. I am no longer involved."

Obi-Wan advanced. "I frankly don't believe you but that isn't what interests me today. What does interest me is finishing the conversation we began on Geonosis."

Dooku sat back in his chair with a dark smile. "Oh? Is the Jedi Council at long last ready to listen to me? What did it take to get them to pull their heads out of the sand?"

"You told me that there was a Sith placed somewhere highly within the Republic," the Jedi Master pressed. "It's true, isn't it?"

"You are only *now* considering the possibility more than two years into the war? Two years of fighting where the Separatist were always somehow just one step ahead of the Republic and only through the sacrifice of Jedi lives and Jedi principals have you *barely* been able to stave off defeat?" The Sith Lord mocked in visible disdain.

“Better late than never,” Obi-Wan quipped.

Dooku rolled his eyes. “Oh, do stop, Master Kenobi. Enough with the witty banter and sarcasm. If you came here to actually converse, then let us converse. Your Order is on the brink of extinction due to its apathy and kowtowing to a corrupt over-bloated government. Do you really have time for games?”

“That’s the endgame is it, our extinction?”

“Did you expect the Sith to settle for anything less than equal repayment after the Jedi annihilated their old empires and all but one of their kind nearly a thousand years ago? How small your imagination is.”

“Forgive me, but thinking like a Sith doesn’t come naturally to me as it does to you,” Obi-Wan said dryly. “Then your Sith Master, whom you take direction from, is someone in a position of power within the Republic, playing both sides against each other, just as the rogue Jedi claimed.”

“Rogue Jedi?” Dooku said with a harsh laugh. “Is that what you’re calling him? He is perhaps one of the only beings using the Light Side of the Force yet living with any scope of vision, any capacity to look into the Darkness and truly *know* what it means. In another life, in another time, perhaps Qui-Gon could have been like him,” he mused, peering deep into his wine glass.

“Do not speak his name,” Obi-Wan snapped. “And why not? He was my student—”

“He was *my* Master, murdered on the direction of your Sith Master. You lost the right to speak of him the moment you sided with the architect of his death.” He leveled his saber blade at the Count’s face. “Your Fall is the equivalent of spitting on his funeral ashes.”

Dooku stood, slamming his glass down on the desk where it shattered into pieces, wine splattering everywhere. “I do not have to explain or justify myself to you!” he snarled. “What do you know of the corruption and death of this galaxy, of the power of the Dark side? As a Jedi, I foolishly wasted my life and my talents trying to make a difference, but with the Dark, I have

commanded armies and changed the very course of history!"

"And now you sit in darkness on your home planet while your great achievements burn and fall to ruin. If the Dark is so powerful, why are you here and not aiding your great Sith Master?"

Dooku clenched his jaw tight and turned his back on Kenobi, walking towards the window where the stars were only just now becoming visible. "I have plumbed the depths of Force knowledge my entire life, both Light and Dark, but foresight was never my gift. Sifo-Dyas was always the one speaking of portents and signs." He was silent for a time and then confessed in a distant tone that did little to hide how shaken he truly was. "I was recently shown a vision of the future, my future, my planet's future. There is nothing quite like the Force screaming at you about what is to come to get you to stop and think."

"So you saw the future and *that* has you hiding away?"

The Count turned. "If you knew the truth, you would hide too. You would run and hide at the farthest reaches of known space, taking all your loved ones with you."

Obi-Wan simply stared in the face of that warning, not even blinking. It infuriated Dooku. He clicked his tongue in scorn. "Don't hide behind the Order's mask of impassivity. It is beneath you. You have attachments, admit them now or squander what little time you have left and mourn their loss for the rest of your miserable days."

Obi-Wan's eyes narrowed. This wasn't what he had expected. What kind of game was Dooku playing at? Why was he warning him? Was he warning Obi-Wan of danger to someone in particular? Who? "Is the Sith Master targeting someone? What do you know of his plans now that the war is ending?" Obi-Wan demanded.

Dooku raised his hands as if showing he was unarmed which was a lie, since with the Force he was never not armed. "I haven't been in contact with Sidious in months now. I am no longer in his confidence."

"And yet you still live."

"He could come for me, of course, but seems happiest on Coruscant. Did you never wonder why?"

Obi-Wan tucked these pieces of new intelligence away, but pressed on. "Enough. Don't prevaricate. I know of the assassination attempts on Mandalore—"

"The *Duchess*? As if a pacifist would be of any interest to the Sith!" He shook his head. "How transparent you are, Kenobi. You play the Councilor, the Jedi Master renowned across the galaxy as the great Negotiator, always in control, but how quickly your thoughts turn to those you love."

"Now, really Count, there's no need to be insulting. Besides, what does a Sith Lord know of love?"

"How many times have you watched your foolish Padawan nearly die and felt a stab at your very heart? How many times has he saved you against orders and the dictates of war, for no other reason than because he loves you in return? And how many times did you tell yourself that if he left the Order, you would leave with him?"

Obi-Wan blinked, his blade dipping just an inch, betraying his surprise at the sudden turn in the conversation. "Anakin?" he asked, bewildered. "What does Anakin have to do with—?"

"You are blind, Obi-Wan. You always have been. Jedi dogma clouds your vision. You and the Jedi Order have claimed him to be a being of extraordinary power, a being of prophecy. Yet you use him with all the casualness of a common tool, just another weapon in your arsenal. It has not gone unnoticed nor has he been left... uninfluenced by Darker powers than yours."

"What use is Anakin to the Sith? It is said he is to bring balance to the Force and defeat the Sith. He is the Chosen One," Obi-Wan countered.

"Is *that* what the prophecy says? Are you sure?" Dooku taunted, with a yellow gleam burning in his eyes.

"That is none of your concern, Dooku. This war is ending. Anakin and the Jedi Order are safe. You won't be able to use our clones against us or the galaxy."

“As if I have ever cared about the Jedi’s slave army. This has never been about them. This is about *power* and *revenge* and you and I and all the other beings in the galaxy have only ever been pieces on a board to be played with and discarded in turn,” he said angrily. “Sidious cares for nothing but himself and the Rule of Two. To finally accomplish his goals he has only ever really lacked one thing, a *true* apprentice.”

“He’s had plenty of apprentices,” Obi-Wan said, growing more worried with every passing moment. “What are you—?”

“There’s a certain symmetry to it all, don’t you think?” Dooku mused, cutting him off, holding out both hands in front of him as if two sides of an unbalanced scale. “The Jedi wipe out all but one Sith.” His hands shift the opposite direction. “The Sith wipe out all but one Jedi.” His hands come to equal height. “Doesn’t that look like balance to you?” Obi-Wan could only stare in horror at the Count’s hands.

“Tell me, Master Kenobi, do you know where your former Padawan is right now?”

LXXX.

Later, much later when Padme is in the middle of giving birth, and Separatist assassin droids and Senate Guards are trying to break in and either kidnap or kill her, Obi-Wan arrives at 500 Republica, following Anakin’s trail.

Even with Dooku’s dark and strange warnings, he did not expect to find pitch battle nor Senate Guards working with Separatist droids. Leading the squadrons of clones defending the apartments (bearing the familiar armor markings of the 501st Battalion), is a massive man in a black mask, wielding a blood red saber.

This can only be Vader.

Obi-Wan doesn’t know what is going on. There were no news reports, no alert on the holonet, the Coruscant Guard had not

mobilized, and he couldn't raise Anakin on the comms no matter how he tried.

Seeing Vader stops him short. Despite Ahsoka's detailed report and even having just come from meeting with Dooku, Obi-Wan is taken aback by the Sith's raw power. He isn't sure at first what exactly to do, which side in the battle to take. *To side with the Sith...* He hesitates, the Force raging around him.

Then Vader sees him and demands he goes and protects Padme, Anakin, and the baby.

"Baby? What *baby*?" Obi-Wan sputters over the noise of blaster fire and the crash of sabers, (was that *Fives* with a lightsaber?) The credit chip drops. "Are you saying that *Anakin* and *Senator Amidala*-?!"

Vader lunges forward causing Obi-Wan to stumble back into a defensive stance, reaching for his saber. "You fool!" He snarls at Obi-Wan. "You blind, Code bound *fool*! Now is not the time!"

Obi-Wan's thoughts are spinning. He knew Anakin harbored an un-permitted attachment for the Senator (he wasn't an idiot!), but he was *sure* that Padme had more sense, and that Anakin would *control* himself. This was beyond everything! They were in the middle of a war! Anakin would be expelled from the Jedi Order! He was the Chosen One! He couldn't be *dallying* with someone and getting her pregnant! There were Sith to deal with! He had a duty to the Jedi Order! *How* could Anakin have done it? How could he have been so *selfish* and *reckless* and-?

The Force reaches out, picks Obi-Wan up by the throat and drags him into Vader's grasp.

"LIAR! **YOU LIAR!**" Vader roars into his face, shaking him like a rag doll. "He is your *brother*!? Your *Chosen One*!? He's supposed to SAVE you and your wretched Order?! YOU **LOVE HIM**!?" the Sith screams.

Obi-Wan chokes in shock and disbelief under the wave of burning black rage and betrayal and the hand closing tight at his throat. Just before he thinks his throat will collapse from the immense pressure, Obi-Wan is flung violently through the door

behind Vader.

He crashes into the next room, staggering to his feet, his mind and soul battered and burned by Vader's anger and pain. (There is so much pain and hurt! Obi-Wan feels the ache of it down to his bones). He stumbles further into the apartment and there Obi-Wan finds Anakin sitting on the bed, a lit lightsaber clenched in his right hand, his wife—

(because the Force is screaming it at him like the Sith just did, *this was no dalliance, this was Anakin's wife!*)

—cradled to his chest with their left hands twined tightly together.

A med droid, a clone medic (Kix, Kix is here!), Threepio, Artoo, and one clone trooper with two lightsabers, (Hardcase. *Stars*, that's Hardcase! Who let *him* have lightsabers?), all surround Padme's bed as she labors to bring life into the galaxy.

The room is shaking from the blaster fire just outside the door where Vader stands with Fives and bars the way. There are sounds of battle and explosions from the balcony where clones and other force users (that must be Luke and, is that Chatterbox?), fight off attackers. Obi-Wan finds he has broken a few ribs and can barely breathe let alone talk, but he takes one look at Anakin's desperate, terrified face and realizes that Vader is *right*.

Anakin is his brother.

Obi-Wan loves him in a way he loves no other living being in the galaxy. There is nothing more important than that.



CHAPTER 9

In Which Vader is Haunted and Luke Is Done Playing the Long Game

LXXXI.

The Zygerrian campaign on Kadavo was wrapping up and Vader felt a deep level of satisfaction he hadn't felt in years. The Zygerrians were beaten back for now. The question was did they pursue the slavers deeper into their empire or did they return to the mopping up action in the Mid and Outer Rims?

Regardless of their decision, Vader had enjoyed putting fear into the slavers. They would no doubt rear their ugly heads again soon, but until then, their primary "processing" center was destroyed and tens of thousands of their slaves were free.

Vader walked the camp they'd set up to care for the Zygerrian's captives until all of the survivors could be transported to safety, finding Luke working with the clones on temporary shelters. Luke finished with his task and came over to his father, joining him as he walked.

"Any sign that Zygerria is sending out their fleet?" Luke asked.

"None. They have doubled their fortifications on their home world, setting up against a siege. If we intend to press forward, the campaign will be very long."

"Part of me wants to finish the job," his son admitted. "It felt good to fight a simpler enemy, one not hiding in the shadows, playing games. It felt right to free them," he said gesturing to the Twi'leks, and Mon Cala, and a dozen other species of all ages around them.

"The Jedi have long been an enemy of the Zygerrians. It used to be the Jedi's mandate to fight slavery wherever it existed in the galaxy. It was the Jedi who first stopped the Royal Slave Auctions many years ago," Vader said remembering the history he had read about so eagerly in the Temple Archives when he first was a Padawan. At the time, such stories filled him with hope. Vader pushed the thought aside. After all he had seen and done, such memories no longer held any meaning for him.

"Your students did very well," Vader said, and halted momentarily to watch Kickback bring down another shuttle for a transport run, Chatterbox right behind him with his own ship.

Luke smiled. "I don't doubt it. They've already had more Force training than I had put together before we came back to this time."

Vader inclined his head, looking at his son incredulously behind his mask. "You are joking," he said flatly.

Luke huffed under his breath. "No, I'm not. You killed Ben within three days of him even telling me the Force existed. He didn't have much time to train me what with Alderaan being destroyed and us rescuing the Princess."

Vader pondered this new information for several moments. Some part of him still couldn't fathom how Luke could remember those events, speak about them openly, and still manage to walk by his father's side. "And with Yoda?"

"I wasn't really keeping track. From the Battle of Hoth until—until... Bespin. I was planning to return to him when, well... *this*

happened,” Luke said gesturing helplessly around them.

The Sith Lord stopped suddenly and turned. “That’s *all*?”

“Yes,” Luke shifted uncomfortably. “Look, I know I don’t have a fraction of the training you have or even Ahsoka has and she was mentioning forms and names of katas I’ve never even *heard* of, and I know I probably shouldn’t have come to Bespin to rescue my friends. Obi-Wan and Yoda were dead set against it, but I don’t care.” He lifted his chin stubbornly. “Even as- as badly as it went, It was the right thing to do.”

Vader didn’t even know what to say. His son looked away from him, embarrassment tinged his presence in the Force.

“You have nothing to feel ashamed of,” Vader insisted. “You have acquitted yourself better than many knights. You faced me and you controlled your fear. What training the Order provides in this time pales in significance before your power and natural instinct with the Force.”

“You think so?” Luke said hopefully.

“I did not lie when I said that together we were strong enough to overthrow the Emperor, my son. The limited number of hours you may have spent with a teacher does not change that. You have let the Force be your guide which is infinitely more preferable than relying on the old dogma of the Jedi Order.”

Luke rolled his eyes at the typical jab against the Order, but was secretly pleased to hear his father’s words. He had felt himself lacking, paling in comparison to the vibrant padawans, knights, and masters of the Republic. They knew so much more than him and he didn’t want to leave the clones poorly trained just because he wasn’t taught from infancy in the ways of the Force.

(He wanted his father to be proud of him, as silly as it sounded. It was an urge that he couldn’t squash no matter how hard he tried. Luke worried that as a moisture farmer for the majority of his life, a Rebel, and a barely trained Jedi, he fell far short of any expectations his father had for him.)

As if sensing Luke’s anxieties, Vader continued. “You have

nothing to be concerned about. If you have questions regarding the Force, I am more than willing to instruct you. Not the Dark side, no," he was quick to add, not wanting to start an argument, "but simply in understanding its mysteries."

"I would like that," Luke said quietly.

"Good," Vader said, pleased and then hesitated. "Wait, what do you mean Obi-Wan *and* Yoda told you not rescue your friends? Obi-Wan is dead. I killed him."

His son blinked up at him in surprise. "I thought you would know. He can speak to me. Sometimes I would hear his voice even after he died. I even saw him once, all blue and glowing. Like a ghost."

Vader thought back to their final confrontation on the Death Star, his final triumph over the man, revenge for Mustafar. He remembered that he accused his old Master of becoming weak, the way Obi-Wan had smiled and raised his saber in salute before he had struck the killing blow, and how he vanished save for his saber and his cloak.

"Are you saying that Kenobi *let* me kill him? Let me win the fight, didn't even bother to *try*, and then somehow— *somehow* became a ghost who can just wander around and talk to the living?" He yelled indignantly.

Luke was totally taken aback. "How would *I* know?" He yelped in response. "I thought it was something all Jedi did! I thought I was imagining it at first. The first time I thought I saw him I was dying of hypothermia on Hoth."

"Are the Rebels so careless that they let you freeze to death on that planet? No, no, that does not surprise me," Vader said. "It's a wonder you have lived this long, young one."

"Now wait just a minute—" Luke began.

"And this is *so typical* of my old master. Of *course* he would find a way to ruin our fight, cheat me of my victory and then even after death continue to meddle! It's his revenge."

"I don't think revenge is the Jedi way," he reminded his father, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Tell that to Obi-Wan!” Vader snarled shaking his finger at the boy.

LXXXII.

“What are they fighting about?” Flare asked Echo, Jesse, and Fives worriedly. “Do we need to stop them?”

Echo looked up and took in the father and son standing in the middle of their makeshift thoroughfare through the camp, arguing without a care for the chaos of people around them, most of whom had stopped to watch. Fives didn’t bother to look up at all.

“Nah, that’s how they bond. Arguing and yelling is Vader’s way of caring,” Jesse said. “It’s when he gets quiet that you should start to get worried.”

“All right, if you say so,” Flare said dubiously as he put down the armful of armor that he had gathered up, (Luke had abandoned the armor his father insisted he wear for the assault all over the place and it was his turn as one of the newer apprentices to find it afterwards).

Fives shook his head with a laugh. “You get used to it, shiny,” he insisted, slapping Flare across the back.

“Hey! I’m no shiny, I’ve seen action!” the younger clone protested.

“Oh, yeah?” Jesse teased. “I’ve never seen a seasoned trooper keep his armor so clean! What do you think, Echo? You think he needs a bit of paint?”

“Definitely,” Echo agreed.

Flare backed away hurriedly as his brothers began to circle him. “Oh, no! I don’t care what you guys think. I like my armor just the way it is. Stay back!”

“You’re the one with the Force powers, make us!” Jesse taunted with an evil grin.

LXXXIII.

Luke and Vader's attention was pulled from their argument to watch the clones' good-natured brawl, the Force sensitive among them using their new abilities in a way that would have had Obi-Wan ordering his former Padawan extra meditation for a month.

"You'd think they would've had enough of fighting and just get along, wouldn't you?" Luke said with a sigh, wondering if he needed to intervene before the rescued and freed slaves around them went from watching with bewilderment to panicking.

"You will find some beings are just incapable of communicating without it devolving into aggressive negotiations," Vader intoned knowingly.

LXXXIV.

Vader found he liked the time that he and Luke spent in their quarters aboard ship. At first, Vader was hesitant to remove his mask, but after Luke had made the adjustments to the atmospheric controls in their shared living spaces, he couldn't deny his desire to look at Luke with his own eyes. The first time he took his mask off, Luke's face had shone with sadness and then with care. A part of Vader wanted to hide away, angry at the mere thought that his son would pity him. (There was *nothing* to pity!) But he shoved that feeling aside, casting his eyes over his son's features and taking his fill.

He could see his wife, himself, and shades of his mother in Luke's face and coloring. He stared, unable to look away even as Luke insisted on upgrading his prosthetics with ones that functioned better and hurt less, based on the technology found in his own right hand.

Luke originally wanted to share a meal with him but when that proved impossible his son had insisted that they *at least*

share water. It reminded Vader of traditions he had long forgotten, things he had purposefully put aside when he committed to the Jedi Order. Anakin Skywalker buried and shed as much of his Rimworld ways as he could when faced with Core world sensibilities and the Order's implacable demand for conformity and for submission of self in service to the greater good. Luke hadn't forgotten, though. He hadn't abandoned who and what he was just because he was committed to being a Jedi. Yoda and Obi-Wan hadn't driven it from him, Vader thought with satisfaction and relief.

Vader found it hauntingly familiar to see Luke echo some of Shmi's mannerism and sayings passed down no doubt through Owen Lars' wife, Beru. For once, it filled him not with anger for what he had lost nor hate for what he had suffered, but with a profound sadness.

Grief was not something to be expressed, merely released into the Force. Detachment and peace was what the Order required. Even the Sith purged the paralyzing feeling, transforming it to anger and to action. Vader had not shed a tear since the desperation and anger of his Fall. Now, twenty three years later (and twenty three years in the past), he inexplicably found his face damp with salt.

LXXXV.

After the success of the Kadavo campaign it was surprising to Rex and the rest of the troopers that they had not advanced to the Zygerrian homeworld. He was not blind to the fact that Vader openly reveled in destroying the slavers and Luke, while not quite as cruel, was no less lethal than his father. Rescuing slaves was a passion that both father and son shared and one the 501st embraced with a similar zeal given their own existence and treatment.

Instead, they had turned the fleet back towards the mop up

zone to try and rendezvous with as many battalions and companies of clones as they could, in what appeared to be a more and more frantic rush to free as many brothers as fast as possible. There were no more long weeks of R&R on the planets they helped bring peace to. It had also not escaped Rex or Appo's notice that they were heading deeper and deeper towards the Core and as they traveled, and Luke and Vader grew more on edge the closer they came to the main hyperlanes.

In the last few weeks, Luke and Vader spent hours sequestered in their quarters, a complete departure from their usual habits: Luke of training with his students and enjoying his time with the men and his father; and Vader of tinkering, of standing sometimes for hours at the bridge viewport gazing at the stars, and openly stalking his son around the ship.

The troopers couldn't help but noticed the sudden change in behavior. Rex wasn't sure just how many cautious inquiries he had fielded from his brothers over the past month alone, but he didn't have any more idea what was going on than anyone else.

Worried, he went to speak to Fives and Hardcase and Chatterbox (yes, it had gotten so bad he was prepared to try and have a conversation with Chatterbox, as futile as that usually was). It was either that or he was going to have to take really desperate measures and have the Hack Squad make contact with Ventress.

He found them and the other Force sensitive clones (Kickback and Flare, Cooker, Left Foot, and Bats and the others Luke had found), sitting quietly in the portion of the docking bay that Luke had appropriated for their training and use. Even Hardcase was sitting still!

As he approached, they stood and Rex waved them back to their seats.

"If this is about Vader and Luke, we don't know!" Hardcase blurted out. "They've barely come out of their rooms in last two days."

"Something is coming, something big," Fives said looking at Chatterbox who nodded slightly. "It's something to do with the

Sith Master. We think– we think that Vader keeps having some sort of vision. It’s so strong, we’re all sensing it.”

“All right,” Rex said slowly. Visions through the Force and Sith Masters. He wasn’t equipped to really deal with that sort of thing, but he needed to do *something*. “What’s the vision about? Is it something we can prepare for? Is there a place where things are going to happen? Any hint to what the Sith Master is planning to do? Anything?” he asked trying to find some way he could help.

“None of us can see much except darkness. All we can tell you is that whatever it is, it hurts,” Hardcase said as he rubbed at his chest as if picking up phantom chest pains. “It *really* hurts.”

Rex’s brow furrowed and then he nodded once decisively. He turned on his heel and marched straight towards Luke and Vader’s shared quarters.

The other clones shared a look and as one, hurried after him.

LXXXVI.

When the dreams first started, Vader tried to hide them from Luke, but Luke wasn’t fooled for an instant, feeling his father’s suffering through the Force.

“It’s– worse,” he had managed to say to Luke, in between panting for breath. “How– can it– be worse? How? It’s– too soon– much too soon. There’s– so much blood, and– and screaming–”

“It’s not real. We won’t *let* it become real,” Luke insisted. “We’re going to save them.”)

Weeks into this ordeal, and Vader still claimed it was too early to head to Coruscant. They had to wait. Anakin was still on the Outer Rim. Padme was not due to give birth for some time yet. There were still so many clone troopers who were compromised. They had to wait it out.

But Luke was not so sure. They had changed so much of the past (present? Luke wasn’t sure how to refer to it anymore), already, maybe Palpatine was growing desperate. Maybe the past

was so altered that Padme really was in danger. There was no Grievous or Dooku to arrange to kidnap the Chancellor. Maybe Palpatine was making his move now in some other way, and if so, they needed to be there to stop him.

Vader couldn't focus enough to *think* let alone plan. He couldn't center himself. He reached for the Dark, reached to command its power and it bucked under his grip, wild, desperate, and savage.

In desperation, Luke had brought various spare parts and broken pieces of equipment into their quarters and pressed them into his father's hands. At this stage he would try anything to distract Vader, anything to help him try and meditate and deal with the echoes of Force visions raking their claws through his brain. When that didn't work, Luke reached for the Force himself and then for his father and poured his own strength into him.

Water quenching fire, that's what it reminded Vader of. A never-ending stream of water, an unheard of miracle for the desert born.

When Vader could think again, he always asked the same questions: how close were they to Coruscant? Where was Padme? What was the date? Where was the 212th? Luke would answer and Vader would maintain that it was still too soon. Finally, Luke had had enough. If the nightmares were affecting his father in this way, if they were worse than they had been the first time, what must Anakin Skywalker be feeling and thinking?

"Father, I'm going to have Hack Squad make contact Ahsoka. I must speak with... Anakin," Luke said. (Not Father, this Anakin Skywalker was not Luke's father. This Anakin Skywalker would have his own son and his own life if they succeeded. He was not Luke's to claim.) "It's time."

Vader shook his head. "No, I forbid it."

"Father—"

"He is weak!" Vader said with disgust. "He knows nothing of the true power of the Dark side. He cannot protect those he loves. He will fail and she— she will *die again!*"

"I don't believe that," Luke disagreed softly. "We can stop this, Father, we can fight him and beat him and he can help."

"He is easily tricked, easily deceived. He still looks to the Order for help. He is not strong enough."

Luke wanted to point out that Vader was talking about himself, but would only hurt his father by forcing him to admit the obvious. His father's hatred of himself was like a dark chasm in the Force, some bottomless burning pit that no amount of Luke's Force presence could ever hope to fill. He would have to find another way to convince Vader of his plan.

"When we face the Emperor, someone will have to be with her, someone must be there to guard her," Luke argued.

"*You*, my son, will protect her," Vader countered with iron certainty. "You will not let her die."

Luke shook his head, grasping his father's hands tight in his, wishing not for the first time that there was some flesh and blood contact between them to mirror their connection in the Force. "I'm coming with you," he reminded Vader. "I won't leave you to face him alone. And if I am with you, then someone will have to be with-with... mother," he said, nearly stumbling over the word.

Vader wanted to refuse. He wanted to say that the 501st, Luke's students, *anyone else* could handle the task of protecting Padme other than Anakin Skywalker, but it would be a lie. He could force Luke to stay with her, refuse to let Luke come with him when he faced Palpatine, but deep inside Vader feared that alone he would not be able to finish the job. The nightmares that wracked his sleep and haunted his waking moments made it very clear that he still could not guarantee the safety of the people he loved, even with the foreknowledge and training of more than two decades, even with all his powers. Master Qui-Gon and the Council named him the Chosen One, a being of prophecy, a savior of sorts, but Vader had never believed it. He was no savior nor invincible warrior, no matter how much he tried to be. Dark or Light, it made no difference. It was devastating to admit, that

he, Darth Vader, Sith Lord and head of the Imperial Navy, victor in hundreds of conflicts could not be certain he could win the most important battle of his life alone, but it was true.

He had failed his mother and Padme before and he could fail again.

Slowly and with dread, Vader nodded. "Comm Ahsoka and then tell the men to—"

The door to their quarters' chimed. Luke looked knowingly at the door. "I'll arrange it. You, *rest*," he said firmly.

LXXXVII.

Rex waited, face impassive at the door to Luke and Vader's shared quarters, trying to ignore the fact that Hardcase and Fives and the other Force sensitive clones were hovering just behind him. The pressure seal hissed and the door slid open and Luke was there.

The Jedi looked tired but steady. Any hint of anxiousness that had previously cloaked him seemed to have evaporated. Rex immediately felt the knot of worry inside him ease. Whatever storm had been brewing had broken at last.

Luke wasted no time calling for a briefing with all officers and squad leaders. He directed them to prepare for non lethal ground combat maneuvers. Rex could only think of one reason why such an order would be necessary and he dreaded the possibility of having to face compromised clones in battle. ("It's a precaution only," Luke assured him. "We will do *everything* we can to prevent any clones still under the chip's influence to be triggered, but we have to be ready." Rex couldn't argue with that). They were to continue their course along the hyperlanes, freeing as many clones along the way as they could, but the fleet needed to be prepared to arrive at Coruscant on short notice. Finally, Luke asked for the Hack Squad to slice him a secure channel to the *Negotiator* and then for Rex to join him for the comm.

LXXXVIII.

Ahsoka's features flicker into view and she cannot mask her surprise at receiving a comm from Luke. He greets her with a bow, but she is too smart not to realize something serious must be brewing for Luke to reach out to her directly. In the past months since Kamino, the 501st has been extremely careful when they made contact with any Order members as they continued to bring peace and help compromised clones. Something has obviously changed.

Luke doesn't hesitate or waste much time on pleasantries; he asks to speak with General Skywalker.

When Anakin enters the holo capture frame, it takes every ounce of composure Luke has not to react. Even through the holo technology he can already see how much of Anakin Skywalker still remains inside Vader. The way he holds himself, the way he stands. To the extent Anakin wears a mask of Jedi impassivity, it is as cumbersome and obvious as Vader's own mask. Luke can see the bone deep weariness that Anakin wears like a cloak, can read the desperate defensiveness he wears as armor. This is a Jedi who has been at the brink for some time and is visibly and tangibly afraid of failing the ones he loves.

In sorrow, Luke looks at Ahsoka to see if she can see it, can see what is happening to her Master right before her eyes. He notices immediately how close she hovers by his elbow but, she does not reach out as Luke suddenly wants to. Luke looks at Rex standing beside him and from the tenseness in the Captain's jaw and the grip he has on his helmet, Luke knows that Rex is shaken at the sight of Anakin, seeing him with new eyes after months apart. Like any good commander, Rex is watchful for the care of his men and is suddenly aware of how Anakin is struggling to hold on.

"Captain Rex," Anakin greets. "How are my men and the fleet?" he demands, ignoring Luke outright.

"Very well, General," Rex answers promptly. "We haven't suf-

fered any casualties since the Kadavo campaign and then only minimal. The *Dauntless*, *Resolute* and *Pioneer* are all functioning well.”

Anakin relaxes just a fraction at the news. “Good, give us your coordinates and we will rendezvous immediately.” He turns and calls out over his shoulder. “Artoo? Get up here and plug in. We’re going to calculate a new course.”

As the image of R2-D2 rolls into the holo frame, Rex cuts a glance over to Luke. “Uh, sir?” A rendezvous was not part of their briefing.

Ahsoka also jumps in. “Master, we’ve been ordered to go take command of the 104th to help with the campaign on Cato Neimoidia, remember? While Master Obi-Wan and Master Plo are engaged elsewhere?” she reminds him anxiously.

Luke is distracted for one jarring moment; he cannot take his eyes off the familiar droid, a unexpected piece of a future that he feared would no longer exist. His droid friend is there, with Anakin, and his heart breaks just a little bit. Whatever calm and professional demeanor Luke wanted to portray when first meeting Anakin Skywalker, all his plans of being circumspect and inscrutable (mimicking the examples of his two Jedi masters) go out the window. *Kriff* it all, he is *tired* of dancing around what needs to be done. He does not have the ability to ignore Anakin Skywalker’s suffering and distress and play the impassive Jedi any more than he can ignore it when his father burns with self-hatred. The endgame is fast approaching and they’re going to need all the help they can get.

“We’re not going to rendezvous with the 212th at this time,” Luke says firmly. Anakin’s eyes narrow at that, and he opens his mouth to argue, but Luke presses on before he can. “We didn’t comm you for that. We commed you because Senator Amidala is in danger and we need to coordinate our efforts to protect her.”

That statement stops Anakin cold. Even in the blue light of the holo, his visibly pales. “*What?*”

But Luke isn’t done yet. “We know about the dreams and we’re

not going to let them come true. We're going to protect her. We're going to stop the Sith Master."

"What dreams?" Ahsoka asks worriedly. "What is he talking about? Master, have you—have you been having visions?"

Anakin takes in a shuddering breath, but doesn't answer her. "You've *seen* them too?" he whispers.

Luke nods. "My father has. I have. We've seen them. We know what they mean and we *won't* let them become real."

Anakin stares at Luke and then, seeing whatever it is he needs to see to convince himself that Luke is telling the truth, he collapses in relief, leaning heavily on the console in front of him as if he has just laid down a huge burden. The move is so sudden, Ahsoka lets out a cry, her hands reaching out to help him in case he falls.

"We're here to help," Luke assures him earnestly, wishing again that he could span the distance between them and be there in person, but for now his words alone will have to do. "We're going to save the Senator. This war will be over once and for all. We're going to take the fight to him. You don't have to face this alone."

When Anakin lifts his head, there is a fierce resolve burning in his eyes. "*Tell me what I must do,*" he all but begs.

And Luke can see it. He can *see* in this moment of profound vulnerability exactly how Palpatine twisted the Jedi General in front of him into Darth Vader, his apprentice and slave. For one moment he burns with hatred for the Sith Master, for taking this fierce desire to protect and save and destroying nearly everything good and just about this man. He can see the pieces of Anakin Skywalker littered throughout Vader, like they are distorted fractured mirrors of each other and can see how the Jedi Order misunderstands. Darth Vader did not betray, murder, kill, or consume Anakin Skywalker. Darth Vader is and always was Anakin Skywalker, trapped by choices he made and blind to the dozens of chances he had and still has to change and make a different life.

Darkness only dominates if you choose to let it. Palpatine's

seduction of Anakin was no different than his tactics on a galactic scale. Luke had thrown a hydrospanner into the Sith Master's plans for domination to save the galaxy, and he was going to do exactly same thing now to save Anakin Skywalker.

"Here's what we're going to do," Luke begins.



CHAPTER 10

In Which Anakin is Frequently Interrupted and Padme's Furniture is Appropriated

LXXXIX.

When Threepio opened the door to 500 Republica, Anakin did not stop to greet him, but immediately rushed inside calling anxiously for his wife.

Padme at first thought she was hearing things. As her due date approached she sometime thought she could hear Anakin calling for her, but when she looked around he was never there. When she came out of her bedroom searching for the phantom voice this time she found she could *actually* see him. For one moment, Padme feared that she missed her husband so much that she was now imagining his physical presence.

He reached for her and took her face carefully in his hands, staring at her in wonder.

"*Anakin?*" she asked in astonishment. He was *real*. He was *home*. This wasn't her imagination. She would never imagine

him looking so worn, pared down to just muscle and bone, on edge, like he was ready to snap at any second.

Resting his forehead against hers, he whispered, "You're alive! You're safe and alive. Oh, thank the Force."

"Of course, I'm safe," she assured him, hugging him tight, not sure what was going on. "I'm safe and you're here," she said resting her head on his shoulder and then stiffened in realization. "You're here," she repeated again in bewilderment. "*How* are you here? The Chancellor said you were on the Outer Rim leading the siege at Cato Neimoidia." Anakin avoided her gaze. She put two and two together. "You *left*? You left your post? Anakin, what's going on?"

"I've—I've been having dreams, visions, like—like with my mother," he confessed brokenly. "I didn't know what to do. We were ordered to stay out on the Rim, but I couldn't do it. I just couldn't. I had to come. You're in danger Padme, the children are in danger. It's not just a dream. I had to come," he said urgently.

She knew that look in his eyes. She knew what it meant when he had dreams. She had been there when he returned from the Dune Sea carrying Shmi's body. This was serious. "Of-of course Ani, of course. What did you see?" She asked in growing dread.

Anakin shook his head, unable to even give voice to the horrible visions. Padme took his hand and led him over to the couch and they sat together.

After a long moment, she asked, "Does anyone know that you left? Does Obi-Wan?"

His eyes flashed in a way she hadn't seen outside of battle, certainly never here, never at home alone with her. "Obi-Wan is on some mission for the Council," he said bitterly, but then a small smile tugged at his lips. "Ahsoka is in orbit with the *Dauntless* and the *Negotiator*."

"The *Dauntless*?" She said in growing realization. "Then—"

"I have help," he said as if hardly believing it. "I didn't come alone. The 501st and Luke, they're here too. They're securing the building. Ahsoka got ahold of Master Plo and he is on his way

with the 104th. They know about the dreams. They *believe* me. They want to help me save you.”

She reached out and stroked his hair, trying desperately to calm him. The tone of his voice scared her. “Anakin, save me from what? From whom? What did you dream?”

“Kix is here and we’ve got a medic droid. I’ll comm him to come up. We need to get you checked and then, if there’s still time, we need to move you someplace safe, get you off planet.” He brightened unexpectedly. “The midwife on Naboo knows we are on our way. I even drew up a birth plan. There’s your favorite candles, the ones that smell like the flowers on Naboo and music—”

“Anakin I can’t just leave,” Padme interrupted. “You’ve been away for so long, you haven’t heard the news. Anakin, *we’ve got the votes*, we finally have the votes! Tomorrow we’re going to vote to end this war, to open negotiations with the Separatists and stop all the fighting. It’s taken me months to get enough support to override the Chancellor’s military authority on this, but I can do it. I can get this to end and then we can go to Naboo together and we’ll have peace. We’ll finally have peace.”

Anakin knew how important this was to her, to him, to the clones, to everyone to bring an end to the war, but he couldn’t forget the horror of his nightmares. Taking a deep breath, he was about to start his carefully planned argument to convince her she needed to come with him *right now* when the door chimed.

“Are you expecting someone?” he asked, tensing watchfully. It couldn’t be the 501st. They had their comm lines if there was any sort of emergency.

Padme shook her head. “No, I was going to have an early night in.” She braced herself on the armrest of the couch, trying to get to her feet. Threepio trundle out to answer the door, but Anakin directed him to help his wife instead while he went to see who was there.

It was a cadre of Senate Guards, in full armor, requesting Senator Amidala present herself for an emergency meeting with the

Supreme Chancellor immediately.

Anakin's head said this was perfectly normal. Tomorrow there was a critical vote after all. Palpatine was a trusted ally and mentor of both him and his wife. Anakin heart said he should not leave Padme's side or let her go where he could not protect her. The Force sounded like a high pitch hum, buzzing louder and louder in his ears.

It felt *wrong*. Suddenly everything felt wrong. The entire exchange was a disconcerting slow motion blur to Anakin. That was, until the flash of a red lightsaber caused the decapitated head of a guard to roll into the foyer of the apartment and then everything sped up again. Anakin leapt into action, instinctively shielding his wife from the massive Sith standing at the front door, dispatching the remaining guards with brutal efficiency.

Anakin's saber was lit in a moment, ready to enter the fray but with a wave of his hand, the Sith shoved him back.

"It's a trap! Tend to your wife!" the Sith commanded before shutting the door, blocking any further sight of the carnage in the atrium outside.

He stumbled to his feet and reached for Padme. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I think so," she said, cradling her belly, instinctively trying to sooth the twins who were as upset as she was. She looked down at the severed head staring up at her from the floor. She knew that face from her time at the Senate, she realized. It wasn't someone masquerading as a Senate Guard. "Did you dream this? *Was that--?*"

Anakin shook his head. "No, Ahsoka knows him. That's-- that's the Sith that travels with Luke, his father. Did you fall? The babies, are they--?"

"His *father?*" she asked in shock.

Before either of them could say more, there was a crash as all three of the decorative air vent grates above them fell from the ceiling, followed by half a dozen commando droids.

The droids brought their weapons to bear. Anakin took a de-

fensive stance in front of Padme. With deadly precision, he cut down one after another. Calling upon the Force he focused on the air vents in the ceiling and crushed them to bar the way for further attackers.

The sound of battle from the front door had not subsided. If this was an Outer Rim campaign, Anakin could have sworn that reinforcements were now trying to break through. His attention was suddenly drawn to the balcony as several familiar armored shapes rappelled down. They were quickly joined by Luke, Chatterbox and Artoo.

“Captain Rex? Luke?” Padme asked in astonishment.

“Ma’am,” the clone greeted her as he and the others started turning over her furniture to create a barricade in front of the balcony.

Luke gave her a half bow, “Senator, sorry to be dropping in. Perhaps you and General Skywalker should retreat to your room?”

Anakin looked again towards the front door which had started smoking. Luke followed his gaze. “My father and Fives will guard the entrance. You worry about you wife, we’ll take care of the rest.”

All of Anakin’s plans to argue and insist that he was more than capable of taking part in the fight were interrupted by Padme’s sharp inhale. Anakin deactivated his saber and steadied her, looking anxiously from her face to her belly.

“Anakin,” Padme said tightly.

“Yes?” He asked hesitantly, not sure what to do especially now that several speeders filled with more Senate Guards and Separatist commando droids were now starting to buzz the building and the familiar whine of canons powering up filled the air.

“Anakin, I need you with me,” she demanded, gripping his hand tightly.

He carefully maneuvered her back into the bedroom, ordering Rex to get Kix and the med droid up to the apartment immediately, shutting the door firmly behind them.

Padme groaned as she sat on the edge of the bed, reached for her night stand drawer and pulled out her blaster and spare power packs. "This has to be about the vote. Someone doesn't want the vote to happen tomorrow and I *have* to be there."

"Padme, you're in labor. You're not going to make the Senate vote tomorrow."

"Nonsense," she said trying to breathe in a steady pattern. "Nubian births are on the speedy side for humanoids. I'll give birth this afternoon to two beautiful, healthy babies and tomorrow I'll—I'll just find a way to be there in time for the vote while you take care of the twins. That's the plan. Everyone's safe. Everyone lives."

Before Anakin could find the words to argue, the bedroom door slid open and Anakin whirled around without thinking, saber darting out to strike down the intruder.

Hardcase brought up one of his lightsabers to deflect a blow that would have very nearly taken his head off. "*Whoa*, General, it's just us."

"Anakin?" Padme called anxiously, trying to distract him from any further attempts to attack those on their side.

Rex, Hardcase, Artoo, Threepio, Kix, and the med droid hurried in, the med droid moving over to immediately tend to Padme.

Kix stopped in front of Anakin, looking at him in visible horror.

"Sir?" Kix asked reaching out like he wanted to check Anakin's pulse and pupil dilation. "Sir, what the *kriffing hell* have you been doing to yourself?"

"Kix, my wife is in labor and people are trying to kill or kidnap her. Forget about me and take care of her," He ordered.

Kix shared a look with Rex and then obeyed.

Rex shut the door behind them and then looked around the bedroom unhappily. This was going to be hell to secure from attack, he thought. "We've got to secure this room as well, General. There're more Guards coming; they've got a canon on one of

those speeders, and those droids'll come through the windows if we're not careful."

Anakin gripped his saber hilt tight. "Right, right," he agreed. He looked over to Padme who was still sitting on the edge of the bed, huffing for breath.

Captain Rex suddenly moved closer, capturing his attention. "Sir, *listen to me*. We'll take care of this. Luke and Vader, Fives, Echo, and all the men, we'll take care of this. We'll protect you, we'll protect the Senator," he assured him. "We have your back."

Anakin nodded jerkily and then went towards his wife just as the bedroom door exploded inward with the force of canon fire.

XC.

Anakin nearly collapses in relief when the twins are delivered and Kix declares that Padme is healthy and well, and not in danger of dying as he had foreseen. He presses his forehead to hers and together they speak the names they have chosen. *Ley-ah*, or Leia in Basic, for their daughter, named for the mighty desert dragon. And *Lukka*, or Luke in Basic, for their son, named for freedom and the first light of the suns. They are alive and well and so, so perfect in their arms.

He finally manages to draw his attention away from his wife and his children and realizes that the battle is over. Beyond what is left of the bedroom he sees the familiar helmet of Captain Rex checking on Obi-Wan who is being fussed over by Kix. His Captain looks up as if feeling Anakin's regard, but he hesitates to intrude.

It is Padme who calls him over with a tired smile and introduces him to the twins. Rex shucks off his helmet and looks at them, wondering at how tiny they are and how they don't Name themselves as clones do. He offers his congratulations.

Anakin asks for a report, but Captain Rex waves him off, telling him they have some time. Padme asks if the rest of the men want

to see the babies. Rex hesitates and then says he will pass on the invitation and quickly leaves to give the new parents some privacy.

XCI.

Rex hurries out of the apartments to where Luke and Vader have set up their watch in the devastated atrium outside the apartment. Both men turn to him as he approaches and Vader snaps out a demand for a report. Rex has a sudden weird moment of *deja vu*.

“General Skywalker and Senator Amidala are in good health as are the babies.”

“*Babies?*” Luke goes pale. Vader makes an incomprehensible noise.

The Captain looks uncertainly from one to another. *Weren’t the babies good news?* He wonders. “Yes sir, Leia and Luke.”

Vader staggers and drops to his knees.

“Sir? *Sir!*” Rex asks in alarm. “Shall I fetch Kix?”

Luke shakes his head violently, leaning over his father. “No, no Captain, it’s fine. Just the battle, *please*, a moment.”

“Of course, sir,” Rex says, withdrawing back into the apartment.

XCII.

Luke places his hands on his father’s shoulders and tries to catch his breath. Leia. *Leia!* A sister. A twin sister and he never knew! He has a sister!

But not really. Not anymore. Leia is lost to him. Only his other self, his little brother as the clones would recognize him, will know the joy of having a sister.

Vader shakes under Luke’s hands. Not one child, but two!

He had always thought he would have a daughter. Padme was convinced she would bear a son. They had both been right. *Two children*. And Leia, Princess of Alderaan, under his nose the entire time! So like her mother, so like him.

And he had hunted her, tortured her, and watched as her world was destroyed in front of her. And she was brave and fierce, a rebel and a Hutt slayer, like something out of an old childhood story.

And he will never know her now, not the way he knows Luke. She is lost to him, stolen.

"Father," Luke says lowly. "Father, they're safe and alive and we must make sure they stay that way. We must plan. There's little time."

Vader shakes himself. What is one more betrayal? One more reason to feel the monster? One more reason to hate Obi-Wan and Palpatine and Bail Organa and Yoda? (One more reason to hate himself?) What is one more Force forsaken lie in his life? In Luke's life?

There is no time left. He must stand. He must fight.

He rises, Luke's hands slipping away. He looks down at his son's determined features, sees grief and joy mingled there. They are united in a common purpose. There are no lies or betrayals here. He can trust his son.

The doors to the apartment open and Rex, Fives, Anakin, and Obi-Wan come to join them in the atrium, the rest of the troopers staying to guard Padme and the babies. Vader's fists clench.

Knowing of Leia and knowing that Obi-Wan must have separated the twins at birth fills him with fury. He cannot face Obi-Wan now without doing unspeakable violence.

"Go," Luke tells him, understanding completely. "I'll let you know when we're ready to move."

XCIII.

Vader finds himself in his wife's ruined apartments. He is not sure how he manages to get there when he has no intention of meeting Padme ever. Nevertheless, he finds himself checking on the troops on guard, watching Threepio shuffle about, trying in vain to set what is left of the furnishing right, and then *somehow*, he is slipping into the darkened guest room where the babies (*two of them! Two!*) are sleeping. Padme is with the med droid in the 'fresher and Artoo is on watch next to their makeshift crib. The droid gives out a curious whistle, but recognizes Vader as one of the defenders and makes no further sound.

Vader silences his respirator, turning it off so he doesn't disturb the twins' rest. He will gladly suffer a few moments of painful breathing for a glimpse of his children.

He leans over carefully to catch sight of them, washed and wrapped in blankets. He stretches out with the Force and he *feels* them, two bright lights, two suns illuminating the galaxy. Vader planned to keep his distance, but finds he cannot help himself. He carefully brushes one finger over the back of Luke's clenched fist and then over Leia's.

She squirms in her sleep and grips his finger instinctively, not letting go. The sensors in his prosthetic have improved through Luke's relentless tinkering. He imagines he can actually feel the pressure of her tiny hand.

He senses movement outside the room and reluctantly pulls away, drawing the blanket a little bit higher over both tiny children. He turns to leave as silently as he entered and stops.

Padme stands in the doorway to the guest 'fresher watching him with a puzzled, cautious expression on her face.

Vader is frozen in place. He cannot move. She is here. She has *seen* him! She opens her mouth to speak and he knows he cannot bear to hear her voice. He reaches for the Force and finds the strength to swiftly and silently escape from her presence before she can say a word.

XCIV.

Obi-Wan doesn't know what to think. He sits in the middle of what is left of Senator Amidala's living room allowing Kix to treat his ribs and his throat. Even though he is not looking, he can feel the joy, the staggering sense of relief mingled with fear, and the love Anakin is feeling as he holds his wife and greets his children. It is heady and strong; Anakin making no attempt to conceal or put aside what he is feeling.

If that wasn't shocking enough, he can feel Anakin twining his Force sense around his family, connecting to the little Force presences that make up his children, literally bonding with them. Obi-Wan scrubs his face wearily and takes a deep breath. He reminds himself firmly that it *does not matter* if Anakin is attached to his wife, his children, to Ahsoka, the clones, or to Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan is just as attached to Anakin. He will no longer deny it to himself, and he is not just saying that because of what Dooku said or what Vader screamed at him, *certainly not!* (He's not just saying that because every nerve in his body feels scraped raw by the betrayal, hurt, and anger Vader poured into him when he had hesitated to help his friend). No, he is admitting his attachment because it is the truth and he is tired of lying to himself.

Obi-Wan is tired of always having to deny what exists and ignore what he feels to get through every second of every day. He doesn't have the energy any more to fight to make Anakin obey the Code, to behave and be dutiful and obedient (*and miserable*, something whispers sadly, *he'd be miserable*). He doesn't have the will to keep lying to himself when deep down he feels just as fiercely as Anakin does.

He just doesn't know what to *do* with this truth, with all these newly acknowledged feelings. Is he still a Jedi? Can Anakin even be considered a Jedi? Has he failed in the one task his Master had asked of him at the moment of his death? What will the Council do?

He looks over his shoulder to the bedroom and shakes him-

self. Since when was the birth of two babies, the children of his dearest friend and his wife a failure or a cause to mourn? How did being a Jedi come to this? Why does being married and having children mean that Anakin has failed as a Jedi and that Obi-Wan has failed in teaching him? No, he cannot and he will not call himself a failure nor Anakin, not after everything they have been through together. They are still alive and breathing. They have survived this latest battle and together they will survive the next. Somehow they will find a way.

Obi-Wan sees Rex come back into the apartment. He hates (yes, *hates*), to disturb Anakin during this rare moment of happiness amidst a day of hell, but they have no choice. The war is not over. He rises and goes to get his former Padawan so they can plan.

XCV.

“What’s the next move, sir?” Captain Rex asks Luke as he watches Vader’s cape vanish down the hall leaving Luke to meet with himself, Fives, General Skywalker, and General Kenobi.

“The attack against the Senator was a desperate, reckless move. He’s overconfident. We can use that. He’ll know soon that his attempt at murder and kidnapping failed. Wires and Slice have managed to block news reports on the attack, but that won’t last for long.”

“Who did this? Who’s behind the attack on my wife?” Anakin demands. Obi-Wan places a hand on Anakin’s arm, trying to send calm to his former student, trying to help him regain the equilibrium the day has thoroughly shattered.

“The Sith Master Sidious,” Luke replies and then continues the briefing without pause. “The commando droids and the Senate Guards were just the beginning. We must find a way to treat the Coruscant Guard as soon as possible. When we go to expose him, there’s a good chance he will order the attack.”

Anakin pulls away from Obi-Wan and moves right into Luke's personal space. Luke does not back away, but raises his chin and meets Anakin's eyes.

"Ahsoka said you know who he is."

"Yes."

"*Tell me.*"

"No," Luke says gently. "There will be an attack on the Jedi Temple and it will be without mercy. The men from 501st and 212th will warn the Jedi and will fortify the Temple as best they can from the outside and the Jedi should do the same from the inside. It's too late to evacuate but we have Ahsoka, Appo, and Commander Cody standing ready to provide air and orbital defense in case of bombardment with the *Dauntless* and the *Negotiator*. With Cato Neimoidia no longer a threat, Master Plo should be here soon with further reinforcements."

Anakin is barely tracking the briefing. He visibly trembles, he cannot contain himself. "*Why* won't you tell me?" he interrupts again. "We can defeat him!"

"Because the attackers will be back and you and Obi-Wan must stay and defend your family. Because Coruscant is not safe, the Temple is not safe, and we can't get you off the planet either without him finding out," Luke reminds him, causing Anakin to take a step back. "Fives, are you sure you want to come?"

"Just try keeping us away. Hardcase, Chatterbox, and I are going. Brothers deserve the chance to be there to meet the monster face to face for all he's done to us."

"All right, then. Load up the speeder and notify the rest of the men. We'll drop Rex off at the Temple on our way. Captain Rex, tell Slice and his team to be ready." He pulls a commlink from his belt and holds it out to Obi-Wan. "Use this secured link only if there is an emergency. Assume all other communications are tapped, even the ones at the Temple."

"So while the Temple is under attack and you go to face the Sith Master, we're supposed to stay here?" Obi-Wan manages with a cough, taking the commlink. "I understand that you have

intelligence to know who he is and where he is, but this is a matter for the Order, not for the clones. Anakin and I are the best equipt to deal with this. There's a prophecy—"

"Always in motion, the future," Luke counters. Obi-Wan is taken aback to hear Master Yoda's oft repeated phrase. Luke turns to Anakin. "*This* is your place," he implores. "Search your feelings. You're needed here. When he realizes that he's failed in capturing Senator Amidala, his anger will be terrible. You and your family are still in danger. *Trust me and stay here.*"

Anakin swallows hard and agrees.

XCVI.

From the Core to the Outer Rim, the Galactic Holonet flickers and then every station, every channel cuts out and is replaced with Senate Security Holo Feed. The galaxy watches, at first puzzled and then with growing shock as the Supreme Chancellor Palpatine draws a red lightsaber and attempts to kill the young Jedi who has asked him to step down and submit to arrest on charges of being a Separatist leader, a murderer, a kidnapper, a torturer, and for committing various acts of treason.

Sentient beings over tens of thousands of worlds call loved ones to come watch; they comm friends and family telling them that they need to turn on their holonet *right now*.

The Supreme Chancellor doesn't deny the charges. Instead he starts screaming that he will not be denied his rightful place at the head of a new Sith Empire. He raves at the Jedi, blaming him for upsetting his carefully laid plans with peace. He then yells at the clone troopers in his office to "Execute Order 66 and kill the Jedi!"

One of the clones refuses and punches the Supreme Chancellor in the face. Then, the galaxy watches in horror as all hell breaks loose.



CHAPTER 11

In Which the Sith is Unmasked at a Terrible Cost

XCVI.

On Coruscant near the Temple District, the ground shook as Republic capital ships and cruisers in orbit began open bombardment of the Jedi Temple.

In the skies above, Ahsoka and Commander Cody launched an offensive to stop the attack by clones triggered through no fault of their own.

Ahsoka wasn't sure how the chipped clones were triggered (as Luke feared they would be), when Hack Squad deliberately ensured that no holofeed of the Sith Master being unmasked and arrested would be broadcasted on any trooper or GAR frequencies to protect compromised clones. It hadn't been enough. The Order somehow still got out. Ahsoka could hear the swearing over the comms which made it very clear that the slicer squad were caught off guard and the trigger was widespread across the entire GAR communications network.

She could also feel the Force ache with pain as Jedi died at the hands of their troops.

She struggled to push the hurt away and tried to focus on the battle as the fighter squadrons scrambled. The *Negotiator* and *Dauntless* targeted their foes carefully, going for crippling blows while their opponents were going for the kill. Ahsoka counted the minutes until the 104th would arrive with reinforcements. She tried not to think about what the bombardment must be like on the ground, tried not to think about where her Master may be, whether Rex and the men were safe, how the younglings and old Masters were doing at the Temple, whether Senator Amidala was all right. She tried to focus, but perhaps she was too much like Anakin after all. She could not just forget those she cared about. She was furious and worried and refused to feel guilty about it.

(Anakin had been so guilty and ashamed when he told Ahsoka of his marriage, as if confessing to an unspeakable crime.

"I know," she found herself saying in response, without even thinking about the words. "Somehow, I've always known."

And she had. It was *so obvious*; the Force practically announced it to the universe. It celebrated their union.

And as for her own involvement, his admission painted it in a whole different light. Ahsoka hadn't so much become a Padawan to Master Skywalker as she had been adopted and fostered into the little secret family that was Anakin and Padme. She thought back to all the times she spent with one or both of them. She realized she hadn't eschewed attachment as a good Jedi should any more than Anakin had. She had attachments; she just ignored them, refused to acknowledge them.

Anakin didn't.

Anakin, she feared, *couldn't*.

No wonder he was afraid. Ahsoka had been oblivious. She had not even conceived for a moment that Anakin would break the Code or that he felt anything other than a familiar regard for the Senator. What else was her Master to assume than that she

would view any connection between him and his wife with disfavor? What else was Anakin supposed to think other than that she would judge him and recoil in disapproval and disappointment if he told her the truth?

It made Ahsoka angry to see him ashamed. Her Master was always so strong and sure. It hurt to know he was too afraid to tell her his secret before now, too afraid to trust her with this.

“She’s pregnant,” he continued on, a strange mixture of happiness and terror. “It’s twins; a boy and a girl.”

Her mind came to a staggering halt. Anakin Skywalker as a father. Stars, now that would be something to see, she thought, turning the idea over in her mind.

Anakin looked at her, steeling himself visibly, as if waiting for her to rebuke him, but that was the last thing on her mind.

“Skyguy,” she said at last, giving in and just hugging him. His arms came up to hold her suddenly, as if he was hanging on to her for dear life, his relief palpable.

“I wanted to end this war first. I wanted to finish your training,” he said anxiously. “You are going to be a spectacular Knight; I *promise* I’ll find a way,” he assured her. “You’re already an amazing Padawan. You’ll be better at this than I am.”

Ahsoka thought back to their first meeting on Christophsis where he had initially refused to take her on as his apprentice and, at last, she understood. How could Anakin take on a Padawan when he feared his days in the Order were already numbered? But he wouldn’t turn her away, not after they fought side by side. So he took her on and promised her that he would see her trained and knighted.

Just like he had promised Obi-Wan that he would stay with him and fight by his side during this *kripping* war.

Just like he promised the 501st to always lead from the front, to face the same dangers they were ordered to face.

Just like he promised Padme to be her husband and love, care, and honor her for all of his days.

Just like he promised the Supreme Chancellor he would find a

way to lead and win the war and help him save the Republic.

So many promises to people he cared about and Anakin had fought to keep them all. It had nearly torn him apart.

And somehow in that uncanny way they had, Luke and Vader had known and were once again coming to the rescue.

Well, they would just have to get in line, because she was Master Skywalker's Padawan and if anyone was going to help him save those he loved it, was going to be her.)

XCVII.

At the Temple, Masters Windu and Fisto of the Council were hesitant at first to believe Captain Rex when he arrived and told them to head to the lowest levels of the Temple. However, as the first of the towers began to crumble and fall under the barrage of turbolasers, as the holonet broadcast the unmasking of the Sith Master at the heart of the Republic, they sounded the alarm. They sent the younglings deeper and deeper into the Temple and hoped that it would somehow be enough, that this was not the end of the Jedi Order.

Outside in the fading light, troopers from the 501st and 212th stood shoulder to shoulder armed with weapons set to stun, with shields and with batons as the Coruscant Home Guard advanced like a wave from all sides of the Temple Plaza.

XCVIII.

The galaxy watches transfixed as pitch battle is waged in the Supreme Chancellor's office, Senate Guards face off against clone troopers armed with lightsabers and the Jedi against Palpatine. Out of nowhere a dark shape looms and crashes through the transparisteel window and joins the Jedi in his attack against

the Supreme Chancellor with a blade as red as blood.

Palpatine starts throwing out lightning, (*lightning!*) from his fingertips. The dark warrior blocks the attack and the Jedi moves in and disarms Palpatine, driving him back to the precipice of the shattered window. Hundreds of billions watch in stunned silence, as Palpatine collapses to his knees and raises his hands in surrender.

“Stop, stop, I beg of you,” he cries in a pitiful tone. “I am unarmed.”

“Liar!” the masked man says in response. “You are *always* armed.”

“My friend, what reason would I have to lie?” the Chancellor wheedles. “It is you who are lying, lying to yourself. *You are no Jedi*. I can feel the hatred within you. I can see the blade you bear, the blood you have spilled with it. You are mired in Darkness! Why do you side with this—this insignificant stripling? This weak excuse for a Force wielder? What can he offer you? *Nothing*. Whereas I can offer you the galaxy, a chance to rule and see the Jedi Order wiped out, a future where you have *everything* you’ve ever wanted.”

“We’ve seen your future. We don’t want it,” the young Jedi says fiercely. “You have *nothing* we want.”

“Don’t I?” the Chancellor says with a vicious smile. “You hate me, you both do. The hate is welling in you now. Why pretend? You think the Order will accept you? You are nothing more than a heretic, a poorly trained tainted novice who they will shun at best, hunt down at worst. And *you*, a Sith Lord—there is no future for you without me. Join me and together we will rule the galaxy as it was meant to be ruled!”

The masked man presses his blade forward and spits back, “I will *never* join you!”

“You have failed, Chancellor,” the Jedi declares. “You are unmasked for who and what you really are. Your crimes are visible for the galaxy to see. The war you engineered to con, trick, and kill your way to power has failed. *The war is over!*”

“And now, *you will die*,” the masked man says, raising his weapon to strike.

Palpatine screams his denials and lunges at the Jedi, grappling with him. The dark warrior rushes to help, but Palpatine and the Jedi trip over the edge of the shattered window and plummet into the darkness below. All over the galaxy, in homes and on ships, in public places, people exclaim and gasp in horror.

The dark man yells a name lost to the roaring wind and jumps after them.

The clones bearing lightsabers rush to the edge; one of them says: “Chatterbox, the computer, the files. We have to stop the kill order!”

The one in the now tattered gold cloak starts ripping apart the Chancellor’s desk and computer, activating a comm and yelling for “Slice, Gin, and Wires” to get started now.

“Hardcase, you’re with me,” the clone trooper then declares and he and his fellow clone jump.

XCIX.

The Temple is on fire. Rex and his men have managed to hold back most of the attack, but there are gaps in the shield and the outer walls are collapsing. Chip controlled troopers are getting in on the west side of the Temple.

General Windu is suddenly beside him, ordering him to take his weapon off stun, to meet the attack with lethal force and press forward.

Rex refuses.

“I don’t think you heard me, Captain!” Windu yells over the sound of orbital bombardment. “We are advancing and forcing the Guard back and away from the Temple. We cannot evacuate so long as we are surrounded. Weapons must go hot. Order the men to shoot to kill and follow behind me as I lead them away from the Temple,” Mace demands.

"I heard you the first time, sir. The answer is no. The ships in orbit don't seem to care if they hit the Temple or the attacking Guard! Please retreat back into the Temple proper. This area is under GAR control." Rex will not kill his brothers if he can help it, never again. "Boomer! Waxer and Boil report the west line has broken. Send two squads to help!"

Windu turns, incredulous and grabs the shoulder of a nearby trooper who is physically pushing back a Guard member trying to break through the line. "Trooper! Shield down and weapons hot. We are pressing the attack!"

Jesse shoves back the chipped brother and yells over his shoulder "Go to hell, sir!" and proceeds to use his shield and baton to knock his attacker to the ground and into unconsciousness.

"Sir, I *must* insist you retreat back into the Temple," Rex demands again. "You are interfering with our operations!" He knows he cannot force the General or stop him if he wants to attack the Guard, but he will not comply with this order no matter how many times it is given. He and his men have a choice and they choose not to obey.

Windu looks from clone trooper to clone trooper fighting back their brothers who are attacking with deadly intent. He shakes his head and ignites his saber.

For a moment Rex despairs, thinking the General will leap over the line and start slaughtering the Guard. But instead, Master Windu hesitates and then backs away into the ruins of the outer Temple wall. Any Guards who get past the line he cuts down and kills, but he does not leave the Temple's boundaries.

Behind Mace Windu, Jedi young and old stand just within the ruined wall weapons at the ready, and Rex dies a little inside each time he sees one of his brothers fall to a saber blade. Out in the Plaza more than one turbolaser shot has missed the Temple and hit the Coruscant Guard. The falling towers have crushed dozens of men both defending and attacking the Temple.

This is torture of the most acute kind. It is Krell all over again. Rex tries to get a hold of himself, to shake it off, but it is so hard.

He yells to his brothers to hold the line because any trooper that they cannot stop through non lethal means will meet their death inside the Temple at the hands of the Jedi Order.

C.

In the airspace above Coruscant, Ahsoka decides that she really wishes her Master was here with her. Their ship is failing and will soon be destroyed. Kickback and Oddball have done all they can with the fighter squadrons. The 104th have arrived which has certainly helped, but it is still not enough. The Temple and the surrounding area is getting pounded and the entire defending fleet has taken heavy damage.

Ahsoka orders everyone to abandon ship and get to Master Plo's ships or to the *Dauntless*, the *Pioneer*, or the *Resolute*. She will stay and maneuver the *Negotiator* into place like a physical shield, blocking any further orbital attack of the Temple.

She looks up and realizes Commander Cody and Ollie are still beside her on the bridge of the *Negotiator*.

Ahsoka orders them again to leave, and they refuse. If she stays, they stay. She smiles at them both through the smoke filling the bridge and together they turn the ship to protect the surface below.

CI.

At 500 Republica, Padme has the babies tied in a sling to her chest, and is crouched down inside the 'fresher tub, a blaster in hand. She is down to just one power pack. Artoo and Threepio are pressed against the closed 'fresher door, blocking it with their metal bodies, being as much of a physical barrier as they can. She can hear Anakin and Obi-Wan and the clones fighting.

She can hear her husband screaming.

The babies are whimpering and she speaks to them softly as the room shakes and plaster from the ceiling rains down. “Shh, shh, little ones. Mommy’s here, Mommy’s here. Daddy will protect us, Daddy is fighting for us. Obi-Wan is helping. The clones are helping. Shh, don’t cry, don’t cry. We’ll be all right.”

CII.

Anakin and Obi-Wan fight shoulder to shoulder, using the Force and maiming cuts whenever possible against the Coruscant Clone Guard. They deal more harshly with the Senate Guards and commando droids who have come in force and are attempting to kill them all and take the babies.

The holoscreen is still on, although it has crashed to the floor, but Anakin has heard enough. Even over the sound of battle he can still hear the live Senate feed.

The Sith Master is Palpatine.

Palpatine, his mentor and friend, whom he has known since he was a child, the man he thought he could trust with his life, the man who made him believe that all the fighting, sacrifice, and bloodshed was worth it, has betrayed them all.

This is the man who has made a mockery of all the death and suffering of the past three years, who has sent men and droids to kill his wife and take his children. Anakin has given his all, has committed totally to the war, to the safety of the Republic, to protecting the people, and it means nothing, *nothing!* It was all worthless. All the battles, all the death, all the compromises were *worthless*.

The betrayal feels like a vibroblade to the chest. His whole world seems to be crumbling around him. Nothing makes sense; it is like he is in free fall. The Force feels so far away and fury threatens to take over and have him slaughter everyone, *everyone* who dares attack his family.

It is only Obi-Wan’s presence at Anakin’s side that gives him

the strength to hang on to sanity by his fingernails when all he wants to do is let the familiar red curtain of rage fall over his eyes.

Obi-Wan keeps up a steady stream of words over the sound of blaster fire, and whoever it is who keeps screaming, (*someone keeps screaming*). Anakin can barely hear him; he sounds so very far away. Obi-Wan is telling Anakin that he can't wait to spend time with the children, how he hopes they are holy terrors and give Anakin at least the same amount of grief he gave Obi-Wan growing up, how strong in the Force they are, how Anakin couldn't have been blessed with a more lovely woman to be his wife than Padme, how Obi-Wan could not be prouder of him as a man, as a friend, as a Jedi, as a teacher, as a warrior, how Obi-Wan loves him, he is Obi-Wan's *brother, stand firm, don't choke them, Anakin **please**, try and remember, don't give in to hate, the children and Padme need you, I'm here, dear one, I'm **right** here, hold on, Anakin, Force please, **please** just hold on!*

CIII.

For Luke, this fall is as painful as the fall from the gangway in Cloud City. The drop seems never-ending. The Sith Master is clawing at him, lighting coursing out of his fingertips. He is in agony; he can barely reach for the Force to slow their descent.

He feels his father's Force grip yank him free from Palpatine's grasp and then his father's arms are around him, holding him tight as they hit the ground. Somehow, Luke still has his lightsaber and he wastes no time staggering to his feet, pushing past the pain and igniting the blade just in time to block another lightning attack. He never expected Palpatine to be so fast, half shadow and smoke, every strike a killing strike. Vader circles around the Sith Master, trying to pen him in between the two of them. Hardcase and Fives rush to join them and they surround the Sith, waiting for an opening.

The Force sends a warning nearly a second too late and Hard-case turns to block blaster fire from Senate Guards above them who are in sniper position on the roofs and balconies. He blocks most but one catches him in the leg and another in the shoulder and goes down with a cry. Fives rushes to defend him and Sidious steals a saber and slashes Fives in the back. Luke prevents him from killing Fives and Vader hammers Palpatine away from the fallen clones with punishing strokes of his lightsaber.

Luke begins to drag the men out of the line of sniper fire and there is Chatterbox leaping down to join them, pulling his brothers to relative safety and blocking further blaster fire, ricocheting the bolts back to the attackers. Luke throws himself back into the fight by his father's side.

CIV.

Slice and his team have been having a grand time these past few months, robbing the Trade Federation, the Banking Clan, and all the corporate guilds blind, hacking the code of the inhibitor chips, and using backdoor codes to help Ventress and Vader shut the Separatists down. But now he, Gin, Wires, Mal, and Uni have to slice the entire Holonet galaxy wide *and* the Senate security feed *and* the Supreme Chancellor's computer *and* back ups *and* they have to do it now before brother kills brother all over the galaxy *and* the Jedi are massacred *and* the friends all die fighting the Sith Master.

No pressure.

"Do we have the code to shut off the kill order or not?" Gin yells over the alarms sounding all over the *Dauntless*.

"There is too much, he has files buried within files," Mal says, gesturing at the screen. "The worm is having trouble locating it. It's just too much."

"We're running out of time!"

"There!" Uni says. "I have it! *I have it!* Patch me in to all comms

via the satellites.” “You mean the ones Kickback hasn’t blown up!” Mal complains.

“We have to switch the holo feed. We have eyes on them in the Senate Plaza,” Wires orders. “Slice?”

“Got it. Uni, *broadcast the signal!*”

CV.

All over the galaxy, the GAR communicators and military frequencies spit out an incomprehensible screech of noise.

At the Temple, the clones chipped and freed stagger in the face of the sound. Some rip off their helmets from the pain, but when the noise ceases the Coruscant Guard stop and drop their guns. Some vomit. Some look ready to turn their weapons on themselves; a few do before their brothers can tackle them and stop them. Others rush to help brothers that just a moment before they were trying to kill or to help the wounded on either side of the battle.

The Jedi guarding the Temple stand down.

Rex yanks off his helmet and sucks in great noisy breaths of air. He looks out into night towards the Senate District where weapons fire continues. He calls for Jesse and a few others to get a transport here *now*.

CVI.

The turbolasers fall silent and Ahsoka staggers across the listing deck to helm control where Ollie is physically hanging on to the console to avoid falling. She has spent enough time flying and crashing with her Master that she is *sure* she can land what is left of the ship on Coruscant. Cody and Ollie hurry to strap themselves in.

“Are you sure you know what you are doing, Commander?”

Cody asks as she takes the controls.

“I’ve seen Master Skywalker do this *at least* a dozen times,” She tells him as they begin their descent (begin to fall really, but Anakin always says attitude is important when flying, so descent it is).

Ollie and Cody share a Look. Cody shakes his head and braces himself. “That doesn’t fill me with a lot of comfort, sir.”

CVII.

When the chipped clone troopers fall and stop fighting, Obi-Wan dispatches the last Senate Guard and puts away his weapon. Continuing to ignore the stabbing pain of his ribs in his chest and his burning throat, he grabs Anakin—Anakin, who is smashing an already destroyed droid to bits, still snarling and screaming obscenities in a mix of Basic and Huttese.

Obi-Wan disarms Anakin and pins his arms to his side, pulling him away from the carnage, and trying desperately to reach him in his madness. Anakin finally stops struggling against him only to collapse on the floor, like a puppet with its strings cut, dragging Obi-Wan with him. He shakes violently and then, as if some invisible hand is ripping into him, Anakin sobs, deep wretched cries.

Kix moves to help, but Obi-Wan directs him with a shake of his head to see to the injured troopers, some just coming back to their senses.

Echo yanks off his helmet and takes one terrified look at his broken General and rushes to get Padme and the babies.

Obi-Wan holds onto Anakin as tightly as he can, trying to ignore his own trembling hands, whispering soothing nonsense in his ear. He hopes that this will somehow be enough, that after everything they’ve been through he hasn’t lost Anakin.

The holoscreen flickers and security footage from the Senate Plaza now fills the screen and the sound of lighting strikes,

screams, blaster fire, and crashing lightsabers blasts from the speakers.

It isn't over yet, Obi-Wan realizes desperately.

CVIII.

The ship is shaking apart around them. Cody notes that they have already lost a good portion of the superstructure burning through the atmosphere. And then there is the other problem. To be in place to protect the Temple District from bombardment means that there isn't enough time, thrust, or lift to direct the crumbling ship anywhere other than somewhere halfway between the Temple and the Senate District as they crash. Ollie sees it too and is coming ahead to evacuate the entire area and prep emergency crews, but apparently the Coruscant Guard are already on the scene trying to rescue fleeing civilians and Senators from the battle happening at the Senate.

Master Plo cuts through the comm chatter, ordering them to get to the escape pods if they can, but Ahsoka knows that if they abandon ship, the risk is too great that the ship will go awry and hit the Temple or the Senate or any of the dozens of other residential buildings in the area. Someone has to fly her down to do the least amount of damage. Her teeth snap together from the jolting ride but she just keeps reminding herself that her Master could *totally* do this and she was his Padawan so she could do it too.

"Ahsoka!" Master Plo shouts over the comms. "The escape pods, *now!* That's an order!"

"I can do this!" she yells back. "I can!"

CIX.

Rex is hanging out of a gunship watching the *Negotiator* head

towards the ground like a fiery arrow. Further away, lightning is illuminating the Senate Plaza.

“Aw, *kriff!*” Jesse yells as he dodges and weaves around falling debris. “Who’s crazy enough to be trying to land the old girl?”

“Appo!” Rex orders through the comms. “You handle the ship, we’re heading for the Senate! Try and get the fire crews to—”

What is left of General Kenobi’s flagship slams into the ground, sliding forward at insane speeds towards the residential buildings, smashing itself to bits along the way. The noise is deafening, the ground buckles and part of the ship sinks into the lower levels before finally coming to a precarious stop, still burning in the growing dark of the night.

Everyone seems to hold their breath for a long moment before the tremendous noise of screams for help and rescue efforts fill the air. Coruscant Guards who were previously trying to massacre Jedi rush to the scene to help.

Rex is torn. Part of him wants to help at the crash site because he has a pretty good idea who was piloting and the bridge appears to be engulfed in flames, but there is still blaster fire coming from the Senate and lightning that means the Sith Master is still fighting. He must trust his brothers to handle the *Negotiator*. He yells at Jesse to continue on to the Senate, ordering the rest of the men with them to be weapons hot as they are about to come into range of whatever is going down between the Chancellor and Vader and Luke. Senate Guards and Sith are not deserving of mercy. They made their choices and now—

—and everything goes silent for an instant, leaving an eerie ringing in his ears and then—

—a soundless explosion of writhing blue black light blinds him and—

—a roar of sound catches up and the whole gunship tips to the side and nearly throws everyone out before Jesse rights their course.

“What. The. HELL?” Redeye manages to say. “Wh-what was *that?*”

Rex leans forward, his whole body trembling. "Land!" he yells to Jesse, "*Land now!*"

CX.

Luke and his father have never practiced fighting together, but just like when they faced Dooku it doesn't seem to matter, they move in tandem. They fight together like they were born to do so.

Luke goes low and manages a hit to Palpatine's leg and Vader moves in only for Force lighting to arc through him at close range. Vader drops his saber, his prosthetics shorting and sparking and Palpatine slashes out. Vader roars in pain and Luke uses the Force to desperately shove his father clear so the blow wounds, fracturing his mask, but it does not kill.

Luke lets the Force take over his every movement, blocks and parries faster than he ever thought possible, and then, *then* finds his opening, slicing off Sidious' hand. Maddened by pain, the Sith throws out great arcs of lightning, striking furiously and indiscriminately around the Plaza. Luke tries to block the lightning the way he saw his father do, but the barrage is too intense. He cannot protect both himself and his father and chooses to deflect the danger away from Vader's fallen form.

Luke goes down with a cry as Sidious' lightning attack connects and he loses his saber. Luke's flesh begins to cook from the inside out. In the distance over his own cries and screams of agony he can hear Sidious gleefully cackling about power. He cannot see his father. In the darkness he can only see Palpatine's horrible sneering look of triumph. The Light seems so far away and Luke can feel himself slipping.

Palpatine's sadistic joy seems to fill the air as much as the scent of ozone and burning. He has won! Just as he had foreseen, Darkness stands victorious over everything.

He is so engrossed in murdering the Jedi that he misses Vader

looming out of the dark behind him. Vader does not hesitate or warn, he draws on the last of his strength and impales Sidious with one vicious stroke and then both he and the would-be-Emperor fall.

Luke struggles to look up only to be blinded by the explosion of Dark pouring out of the Sith's body as he dies.

CXI.

Once there was a boy born the poorest of the poor, who owned nothing, not even the flesh upon his bones or the labor of his hands. He could claim no father nor mother; one he did not have and the other was owned by someone else. He could not speak or act for himself except in secret and always under threat of suffering and death. Anything he built in secret, anyone he chose to love, could be lost to him, taken from him, and he would be powerless to stop it.

He only had his thoughts and his feelings (*unspoken, hidden*) to truly call his own.

One day, a man traveled to the poor town where the boy worked. The man traveled with an angel and the boy offered all he had secretly built and loved to help them in their time of trouble in honor of lessons taught to him by the mother he could not claim nor hold. He saved them and in exchange the man told him that his thoughts and feelings could grant him power to win his freedom.

And so the boy left his mother still in chains and did not look back.

He was taught and trained how to wield the power within him, but in exchange, his thoughts were not his own to freely think and his feelings were no longer his own to express and feel. But the power gave him the ability to protect and fight back for the first time in his life. So he submitted to the leashing of his mind and felt secret feelings and thought secret thoughts, for he knew

that if anyone found out he would lose all he had, it would be taken from him, and he would be powerless to stop it.

And lose he did: mother, wife, dearest brother, little sister, comrades in arms, trusted mentor, values, causes, faith, hope.

A daughter and a son.

CXII.

He was being lifted up and through the ruins of his mask, faceplate half shattered, he could see Luke. His son was alive. He was here.

“Father,” he said. “Father, can you hear me?”

And then Vader felt it, the cool water touch of Luke’s Force presence, flowing through him. It brought sensation back to what little flesh he had left and he wheezed in pain, but it was a good pain. It was a good feeling. His son was here. He hadn’t lost him.

“L-luke,” he managed to mumble.

“I’m here, *I’m here*,” Luke said urgently, pulling him closer. “I *won’t* leave you.”

Vader wished he could feel his son’s arms around him.

“Is it done? Is-is... he dead?”

“Yes, yes. Father, it’s done,” Luke assured him, nodding jerkily before lifting his hand to block the glare from the floodlights of a gunship landing nearby.

“Tha-that’s good. That’sss good,” he slurred. “Safe, sssafe now. Ev’ryone sa-fe.”

Luke, Padme, the babies, Ahsoka, the men, all safe, even– even Obi-Wan.

Even Anakin.

“Father, help is coming. *Please*, hold on, we’re going to save you,” Luke begged.

He tried to focus, it was so hard to breathe. *My son, My son, I have to tell you, I am so fortunate, I am so, so proud...*

“... ‘Iredy saved, Luke. Already saved m-me.”

“No, *no*,” his son cried in denial. “*Don’t go!* Father–!”



CHAPTER 12

In Which the Jedi Discover Things Will Never Be the Same Again

CXIII.

Even knowing that Luke had left to face the Sith Master, nothing prepared Anakin for the moment when the holoscreen had come to life and the Supreme Chancellor started yelling at the clones to kill the Jedi. Now curled up on the floor, Obi-Wan's arms around him, he still isn't prepared for the crash of sabers, Luke crying out in agony, and Palpatine screaming about power. He watches the light from the holoscreen splash across the walls and floor and over the bodies strewn around Padme's darkened apartment.

"—worst is over, Anakin, I'm here and—"

Something blocks his view, and Padme sits before him, Echo helping her down to the floor. Desperate, he reaches out a hand to her, to the twins. She is *here* and she is *breathing*; the horrible nightmares that have plagued him for weeks have not come true.

She is crying as she leans over him, hands holding onto him for dear life. He wants to tell her not to, *not* to hold onto him because he cannot be her bedrock, her certainty, her champion.

“–wouldn’t have gone to the Council, dear one, you must believe me that–”

The universe has cracked in two and Anakin cannot stop shaking, cannot stop the terrified sobs from spilling out. He cannot save them. He cannot protect them. He is not good enough, fast enough, smart enough, strong enough, powerful enough. Nothing is safe. Nowhere is safe. (He hasn’t cried so hard since that day when his mother was dragged away from him by Gardulla to serve as a bet on a pod race.)

“–please, nothing is more important, I know that–”

There is a tremendous crash and one of the few remaining windows blows out. The entire building seems to shake to its very foundation, cracks appear in the walls. Denal swears and then shouts that the *Negotiator* has just crash landed. Anakin squeezes his eyes tight shut. Ahsoka! Ahsoka is on the *Negotiator*! And here he is on the floor, unable to move, worthless and useless! *My Padawan, my men, the Temple–*

“–when I shouldn’t have. I am sorry, Anakin. I am so, *so* sorry–”

(Obi-Wan, that’s Obi-Wan still talking, he hasn’t stopped talking. He’s here. Obi-wan hasn’t left him.)

“–going to be all right, *I swear it*. We will make it all–”

And all sound vanishes and Anakin knows what to do without thinking. He sits up and grabs Obi-Wan, Padme, and the babies close in his arms and reaches for the Force just as a wave of Darkness comes roaring through the room. It is like being buffered by a sandstorm of hate and rage, writhing evil, searching, murderous, still desperately hungry for him, for Padme, for the twins...

No, Anakin thinks and feeling his loved ones beside him, his men around him, he somehow finds the strength to stand his ground in the Force.

NO!

The storm subsides and he looks around and they are all still here, they are all still breathing, the twins now wailing and crying, and the holoscreen blessedly silent at long last. Anakin draws one shaky breath after another and then reaches to help Padme sooth the children.

Leia's face is all scrunched up and red as she howls in displeasure and Anakin wraps his Force presence around her, checking frantically, but thankfully she is all right.

Luke, what about Luke? he thinks. Padme is rocking him even as exhausted tears drip down her cheeks. Obi-Wan reaches out and runs a careful hand over his son's head and sighs audibly in relief. *They're all right, they're all right and Palpatine is dead.*

The Force shudders around them, reverberating with after-shocks. Anakin blinks, trying to clear his greying vision. For some reason he feels divorced from his very body, as if he is in two places at once. He's finding it hard to breathe, his lungs burn. He tried to focus. A distant part of him is prompting him to action. He needs to get up, get to the crash site to check on Ahsoka (he can feel her, she *lives*, a flickering light nearby), go to the Temple and assess the damage, the Senate, he has to get to the Senate where Luke and the others have defeated Palpatine. He can't tell if they're alive or not, the holoscreen feed was knocked out by the Dark Force storm, but if he could just get up—

Anakin swears, just for an instant he sees... *someone* standing behind his wife, a flash of color and of stardust, and then it is gone.

CXIV.

"Sir, evac will be here in 10, what do we need to take?" Echo asks softly, crouching down to General Skywalker's level. His General starts at his words; he opens his mouth and then closes it. Dumbly, he shakes his head at Echo.

"Evac? Evac where?" General Kenobi says with a cough.

“Off planet, sir. We have orders to remove you from Coruscant as soon as we had a window of opportunity. The *Resolute* isn’t too badly damaged and we need to move. We need to get the Guards into surgery and remove the chips. Senator, what do we need to bring for the little ones?”

The Senator looks bewildered, reaching up with a shaking hand to wipe her face. “I-I don’t have any, I haven’t– I was going to go to Naboo to have the babies, but we have the vote first, tomorrow’s the vote, and, and –” She looks around the ruins of her apartment in shock as if just realizing the total destruction the fighting has caused. Echo winces internally. It’s a complete disaster area.

“I, uh, I don’t think there’s going to be any vote tomorrow,” Echo tells her carefully. “We’ll take care of packing, ma’am. Kix,” he said, calling the medic over. General Skywalker is deathly pale, shaking and sweating, and struggling to breathe. Echo has only ever seen one or two of his brothers look this bad after a firefight and he is really worried for the General. He is also *very grateful* that Captain Rex, Vader, and Luke had instructed him that he was not under *any circumstances* to take the General or his wife to the Temple after the confrontation ended. The Senator isn’t much better than her husband, being only a few hours post labor. General Kenobi looks like he is punch drunk after staying awake for too long on too many stims.

“The Council,” General Kenobi says abruptly, trying to engage rational thought. “We need to report to the Co...” he trails off as suddenly as he begins. General Skywalker literally and violently flinches away from the other Jedi at his words, leaning bodily over the babies being held between him and his wife, as if protecting them from some new danger.

Before Echo can interject and insist they leave for the ship, Kenobi backtracks.

“No, no, you’re right,” he says quickly, placing a hand on Anakin’s trembling shoulder, trying to bridge the sudden gap between them when a moment ago there was none. “Medical facilities on

planet will be stretched thin; the men need treatment. The *Resolute* will be perfect, thank you Echo.”

That is all he needs to hear. Echo will get them to safety and then hopefully there will be word from Fives and the others by the time they are in the air.

CXV.

As the gunship hovered over the Senate Plaza, Rex leapt out, not waiting for it to land, the men right behind him. The attacks from the Senate Guards have ceased, but Rex wasn't taking any chances, gun drawn and at the ready.

He found Chatterbox first, trying to keep Hardcase from bleeding out, a tourniquet made out of pieces of his cloak tied around his leg. Rex didn't think he'd ever seen Hardcase look so still and quiet, his eyes unfocused, his breathing shallow.

Fives was still somehow awake and sobbing in pain, Chatterbox not daring to move him any further due to a spinal injury until a medic could be called to the scene. Rex placed a careful hand on Fives' shoulder and whispered in his ear that help was here, waving the medic over urgently.

There was noise from the Senate. People were starting to come out of the building, senators and aides and even droids, drawn to the scene now that the fighting had stopped and the holonet had gone off. Rex ordered his men to keep everyone back and if necessary to deal with what was left of the Senate Guard. He moved forward, Jesse on his six.

The body of the Chancellor was nothing but a black smear on the ground. And Luke... Rex found Luke curled over the shattered body of his father.

He holstered his weapon and took off his helmet. He approached Luke slowly, hands clenching and un-clenching. What could he say? When he lost batch brothers or close squad mates he had been trained to leave the dead, to keep going no matter

what. Grief came only in the darkness of the barracks, or some quiet corner of the landing bay, brothers remembering those lost. Clones were bred to be soldiers in service to the Jedi, but now, when Rex had more freedom and more opportunity than ever before in his life he felt truly powerless.

Luke's head rose and his hands came up to his father's cracked mask. Carefully, he lifted first the helm and then peeled back the face plate. Rex swallowed hard at the sight of the man underneath. Behind him Jesse hissed under his breath in sympathy as the burned and scared flesh came into view. (There had been talk when Vader had shown up on Umbara, whether he was a droid or if he was like Grievous, some sort of half man half machine, inhuman and monstrous. But there was a person under the armor, a man, covered in scars.)

Wordlessly, Luke balled up his gloved hand and began to smash first the mask and then the helmet to pieces. Rex stepped forward, reaching out to stop Luke before he hurt himself only to realize that his hand was a prosthetic.

Rex wondered how he had lost it.

When the mask was dust, Luke reached for his father's chest plate armor and untangled the respirator apparatus and smashed that as well. Finally, he took his father's armorweave cloak, pulled it free, and slowly, carefully drew it up to serve as a shroud.

"Captain Rex," the Jedi said in a low choked tone.

"Sir," he responded, coming to attention.

"The war is over. We have peace." There was a long pause. (Luke had said those words so many times, willing them to be true. Now at last they were true, Rex realized.) "I-I am not sure what I'm supposed to do now," he admitted, voice cracking with despair. His hands shook over his father's body. "We—we didn't really *talk* about what we would do after the Emperor was dead." Luke swallowed hard. "I think maybe... he didn't expect to live. *I* didn't expect to live," he added. "Some barely-trained Jedi facing him and living, when he killed thousands of the very best." He ran an

exhausted hand over his face, wincing when he touched on the burns, raw and red on the edge of his jaw.

“Sir, you need a medic,” Rex offered anxiously. He wanted to stop this talk, stop it *now*. Luke and Vader had always stood so calm, so firm, so competent like nothing could shake them. To know that they were simply hurdling towards this confrontation with that *skrag* Palpatine and never expected to come out the other side... “You’re injured. Let us—”

“What am I supposed to do now? This isn’t my place,” he murmured. “No future for him, for us. I don’t want to hurt them, they’ve been hurt enough. But- but I can’t go on alone. Maybe... maybe I should—”

Rex stepped forward and took hold of Luke’s shoulders, drawing him back from his father’s body. Jesse and Redeye moved quickly to gently lift Vader onto a stretcher. “Sir,” Rex urged. “We need to get you to a medic.”

“No, I can’t leave—”

“Sir, if Vader were here he would *kill me* for leaving you injured. I’m not so sure that he won’t find a way to kill me even now if I don’t take care of you. *Please*, sir,” Rex said desperately. “Let us help you.”

Luke’s eyes never left the body. He finally nodded. He staggered to his feet, leaning heavily on the Captain’s shoulder and together they walked toward the waiting gunships.

CXVI.

Appo lands with relief troops from the *Pioneer* and the men hurry to get to the bridge of the *Negotiator* as fast as they can. They find Cody trapped under a fallen pylon and Ollie and Ah-soka are collapsed nearby, both barely breathing due to smoke inhalation, both suffering burns on their face and arms.

There is the question of which medical facility to take them to. Local hospitals and wards will not treat clones (by Republic

law the Kaminoans have sole copyright of their genetic code and have decreed clone biology a trade secret). Moreover, the local medical facilities are no doubt overflowing with civilian casualties. Luckily, Appo receives word from Waxer of the 212th to bring the injured to the Temple to be treated.

(Appo later learns there was a fight about treatment of the brothers injured in the Temple assault. The Jedi didn't want to let them bring the wounded and the dead into the Temple. Even with it crumbling around them, they tried to keep everyone out. But Dogma, (*Dogma*, out of all of them), forced the Jedi into letting the clones come in for treatment. They say he stood up to General Windu himself and forced himself past the man and his saber, refusing to be cowed. They say Dogma told the Jedi that they would have to kill him to stop him. He refused to let his injured brothers suffer an instant longer than necessary just because of Jedi rules and tradition and Republic law.)

Dogma has the men lay out the bodies of the Coruscant Guard killed by sabers, turbolasers, and crumbling masonry side by side in what probably was the Jedi equivalent of a mess hall and places them under a stasis field. Even more bodies of the 501st and 212th are laid to rest there as well, some killed by fellow clones, refusing to use lethal force on those still chipped, even to save their own lives.

Appo posts an honor guard around their dead and feels a sick sort of pride in knowing that none of the Coruscant Guard were killed by the combined clone forces defending the Temple. Injured yes, but dead? No, not a one. (He also finds for the first time that he feels uncomfortable around the unfamiliar Jedi. As he walks the halls of the Temple, he cannot help resting his eyes on the sabers at their belts and thinking how many of his brothers they cut down rather than subdue through some other method.)

Commander Wolffe and the 104th arrive with reinforcements and medical supplies. General Koon works tirelessly with Boost, Vir, Waxer, and Shocks to treat the Coruscant Guard, healing the

genetic defect and preparing the chips for surgical removal.

Appo isn't sure how he feels when he sees one of the Jedi Healers (a Mon Calamari female) finally step forward and ask to be shown the Force healing technique almost a day later, after hundreds of Guards have already been treated by the tireless efforts of the General and the Force sensitive clones. General Koon directs her to work with Vir. But Appo does know he feels a sense of fierce pride when a member of the Coruscant Guard, shaking and pale, is discovered to be Force sensitive. The Force sensitive clones are quick to assure him that he can receive training if he wants and he can take as much time as he needs to get back on his feet again. The Guard, who doesn't even have a Name, can't do much more than nod, but Appo isn't worried for him. His brothers are never more than an arms length away and General Koon invites him to join his Force training sessions over the visible and whispered dismay of the Jedi hovering nearby.

When Commander Wolffe finally insists he get some rest, Appo ends up bunking down with some other men on the floor of some unused room, all of them staring at an unfamiliar ceiling in silence; too tired to even sleep, too wired and uncertain in the silence of the Temple. It is only when he hears the nearby patter of feet and younglings chattering nearby that every muscle in his body starts to unclench and he can finally roll over, get comfortable, and sleep.

CXVII.

When Ahsoka wakes she pushes at the oxygen mask over her mouth and nose with clumsy fingers. The medical tubes and elastic ties on the mask are cutting painfully into her lekku. She fumbles around until she pulls off the mask and immediately regrets trying to breathe without it. Things start beeping around her and then someone grabs the mask and presses it back against her nose and mouth. She looks up and sees Cody sitting,

(floating, he's on a hover chair) by her side.

"Put the mask back on, sir," Cody croaks, "Or the medics are going to come down on you hard."

Ahsoka uses one unbandaged (*bandages? really?*) hand to hold onto the mask and takes a few deep breaths. "I think you can call me Ahsoka now," she says. She recognizes the Temple's architecture. She peers at Cody, whose leg is propped up and covered in bandages rather than bacta, which has Ahsoka worried about a bacta shortage on Coruscant of all places. She looks around the rest of the ward and sees Ollie and troopers she does and does not know in the beds nearby. "Master Anakin, Master Obi-Wan, the men—"

"Echo reported in that the Generals, the Senator, and the babies are alive and he's taken them to safety. Troop casualty numbers were much higher than we hoped for. There's been some suicides among the Guards," Cody says softly, trying not to be overheard, as he gives her the briefing. He knows she won't rest until she hears the news and doesn't bother to try and convince her to go back to sleep. "The Jedi at the Temple suffered some injuries and only a few deaths. There were some Jedi deaths out in the field before the compromised clones could be stopped. There were some civilian casualties, but not as many as there could have been if you hadn't piloted the *Negotiator*. Many troopers died, both defending and attacking the Temple," he finishes quietly.

Ahsoka swallows hard. "The Sith Master? Who was it? It was too risky to have the Senate feed on GAR frequencies, not that it seemed to matter, the men still got triggered," she says bitterly. "Is he captured? Is he dead?"

Cody is stonefaced. "He's dead. Vader killed him. It was the Supreme Chancellor."

She chokes at his words, chest heaving as she tries to breathe. "No, that's not true! That-that's *impossible!*"

"It's true," Cody insists firmly, reaching out and taking her free hand in his and just holding it, gently. "It was Palpatine. He

controlled the Republic and the Separatist at the same time. The whole war was a sham. Start to finish, it was all him.”

Tears prick her eyes. She can’t believe it. Her mind frantically goes over every moment she had ever spent with the man, had seen him, had been in his presence, had defended him and helped her Master save his life. She’d felt *nothing* through the Force, not even the slightest hint that he carried any Darkness. But Luke was right all those months ago when he’d told her that it was obvious if she stopped, used her head, and *thought* about it. Who else could have funded the creation of a clone army and implanted them with control chips? Who among all the galaxy was benefiting from the war no matter what happened on the battlefield?

Force, she has been so *blind*.

“He’s dead,” Cody assures her. “He’s dead and can’t hurt anyone else ever again. You can even watch the holovid of the whole fight if you want and watch him die on repeat. They keep showing it on the holonet. You’d think the galaxy had never seen a lightsaber fight before, the way they keep going on and on about it,” he says sardonically.

Ahsoka struggles to find composure. “I bet- I bet it was a pretty awesome fight. Are they here?” she asks, trying to raise her head. “Luke and Vader, Fives and Hardcase and Chatterbox? I can’t believe there’re clones in the Temple, but if they let *Vader* inside...” she says with a watery laugh.

The commander shakes his head. “They were taken to the *Dauntless* last I heard. They took a hell of a beating, but Rex commed before they left the system and said everyone was going to pull through in time. Vader... his injuries were too severe,” he explains. “He died shortly after the Sith Master.”

Ahsoka closes her eyes. She isn’t sure why, but the thought of Vader’s death fills her with a profound sense of sadness, of loss.

No, I am not sad that Vader is dead, I am sad for Luke! She tells herself firmly. Luke has lost a father whom he loved (when *no one* in their right mind should or frankly could love a Sith). She

shouldn't feel upset about Vader's death. He was darkness and pain and barely controlled violence. (*He defeated the Sith Master, he unmasked Palpatine, and helped save them all*, something whispers inside her). But as much as Vader avoided her during their brief time together, (except to criticize her beliefs, the Order, and the way she held her sabers), Ahsoka cannot help but remember that there was more to him than just being a Sith. Vader could be quirky, just as obsessed with machines as her Master, and she cannot deny that he cared deeply about his son.

Sith killing each other, that's a good thing, right? Ahsoka thinks to herself. *It's a good thing Palpatine is dead. It's a good thing that Vader isn't around anymore to try and take power or do Sith things. It's a good thing.*

So why does she feel like crying?

CXVIII.

When Yoda arrived back on Coruscant several days after Palpatine's death, he cannot help but be shocked at the devastation and changes wrought in his absence. During the war, returning to the Temple had always given Yoda a measure of peace. It remained a sanctuary and a haven in the face of so much darkness. Now, the Temple and the surrounding area was in ruins. The whole top of the Temple structure had crumbled; what was left was structurally unsound and would have to be rebuilt. In the meantime, the Temple was exposed to the elements and outside world for the first time in millennia.

In another time, it would have been a bigger problem, but Yoda realized sadly that there were so few Jedi left that they could easily accommodate moving living quarters to safer areas deeper inside the Temple.

But it wasn't just the physical world that had so altered since he was last on Coruscant. The very atmosphere, previously so serene and quiet and solemn seemed permanently shattered.

Around the Temple, rumors and stories ran rampant as the extent of Sidious' plots were uncovered. The holo broadcast of his failed arrest and death were still being shown and whoever had managed to hack the entire holonet had also seen fit to dump all of the Chancellor's files into the public domain. Those who had knowingly profited or been complicit in his conspiracies were being arrested by the Coruscant Guard and were waiting for their trials before the Judiciary, (a long wait considering a solid quarter of the judicial officers were among those waiting for trial for their crimes of knowing collusion with the Sith, along with a third of the Senate). The Order was abuzz with the revelations of the past few days, a constant hum of conversation echoed through the halls. Jedi young and old seemed permanently glued to the holonet. Yoda couldn't seem to pass a single occupied room where someone wasn't watching or listening to the news.

(Yoda had also received word from Jedi Shadows and spies that similar arrests and political shake ups were occurring in the Separatist Alliance, spearheaded by the Sith assassin Ventress of all people, and backed by an army of oddly behaving battle droids. The neutrality of the Trade Federation, Banking Clan, Commerce Guilds, and the Techno Union had been shattered by the leaked files; the treaties they had hid behind for the entire war now null and void for dealings with a Sith. Who knew such iron clad treaties contained such a useful and previously considered obsolete contract clause?)

But what had captured the imagination of the watching Jedi and public were the ones who had faced the Chancellor, unmasked him, and defeated him. All across the galaxy, people wanted to know who their heroes were and where they were now.

Yoda *also* wanted to know, as did the Council.

How had a Sith Lord and his son known the truth when the entire Order had been blind to Palpatine's machinations? And just who among their Order had fallen to the Dark *and* fathered a child under their very noses?

The Jedi had no answers to give to the public, let alone members of their own Order. This didn't stop the Initiates from talking about it, play acting Jedi vs. Sith and the fall of Sidious, and glomming onto the clone troopers for stories (who more frequently than not indulged the "little Commanders" with the most gruesome battlefield tales of Luke and Vader or Skywalker and Kenobi that they possibly could). The creche Masters admitted to Yoda with barely concealed frustration that they had lost control over the situation and that the troopers staying in the Temple were encouraging all sorts of unorthodox behaviors in the younglings.

Yes, the clone troopers were *everywhere* in the Temple proper. They were seeing to their wounded and their dead. The Temple was the main hub where members of the Corsucant Guard were treated and healed of the genetic defect and the chips in their brains. Somehow, this also meant that the troopers from the 501st, the 212th, and the 104th had a right to *move in*!

Yoda still wasn't sure how it had happened and both Masters Fisto and Windu didn't want to talk about it. (No, really, that's all they would say when Yoda or anyone else asked. "I don't want to talk about it," Mace said and directed Master Yoda to talk to a trooper named Dogma if he had any questions about clones in the Temple). The clones made themselves at home, setting up a perimeter and a watch for security reasons, ate with the Jedi at meal times, and could be found at all hours of the day and night exploring the Order's sanctuary and gardens, peering in on the creche, using the training halls for their own exercises, and even going through the Archives at their leisure.

The Force sensitive clones, few and far between, (but noticeable because they were the only clones to wear cloaks of colors matching their armor markings), were causing an even bigger sensation. This worried Yoda tremendously as did the fact they had and continued to receive unsanctioned training in the Jedi arts.

When Yoda had come face to face with one of them, named

Waxer, just outside of the communal dining hall, he had not hesitated to talk to the clone, to instruct and warn him of the dangers of learning of the Force outside the sanction and rules of the Order. He felt it his duty as Grandmaster to speak out and try and put a stop to this dangerous practice. The Council and *only* the Council would decide who would be trained in the ways of the Force and the Order could ill afford even more rogue Force users wandering around.

Waxer's companion Boil had not hesitated in interrupting him, telling Master Yoda to *stick it in his pointy ear*, as Waxer was *only* four years old and was *more* committed than most Jedi to helping other people and if Yoda didn't like it, that was just *too bad* because Generals Kenobi, Skywalker and Koon had already agreed that all Force sensitive troopers could learn if they wanted to! Boil then loudly insisted that Waxer (and Vir, Boost, Shocks and the newly discovered Force sensitive Guards), were even planning to attend the next Initiate sparring session that Plo Koon was teaching and there was *nothing* Yoda could do to stop them!

The entire dining hall listened in, the Jedi aghast, the clones nodding and showing solidarity for their brothers. Yoda's ears were still twitching in the face of this explosion of temper as Boil pushed a red faced Waxer down the hallway.

Yoda had known that when the war came to an end the Temple and Order would not be the same as it once was, but this... never in his deepest meditations could he have foreseen this!

CXIX.

Jedi Council meetings were not what they once were, but maybe that was a good thing, Mace thought to himself. No more casualty reports. No more desperate strategy sessions. No more migraines caused by innumerable shatterpoints looming on the horizon. No more meetings on the battlefield via holo because

they were spread out all over the galaxy. Well, at least *the majority* of them were not attending meetings via holonet, (Obi-Wan wasn't attending Council meetings in person and he sure as hell wasn't on the battlefield!)

Meetings were longer than before because now the discussions were on matters that the Order had delayed in addressing because the war previously took top priority. Mace wasn't sure why he always imagined things would be easier once the war was over but he had been so, so wrong. The list of problems requiring the Order's attention was daunting.

There was the decimation of the Order to consider. So many Masters and Knights and Padawans were dead that there was actual talk of abandoning the rule limiting one Padawan to one Master.

There was the destruction of large portions of the Temple to deal with and it was clear that the Senate was not going to foot the bill to repair the Temple any time soon. The Council now met in the gardens open to the air and elements. In the distance they could hear some Padawans and younglings training, and more than likely, eavesdropping.

The Council had to grapple with the realization that Palpatine was Darth Sidious (They had taken orders from a Sith, had let him into the Temple and around their students! Mace was *still* struggling to release his fury into the Force and was spending much of his free time sparring with anyone willing to give him a challenging fight).

There were other massive changes in the political landscape to address that required the Order to make decisions that could affect them for generations to come. The League of Neutral Systems was turning out to be the saving grace of both the Republic and the Separatist Alliance when both of their economies nearly collapsed after Palpatine's death. The Order still hadn't figure out *how* it was that the ever growing League now owned all the previous debts held by The Trade Federation, Techno Union, Banking Clans and other commerce guilds. However, considering the

League was willing to forgive all Republic and Separatist war debt if (*and only if*), the Reconstruction Accords were signed, no one was too anxious to ask many questions. The Reconstruction Accords themselves were being championed by Duchess Satine, Senator Organa, Senator Mothma, Senator Amidala, and Asajj Ventress and outlined complete and systematic reform of the galaxy, sentient rights (specifically clone rights), trade policy, the GAR, the droid armies, and even the Order's role in galactic affairs! The Order needed a voice in the negotiating process, but were struggling even among themselves to decide what to negotiate *for*! They had spent so long at the beck and call of the Supreme Chancellor fighting in a sham war, Mace wasn't even sure *he* knew what position they should take to protect the future of the Republic and the Order.

All this was nearly overwhelming, but there was still more problems that were making it difficult for the Order to find its footing. Many of their number (some injured by their own troops) refused to leave the former front lines until all the troopers in the field could be helped and healed (Master Secura, Master Billaba, and Master Mundi among them). Other Jedi were just plain missing. No one knew if they were alive or dead, they had simply not reported in.

Then there were the clones themselves! The clones wouldn't even *discuss* when they were leaving the Temple until all of their injured were healed or ready to move and their dead had been honored. Mace had a sinking feeling that even when all the troopers were healed, the 104th detachment under Commander Wolffe wasn't going to leave *at all* so long as Master Plo was in residence. Based on what Yoda reported, Mace feared that if the clones became a permanent fixture at the Temple, the creche masters and instructors would go on strike in protest and Master Nu would put the Archives under lock down.

The Coruscant Guard refused to answer to the Senate anymore and there was no new Supreme Chancellor elected, (and would not be for some time. What was left of the Senate was

gripped in a constitutional crisis). The Guard had defaulted to answering to the Clone Marshall Commanders who conferred only with each other and a clone representative known as 99, whom no one on the Council could recall ever working with! The Clone Commanders now decided *among themselves* what orders they would follow and what Jedi and Senators they would listen to. It was a level of autonomy that was terrifying to contemplate and the Order didn't dare admit to the Senate that they no longer held command over the GAR lest it spark fears of a coup.

Senator Organa and Duchess Satine had vouched for this clone known as 99 though, which made the Council feel a bit better, but where was Senator Amidala, usually the Order's staunchest ally in the Senate? Her apartment was revealed to be a warzone during a nightly holonet news report. Other residents of 500 Republica recounted the terrifying attacks they witnessed both before and after the unmasking of the Sith Master. If it wasn't for Representative Binks informing the galaxy that Senator Amidala was alive and well on a sabbatical (but fully supporting the Reconstruction Accords), there would have been a panic.

To top off all of that, at some point during *every single meeting* the Council had, Master Yoda would bring up the subject of when Kenobi and Skywalker would return to Coruscant, (not that Mace necessarily *wanted* Skywalker back, trouble followed him like a black cloud), when they would receive a full debrief on the events of Palpatine's fall, and where Luke was now that Vader was supposedly reported as dead.

Every time that happened, *every single time*, Obi-Wan would claim technical difficulties and cut his holo transmission.

"Subtle, he is *not*!" Yoda grumped.

The Council had initially called for Ahsoka Tano to come before them and report further on her time spent with Luke and Vader. She had answered every question the Council posed, but otherwise volunteered nothing, much to Mace's frustration. With no other option and resources so limited, the Council voted to send Ahsoka to bring Kenobi and Skywalker back to Coruscant

immediately.

Not only did she fail to bring either Master back, she had filed a written report giving only the vaguest of details and had ignored all further comm messages from the Council thereafter!

"She is with her Master," Plo assured them, the picture of calm. "A student's place is with her teacher."

Mace frequently began and ended the meetings feeling exhausted. Peace was no less hectic than wartime. He could tell his fellow council members were tired as well (*except* Obi-Wan who looked more and more rested, and dare he say it, *happy* as the days and weeks went by, when he bothered to attend meetings at all).

Maybe, he should leave Courscant too, Mace thought testily. Maybe he should change his look the way Obi-Wan had and start deliberately avoiding Council meetings. Maybe then he could get some rest.



CHAPTER 13

In Which Promises are Made and Kept

CXX.

Ahsoka accepted her mission to retrieve Master Skywalker from the Council with a bow. She wasted no time leaving the gardens. Commander Cody in his hoverchair and Ollie, still covered in bandages and healing burns, joined her as she walked. She visited the quartermaster who gave the men by her side a dubious look and grabbed a cloak and two packs and then went to her Master's quarters.

She had never been inside Anakin's room before. She didn't think she'd ever been inside a room that *felt* more like him though. Posters decorated the walls. A homemade model of his star fighter (complete with miniature Artoo) sat in a place of honor. He didn't have a desk so much as a mechanic's workstation. He had no chairs, using the many crates filled with parts stacked around to sit on. (She still couldn't believe that Obi-Wan let Anakin keep his room like this.)

Ahsoka didn't hesitate. She handed one of the packs to Cody and told him to gather any personal items he could find in Master Kenobi's room, (Cody couldn't even fit into Anakin's room while in the hoverchair), while she and Ollie tackled Anakin's things. She let the Force guide her in deciding what to take and what to leave.

Call it foresight, but she just *knew* that neither Anakin nor Obi-Wan would be returning to the Temple any time soon and wherever they went, she would go too.

(Once upon a time, such a thought would have been unthinkable. Once upon a time, she couldn't even conceive of leaving the Order. Now she packed her Master's things without hesitation. She knew she was on the right path.)

When she and Ollie finished and joined Cody in the shared living room, his pack was still empty and he held a rock in his hand.

"This was all there was," he said, holding it out to Ahsoka.

She took it into her hand and turned it over and over. It seemed like just an ordinary rock to her until she reached for the Force, then it began to visibly shine. She stuffed the rock into the pack and asked Cody to grab the mugs and the tea pot from the kitchen, while she took any tea she could find from the cupboards. She had Ollie take the plant on the kitchen table. Ahsoka then headed to her own quarters and leaving the men outside, emptied her one drawer of personal items into the second pack.

"I'll be taking the *Twilight*," she told them as they walked her out of the only still usable entrance of the Temple. "I'll comm when I get there."

"Do you even know where to go?" Ollie asked, one brow raised.

She rolled her eyes. "*Please*. Skyguy is married to Senator Amidala and has kids; where do you think he is?"

"Naboo," both Cody and Ollie replied in perfect unison.

"Exactly," Ahsoka said with a nod as she juggled holding the

second pack and the plant in her arms, “and Master Obi-Wan is probably with them.”

Ollie blinked at that. “Then why is the Council sending you on this mission to find General Skywalker? General Kenobi is on the Council and with him. Why not just order him to bring General Skywalker in?”

“Because,” Cody explained, “the Jedi don’t allow their members to get married and have kids any more than we in the GAR are allowed to marry and have kids. General Kenobi knows that General Skywalker broke regs, but has decided to help keep his secret. For some reason, no one else on the Jedi Council has figured out that General Skywalker is married to Senator Amidala yet.”

“*Ohhh*,” Ollie exclaimed. “I understand sir.” Then a frown crossed his face. “No, I don’t know why I said that. I don’t understand. How does *no one* know that General Skywalker and the Senator are married? She was pregnant while she was onboard the *Negotiator*. It wasn’t like they kept it a secret. They were professional about it, but we all knew.” He looked at Ahsoka. “You knew, right Commander?”

“Of course I did,” Ahsoka said hurriedly. “I knew. I always knew. It was obvious, wasn’t it? The way that he would bring her tea and rush to her rescue all the time. Soooo obvious.”

Cody crossed his arms over his chest and smirked knowingly at her. She glared back at him, daring him to contradict her.

“*Anyway*, there is no need to let anyone else on the Council know where they are or what they’re doing. With all the Council has to deal with and everything my Master has been through, no one needs to know about the marriage or the twins.” she insisted. “I don’t care how obvious it is to you, a-and to me, of course. We’re keeping this secret, got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Ollie agreed. “I’ll be sure to spread the word to the men.”

“Good,” Ahsoka said, swallowing a sigh of relief.

“Let General Kenobi know the 212th is ready to meet him on

Naboo with the rest of the fleet as soon as he comms,” Cody said. “Safe travels, Commander.”

“I have a name, Cody,” she reminded him. “People who fly with me get to use my name.”

“Ah yes, the perks of surviving General Skywalker’s piloting techniques. General Kenobi always mentioned them with such fondness. Now I know why,” Cody said, with a glint of humor in his eyes. Ollie swallowed a laugh. “Safe travels, Ahsoka.”

CXXI.

When they arrive on Naboo, Padme leads Anakin and Obi-Wan to a beautiful estate in the Lake Country. Other than the sound of nature and the occasional fussing of the twins, it is quiet.

Too quiet.

Obi-Wan has grown used to the pounding of canons and air strikes and hundreds of clones going about their daily tasks. He finds himself at loose ends, unaccountably twitchy.

Padme and Anakin seem to find ways to fill their hours. Padme may be on “sabbatical” according to the media, but she continues to work tirelessly pushing for the adoption of the Reconstruction Accords, rooting out corruption, and comming political leaders and diplomats on dozens of different worlds to help support relief efforts that the GAR is engaged in. Anakin is never far from her side, guarding and caring for the twins, and happily filling the role of aide and assistant.

Obi-Wan feels he should be busy too. He needs to be... well, he’s not quite sure what he needs to be doing other than being where he is, but he just doesn’t seem to be much *use* to anyone.

Practicing saber forms alone doesn’t help. Meditating doesn’t help. Even when he tries to sleep, his mind revolts, jolting him awake in panic without reason or cause.

It is just *too quiet*.

And it's not only because Anakin hasn't uttered a single word nor made a sound in days.

(When treating Anakin on the *Resolute*, Kix told them it would take time and not to press. Anakin wouldn't be the first soldier Kix had seen go temporarily mute during the war.

Obi-Wan had gaped upon hearing the medic's matter of fact diagnosis. He'd never heard of any such condition before, and certainly no Jedi Knight would simply *stop talking* without a physical ailment as the cause. When he had pressed Kix for a cure, the medic had glared at him and repeated himself slowly and forcefully; time, patience, and a chance to rest was what General Skywalker needed. When he agreed to follow Kix's instructions, the medic had provided him a file on the subject of battle stress and trauma and practically ordered Obi-Wan to "educate himself.")

Desperate for something to do, for something to distract himself with before he goes to pester Anakin by having another one sided conversation with him, Obi-Wan stumbles upon a beautifully furnished room, (just like all the others), but this one has a holoscreen stored away as if it is a guilty secret. He flicks it on and the sound of podracing fills his ears.

Of course, he thinks, in this home the holoscreen would be set on the racing channel.

As if somehow inexplicably drawn by the noise from clear across the estate, Anakin appears on the couch, the babies with him, (they are never far away, Anakin barely lets them out of his arms and Obi-Wan has found him sitting in front of their crib, dozing in the night as they sleep.) Obi-Wan is stuck watching racing highlights with Anakin for the next two hours until the twins need feeding and Anakin, reluctantly and still silent, drifts away.

Obi-Wan flips through a few other channels, catching a bit of news and a rebroadcast of Sidious' death which he hurriedly skips over, (he hasn't watched it since it aired live and has no desire to watch it now), and then he lands on what appears to be

a cooking channel. A portly Twi'lek is making something called a *roux* to finish off what looks to be one of the most delicious meals Obi-Wan has ever seen. He ends up marathoning the program for the rest of the afternoon, imagination on fire by the idea that "Anyone Can Cook!" as the holonet chef insists.

When Ahsoka arrives on Naboo, she hands him his tea mug, his tea pot, his tea collection, his inherited plant, and his 13th birthday present from Master Qui-Gon. He is a bit bewildered by it all, but cannot deny it feels good to have these familiar items with him. She livens up the estate, but even Ahsoka's presence does not prompt Anakin to break his silence.

She finds Obi-Wan one afternoon engrossed in his cooking shows. In another time and place she would be teasing him about it, Anakin egging her on.

It is a well known fact in the Open Circle Fleet of the GAR that Obi-Wan burns everything but tea and his food is inedible by all sentient beings, (except Anakin, but then Anakin eats worms and insects so he doesn't really count). He isn't even allowed to prepare ready made rations after that debacle on Christophsis when he had helped set up the evening meal for the troops. (Commander Cody had politely begged that he stay away from the supplies they had fought so hard to bring to the starving planet and *never help with food preparation again.*)

However, without Anakin there to play along, Ahsoka does not tease, but sits and watches with him for a while, growing noticeably more bored as the show progresses.

Finally taking pity on the Padawan who has spent the last few days trying to be there for her silent Master to no avail, Obi-Wan asks her, "Do you want to see some magic?"

She has nearly nodded off, but now she jerks awake. "Huh? Magic?"

"Watch," Obi-Wan says and flips the channel over to a sports channel which was showing pod-racing heats on some planet that hasn't been devastated by war.

She stares at the screen for a long moment and then turns to

him in confusion. "I don't understand. What's so magical about—"

And Anakin enters the room and sits between them without a word; this time he only has Leia in his arms.

Ahsoka sits in shocked silence as the last 15 minutes of the program finishes and then the next program begins: masked wrestling.

"Now this is more like it!" Ahsoka crows, leaning forward with some interest.

Both Obi-Wan and Anakin turn to each other in a moment of perfect silent understanding and share a baffled look at the Togruta's taste in entertainment. Padme then wanders in and swaps Luke for Leia, not at all subtle about the fact that she wants to watch wrestling too.

Anakin, Obi-Wan, and Luke beat a hasty retreat as The Boulder steps into the ring.

CXXII.

Padme cannot sleep. Before giving birth, Anakin had informed her that according to the books he was reading it was a good habit to sleep when the babies slept. But no matter how much she tosses and turns, she cannot settle. She gets up and ghosts out of the room. She doesn't have to worry about waking Anakin. He's already left their bed to sleep sentry in the nursery, something he does more often than not, especially when he has nightmares.

She goes to the other side of the estate to the room where the holoscreen sits. It doesn't take long to find a clear, unedited holovid of Palpatine's death, still playing on one of the hundreds of channels. She curls up on the couch and watches the entire thing from start to finish, sound on. Then she rewatches it with the sound off. Padme is in the midst of watching it a fourth time with the sound off, when Anakin joins her, sitting silently next to her. He does not look at the screen, his eyes remain fixed on her

face.

She pauses the playback. Padme isn't sure how to express the idea that has been slowly forming in her mind for days now, but she knows she has to talk about it or it will fester between her and Anakin. She *has* to speak about it, at least once, no matter how much it hurts them both.

"After Luke and Leia were born, Vader came to check on them. He-he came into the guest room. He made sure they were warm. He even silenced his respirator so he wouldn't wake them."

Anakin says nothing. It has been days since she last heard him speak.

"I look at Palpatine in this vid and he's unrecognizable," she continues, gesturing at the paused battle on the screen—Vader and the Sith Master frozen in combat, red blades blazing. "His face, his voice, *nothing* is familiar. It's like I'm watching a stranger wearing his face. He was my mentor and I never really knew him. I never really *saw him*, the real him. I put my trust in a lie." Padme swallows, hands clenching into fists. She is so, so angry. She never saw the monster underneath the kindly mask and she *hates* him for tricking her, for using her and her husband, for betraying every hope she had entrusted him with. She leans forward and takes a deep breath, trying not to let the anger overwhelm her; she needs to focus on what she really wants to say.

"But when I see *Vader*," she continues, voice cracking. "I would know him anywhere. He wouldn't even have to speak. He wouldn't have to remove his mask. *I'd just know*," she says trying to convey the horrible truth that she has realized without actually saying the dreadful words.

Anakin moves suddenly to kneel before her. She doesn't have to say anything more. As always, he seems to understand her, understand what she is trying to say. Somehow he knows the truth too.

He bows his head and his voice is hoarse with disuse, broken with shame as he speaks. "I-I must have... I-I turned, I... I failed

you. *You died!* I dreamed and dreamed you'd die and the children were lost, and I couldn't save you! I couldn't save any of you! I *betrayed* you and the children and Obi-Wan and Ahsoka. I sided with *him*. I must have. I can't even—"

"No, *no*," she says cutting him off, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes in the face of his suffering. She reaches for him, cradling his face in her hands. "*You saved us*. Look, *look!*" she turns his head towards the screen, "You came back to save us all. You a-and Luke."

She embraces him, needing to feel him, and his arms wrap around her torso holding her so tight. "I'm sorry, Padme. I am so, *so sorry*," he cries.

"Shhh," she soothes, pressing a kiss to his hair. "You didn't *do* anything. The one who did, he fixed it. He fixed his mistakes and more. Didn't you know? You didn't hear the news. The famine on Dantooine, Luke and Vader brought food convoys into the system; they got past the pirates. The refugees stranded out on Charros, remember, the ones I told you about? They rescued them. On Vashka, where they had those horrible earthquakes and flooding and no one could spare the time or resources to help because it wouldn't help the war effort, they provided aid. He *remembered*," she says in amazement. "Years later and he remembered me talking about all those people in need and then he came back and he didn't just defeat Palpatine, *he helped everyone else*."

Anakin shakes his head. "He did monstrous things. He must have. I know. *I can feel it*. I've done monstrous things," he confesses.

Padme pushes against his shoulder until he draws back and meets her eyes. "*I'm not afraid of you*. I know who I married. *Never* forget that. I know you and I love you. That will *never* change."

He reaches up with one careful hand to stroke her cheek. "I love you. I love our children. No matter what else happens or what I do or-or what I become, please believe that. I will *never*

stop loving you.”

Padme nods. “I believe it and in you. I see the good in you and in him, even if you don’t. Just—just don’t hide or run away, Anakin. Don’t shut me out, *please*. Don’t go where I can’t follow you.”

“I won’t, I promise,” he says tearfully. “Wherever we go, whatever happens next, we’ll do it together.”

“Together,” she whispers back.

CXXIII.

Fives, Hardcase, and Chatterbox won’t let Luke be alone. It’s very obvious they have set up a rotating watch over him. At the beginning, they are all together in the medical quarters on the *Dauntless*, but Luke isn’t blind. He knows what they are trying to do. They are trying to distract him.

Hardcase pulls out a sabbacc deck, (since his initial plan to get Luke drunk was banned by the medics on duty), and Luke is reminded of Han and Chewie teaching him to cheat at cards.

Chatterbox turns on a holoscreen and they watch the Boonta Eve Classic together and all he can think about is his aunt and uncle, and father’s plans to kill Jabba and free Tatooine.

Fives, who is bed bound as his spine heals, has Echo scrounge up whatever reading materials he can find on the ship, (some really cheesy romantic holodrama tie-in), and proceeds to read it aloud over the protesting groans of all who are resting and recuperating in the medical quarters. He even makes Echo read dialogue with him during the romantic bits which has most of them crying tears of laughter and those with healing gut wounds begging them to stop. Even as he laughs, all Luke can think about is that he remembers a similar book hidden amid Leia’s few belongings on Hoth.

When the medics finally let Luke leave, he wanders around the ship, aimless. He spends a few hours with the Hack Squad, who have saved the galaxy as far as Luke is concerned. He finds most

of them playing holonet shoot 'em up games based on the Old Republic days. Mal and Uni are busy on the social holomedia sites, flooding them with anti-Sidious memes base on old holo-caps of Palpatine and his underlings, pro-Reconstruction information, and clone brother in-jokes and GAR humor. (He fully supports their efforts but Luke puts his foot down when he sees them about to post some holovids from their karaoke nights, though.) Luke joins them for a few rounds of the game but holo battle is too easy and they trounce all the other teams. He finally finds a empty office away from his students' watchful eyes and starts checking his comm for messages.

There is one from Ventress, as she describes life as the *de facto* spokesperson of the freed battle droids and her position as Speaker in the Separatist Assembly. ("They've all decided they want names because if clones have names instead of numbers they want names too. They have all decided on the Same. *Kark-ing*. NAME! ALL. OF. THEM. WANT. TO. BE. CALLED. ROGER! I CAN'T EVEN SABER THEM ANYMORE! THEY THINK I'M THEIR *KRIFFING* FRIEND! What the *hell* did Vader program into that worm?! Tell him he has a lot to answer for when I see him again!")

There are messages from the clone medics giving him updates on their efforts to help the clones out in the field, and which Jedi were injured or killed before the chipped troopers could be stopped. There are messages from commanders of clone battalions and companies he has never met, thanking him, and asking him what to do with natural born officers that have proven to be in league with Sidious.

There is a comm message from a Barriss Offee who most formally introduces herself and then proceeds to provide some of the most detailed reports he has ever read, and that is saying something. Luke has received reports from Echo, after all.

There is a message of condolence from Duchess Satine that is almost too painful to listen to. She tells him he is welcome on Mandalore any time, and shares news of how 99 and his squad

of Force sensitive children are doing and how very soon all the developing clones will be ready to be decanted.

Luke stops there. He doesn't want to think about his father. He doesn't want to think about visiting some planet. He just wants to stay on board the ship and try not to think about the future because honestly, what future is there for him? He considers for a moment what Ben must have felt like after the extinction of the Jedi Order and Anakin turning to the Dark side. He ended up a hermit in the Jundland Wastes. Yoda, the Grandmaster of the entire Order, spent two decades on Dagobah alone. Is that what he should do now? Find a place to live in exile so he doesn't disturb the lives of Anakin, Padme, Leia, and Luke, so he doesn't upset the timeline any more than he already has?

He wonders if he will ever see his father again, the way he saw Ben on Hoth and on Dagobah.

Luke picks up the datapad lying on the desk. Vader's list of disasters glows on the screen in front of him. He has the ships and the means and the men to tackle the ones that remain, but no Biggs, no Han, no Leia, no Chewie, no Wedge, no Rogue Squad, no droids.

No Father.

He closes the file and the screen now shows Vader's plans for the Tatooine campaign. Luke looks across the desk at the vacant chair on the other side. Such a short time ago, Vader was sitting *right there*, in this very room. His father had refused to show Luke his work, had password protected the file, but he must have not had time to save and close the battle plans before they arrived on Coruscant.

(Luke had tried to steal the datapad, pull it out of his father's hands with the Force to take a peek, but Vader had just tightened his grip.

"I said you were not to be involved in any planning on this mission and I *meant* it, young one," his father had insisted firmly.

Luke had rolled his eyes at that. "Who here knows his defenses

better than me?"

Vader had lowered the pad and even through the mask, Luke could see his father wasn't impressed with that argument. "Your intel is 20 plus years out of date. *I* am planning this campaign. Be grateful I am letting you come."

"*Letting me?*" Luke had retorted indignantly. "This was *my* idea. I'm the one who helped kill him the first time."

"That is why you get to come instead of staying with the fleet, despite the fact that *your idea* of good planning is getting yourself fed to carnivorous beasts. You're welcome."

Luke had made a mad grab for the datapad after that statement, but Vader had dodged, stood up, and held the datapad well out of non-Force assisted reach, radiating smugness.)

Now with the plans in his hand sitting alone in the office, Luke cannot tell how his father's plan is less risky than Luke's original plan had been! The only real difference is Vader put himself in the lead, facing the danger instead of Luke. He laughs for half a moment before tears threaten to overtake him and his vision blurs.

Is *this* how it's going to be from now on? Nothing but grief ready to swallow him whole, nothing but reminders of his father or his sister or his friends, reminders of a future lost? Luke chokes down the sobs threatening to break free. (He is terrified if he starts, he may never stop.)

Perhaps exile isn't such a bad thing, he thinks bleakly.

But first, Luke will see his father's plans completed and Tatooine freed from Jabba and the slavers once and for all. He owes it to the grandmother he never got to meet. He owes it to his Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru to try and give them a better chance and a better future.

But mostly, he owes it to his father to help Vader keep what Luke thinks must have been a very old promise.

He comms Rex and asks him to set up a briefing. He will invite the troops to help and once all of Tatooine is free at last, he thinks his father will not mind having his ashes scattered over

Shmi's grave at the Lars homestead.

CXXV.

At long last Anakin finds his words and starts speaking again. One evening Obi-Wan hears his voice; he is reading to the twins out of the storybook that Ahsoka had bought at the local market, (something about escaping rathtars; hardly appropriate material for children, but not surprising in the least.)

He sags in relief to hear Anakin speaking again. Obi-Wan didn't realized how much he'd missed hearing his voice.

Obi-Wan hesitates to interrupt, half afraid that his former Padawan will retreat into silence, but he has a promise to keep. He will not attend Council meetings via holo without telling Anakin he is doing so and giving him the opportunity to listen in if that is what it takes to show Anakin he can trust his old Master with his secrets and his family. After so many unfulfilled promises and half truths have nearly destroyed the boy he'd raised and trained, Obi-Wan isn't taking any more chances with the brother he loves.

He quietly stands in the doorway, watching Anakin with his children. Obi-Wan would never have expected Anakin to willingly forsake the visible joy he took in combat, in flight, and in battle for domesticity. It still baffles him that his former Padawan, who avoided mandatory creche duty at the Temple like the plague, refused to even talk to Initiates, and repeatedly rejected taking on a padawan, would be so happy to spend hours alone with two infants.

("That's probably why he avoided it all at the Temple," Ahsoka told him, when he had shared his surprise and confusion.

At Obi-Wan's lost look, she took pity on him and explained. "Look, it *doesn't matter* what the situation is- clones fresh from Kamino, younglings, those who are weak and in need of help - Master Anakin *always* reacts the exact same way. He starts to care, he gets attached, and then he gets insanely protective and

dotting. Skyguy can't help himself and he *knows* it. He's hardly going to willingly visit the creche and spend time with the younglings when he knows he is going to be lectured by *you* and censured by the Council for developing attachments." Ahsoka colored darkly in mortification, realizing what she'd just said. "I-I mean... I'm sorry, Master. That was rude—"

"No, no," Obi-Wan said, halting her apology. He was completely taken aback, his whole perspective of his former Padawan shifting. "You make a fair point. It just never occurred to me. I though he avoided it all because he disliked it so, not because the reverse was true.")

Ahsoka is right. Anakin is a natural with children, caring and protective. He is even doing voices as he reads the story, not that the twins can understand a word he is saying. But through the Force, Obi-Wan can feel their contentment, their happiness, as they rest against their father's chest.

Anakin finishes the story and as he closes the old fashion flimsi book, and then looks up, waiting.

Obi-Wan opens his mouth to tell him of the Council meeting, but what comes out instead is, "You're not going to bring the twins to the Temple."

"No, I'm not," Anakin responds quietly.

Obi-Wan struggles to find something to say, but he, the great Negotiator, is at a loss. "Padme is going to give up her Senate seat and raise them instead?"

Anakin rolls his eyes. "*No*, we're going to raise them together. Why would we have children if we didn't plan to take care of them? Besides, Padme will be vice Chancellor as soon as the Senate gets its act together."

Obi-Wan cannot ignore the ache of loss he feels at hearing those words. "You're leaving the Order, then."

(Obi-Wan wants to say he is surprised, but a part of him has been preparing for this day almost from the beginning. It had only been a few months into training his Padawan and he'd *just known* that the Order was not the place for Anakin, would nev-

er be home, would never be a welcoming sanctuary for him, would never replace the family that Anakin longed for. And even knowing that as long as he has, it still hurts. He thinks of all that could be if Anakin would just stay with Order. Anakin leaving the Order would be such a *waste*, because Anakin is an amazing Jedi Knight, an unparalleled warrior and defender. He is already renowned. If he stayed he could be a legend among the Jedi, remembered for millennia, if he only... if he only stopped being everything that made him Anakin in the first place, Obi-Wan realizes sadly.)

“Am I?” Anakin asks evenly. “I’ve dreamt of being a Jedi for as long as I can remember. I don’t plan to stop being one. I promised I would finish Ahsoka’s training and I know I can’t leave you alone to wander the galaxy. You’ll get yourself killed without me around to save you, Master. Don’t deny it. The last few years have made that abundantly clear,” He carefully gets to his feet, cradling the babies close as he takes them over to their crib, ignoring Obi-Wan’s affronted look at the thought that he needed Anakin to save him.

“So how exactly is this going to work then?” Obi-Wan asks in a quiet voice in deference to the twins, as he comes into the nursery. “Being a Jedi *and* a husband *and* a father?” While a part of him is greatly relieved that Anakin is not abandoning the Order, the Order isn’t just going to *let him* stay married and with children. What does Anakin think is going to happen? Does he think he can just hide the fact that he has twins and a wife? How long can he keep up such a charade with Padme in the Senate and Anakin traveling with Obi-Wan and the fleet? Obi-Wan can’t cover for him forever. He’s barely covering for him now!

He gets a shrug in reply. “Jedi raised families in the days of the Old Republic. We’ll figure it out.”

“Ah, so it’s going to be one of *those* plans,” Obi-Wan says with deep sigh. *Typical*, he thinks. Anakin is just going to wing it and Obi-Wan is sure this is a disaster in the making. “Wait a minute, ‘*we*?’”

Anakin hands him Luke to hold while he settles Leia carefully, before taking his son back to join his sister in the crib. “You’re not getting out of this, Master. I don’t know how people do it in the Core, but where *I* come from everyone in the family helps raise the children. Ahsoka will train one of them and you will train the other. You better choose soon if you have a preference. I think I saw her cutting up one of Padme’s maternity dresses to make them their own mini Jedi cloaks.”

“Train... *another* Skywalker?” Obi-Wan says weakly, looking down at the deceptively silent and peaceful children laying in their bed. They weren’t fooling him. They were trouble. He knew what Skywalkers were capable of better than anyone.

“Yep. We’re a special breed. It takes a special sort of teacher.”

“Is it too late to avoid this great honor?” he asks as Anakin covers the children with a blanket and turns down the light. “Surely there is some other way I could contribute to-to the family?” he asks, only hesitating a little over the unfamiliar words.

“Nope, we’ve already decided,” Anakin says, herding him out of the room.

“*We*?”

“Padme and I.”

“Oh well, if you’ve *already* decided...”

CXXVI.

Young Luke Skywalker was watching Commander Cody and Captain Rex intently. He rested his chin against his hands on the table and stared, ignoring his own lunch. It was very clear that he was only half listening to what Obi-Wan was saying.

When a lull in the conversation fell, he spoke up. “I am almost 8 now,” Luke announced.

Cody fought to keep a smile off his face. “Getting big,” he agreed. “Soon you’ll be joining us on missions.”

The boy straightened up with pride. “Big enough for full ar-

mor,” he declared. “I can get armor just like all the other clones when I’m 8!”

Obi-Wan sighed in mock despair. “And here I was thinking you would be wanting a real lightsaber for your Name day, like your father when I first started training him. You troopers have corrupted him,” he said, poking his fork towards the two clones.

Rex leaned in. “Armor is special, little brother. Not everyone gets to wear our armor. It’s just for us clones,” he said tapping his helmet resting on the table.

Luke’s brow furrowed in dismay. “But I *am* a clone! Shouldn’t I get to have armor too?”

Obi-Wan choked on lunch. Cody ended up spitting his drink out all over the table.

“What do you mean, *you’re* a clone?” Obi-Wan sputtered. “Who told you that you were a clone?”

It was probably Hardcase, the Jedi Master thought. He was always putting the strangest ideas into the twins’ heads.

Luke rolled his eyes. “It’s *obvious*. Just look at me and Leia.”

Cody and Rex looked at each other, their shared features, and then over at Luke’s blond mop of hair and blue eyes.

“Uh... Luke, we *know* who our brothers are and while we might call you little brother, and love you like a little brother, that doesn’t mean you’re a clone,” Rex explained carefully, not wanting to hurt Luke’s feelings but really needing to clear this up now. “You’re natural born. You have parents and a sister, remember?”

“Don’t be silly, Uncle Rex. I’m almost 8, I *know* that. Leia’s mom’s clone and I’m a clone of the other Luke, the grown up one. And because I’m a clone and I have a clone brother just like you, I should get to wear armor too.”

“Luke, that’s not...” but then Obi-Wan trailed off and looked at Luke Skywalker, his dearest friend’s son. *Really* looked at him and then with a growing sense of dread he looked over at Cody and Rex. Cody was blinking, stunned, having himself just put the pieces together. Rex on the other hand was averting his eyes, not meeting the Jedi’s gaze. It *couldn’t* be true. There was *no way*...

Obi-Wan rubbed his hands over his face. *Force, how **blind** was he?*

But if Luke and Luke Skywalker were the same person, that meant *Vader* was...

Obi-Wan stopped that thought in its tracks.

No.

No, it was too big.

His mind didn't even want to go there. His heart hurt. No, not his Padawan. Not the bright boy he'd trained. No.

(Yes, the Force said implacably).

He groaned. So much now made sense that was always so incomprehensible about that terrible wonderful day when the twins were born and Palpatine had been defeated. He took a deep calming breath and released it slowly. He then took another. Stars, it had been *right there* in front of him the whole time! Rex obviously knew. *How* did he know? Who *else* knew? Did *Anakin* know? Sweet Force, he hoped Anakin didn't know! But now that Obi-Wan knew, he would have to tell Anakin, right? Anakin hated secrets. They had promised each other, no more secrets.

How was this even *possible*?

Trying to get ahold of himself, he reached out to clasp Luke's shoulder.

"Luke, I was there when you and your sister were born. I can promise you, neither of you are a clone of anyone," he said slowly and calmly. "Not that there is anything wrong with being a clone," he added hurriedly, not wanting to replace one mistaken impression with another. "Just... you are *not* a clone and neither is Leia. Do you understand?"

"So no armor?" Luke asked sadly. Leia was going to be so upset. She'd already decided what design to paint on her armor and their play battles were going to be so much more epic with real armor and helmets. If they didn't get armor for their Name day, that also meant that Leia's plan to ask Dad about getting tattoos like the clones would probably not go well either.

Cody had placed his head face down on the table with a thump. Obi-Wan wanted to join him.

“No, I don’t think you will be getting any armor,” Obi-Wan told him. “Maybe when you’re older,” he temporized.

“*Oh*-kay,” Luke heaved a big sigh, but then looked up sharply. “So if I’m not a clone and Leia’s not mom’s clone either, then where do babies come from? You said you were there, so you must know!”

Rex couldn’t help himself, he started laughing.



CHAPTER 14

In Which Our Heroes Epically Fail at Communication But Succeed in Making a Difference

CXXVII.

Ahsoka is in the middle of telling the twins the story of the Blue Shadow Virus attack on Naboo as she puts them down for a nap when she sees a shadow move just out of the corner of her eye. She whirls around, scanning the garden outside the nursery doors. She sees nothing out of place and the Force is undisturbed, but her combat ready instincts have been honed through many a bloody campaign and they have not let her down yet.

Her fears seem well founded when Anakin comes skidding into the nursery, eyes wide and panicked. He has been vigilant in his watch over the babies since their birth and even the slightest hint of a threat or danger to them has him springing into action. He checks on the children in their crib and then turns to look outside. “What is it?”

Ahsoka shakes her head, hesitant to draw her saber with the

children in the room. "I don't know—" she begins and then two cloaked figures materialize from the riot of color in the garden. They are roughly humanoid, but the way they move speaks of combat training that rivals a Jedi.

Or a Sith.

They both kneel and raise their hands, showing they mean no harm.

"Who are you?" Anakin snaps. "What are you doing here?"

"Master Anakin, Master Anakin!" Threepio's voice floats down the hall as the droid hurries towards them. "Mistress Padme says that there are guests who wish to speak with you most urgently."

"We've already met them, Threepio," Anakin says, gesturing to the two kneeling figures in the garden. "Apparently, they are here for more than just me."

"Oh dear," Threepio cries, coming to a halt. "The twins!"

Trusting that Ahsoka is keeping an eye on their intruders, Anakin grabs one of the slings nearby and quickly picks up both babies. Leia makes a frustrated sound at being disturbed from her nap, but Luke doesn't stir as Anakin swaddles them against his chest. "Keep an eye on these two while I go find out what's going on," Anakin says as he backs out of the room, dodging Artoo rolling down the hall at top speed.

He finds the "guests" in the front room with Padme and Obi-Wan. When he enters, hand on his lightsaber, the twins nestled against his chest, the three visitors rise and drop into deep bows.

"What's going on?" Anakin demands. "Ahsoka found two of them in the garden near the twins! What business do you have here? Who sent you?"

Padme stands now, furious where a moment before she was hospitable. "I invited you into our home in good faith and you send others in secret to do what? What are you doing near my children?"

"You said you came to fulfill a debt, Khal'vat. If you mean to do harm, you will find you and your companions woefully out-matched," Obi-Wan warns.

"Forgive us, Maitrakh," the lead female says to Padme. "Two of our number were to stay behind for safety reasons until we could speak to you. They are young and have proven... overeager in their desire to fulfill their duty. We apologize."

"What debt?" Anakin asks impatiently. "Who are you?"

"I am Khal'vat of the Noghri," she says. "May I?" She holds out her hand. Anakin recoils, turning to keep the children out of reach.

"I mean your children no harm," she insists. "Your hand, please."

Anakin looks to Obi-Wan who reaches up to touch his left ear, a familiar battlefield signal. He narrows his eyes and takes off his left glove and gives her his flesh and blood hand. She raises his palm to her nostrils and breathes deep once, twice. She then releases his hand. She looks at both her companions and nods.

"Ary'ush," they say in unison with gravely metallic voices. As one, they kneel to Anakin. "We come to serve you in honor of the debt our people owe to your blood on behalf of all of the Noghri."

Anakin looks askance at his wife and then at his former Master. "I'm not aware of any debt owed to me. As a Jedi you owe me nothing for any service I may have rendered to your people. I do not expect repayment."

Khal'vat shakes her head in disagreement. "We owe you and your blood a great debt. Your blood prevented a cataclysm that would have destroyed our planet and enslaved us all for generations. We know it was not by mere chance that you aided us. Our Eldest Maitrakh has visions and knows what your blood has done for all the Noghri. In repayment, your enemies are now our enemies. Your battles are now our battles. We will serve and guard you and your family always." Anakin pales at her words.

"Anakin—" Obi-Wan begins, brow furrowing.

"They are from Honoghr. The 501st stopped a Separatist attack there months ago. It was believed that Count Dooku was developing a fleet armed with biologic or chemical weapons," Padme

says hurriedly. “We received the report through the Senate Arms Committee.”

“The ships nearly destroyed our planet and our people. We *must* repay the debt.” Khal’vat says solemnly.

“I-I—” Anakin says, looking to Padme who just shrugs helplessly. Anakin knows that this isn’t *his* debt. *He* didn’t stop the attack. He didn’t save these people. But how could the Noghri *possibly know* of his... connection to Vader and to Luke just by *smelling* his hand? Swallowing hard he meets Obi-Wan’s gaze. His Master hasn’t said anything about the Battle of Courscant, hasn’t brought up Anakin’s failure, hasn’t spoken of Vader, but now...

Obi-Wan strokes his beard, deep in contemplation. “Whatever your Elder may have foreseen, whatever that other future may have been, it did not come to pass. The sorrows of that future aren’t real. What matters is the present, the here and now. War came to your system through the acts of an evil that festered in the heart of our government. If anything, we owed you and your people and preventing the disaster was our repayment to the Noghri.”

Anakin is struck nearly breathless by Obi-Wan’s words. Things have been so different between them since Palpatine died, and Anakin has lived half in dread, half in hope, waiting for Obi-Wan to say *something* about Vader. He no longer has to worry though.

Obi-Wan doesn’t hate him. He doesn’t blame him for Vader. He isn’t disappointed in him. He’s still here. He hasn’t left. He’s still part of Anakin’s family.

Obi-Wan is looking at him now, eyes urging him to say something. Anakin nods, trying not to focus on the giddy sense of relief that fills him. “Yes, it’s us who owed you, who owed everyone for not figuring out who the Sith Master was sooner. We should’ve never let the war happen in the first place. There is no debt to repay.”

Khal’vat and her companions stand and bare their teeth. For a moment, Anakin is taken aback before he realizes the Noghri are mimicking the human custom of smiling. It is slightly terrifying

to see. “Your blood has made this argument already and refused our service. The honor of your family runs strong. But all the Dynasts are agreed in this. We will guard your family regardless. Our service is just much more... effective if you know about it and do not object.”

There is a crash from down the hallway, and Anakin can hear Ahsoka’s voice raised not in fear or in panic, but in surprise and perhaps with a touch of laughter. Artoo is whistling up a storm and Threepio’s fussing is more than audible in the background.

Padme shakes her head and sighs. She has put up with unwanted bodyguards before and got a husband, babies, a brother-in-law, and a foster daughter out of the bargain. She wonders what changes the Noghri will bring. “What sort of accommodations do you and your people require, Khal’vat?”

CXXVIII.

When Obi-Wan disembarked from the commercial transport, he honestly did not expect anyone to be waiting to meet him but there ahead of him, surrounded by her guards, was the Duchess Satine.

He tried to walk casually towards her, self consciously grabbing the edges of his cloak before forcing himself to let go of the material.

“General Kenobi,” she greeted him with all pomp and formality. “It is unexpected—” He lowered his hood and revealed his clean shaven face and she faltered. “Uh- it is –unexpected to-to see you on our planet. Y-you were not expected.”

She was staring at him. He wondered now if shaving the beard and mustache had been a mistake.

(Anakin had been insistent that he shave before he left though, threatening to do it in Obi-Wan’s sleep if he didn’t take care of it himself. Obi-Wan had nearly changed his mind in the face of such a threat as a matter of principal, until Padme had chimed

in that she thought the beard made him look twenty years older than he really was.

Ahsoka had listened to the exchange quietly but he later overheard her talking to Anakin about it: “So Master Obi-Wan didn’t always have the beard?”

“What? No, when I first met him he didn’t have a beard or a mustache. He wasn’t *born* with it, Snips.” A pause. “You thought he was born with it? How could you think that?”

“How would *I* know? You humans with your weird *face hair* on your foreheads and on your lip and chins. Master Dao has hair growing out of his *nose*! What was I supposed to think?”)

Obi-Wan wasn’t just without his beard though. He’d left his armor behind as well, though he did still have his lightsaber. He should have remembered to leave it behind, but he’d forgotten and felt more naked without it than without his facial hair.

Satine was still staring. Obi-Wan realized it was his turn to say something. “Thank you for coming to meet me,” he responded with a bow. “How are you?” he asked awkwardly.

Satine blinked rapidly as if coming out of a daze. “We are doing quite well,” she said absently, but then her tone hardened. “The same cannot be said for the Republic unfortunately. What demands does your Order have on Mandalore today?”

“No-no, you misunderstand,” Obi-Wan hurriedly tried to explain. “I’m not here on behalf of the Republic or the Order. I came to... to see how Mandalore was doing now that the war is over.”

“You came to see how *Mandalore* was doing?” she repeated incredulously.

“Yes. There’s been so much destruction and I had some free time so came to see Mandalore. I was just on Naboo, you see—” he said gesturing behind him.

“Naboo?” she asked.

“Yes, the weather on Naboo is lovely this time of year. We escorted, well, when I say we, I mean Anakin and I, we escorted Senator Padme, I mean Senator Amidala home after the fighting

on Coruscant stopped. She has a house in the Lake Country. Have you ever had the pleasure of visiting? It's very nice and—"

Some part of Obi-Wan was aware he was babbling. He just couldn't seem to stop. Finally, in desperation he thought to himself: *what would Anakin say?* Anakin had the love of an amazing woman. Anakin had somehow been able to make enough coherent conversation with Padme that she desired him as her husband. Surely *he* could at least manage to do as well as Anakin! He thought back to his former Padawan's attempts at talking with the Senator that he had been witness to all those years ago.

Maybe Padme had taken pity on him?

"—I've never been to the Lake Country before now. Um, yes..." he trailed off.

"Well, General, *Mandalore* is doing just fine."

Obi-Wan tucked his hands into his sleeves. "Oh, that's good. Yes, very good."

Satine's lips pursed and he recognized that look of barely concealed frustration. "So, if there isn't anything *Mandalore* can help you with—?"

"Would you mind if I stayed?" he interrupted, voice cracking like a thirteen year old. "For a visit? It would be nice to see *Mandalore* when I am not on a mission."

She is taken aback at his question. He has managed to surprise her. She raised her eyebrows. "A *social visit*? I wasn't aware Jedi were able to socialize," she remarked sardonically as if inviting him to argue with her. Obi-Wan refused to rise to the bait. "You would have to abide by all the rules as a *guest of Mandalore*," Satine reminded him sternly, gesturing to his weapon.

Without hesitation, he unclipped his lightsaber from his belt and held it out to her. "Here," he said, pressing it into her hand hilt first.

She took it in reflex and gaped at him for a moment before looking down at the saber in her hand. "I thought a Jedi's lightsaber was his life," she murmured.

Obi-Wan nodded. "It is."

Satine looked at him and then slowly, wonderingly, she began to smile.

CXXIX.

Echo shut off the comm and sat back with a long sigh. He turned in his chair to look over at Jesse who stood just outside of holo range.

"You owe me," he said testily.

"I said I would pay and I will," Jesse replied.

"No, I mean you *owe* me more than what you promised. You knew if I took your shift that Senator Amidala would comm. You knew! You threw me under the AT-ET! Don't deny it."

"Look, I'm not the one to blame here. Luke is the one who gave the order that he doesn't want to be disturbed while coordinating the Tatooine campaign. If you want to blame anyone, take it up with him!" Jesse said raising his hands defensively.

"At least it wasn't the General. If it was him, I don't know what I would've—"

The comm beeped alerting them of another incoming message from Naboo. Jesse hurriedly backed away. Echo swore and tried to grab him, but then the holo receiver lit up with a Priority One message and there was General Skywalker. "Echo, it's good to see you."

"Good to see you too, sir," Echo said coming to attention, trying to inject a positive tone into his voice to cover the dread he felt. "Would you like a status report?" he asked hopefully.

The Jedi raised one brow. "No. I'd like to speak to Luke."

"He's unavailable sir. He's in a planning meeting with Captain Rex and is not taking any live comms for anything less important than a full scale Sith uprising, sir," Echo said, staring off into the middle distance, mentally preparing himself for the General's response. He had successfully faced Senator Amidala's frustrated glower, her sad eyes, and her sweet entreating, but he wasn't sure

he could stand up to the General even for Luke.

To Echo's surprise, the General didn't press. Instead he sighed, rubbing his brow with one hand. "Right. I figured," he muttered. "When will he be available?"

"Can't say, sir," Echo said promptly, still not letting down his guard.

"Is he... his injuries, is he all right?"

"He was released from medical and is restricted to light duty, sir."

"What about the others?"

"Everyone is on the mend, General. We're more than ready for the fight," Echo assured him.

General Skywalker's eyes narrowed. "Fight? What fight? The 501st is on stand down."

"We are, sir!" he said hurriedly, trying to cover his slip up. "No fighting here."

Somewhat mollified, the General backed off. "Well then, please tell him I commed and would like to speak with him. And let Captain Rex know I got his report."

"Of course, sir."

The holo faded.

Echo didn't hesitate. He whirled around and lunged at Jesse, who with a squawk escaped out into the hallway rather than face his brother's ire.

CXXX.

"There, see?" Anakin said gesturing to the after image of Echo's holo as it faded out. "He's fine. He's on light duty and he's in a meeting."

But even as he said the words, Anakin didn't believe them. Meetings with Rex meant that there was some offensive in the works. Echo had mentioned a fight and though he tried to deny it, Anakin was sure that somehow the *Dauntless* was heading

into battle and soon. A part of him itched to join them. In combat there was only the moment, taking one chance after another, surviving from instant to instant. There were no nightmares, (those came later). There were no doubts.

But another part of him, a larger part, felt nauseous at the very thought of a firefight. How could he ever lead his men into battle again when they had all been used to fight a sham war for almost three years? It turned his stomach and he realized he was sweating. He wiped his mouth hurriedly and tried to push those thoughts and feelings away.

Padme crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. "He's been in meetings for days. Before that, he was in medical for over a week. If he's on light duty, why won't he take my comms?"

Anakin got up and moved around the comm unit to flop down on the floor where a blanket had been spread and the children were laying in the afternoon light. Just the sight of them calmed him. "He's answering written messages, you said so yourself. He's responded to all your request for reconstruction updates."

"That's not the same thing," she insisted as she began to pace. "He's deliberately avoiding me."

Anakin sighed and looked down at the babies. Their movements were still jerky and uncoordinated at only several weeks old, but he could tell that Luke's eyes were trying to focus on the toy Anakin was holding above him and Leia was practicing making sounds.

His children were the most precious beings in the universe. They were so small and helpless. They *needed* him. There was something so effortless and satisfying in providing for their every need. With Ahsoka, providing training, support, and care was familiar even if he still worried for her safety. Ahsoka was growing more and more confident in her abilities every day and even now was sparring with the two younger Noghri guards, Lir and Evr'shkimkh. He knew that so long as the Order didn't interfere, he would finish her training and see her knighted. What Anakin wasn't sure about was what to do with a grown son from a future

that no longer existed!

(He was lying to himself. He totally knew what to do. He should order the *Dauntless* to Naboo and bring his son home. He wanted all his family close to him. It was what Padme wanted too. Bad enough Obi-Wan had left for Mandalore alone, but what was even worse was having Luke somewhere out there in space having just lost his father, refusing to respond to Padme's comms, keeping his distance.)

"He's grieving," Anakin said softly, reaching out to Leia, giving her his finger to hold onto. "He's not alone. He knows you've commed. The men are with him. We need to give him time."

Padme lowered herself to the floor to sit beside him, leaning her head against his shoulder. "I know. I just— I just want to fix this. I want to make it better for him. I don't want him to be hurt."

"Of course you do. You're a mom. That's what moms do," Anakin replied, thinking of his own mother. Stars, she would have loved to meet the twins. She would have held them so tight. She would never have let them go.

Padme groaned and buried her face into his shoulder.

"What? What is it?" Anakin asked, worriedly.

"My *parents*. My *sister*, *everyone*," she said waving one hand around. She sat back and gave him what Anakin had privately dubbed her Resolve Face. "We need to tell my family about us and the babies," she said firmly.

"All right," he agreed.

"I know you don't want to tell anyone, but it's time. They can keep a secret, so I don't want you to worry— wait, *what*?"

"If you want to tell them, then tell them," he assured her, pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"You're okay with me telling my family?" Padme asked in shock.

"I was always fine with you telling your family, in principal. With the way things are going in the Senate now, they won't dare pressure you to step down. It's the perfect time to start a new

Nubian political tradition.”

“Oh,” Padme said in surprise. “That’s certainly true. So I guess... we tell them.”

“You don’t sound very happy,” Anakin offered. “I thought it was only my side of-of *things* that would be a problem here.”

Padme shook herself. “No, I’m happy. It’s just... there may be some yelling, and my mother is going to cry and make us feel horribly guilty. My sister is never going to stop saying ‘I told you so,’ when she realizes I married you, that is, once she finally gets over the fact that I eloped with you and didn’t invite her to the wedding, which will take about two years.” At the sight of Anakin’s horrified face she grew defensive. “Well, what did you *think* their response was going to be when finding out that I’ve been hiding a husband and—and pregnancy and children from them?” she asked in a huff.

“I don’t know,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “The Order just expels people and pretends they don’t exist anymore. There’s not much yelling or crying, just crushing disappointment that everyone pretends they don’t feel. On Tatooine, secret marriages happened all the time. It’s... normal, I guess. It’s the slavers that are the problem. Mom would’ve been happy no matter what.”

“Well that’s *not* how it is on Naboo. Family is very important here. There are rituals and holidays. Our wedding was scandalous for a lot of reasons,” she told him archly, reaching for Luke. “You better prepare yourself,” she said getting to her feet with the baby.

Anakin swallowed a sigh and gathered Leia into his arms to follow his wife. The children were ready for food and a nap. “Don’t tell your mother or Obi-Wan, but Core world people are just plain *weird*,” he murmured to Leia.

He took her burbling in reply as agreement.

“Sir?” Rex asks. He is hesitant to interrupt Luke while he is training with his students, but knows that the Jedi would want to hear this news right away.

“Yes, Captain?” Luke responds, eyes still fixed on Cooker and Chatterbox as they spar to test out Cooker’s newly constructed saber with a fabricated crystal that glowed green.

“We’ve received word from the *Vigilant*. They’ve volunteered to join the campaign. They’ll be leaving Coruscant shortly.”

“The *Vigilant*, that’s the 212th, right?” Luke turns his attention back to the fight. “Cooke, you’re over extending and leaving yourself open. Don’t just stretch out with your body, stretch out with your feelings. The Force is there to help you.”

“Yes, sir,” Rex says. “Commander Cody is staying on Coruscant to await word from General Kenobi with the rest of the fleet, but a full third of the 212th is joining us.”

For the first time in days, Luke looks pleased. “That’s good news. We’ll have the numbers we need then to make this work with minimal casualties.” His eyes turn sharp. “They know this is strictly voluntary. No one *needs* to come and fight. *No one* is ordered to join us.”

“Everyone knows,” Rex assures him. “I’ve received word from men from half a dozen different outfits wanting to join in the campaign. Luke, we *want* to fight. If anyone in this galaxy can even halfway understand the suffering of these slaves, it’s us.”

“Good,” Luke says with relief as he moves around the docking bay, following the sparring clones as they get acrobatic. “Then there’s just one more person we need to invite.”

Rex blinks at that. “Who?”

“General Skywalker.”

It seems so obvious when Luke says it. *Of course* they should invite the General. But at the same time, Rex feels a growing sense of worry fill him. If they invite General Skywalker to come, what will happen to the 501st? Will Luke leave and will the Gen-

eral retake command? Anakin Skywalker is one of the few Jedi Generals that Rex along with the other Clone Marshall Commanders are willing to listen to without hesitation. He is well respected. It should be a good thing to get back their commanding officer.

But then, what about Luke? Rex isn't blind. He knows that things are different now that Vader is gone. Where before the two of them had led the battalion without hesitation, now Luke is withdrawn. Even though the men do everything they can to make sure he is not alone, there are hours where he retreats to his quarters and no one enters. If not for this campaign and for the Force sensitive clones, Rex fears that one day Luke will just vanish. He fears that Luke will take a shuttle or a starfighter out into the Black one day and never return, slipping away as inexplicably as he suddenly appeared on Umbara all those months ago.

(Rex can't forget what Luke said when he found him collapsed over the body of his father. The words haunt him.)

And then, there's General Skywalker. Rex has read Kix's report. While the Order may not care that their best warrior has suffered severe trauma and a breakdown, *Rex* cares, and he knows better than to just throw someone back into a fight after something like that.

There is a feather light touch on his shoulder, even through his armor Rex can feel it. "He should know," Luke insists quietly. "I know that he is with his family, but he has a right to join us if that is what he wants."

Rex isn't sure what exactly Luke means by that, but he's learned over time that he doesn't always need to know. Luke's motivation is always compassion for others.

"I'll comm him," Rex says.

Luke smiles in response. It doesn't reach his eyes.

CXXXII.

It is nearly six weeks After (and from now on, Anakin expects he will divide his life into Before and After the twins were born and Palpatine's death), that Rex comms. Anakin learns that a major operation is being planned with volunteers from the 501st and the 212th and many of the Force sensitive clones. He is hesitant to leave his family and is unaccountably nervous about returning to any sort of combat, but this is not the Clone Wars or Outer Rim Sieges. His Captain assures him that this is an anti-slavery offensive and is strictly voluntary. Obi-Wan is still on Mandalore (ostensibly for a social visit, but if he knows his Master he is no doubt hard at work with the Duchess on the Reconstruction Accords). Ahsoka is still with them on Naboo and the Noghri are a constant and vigilant presence. Ahsoka says he should go and see what is going on. Padme's urging is a bit more forceful. If the 501st is involved that means Luke is likely to be in the middle of things.

As he travels on the *Resolute* to join the rest of the fleet, Denal ask after his family and Anakin proudly shows off a few (just a few!) holos of his children. The men bear his enthusiasm with good grace as they have stories of their own little ones running around at their "Home Bases" on several planets, growing and maturing slowly.

When they rendezvous with the *Dauntless*, the *Vigilant*, and the *Pioneer*, Anakin is stunned to find out the offensive's objective is Tatooine.

He enters the briefing room on the *Dauntless* in a daze. He cannot believe it. They've all gathered here to begin a campaign to free Tatooine from the Hutts and slavers. The men, all volunteers from the 501st and the 212th, are working to free the slaves and liberate his home planet. Anakin feels like he's dreaming.

Anakin is pleased to see Rex, Appo, and Fives and all the others from the 501st. It has been too long since they were together. There are some who have fallen in battle since he left them on

Umbara and he allows himself to mourn their loss. There are a few who have mustered out by choice, but those that remain greet him like a long lost brother returning home at last. Kix insists that after the briefing Anakin stop by the medical quarters for a check up. Hardcase outright asks him if they can spar later on. Dogma is there, never far from Tup's side, solid and settled in his own skin in a way that Anakin wouldn't have believed possible. Redeye, Echo, Slice, Mixer, Joc, Boomer, Jesse, Mal, Oddball, Wires, they are all there along with many new faces, more than a few wearing brightly colored cloaks that he realizes after a moment mark them as Force sensitive.

The lights dim and Luke, still clad all in black, takes the floor to begin the briefing. Anakin watches intently, paying more attention to Luke than what's being said, if he's honest. He can hold both twins in his arms with ease, but standing before him is his son, fully grown, a Jedi and a powerful warrior. It is disconcerting to say the least.

Anakin has so many questions. Where is his sister? How did Vader and Luke manage to come back in time? How is it Luke is a Jedi rooted in the Light when Vader was clearly Fallen to the Dark? Who raised the twins? Who among the Order survived to train Luke?

He finally forces himself to focus on the briefing. Anakin reviews the detailed campaign starting with the offensive at Jabba's Palace and then moving to the smaller communities before hitting the towns. He learns that undercover operatives have already been working with the local Underground to prepare the people to aid in the liberation of the planet from the Hutts.

Luke has finished his presentation and is looking at him intently. It takes a moment for it to dawn on Anakin that Luke is waiting for *Anakin* to say something as technically he is the ranking officer in the room.

"Impressive," Anakin can only say, amazed that his life has come to this. He had given up on it ever happening, a dream un-befitting a Jedi of the Order. He wants to say *thank you*, to ask

how Luke knows of his childhood dream, to somehow express how proud he is that *his son* is leading the liberation of Tatooine. Instead he bites his tongue and asks, "Your plan?"

"My father's," Luke corrects with a funny half smile and Anakin feels like he's taken a punch to the gut.

His father.

Vader.

"We were planning to go before..." Luke shrugs, trailing off.

Captain Rex casts a quick eye over the plans and nods. "Vader always had an eye for maximum damage. He couldn't pick a more deserving target from what I hear." He then catches something and zooms in on the planned assault for Jabba's Palace. "I don't recall *this* part of the plan," he says pointedly to Luke.

Innocently, Luke denies any knowledge of what Rex is talking about and he has Anakin nearly fooled until Hardcase starts snickering. Fives leans forward and then groans when he sees what Rex is talking about. "Sir, you aren't *seriously* planning—"

Rex cuts him off. "There is *no way* in hell I am letting *you* lead the charge on Jabba's Throne Room and confront the Hutt one on one. I was there when your father first started planning this. Vader was very clear you weren't to be directly involved in the assault. I can't let you do this," he says to Luke. "Your father will kill me."

The men from the 501st try and fail to smother their laughter, their brothers from the 212th watch and listen, not quite sure they get the joke, but they've heard the stories and seen the holonet vid of the final battle. Vader is already a legend.

"My father's dead," Luke reminds him, crossing his arms over his chest stubbornly.

"That isn't likely to stop him!" the Captain retorts hotly.

Anakin looks around and sees many of the clones nodding in agreement at Rex's words. What sort of a man *was* Vader? Anakin is shocked to hear them talk about Vader like a—a *person*, someone they respect, and not just a monstrous Sith lost forever and doomed to the Dark side. Padme thought there was good in him.

Luke, pale and somber, obviously loved him. Anakin wonders for one wild moment what it would have been like to actually have met this man, this other self.

“Captain,” Luke begins to argue and then he stops and his tone softens. “*Rex*, let me do this. I’m ready.”

Rex’s usual stoic face goes through a series of contortions before he agrees, but he insists that Luke have Fives and Chatterbox as back up the entire time while Hardcase, Flare, and Cooker are planting explosives with the rest of the squads.

“Is there room for one more on the Palace assault?” Anakin asks after the Captain rattles off the rest of the assignments.

“Of course, sir,” Rex says with a grin, “You’re with me.”



CHAPTER 15

In Which There is a Great Deal of Sand and Anakin Has Several Unexpected Meetings

CXXXIII.

As the shuttle door lowered, Luke braced himself for the wave of heat. It came, blisteringly hot. With the ease of long years of practice he refrained from wetting his lips and breathed shallowly through his nose. He walked down to the edge of the gangway and then stopped, staring at the sea of sand before him.

“Something wrong?” Fives asked, also halting just short of the edge, looking around carefully for the reason behind Luke’s hesitation.

“No, just remembering,” he said quietly. At Fives’ puzzled look, Luke waved his hand at the dunes and rocks surrounding them. “Y’know, the sand.”

Hardcase snickered and practically leapt off the gangway

causing sand to fly up into the air. “Oh, yeah. Vader would’ve been pissed. Remember how he was when he had to take over that Seppie base in the middle of the desert? I’ve never heard anyone complain about sand so much in my life.”

“What’s that?” Rex asked curiously, coming up behind Luke.

Gesturing out at the dunes, Luke repeated himself with a twist of his lips. “The sand.”

“*Ugh*, I know!” Anakin huffed and groaned as he stomped down to meet them. “I hate the stuff. I’m going to be washing it out of my hair and finding it in my boots for a solid month after this.” Anakin shuddered visibly, tentatively stepping down, fastidiously trying to avoid getting sandy. It was completely futile. Anakin looked down at the yellow grains already clinging to his clothes and made an inarticulate noise of disgust.

Luke stared at him for a moment, and then quickly turned away, smothering an involuntary laugh behind one hand as he hurried away from the shuttle.

Anakin glowered darkly for a moment. “He laughs now, but give it time. He doesn’t know how awful sand is,” he muttered as he headed after Luke, Fives, and the others. “It’s worse here than on any other planet, I swear.”

Rex looked from General Skywalker to Luke, then over to General Skywalker and then back to Luke. He finally came to the only conclusion that made any sense of the last few months of his short life. He took off his helmet and buried his head in his hands.

“Oh, you’ve got to be *kriffing kidding* me!” he declared. He thought he’d finally hit his limit of being shocked by Jedi weirdness when it turned out that clones could be Force sensitive, but no. He believed he’d been desensitized to strange happenings having fought along side Vader and Luke for months, but no. Now, he had to deal with whatever fresh hell this was!

A hand on his shoulder had him nearly jumping out of his armor. He turned and saw Chatterbox, patting his back solicitously. Rex’s eyes narrowed, remembering what Chatterbox had bet

on all those months ago. His brother had known the truth and said nothing. “*Of course*, and now you’re going to win the pot,” he grouched. “No one else was crazy enough to bet on time travel! It’s *impossible*!”

Even through the helmet, Rex knew Chatterbox was smirking.

“What a *karking* mess,” Rex muttered. “Cody never has to deal with this kind of thing.”

He caught up to Luke as they were getting into position to assault Jabba’s Palace. Rex stood over the Jedi and said in a deeply unimpressed voice, “General Skywalker sent you to Umbara, huh?”

Luke froze for a moment (caught), and then shrugged helplessly. “Well, he did,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Why didn’t you *say* anything?”

The Jedi looked at him in total disbelief.

“I mean... you could’ve... I would’ve...” Rex trailed off with an exasperated sigh. He hated when officers did dumb things and he couldn’t figure out a smart alternative to their idiocy.

“*Don’t* tell him,” Luke pleaded suddenly. “Please.”

The Captain looked over to General Skywalker, who was visibly uneasy in the face of the upcoming firefight. He suppressed another sigh. Luke was right. Now was not the time. He put his helmet back on and readied his weapon. “I’m going to regret this,” he muttered to himself. “I just know it.”

CXXXIV.

The first time Anakin sees the blue specter he later figures must be some sort of *ghost*, is just after he has sliced through several of Jabba’s guards. He is sweating and his hands tremble around the hilt of his saber. He is afraid. It has been over a month since he has been in any sort of battle and all he can think about is the last time he raised his lightsaber in Padme’s apartment.

He looks down at the bodies in front of him and then his eye

catches on the blue shadow just beside him. It is only visible for a moment, but the ghost watches him with the strangest expression on his half shadowed face. Anakin swallows down his panic as he feels Rex at his back, sticking to him like a burr. It helps steady him. It reminds him that he is not alone.

When he looks back, the ghost is gone.

The second time Anakin sees the ghost is just after Luke uses the Force to shove Jabba into his own rancor pit. As Jabba screams, Luke ignites his saber, (he hasn't even drawn his weapon so far, Anakin realizes in shock), and asks the assorted mercenary and assassin scum standing petrified around the now empty throne, "Who's next?"

The scum scatter in panic.

Anakin sees the ghost standing, looming behind Luke. He wants to yell "Watch out!" but there is nothing malevolent about the hooded figure. Instead, the spirit hovers protectively, ghostly hands going for its waist as if to grab for a weapon that isn't there.

There is a gurgle from the rancor pit. Anakin looks down and finds himself filled with a strange sense of relief, like a knot in his chest un-tightening at the sight below him.

It is done. Jabba is well and truly dead.

He looks up and meets Luke's calm but satisfied expression.

The ghost is gone again.

CXXXV.

The Palace is under their control. They've killed many and taken prisoners, but some of Jabba's lackeys may have gotten away. Luke comms Appo. With the Hutt dead, it is time to bring the fleet into orbit and blockade the planet.

"The Underground is ready to move in the smaller villages if we can set up the scrambler signal and prevent the slavers from triggering the detonator implanted in each slave. We should split

up Hack Squad to travel with the companies and take control of the smaller communities as soon as we can,” Luke says, pointing to some of the outlying settlements.

Anakin looks over the plans carefully. “We can’t let the slavers factionalize. With Jabba dead, we are dealing with a power vacuum we need to fill and fast or it will be filled for us. We need to get the rescued people and the freeborn organized to take control of the planet themselves.”

“Already on it, sir,” Rex assures him. “Appo, what’s the ETA on the Senator?”

“Three rotations, sir.”

“Which Senator?” Anakin asks, eyes narrowing.

Rex shares a glance with Luke and then answers. “Senator Amidala.” As the General opens his mouth to protest, he hurries to explain. “She is the only one available as she’s on sabbatical. All the rest are tied up with finalizing the Accords or have been arrested. Commander Tano will be with her.”

“The planet isn’t secure; we can’t bring her *here*!” Anakin declares, aghast. “And the twins! We can’t bring the twins to this place!”

“Well, let’s secure the planet,” Luke suggests, “Starting with Mos Eisley spaceport.”

“Sounds like a plan. Anything we need to know in particular, sir?” Rex asks.

“I am reliably informed that it is the most wretched hive of scum and villainy in the galaxy, but otherwise not a bad place,” Luke says affably.

Anakin runs a hand through his hair, and then looks at his sand covered fingers with despair. “Fine. Let’s take the spaceport then.”

CXXXVI.

While the liberation of Tatooine does not involve the intense

firefights that have made up most of Ahsoka's experiences during the Clone Wars, there are still things that she sees that shock her. She thought she had seen it all, that nothing could surprise her anymore, that there was no horror that she cannot face.

She is wrong.

Luke has them rescuing younglings being kept in hidden brothels waiting for transport off world to be sold to the highest bidder. Ahsoka knows that those young painted faces will remain etched in her memory until the day she dies. They free those kept chained for the pit fights, scarred and feral. And then they head to liberate the emerald mines, hidden deep in the southern desert.

Luke has pried the location of the mines from one of Jabba's lackeys through some method that Ahsoka doesn't even want to think about. They make their way to the mountain range where the mines are hidden, trying to take the slavers running the operation by surprise.

They fail.

CXXXVII.

There is little warning. One moment, Luke is crouched below a dune, preparing to lead the offensive to liberate the mines while while Anakin and Ahsoka take down the slavers, and then the ground begins to shake.

"No," he murmurs. He stands, ignoring the hissed order that he get down. "No, no, *no!*" he cries.

He doesn't hesitate; he breaks cover and runs towards the mine entrance, ignoring the shouts behind him that he stop.

Luke doesn't stop, there is no time. The slavers have set off explosives to bury the mine. There is a tremendous crack and the face of the mountain begins to slide down, heading inexorably forward like an unstoppable wave of rock and sand to bury the entrance of the mine. Luke takes a deep breath and reaches for

the Force, hoping that it will be enough.

CXXXVIII.

The mountainside comes to a visible halt, tons of rock and sand hanging frozen in the air. Fives swears and breaks cover, Hardcase, Chatterbox, Flare, Cooker, and Left Foot right behind him. They rush to Luke's side and reach for the Force to help their teacher.

Their comms crackle and suddenly someone is speaking Huttese over their commlinks. Ahsoka doesn't speak the language, but she can see the fury in her Master's eyes as he translates.

"They say they will wait for the Hutts to come and quell the uprising, and in the meantime they will protect their gems. They say they can always find plenty of new slaves."

Anakin is angrier than Ahsoka has ever seen him and it is clear why. Not with a full battalion of army engineers, droids, and a hundred Force users could they hope to move all the debris fast enough to free the slaves if Luke can't keep the mine from collapsing under the weight of the mountain.

"New plan," Anakin orders. "Ahsoka, take two squads and don't let those slavers escape. Rex, you and I will head into the mines with the rest of the men and get those people out. Go, go!"

CXXXIX.

Anakin isn't keeping count of how many they rescue. He rushes into the mines, his men behind him, drawing his saber and slashing at the chains that hold the slaves captive, ordering them to run for the entrance as fast as they can. He then leads the men deeper and deeper into the mines, where tunnels have collapsed and lights are failing, freeing everyone he can find. He tries to

check every corridor, every crevasse for signs of life, trusting (praying), that the Force will guide him.

The weight of the rock above his head, the heat and dust of the mine, and the suffocating feeling of being trapped are nothing compared to feeling the Force seethe and flare around him. He can practically see Luke's presence in the very air, holding together the entire mountain by sheer force of will, fighting gravity, keeping the sand and rock from crashing down and entombing every living being still inside.

As he stoops to pick up an injured man, a rumbling noise rises from deep within the warren of caves and tunnels and the ceiling begins to crack.

They are running out of time.

CXL.

"How many more?" Rex calls worriedly as he urges the rescued slaves to hurry. "Do we have everyone?"

"I can't get a clear bioscan and it's a maze down here!" Echo says in frustration, resorting to physically hitting his data pad to try and get a better reading to no avail.

"Get Chatterbox, Fives, and Hardcase down here to join the search if they can be spared!" Rex orders, raising his arm to protect himself from the now constant rain of debris.

CXLI.

Fives wishes he could take off his helmet, but he isn't sure it would be any easier to breathe or see without it. They are scouring the mines for anyone they can find, using the Force, but how can they be sure that they've found everyone still living? He turns another corner and meets up with Chatterbox and Hardcase, both with their sabers lit as the lighting in the mines has now to-

tally failed.

“Is there anyone else?” he asks desperately. He knows they don’t have much time. Luke may have managed the impossible, but not even he can hold the mountain forever.

Chatterbox tilts his head as if he’s listening to something and then hurries down another fork in the tunnels, left, then right, then right again and comes across what looks like just another caved in area. He climbs up, trying to get as close to the ceiling of the tunnel as he can and then with his hands and the Force starts digging. His brothers move to help and when they make an opening, Hardcase scrambles up and tries to shine a light behind the wall of sand and rock.

“Anyone in there? We’re here to rescue you!” he calls out. Silence greets his words. “Aw, c’mon. We’re the good guys. We’re with the Republic. We’re Jedi. See, we’ve got armor and lightsabers and everything.”

There is silence and then a scuffle in the dark and a hand, calloused and small pokes its way out of the opening and nearly jabs Hardcase’s helmet as its owner fumbles around blindly. Hardcase grasps the hand in his and scrambles to widen the hole. “It’s all right, we’ve got you, we’ll get you out,” he says.

It takes several tense minutes and the whole tunnel shakes more than once, but Hardcase never lets go. They pull out ten little ones, each of them just shy of their teens. The first one, a human boy, clings to Hardcase’s back as they rush for the surface.

CXLII.

Ahsoka manages to catch the slavers before they can escape. With Jesse, Dogma, and Tup at her side, they crash the escaping ship and stop another two transports from even getting off the ground. The slavers’ greed works against them. If they had just left the gems behind they might have gotten away. It is a mess of a fight, but they kill or capture every last one of the slavers.

Leaving Jesse in charge of the prisoners, Ahsoka rushes back to the entrance of the mine, passing dozens and dozens of people stumbling and staggering away from the shaking mountain.

Ahsoka is nearly sick at the sight of them. Twisted, scarred, and lean figures, pared down to stringy muscle stretched over bone. Some are barely teenagers, others are much older. Men and women, a dozen different species. Some slaves have been in the mines for so long they cannot bear the light of the setting suns, crying out in pain, hiding their faces as they exit the mines. Kix and Quick and the troops move forward, hauling the rescued people away from the mountain as quickly as they can.

In the chaos, she sees her Master come up out of the darkness, carrying a woman in his arms, another man slung across his back. The air is filled with sand and dust and the rumbling from the mountain is growing and growing. She lights her saber and rushes in to help.

They must hurry; Luke can't hold on forever.

CXL.

Anakin and Ahsoka run for the mouth of the mine, pushing through the sand falling from above, handing off those they've rescued to Denal. Rex grabs Anakin's arm before he can rush back into the darkness. "Sir, we're out of time!"

Anakin looks past Rex to where in the distance Luke is now down on one knee, curled forward as if the weight of what he carries is pressing him into the sands. Cooker, Flare, and Left Foot stand right behind him, still as statues.

Chatterbox and Hardcase push past him, younglings in their arms, clinging to their backs, and running in tow. Ahsoka helps by taking up one of them into her arms and heads out of the shadow of the mountain.

"That's everyone!" Fives yells, coming up behind them, carrying two more. Together they sprint towards the clearing as fast as

they can.

“Move! Move!” Rex yells to the troops and rescued slaves alike as he runs.

Anakin heads straight for Luke, who lets go of his burden with an audible gasp. Anakin sees his son start to fall, but then he is blinded. A cloud of debris and sand explodes around him as the mountain collapses with a tremendous crash. The shockwave sends him flying off his feet. As soon as he can, Anakin rises, using the Force to clear the air, and rushes to where he last saw Luke. He digs frantically through the sand and pulls his son free. He desperately checks and finds Luke is breathing, and picking him up in his arms yells for a medic.

CXLI.

Shuttles and speeders have been coming and going from their makeshift camp all night bringing supplies and taking the most severely injured either to the ships in orbit or back to the liberated towns and settlements. There are some Tusken over the ridge and a krayt can be heard crying out in the distance, but the sheer number of troopers on guard has kept both threats away. Ahsoka has taken a few hours to sleep, but is now up in the predawn, lending a hand wherever it is needed.

She finds her Master sitting and dozing next to Luke who collapsed after releasing his hold on the mountain. There is something familiar about the scene and she smiles as it comes to her. Skyguy is sitting sentry over Luke just as he would over the twins. It is almost sweet to see how he has taken with the rogue Jedi. So much for Anakin giving Luke a piece of his mind for stealing his fleet and kidnapping his men, Ahsoka thinks fondly.

She passes by the two clones standing sentry and comes over and crouches down. Anakin's eyes open to slits and he stretches and rolls his neck out. “How is he?” she asks.

He immediately looks over at Luke. “He was unconscious at

first, but Kix says he's sleeping now. He'll be all right."

"Good," she says and then sighs. "I'd thought I'd seen it all after the battles we've been in, but *this*... we were nearly beaten by a bunch of slavers. They were willing to kill everyone to keep their stupid jewels. Force, what is *wrong* with this planet?"

Anakin huffs a laugh. "That *is* the question."

"Well, at least we're here now cleaning this place up once and for all."

"This isn't going to be over quickly, Snips. Even once we've managed to liberate every person on this planet, we're going to have to hold off the Hutts and deal with all the hangers-on that made money off his filthy trade. The scum we've killed and captured weren't bluffing. They *will* try and come back, make no mistake about that."

She swipes at her itchy face in frustration. "So what, the 501st and the 212th are going to occupy the planet indefinitely? That's not feasible." She can't figure it out. There were many planets in Hutt territory they could have targeted first. The 501st had already made inroads against the Zygerrians. Why a campaign on *Tatooine*? It held no strategic value. It's sole claim to fame seemed to be that it was the planet Jabba the Hutt chose to live on before his untimely death.

"Don't worry, there's a plan. There's a reason why Padme is here. You missed the briefing. Echo or Fives can fill you in later. It's a good one," he finishes softly, looking back over at Luke's sleeping form.

"And here I thought we just came to visit *you*," Ahsoka jokes.

"Like hell," Anakin says, rising to his feet. "As if I'd want her, or the twins, or *you* even, within a parsec of this planet if I could help it."

She stands with him as he begins to walk through the camp in the early morning light. As they pass by the liberated people, some stand, others sit up. Many reach out to brush their hands on her Master's robe, or arm, or boot. There is a whisper of sound around him. They whisper *Jedi* as he passes them, with a tone of

reverence. They also whisper some other word in a language that Ahsoka doesn't recognize.

She looks over at Anakin and his jaw is clenched with tension. He doesn't respond, doesn't so much as twitch at their touch, but he is deeply and visibly uncomfortable with the attention. Ahsoka's always found it kind of funny how hard it is for her Master to accept the praise of others when he positively glows at hearing a compliment from Obi-Wan.

He catches her staring. "I barely did anything," he mutters.

"Oh, *barely* anything," Ahsoka says back sarcastically. "Anakin, you only freed most of them from a collapsing mine."

"That wasn't me," he argues. "That was all thanks to—"

"Anakin?" a voice interrupts. "*Anakin Skywalker?*"

Ahsoka turns to look behind her to see who has spoken. That was not one of the troopers' voices. Anakin stops in his tracks.

"Skyguy?" Ahsoka inquires, puzzled. But he doesn't answer, doesn't even look at her. He turns on his heel and moves unerringly to where a man is trying to prop himself up from a makeshift sleeping place on the sands.

"Kitster?" she hears him exclaim breathlessly, reaching out and grabbing the other man's shoulders. "Suns and stars, Kitster Banai, is it you?" He says something else after that, in a language Ahsoka doesn't recognize.

But upon hearing those incomprehensible words, the man grips Anakin's tabard with twisted calloused hands. "It's you, it's you," he cries like he can't believe it. "You came back. You came back to free us, just like you said." He lapses into the same language that Anakin used after that, his joy warring with his disbelief.

Anakin gives a watery laugh in response. "Oh, Kit, *you're alive.*"

Ahsoka watches, stunned. There can be only one explanation for how this man knows her Master that she can think of and it is beyond imagining. Anakin has *never* spoken with her about his past and while she has heard rumors about him before becoming his Padawan, she knew no details. He's never even told her

what clan he'd been part of as an Initiate in the Temple. She's always felt a little put out by it, by his lack of trust. Now, on Tatooine, surrounded by survivors of the slave trade, she is putting the pieces together at last.

Anakin never shared childhood stories of life at the Temple with her because he didn't *have any*. And seeing firsthand what his home planet is like, she understands why he would choose not to talk about his childhood. Why talk about becoming free from slavery and making your way to live on Coruscant when everyone you once knew still lived on this hell hole of a planet?

For one truly awful moment Ahsoka thinks of Anakin's birth family and wonders if *they* are enslaved somewhere on Tatooine. It is a terrible thought. Jedi aren't *supposed* to think about such things. Force sensitives leave their attachments behind when they come to the Order. But now that she is here, she cannot see how any person could just forget *all this*, leave behind their loved ones on this planet, and not go insane with worry.

Around her, the whispers of the other freed slaves changes and grows in volume. *Sky Walker*, they say to one another. *Sky Walker*, like it's two different words, like it's a title, imbued with a power she doesn't understand.

Despite the heat, Ahsoka shivers.

CXLII.

The third time Anakin thinks he sees the ghost he decides he may just be imagining things.

After the liberation of the mines, Luke has sent him, Captain Rex, and a few squads to spread the "tax rebate" of water and coin appropriated from Jabba and other deceased slavers to various communities around Tatooine as part of Padme's plan to jump-start a new economy not based on slave labor. Ahsoka is busy leading another company of men going from town to town with Luke liberating everyone they can find.

Anakin finds himself in Anchorhead of all places.

He knows he should probably visit his stepbrother Owen, but he stalls, unable to move forward. As if reading his mind, Rex informs him that he has Anakin's wife on the commlink and the men retreat to give him some privacy, (a talent the clones have perfected over years of practice). He stumbles over his words, trying to explain the mess of feelings inside him to Padme. He is elated to be part of the forces liberating Tatooine. He is making his childhood dream a reality in ways he never thought possible. But Anakin's dreams have also led him to despair and suffering and he cannot help but worry what his new good fortune is going to cost him.

In Anakin's experience, good things always cost dearly and he has so much to lose.

Padme listens and then tells him that she and the babies will head from Mos Eisley to Anchorhead and join him for a family visit with Anakin's stepbrother. Anakin wants to argue. It's not safe to just travel around Tatooine, even with the Noghri and an entire squadron protecting her and the children. But at the same time, it is family and he may not get the chance (or frankly the desire), to visit Tatooine again any time soon.

(That and Anakin really wants to hold his wife and children.)

Anakin nods hurriedly, already counting the hours until they arrive.

It is a bitter experience for Anakin visiting the Lars homestead, but they are welcomed as is their "tax rebate" and the news of Jabba's death. Beru Lars says that since times will not be so lean, maybe soon Luke and Leia will have a new cousin to play with. Owen turns red hearing that, handing Luke back over to Padme hurriedly. Beru smiles softly and continues to coo over Leia, cradling her in her arms.

Needing some space, Anakin goes out into the early evening air. That is when he thinks he sees the ghost again. It is just a flicker of blue, a ripple in the Force, but it is there, out by the headstones that mark the family grave plot. Anakin has not had

the strength to visit, but he imagines he sees the ghost kneeling there and, if ghosts can shed tears, then it cries silently over Anakin's mother's grave.



CHAPTER 16

In Which Obi-Wan Reluctantly Attends a Dinner and Justice is Served

CXLIII.

Reports of Tatooine's uprising are slow to spread. The Galactic Holonet is silent on the subject, but the holomedia boards begin to fill with images and stories from the liberation thanks to the clone troopers wanting to share their adventures with their brothers all across the galaxy.

When the first rumors reach Obi-Wan's ears on Mandalore, he groans because he knows, he just *knows* that Anakin is there. The *very second* he felt safe enough to leave Anakin unsupervised, (Padme, Ahsoka and the droids don't count), to leave Naboo, his former Padawan decides to go haring off across the galaxy to free the slaves on his home planet.

Before, (and where Obi-Wan once divided his life between before Qui-Gon's death and after, he now divides it between before and after Palpatine's defeat), Obi-Wan would have tried to pre-

tend he wasn't fully aware of what Anakin was doing, to create plausible deniability for when the Council found out what was going on and started asking questions. He would have played ignorant, or barring that, he would have quietly gone chasing after his wayward brother to drag him out of whatever mess he had embroiled himself in before Anakin created a galactic incident. Now things have changed. The Council is the least of Obi-Wan's worries. Now his anxieties center solely on Anakin.

Anakin is not invincible nor all powerful. He is battered, and worn, and he is tired after three years of fighting a sham war. Going back to his home planet, going back into danger so soon after everything may be too much for Anakin to bear. If it wasn't for the knowledge that Captain Rex, the 501st, and a good portion of the 212th were with him, Obi-Wan would already be on the first ship heading towards the Outer Rim.

Of course when Satine tells him that she will be hosting a diplomatic entourage from the Separatist Alliance as part of the final negotiations of the Reconstruction Accords and requests he escort her to the event, Obi-Wan seriously considers ignoring good sense and heading for Tatooine anyway. The last thing he needs to do is be part of galaxy wide political negotiations. He dislikes almost all politicians; Palpatine being revealed as a Sith Master hasn't helped change his opinion, only solidify it. However, upon learning of the diplomatic envoy the Council has all but ordered him to travel to Mandalore to attend on behalf of the Jedi Order, (not knowing that he is already *on* Mandalore and has been for some time). So between Satine and the Council, Obi-Wan re-dons the mantle of Jedi Master and High Councilor, trying to ignore how it feels like he is taking up a heavy burden rather than stepping into his chosen role in life.

When he sees who is leading the entourage, unthinkingly he lets go of Satine's arm and nearly bolts out of a window. The Duchess tries to grab him, but it is Quinlan Vos yelling Obi-Wan's name that has him freezing guiltily, a few steps from freedom.

"Oh, let him run, Quin," Asajj Ventress practically purrs from

where she stands beside Knight Vos. "I've missed the sight of Jedi running in fear since the war has stopped."

Obi-Wan's shoulders tighten and he whirls around. While Mandalore may be a peaceful planet, he is not going to let such an insult pass, especially not from a *Sith politician*! "As I recall, it was *you* who turned tail to run at the first hint of trouble."

"Really? That's not what I remember."

"Then I suggest you seek medical attention for your spotty memory, my darling," he snaps back at her.

"*My darling?*" Satine and Quinlan echo together. Obi-Wan flushes, kicking himself for forgetting he has an audience and it is *not* Anakin.

Quinlan looks ready to burst out laughing, his eyes dancing with the possibility of years of teasing. Satine looks deeply unimpressed, her eyes flashing under her arched brows.

"Come, come," Ventress says with a throaty laugh. "You *must* allow the great Negotiator his little games." She takes Quinlan's arm. "You know how he is. He only ever flirts with his enemies. He saves his venom, cold shoulders, and arguing for those he loves. Haven't you seen the way he is with Skywalker?"

Quinlan is now snickering. "Does that mean you love me too, Obi-Wan? I can't deny you look much improved without the beard."

"Now look here, Anakin was my Padawan and he is happily—" he bites his tongue before he says more, but it is too late. He runs a hand over his face. *Anakin is going to kill him!*

"Happily, what?" Satine says urgently, moving forward, having caught Obi-Wan's slip. "Happily... *married?* A Jedi, married?"

He wants to say *no, of course not*. Jedi don't get married. Jedi are forbidden from marriage. Marriage is attachment. Attachment is forbidden. It is dangerous.

But he sees hope in her eyes, burning like a candle and cannot bring himself to snuff it out with a lie.

But is it his secret to tell? He thinks of Anakin and Padme together, his former Padawan so blatantly lovesick Obi-Wan is fre-

quently embarrassed on his behalf, (though Padme finds Anakin's devotion adorable).

Obi-Wan thinks about the fact that while he and the Order didn't recognize that Anakin was more than just *partial* to Padme, (and given how obvious it was in hindsight, it is a miracle the Sith Master hadn't exterminated the Order years ago in their obliviousness), the 501st *obviously* knew. When they had left Coruscant on the *Resolute*, the clones traveling with them didn't bat an eye at the Senator or the children staying in Anakin's quarters. Palpatine sending assassins after Padme and the babies meant *he* knew.

He looks over at Ventress, who is smirking. *She* already knows the truth. She is watching him like a hawk to see if he hides behind the Code, if he lies, ready to tear into him like a coward if he does.

But even if everyone in the galaxy other than the Order has already discovered the truth about Anakin and Padme, he still owes his brother and sister-in-law some modicum of discretion!

He clears his throat and says, "I can neither confirm nor deny that any Jedi of the Order is happily married at the present and celebrating the birth of twin children."

Satine's face lights up with joy. "Twins!" she exclaims. "Oh, Padme!" And Obi-Wan winces. Of course, even Satine can figure out who Anakin married in under five seconds. She scowls suddenly and punches Obi-Wan in the arm. "I need to send congratulations and a gift, and a belated wedding present. There are *traditions* that must be observed! Why didn't you *tell* me?"

Obi-Wan rubs his shoulder, ignoring the laughter from Vos and Ventress. "For a pacifistic you are so prone to violence, Duchess. And I haven't told you anything about anyone. I admit *nothing*," he says with a wounded sniff.

Quinlan shakes his head. "Damn, I don't know how straight laced High Councilor Kenobi managed to train a Jedi like Skywalker, but I think Master Jinn would've been proud."

Ventress rolls her eyes. "All of you goodie goodies are blind.

The two of them may as well have broadcast their marriage all over the holonet. Even some of the *battle droids* figured it out and they have the processing capacity of a multi-tool. If it wasn't for Luke and Vader Sidious would've exterminated the Order and you would only have had yourself to blame for not seeing it coming."

"Come on, now is not the time to boast about the superiority of the Dark side, Asa," Quinlan says to her, tugging her towards the banquet hall doors. "I'm starving. Let's leave them alone and hope the Duchess can get Obi-Wan to loosen up some more. She's already convinced him to shave."

Neither the Duchess nor the Jedi notice them leaving.

Satine reaches up to place her hand on Obi-Wan's. "So a Jedi can get married and have children with a Senator and be happy," she says quietly. "*It is possible.*"

"Yes," he says hoarsely, gripping her hands tight, never wanting to let go. "It's very possible."

CXLIV.

Mos Espa is filled with people, all talking, all moving from place to place, building to building, sharing news, sharing names, trying to find loved ones, trying to locate family. It is risky for the freed slaves to congregate in the biggest settlement on Tatooine. It is itself an act of rebellion to do so out in the open light of the suns. There are scramblers in place and known slavers and slave owners have been either killed, arrested, or forced to free their slaves, but that doesn't mean that the town is safe. Smugglers, mercenaries, and criminals of all types are everywhere and to say they are unhappy with the political changes on the planet would be an understatement. But the liberation forces can't just arrest everyone and people need a place to meet and try and rebuild families torn apart by the slave trade. It is a risk, but one the people decide they will take.

(Senator Amidala had suggested taking a census and creating a searchable databank of names and locations so those freed could find each other without facing the danger of traveling and meeting in large groups. Luke stared at her in disbelief at her bizarre suggestion, unable to even begin to tell her why that idea wouldn't work. It had been Anakin who'd gently explained during their comm meeting that most of the freed people couldn't read or write, and those that did didn't all read and write the same language. He reminded her that almost no one on the planet had personal or reliable holonet capacities except the slavers and criminal elements, and no freed slave was ever going to give their family names and details into a public databank that slavers could access. A name was sometimes all a slave had.)

Luke walks through the chaos of people finding loved ones, witnessing impossibly joyful reunions and tears as those lost are mourned. As Luke exits the now former slave quarter and heads towards the market, he nods respectfully towards the grandmother sitting and holding court with the younglings looking for their kin, and receives a smile in return. The elders of the communities, the leaders of the Underground were stepping out of the shadows to take back the planet and joining forces with the freeborn farmers. From these networks and traditions a new way of life would spring from the desert and while Senator Amidala's Core resources and plans for governance and economy building are of interest and somewhat useful, some things (important things) will not be changing on Tatooine.

(It is hard to discuss and debate fiscal policy and centralized democratic principals when people's first priority on Tatooine is and always will be ensuring that there is enough water to drink to survive the heat of the day.)

He finds Anakin in the middle of translating a four way conversation in Huttese, Basic, Bocce, and Jawaese between several people looking for information, Rex trying to take notes and help, and Ahsoka just watching with an amused expression on her face.

“How are things going?” Luke asks the Padawan, ducking under the awning to take advantage of the shade.

“I think the Jawa has some information, but isn’t willing to part with it without payment,” Ahsoka says. “Beyond that, I lost track of who wants what about ten minutes ago. Any problems out there?”

Luke shakes his head. “Nothing out of the ordinary so far.”

The group surrounding Anakin are bowing and nodding, having come to some sort of an agreement, and he sends them on their way before turning to Luke and his student. “Where’s Obi-Wan when you need him?” he grumbles. “He’s the talker; he should be here negotiating, not us.”

“I don’t know. It looks like you were doing just fine there, Master,” Ahsoka says with a smile.

“I haven’t spoken Bocce in years. I nearly caused a blood feud to break out. I wish Threepio was here.”

“Now those are words I’d never expect to hear let alone agree with,” Rex says in a *sotto* voice to Luke.

“Hey, no droid jokes,” Anakin says pointing a finger at both of them warningly.

“Never,” Luke replies easily. “Threepio is one of a kind and very helpful.”

Anakin looks enormously pleased at his words. “You think so? I, uh, I built him, you know,” he confesses to Luke. “When I was a kid. To help my mom.”

Luke can’t believe it. His father never told him that! When Luke had seen Threepio during his first meeting with Senator Amidala, he’d been amazed that his own mother’s protocol droid would somehow end up on Tatooine years later and make its way into Luke’s care. Knowing that his father had flown in the Clone Wars with Artoo was yet another coincidence that defied all odds. Now to find out that his father had actually *built* Threepio...

“So... when he’s praising and thanking the Maker...” Luke begins to say.

“He means me,” Anakin finishes, looking more than a little

smug and proud.

As the two of them begin to discuss droid design and programming, Rex looks from one to another and then just shakes his head indulgently.

“What?” Ahsoka asks the Captain quietly, and then looking over at Luke and Anakin, trying to figure out what Rex’s sees that she doesn’t. “What is it?”

“Nothing, nothing,” Rex says, ignoring her look and trying to pretend he is involved in reading the datapad in his hand.

CXLV.

“Zee? He’s got a Name?”

Hardcase looks over his shoulder at the little one still clinging to his back. The boy he had pulled from the mines over a week ago has not let go of Hardcase since. Even Kix has given up trying to pry him loose and has just treated him as best as he could while he clung to Hardcase. He shrugs. “Well, he weighs about as much as my Z-6 canon and he doesn’t have a Name that he’s willing to tell me or can remember, so I thought Zee would work for now.”

Redeye leans around trying to make eye contact with Hardcase’s passenger, but the boy simply scoots sideways to avoid him.

“And he’s much better than my canon. I don’t have to hold on to him or anything. *He* holds on to me,” Hardcase says proudly.

“Any luck finding his family?” Fives asks. “That *is* the point of coming here,” he reminds Hardcase, gesturing to the marketplace around them where survivors and former slaves are meeting and mingling.

“Well, if there’s no one in this town, we’ll try another, but he’s fine with me, right Zee?”

“Right,” came the quick chirping reply.

“C’mon, come down for a second,” Hardcase says in amuse-

ment, pulling the boy around and setting him on his feet. Zee grips onto Hardcase's arms, his fingers digging under his armor, latching on for dear life.

"No one's going to make you go with anyone you don't want to. You're a person. You get to choose," Hardcase tells him kindly. "But if you have a Name and a family and you want to find them, we'll help," he says gesturing to the brothers around him. "Do you understand?"

Zee nods hesitantly and his death grip eases just a hair. Hardcase smiles and picks the boy up in his arms. "No more than any canon, I'm telling you," he says again with a laugh.

He is still laughing when Zee's body literally explodes in a viscera of blood and bone and gore.

Hardcase looks around at his brothers' faces, splattered in red. He looks down at his arms in shock. Without a word he collapses to his knees and tries to gather up what is left of the boy as if attempting to put him back together.

"Oh, *kriffing hell*," Redeye moans, unable to tear his eyes away from the horrifying sight. There is another wet pop and near the former slave quarters a Rodian woman explodes.

Fives slams on his comm and screams for Slice and Mal. The scrambler has failed. Someone is detonating the rescued slaves. Redeye and Jesse bring their guns to bear, scanning the area for anyone or anything that looks out of place, someone with a remote, someone killing. The marketplace descends into panic as people scatter in every direction, trying to put distance between each other, former slaves desperate not to hurt those they love if they are triggered.

CXLVI.

As their comms start crackling with overlapping clone voices yelling over one another, there is a third explosion and then the screaming starts. Ahsoka has her lightsaber in her hand,

but what *good* is it? There's nothing she can do. She turns in a circle, looking desperately for any sign of who could be behind this newest atrocity; she searches the Force but there is nothing. *Nothing!*

Luke has not waited though. She sees him dodging through the crowd headed towards where the scramblers are set up, no doubt intending to figure out how or why they failed and to trace the source of the detonations.

"It could be *anyone*," Rex snarls furiously. "Anyone could have a remote! Hells, it could be someone just randomly trying any signal they can to get through the scrambler and getting lucky!"

Ahsoka moves closer to Anakin. He stands silent, staring out at the panic around them when he should be moving, he should have a plan. Her Master *always* has a plan. "What are we going to do? How are we—?"

He violently shoves her away. She goes skidding back, nearly tumbling to the ground.

"What the—? *Master!*" she yells.

Anakin stands, pale and sweating, his hand outstretched from when he pushed her away, his eyes blank. "Get away! Get back!" he shouts. "*Don't watch!*"

She has never seen him like this and it frightens her. "Anakin?" she asks, moving cautiously closer again.

"General? General, are you all right?" Rex says anxiously, raising his own hands to show he is unarmed. "Are you with us? Do you know where you are?"

Anakin blinks at the Captain's words, as if waking from a dream and visibly shakes himself. He presses his hand against his sternum, face ashen. "Obi-Wan made them take it out," he says blankly as if reminding himself of something he'd forgotten for a moment. "Obi-Wan made them."

Ahsoka reaches out and this time Anakin fumbles and grasps her hand in his, holding on for dear life. He squeezes his eyes shut, fighting back tears. "It's *gone*. He made them take it out."

"Oh, Anakin," she whispers in horror and pulls him into her

arms. He holds her tight as he takes one shuddering breath after another. Over his shoulder she looks at Rex who seems just seconds away from shooting the very next slaver he sees.

Ahsoka may very well join him, but right now she is too busy holding onto her Master.

CXLVII.

Chatterbox is frozen in place, ears ringing, staring down at Hardcase and at what is left of Zee.

(There is so little left. There is nearly nothing recognizable.)

It is not until another freed slave explodes that the Force *finally* tells Chatterbox where to go. He runs, shoving his way through the crowd towards a nondescript building on the far side of the street. He is barely aware that Fives is on his heels.

They burst through the doors together, sabers lit, blocking blaster bolts as they fight their way up the stairs.

Fives' comm is crackling with urgent messages, shouted orders, and updates from the troops. He doesn't respond. He fights his way up and up, trusting Chatterbox to watch his back. He finds the slaver, a male Crolute sitting, detonator in hand, watching out the window at the death and chaos he is causing.

Five's doesn't hesitate. He reaches with the Force and yanks the remote from the slaver's hand, crushing it, and slams him up against the wall before he can reach for a weapon.

"Why? *WHY?*" Fives yells.

The slaver just shrugs. "What do you care, *clone?* They're nothing. Scarcity will drive the prices up when the Hutts return."

"You *skrag*, you filth! The Hutts *aren't coming back!*" he spits, furious.

"That's what they always say," the Crolute says with a laugh. "Give it time. I can wait— *hrk!*"

Fives stares at the slaver in surprise and then realizes he is choking on thin air. He looks behind him and there is Chatterbox

standing in the doorway. He is covered in blood and sand. His face is stone, his eyes burn with anger, and his hand is held outstretched in a grasping motion.

"No, stop!" Fives says dropping the slaver and grabbing ahold of his brother.

"He deserves to die," Chatterbox says. "He *deserves* to *die* for what he did! He didn't have to do it! He'd already lost! He didn't need to trigger us! *He didn't need to!*"

The slaver is contorting on the floor, gagging and gasping for air, scrambling and scratching at his throat.

"Chatterbox, it's not him! It's *not* Palpatine! He's dead! He's dead already," Fives says, shaking him.

"Doesn't matter. He's *no better!*"

"Listen brother, *listen to me!* This scum, he'll get his. He will. I promise. *I promise* you, even if I have to do it myself! Let him go! That's an order soldier!"

Chatterbox closes his eyes. Slowly, he releases his grip on the slaver's throat.

The slaver goes limp with a cough, still alive. Chatterbox takes in a shuddering breath and tries to listen for the Force. Why hadn't there been any warning? Why hadn't he known what was going to happen? He should have been able to stop this! Zee shouldn't have died!

When he opens his eyes, it is not Fives there with a hand on his shoulder, but Luke, worried blue eyes looking up at him. He straightens quickly to attention, (an old habit he still can't shake) and then looks away, ashamed.

Luke says nothing. His eyes shine with understanding and grief. He looks over his shoulder at the kneeling Crolute whom Fives has bound tight.

"You just murdered four people," Luke says slowly.

"They were slaves. All escaped slaves know the rules. Run and you die. That's the law. Hutt law.

I'm not the one who's guilty here. And you, *Jedi*," he spits in disgust, "have to uphold the law unless your precious Republic

wants a war with the Hutt Clans.”

“The law,” Luke echoes. “You want Hutt justice, is that it?”

“It’s my right. I’ve paid my cut to the Families. I have a right to compensation for property taken from me.”

Luke smiles blandly and nods. “Very well. We will honor your right.”

“No, sir!” Fives protests. “Not after what this monster did! You can’t—!”

But then Chatterbox steps forward and cuts him off, shaking in fury. “Hutt justice is fine by me. Shall we offer the same rights to the other prisoners?” he asks Luke.

“We’ll give them a choice,” Luke replies mildly. “They can submit to Judiciary proceedings through the Republic or they can be subject to the laws of Tatooine.”

Fives looks from one man to the other and sees the ice in their eyes and thinks back to what they found and saw when taking Jabba’s Palace. All his remaining arguments die unspoken on his lips. Now that he thinks about it, Hutt justice sounds perfect.

CXLVIII.

While Fives and Chatterbox drag the murderer towards the makeshift jail, Luke wishes his father was alive. Vader could have killed the slaver and spared Chatterbox, Fives, and Luke the trouble and the pain of dealing with him. Vader probably would have done a better job in setting up the scramblers than Luke did and then this never would have happened in the first place. Maybe if his father had lived to complete his plans, the liberation of the planet would have been better, fewer people would have died. Maybe his father was right; Luke shouldn’t have planned anything himself. What did he know about freeing an entire planet? If Vader were here—

But his father is not here, he tells himself sternly. His father is *dead*. There is *no use* pretending otherwise. It is up to him to

figure out what to do alone and hope that it is the right decision, hope that it is enough.

He pushes away his pain and grief with the ease of long practice. Now is *not* the time. There is too much to do. He is needed. Luke moves through what is left of the subdued crowd. He sees Hardcase, kneeling in the sands and draws off his cloak. Crouching down, he spreads the cloth gently over what is left of the youngling, helping to gather up the body for burial. Hardcase doesn't say a word, he just takes the bundle into his bloodstained arms with infinite care.

"Jesse, I need you to get a sand skiff or two and collect those prisoners who have decided they wish their deeds weighed by the Hutt clans' scales," he orders quietly.

Jesse looks at his brothers who don't seem to have any more idea than him what is going on or what Luke is talking about, but moves to do as he is asked.

"Redeye, go speak to the grandmother in the Quarters. Tell her that I would like volunteers to come with us to help take the prisoners to the Great Pit."

Redeye nods. "Volunteers. The Great Pit. Yes sir."

"The Great Pit of Carkoon?"

Luke turns from Hardcase and sees Anakin standing behind him.

"You can't be serious," Anakin breathes.

"They asked for Hutt justice. I plan to give it to them," Luke says calmly.

"How do *you* even *know* about the Great Pit?" Anakin asks in horror.

"I used to live here," Luke says as he stands and Hardcase rises with him. "We will bury the dead and then we will go. Captain Rex, I'll give you the coordinates. We only need a few men. The rest can stay here to help take care of the people."

CXLIX.

As Luke leads Hardcase to where a place is being prepared for burial, Ahsoka grabs onto her Master's arm trying to get his attention. "What's the Great Pit?" she asks urgently.

"It's where the sarlacc lives," Anakin explains distractedly, still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Luke had once lived on Tatooine, that he knew of the Great Pit, the place they executed slaves that dared to rebel and kill their owners. Every slave on Tatooine knew of it, but the only ones who'd *seen* it and knew where it was had either been fed to the sarlacc, were doing the feeding, or were being forced to watch their loved ones be executed. How could *Luke* know where to take the prisoners unless he'd seen it himself in the future? Who had *dared* take his son to the Great Pit? Who had Luke watched die?

Ahsoka's brow furrows in confusion. "Sarlacc? Like Shii-Cho, The Way of the Sarlacc? The *lightsaber* form?"

"Nothing like the form," he says sharply, moving towards where Jesse had arranged their transportation and the prisoners were being gathered. Luke may have spoken in a calm tone, but Anakin can *feel* how angry his son is, cold and sharp like ice. Anakin may be a near stranger to his grown son, but he knows that Luke is determined to right this wrong no matter what the cost to himself and Anakin cannot let him do it alone. "Look, Ahsoka, you don't have to come and watch if you don't want to."

"You're going though, right?" she demands.

Anakin clenches his jaw tight. As if there is any question. He wants to see. He wants to witness this himself. He wants to be there for Luke. "Yes, I'm going."

"Then I'm going with you," she says firmly. "I'm not letting you go anywhere else on this hell planet without me, even to see something as-as innocent as a-a sarlacc."

Anakin considers the stubborn tilt of his Padawan's chin and knows there is no talking her out of this. "Innocent is not the word I would use, Snips," he says with a shake of his head.

“What’s wrong with sarlaccs?”

“Come and see for yourself,” Anakin intones darkly as he climbs aboard the skiff.

CL.

When they reach the Great Pit, the prisoners who have been growing more and more nervous, start panicking and yelling. Luke has them cringing back from him with a Look.

Ahsoka stares down and finally understands. “That’s a mouth! A mouth with teeth and tentacles! Are we, is Luke going to... are we going to *let him*-?”

Anakin, who has been very quiet during the whole trip, smiles a tight smile and pats her on the shoulder. “This is the desert, and we are desert people. Desert people don’t forget,” he tells her in a tone of voice she has never heard, as if he is reciting something old and half forgotten. “This was Jabba’s second favorite way to entertain himself. He used to come out here and throw parties. They wanted Hutt justice. They’ve got it.”

Echo peers over the edge, his datapad in hand. “They say that this sarlacc towers over a hundred meters in height and one this size is more than 30,000 years old. They say it’s an agonizing way to die.”

Fives grabs the back of Echo’s armor and pulls him towards the center of the skiff. “Sounds fitting to me. This scum certainly deserve it and I can think of a few other people I wish were here to feed to the sarlacc.”

The prisoners start begging, but Luke ignores them. He has seen the emaciated people they rescued from the mines. He has carried the bodies of child sex slaves from their filthy pens. He has seen rescued slaves blown to pieces all his life, not just today. In another time and place he had helped his aunt remove detonators from runaways, trying to give them their freedom. Luke has helped free tens of thousands of people over the last few

weeks and for every slave restored to freedom, it is like a wound in the very fabric of the Force has healed and been soothed.

Luke meets the eyes of the volunteers who have come with them to witness this justice: a male Twi'lek, his father's friend Kitster, and two human females. He will not ask them to do anything he will not do himself.

Luke steps forward with them and together they push the slavers over the edge and into the hungry mouth of the sarlacc.



CHAPTER 17

In Which Anakin Hears What He Should Have Heard a Long Time Ago and Obi-Wan Drops the Mic

CLI.

It was dark when they returned to Mos Espa. The town was quiet except for the sound of low voices from the former slave quarters. Luke dropped down into the cooling sands and found his way in the darkness to where Hardcase sat besides a small grave plot, the clones following unerringly behind him.

Luke crossed his legs and sat beside him. "It's done," he said. "He can't hurt anyone anymore."

Hardcase didn't look up from where he was digging his fingers into the hard packed sands, not even when Rex, Fives, Echo, and the others came to rest beside them, shucking off helmets, stretching out their legs. Chatterbox stayed standing, looking anywhere but at the gravestone.

"He's dead?" Hardcase asked in a lifeless tone.

“Dying,” Echo corrected. “Slowly being digested over a thousand years.”

“Good,” Hardcase muttered, jamming his still blood-stained fingers into the ground. “Doesn’t bring him back, though,” he said with sniff, bringing up one arm to wipe at his equally stained face. “Doesn’t—doesn’t *fix* things.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Luke said thinking of the little boy with the bright smile who hadn’t left Hardcase’s side, not for an instant, who’d followed in his footsteps, and had clung to him every chance he could.

“You can just say it!” Chatterbox shouted suddenly, breaking the silence. “You can! I failed! It’s my fault!”

Hardcase looked up at him, eyes wet and wide.

“I should’ve known. I should have *felt* something. I should have *sensed* something. The Force should’ve warned me. I wasn’t *listening*! I missed something! It’s my fault he’s dead!” he cried.

“No, it’s not,” Hardcase denied lowly. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It was! I should have been paying attention! I could’ve stopped it if I’d just— I’d just— If—!” He pressed his fists to the sides of his head and swallowed back a sob, sinking down to the sands.

“That’s nothing,” Kix spat in disgust. “I’m the one who should have made sure that we finished all the surgeries removing those transmitters and bombs beforehand. If we’re pointing fingers, then point them at me.”

“And what about us?” Mal said with a black laugh. “Hack Squad. We can do it all. It was *our* scrambler that was supposed to keep everyone safe. We couldn’t even do that. Some *skrag* with a homemade remote and randomizer got around our tech without any trouble at all.”

“We were all charged with security. We were all responsible for making sure that everyone who was a threat was either watched or was in prison. We all failed,” Fives said angrily rising to his feet, shrugging off Rex’s hand when he tried to calm him down. “We’re all to blame!”

“No,” Luke said firmly, cutting them off. “No. You didn’t fail.

Listen to me, all of you. *You didn't fail*. None of you did. It is possible to make no mistakes and still lose a battle. That's not failure. That's life."

Chatterbox made a noise of disgust. "Then what's the point?" he demanded. "What's the point of having this-this Force sense if it isn't going to warn me before people start exploding or chips get triggered or-or when Jedi Generals send you to kill your own brothers?"

Luke closed his eyes and was silent for a long moment. What *was* the point? he thought to himself. Why have this power to move mountains and lift ships when those you loved and wanted to protect still suffered and died, (or no longer even existed?) Luke was no sage like Master Yoda. His knowledge of the Force was laughably limited, no matter what Vader had claimed. There was so much he didn't know. But these men who volunteered to help him fulfill his father's last wish deserved answers. They deserved the truth.

"The Force is a powerful ally. It's all around us. Sometimes I believe that if we only knew how, we could do anything with it, anything at all. But the truth is," He opened his eyes, "The truth is that Force or no Force, *none* of us can do the one thing we really want to do. We can't stop death. For every hundred beings that we save by our wits, with a blaster, or with the Force, there will be one we lose and there is *nothing* we can do about it no matter how strong we are, no matter how hard we train or plan." Luke looked up and there leaning against the wall of the nearest building was Anakin, listening, watching intently. In that instant, Luke missed his father so much it felt like a physical wound. "What happened to Zee and the others will happen again and again and again," he said, clenching his fists tight.

"Then what do we do?" Hardcase asked suddenly.

Luke thought back to his childhood, the harsh sands, the harsher planet. He couldn't remember a time that he hadn't known that he was Luke Skywalker, freeborn son of a slave family, when he hadn't known that people suffered in bondage from

which there was no relief.

He thought back to the Alliance, to the desperate chances they all took with their rag-tag fleet against the military might of the entire Empire. He remembered the crippling losses, and the devastating defeats as they were hunted relentlessly across the galaxy. How many times had he sat in barracks previously full of squad mates only to find them nearly empty and filled with ghosts after a fight? Too many times to count. He could almost picture Wedge, Wes, and Hobbie sitting with him now in the dark, passing around whatever alcohol they could scrounge up, holding onto whatever hope they had left.

He remembered facing Vader, and those moments when he may have been beaten but somehow found the strength to keep going. *That* was what he wished to impart to the men, *that* was what he hoped Anakin with Ahsoka could learn and understand without ever having to go through all he and his friends went through.

"We save the hundred and we don't stop trying to save the one. We *never* stop. We must believe we can do it, believe that this time *somehow*, we can bring everyone safely home."

"Then... then I want to free every person I can," Hardcase said slowly, a new light burning in his eyes. "Every person like Zee all over the galaxy. I want to find them and rescue them all. I don't care how long it takes or who I have to fight."

"My father said that that's what the Jedi used to do, they used to fight slavery, because slavery was how the Sith built empires. If that's what you want to do, you won't be alone in that fight," Luke assured him.

"No, he won't," Redeye said. "I may not have the Force or be a Jedi, but I'll help. I'll help you hunt down and wipe out every slaver we can find." Jesse and Cooker and several other brothers nod, promising to have Hardcase's back.

"I'll help but... I want to make sure our brothers are safe as well," Fives said. "I don't want any of us to ever fight another battle or war just on some person's say so. We're soldiers, but I don't

want another brother to die for *no good reason* ever again.” Fives said fervently.

Kix and Dogma murmured their agreement and Rex swore lowly, “Never again. I don’t care what the orders are or who gives them. I never want to fight another brother for as long as I live.”

“If I have a choice, if I can choose, then I just want to fly,” Kickback said softly, staring at the stars. “I’ll take brothers wherever they want to go, provide air support as you wipe out every slaver in the galaxy and fight every injustice from here to the Core. I just never feel right in my own skin unless I’m up there.”

Luke looked at Chatterbox, who still sat radiating misery and guilt and shame. Chatterbox had spoken on this day more words than Luke had ever heard from him in the entire time he’d known the man. There were so many things Chatterbox had to say, but didn’t. He buried them under a veil of impassivity that hid a well-spring of resentment and anger. Luke knew that feeling too well; it reminded him of his father’s rages when he felt powerless, of the shadows and smoke that used to curl around Luke constantly while his father was alive. The feeling was so unnerving at first, but now he missed it more than he could say.

Chatterbox was too perceptive not to notice Luke’s regard. Finally the clone spoke, each word said as if it was being forcibly dragged from his lips. “I want... I want what I do and say... I want it to *matter*. It’s never mattered before. There was always something bigger, something more important. Me... I was *nothing*, just another number.” He wiped his face with one arm.

“It matters, Chatterbox. I swear to you it does,” Luke said. “*You* matter.”

“I don’t know what to do. I’m-I’m just, I feel *so angry* all the time,” he admitted with a helpless sort of fury. “And I *know* we’re not supposed to feel that, Jedi aren’t *supposed* to get angry. I know it’s wrong—”

“There is no such thing as ‘supposed to’, ” Luke said, quickly interrupting. “You and your brothers have been controlled by other people and treated like *things* most of your life, just like

Zee was. Of course you're angry. You're *allowed* to be. Just don't let anger become your new owner. Don't just replace one slaver in your life with another."

Chatterbox closed his eyes, trying to focus, trying to hear the Force, but its song was discordant and mixed up, rough to the ears. "I don't know how to stop it, how to stop feeling this way," Chatterbox said in frustration.

"It isn't a matter of stopping," Luke explained earnestly. "If you don't pay attention to anger, pretend you don't feel it, it will turn and savage you like a krayt dragon when your back is turned and then *it* will be in control of *you*. If you face it like you're doing now, watch it, listen to it with a conscious mind, then you are more than smart enough and capable enough to understand what it wants and where it comes from. Once you do that, anger cannot control you."

"Easier said than done," Chatterbox muttered.

"You've already done it," Luke countered. "You were angry and you let it control you, but then you stopped. You *listened*. Fives was there and you chose to listen to your brother, to trust him."

Chatterbox blinked at him, as if remembering and then turned to look at Fives.

Fives nodded slowly.

Luke reached out and placed his hand on Chatterbox's shoulder. "You're strong and you have carried so many of your brothers when they desperately needed you, but no one is invincible. Now, when you need it, trust that you have many people willing to carry you, Chatterbox. We're here. You're not alone."

CLII.

Ahsoka couldn't sleep. Once again it was Luke's fault, but this time she wasn't upset. He had the most uncanny way of turning her certain universe upside down and she was starting to get used to it. She got up quietly and walked to where her Master

sat against the clay wall, keeping watch over the sleeping men despite the posted sentries. Hardcase had refused to leave Zee's side and rather than press the issue, the men had settled in the sands around the grave for the night.

Anakin had been quiet since returning from the Great Pit. He'd listened silently as the men talked, as Luke had spoken. He hadn't interrupted or said a word as Luke talked absolute heresy. For a moment, Ahsoka worried that he'd returned to silence, losing his words again, but now she heard him whisper.

"When I was little, I used to dream that I was a Jedi, that I came back to Tatooine and freed everyone. That's all I ever wanted. I wanted to free my mom," he said, voice breaking as he spoke of her, his grief tangible. "I wanted to help people and the stories said Jedi were heroes who helped people in need. Only *they* could defeat the slavers. I wanted to be a Jedi more than anything else. I still do."

"You *are* a Jedi," she reminded him quickly.

He huffed. "Not a very good one by the Order's way of judging things. They're going to find out about Padme and the twins sooner or later. When that happens, they'll probably expel me. Especially since I will *not* abandon my wife and I will *not* give my children to the Temple. But I think... I think that even if they *do* expel me, maybe I'll still be a Jedi. I'll be a Jedi like Luke is instead," he said softly almost hopefully. He then nudged his shoulder against hers. "And I'll still complete your training if you want me to, even though I'll be a heretic and a rogue."

"I do," Ahsoka said without hesitation. "Someone once told me I wouldn't make it as just *anyone's* Padawan."

He sighed. "Snips, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said—"

"No, shh. That person, he was right. I needed someone who let me hone myself into all that I could be, not squash me into something I'm just... not." She looked up at the splash of stars that ran like a river through the night sky. The sky looked so different in the Outer Rim. With all the fighting, she sometimes forgot to look up and just enjoy it. "I heard from Barriss. She

commended me on the way to Tatooine. She's leading an entire corp of clone medics, traveling and healing the troops. She saved hundreds of lives when Order 66 came down because she disobeyed her Master and didn't return to the Temple when she was ordered to. She's on her way here to help," Ahsoka said. "The thing is, I've never heard her talk with... *passion* before. I think if she had to fight in the war one second longer she would have gone insane. She's a better Jedi away from the Order than with it." She turned to look at him, meeting the flash of his eyes in the dark. "You let me do the same. You *let me* find out how I could be the best Jedi and the best person I could be. I think... I think now you need to *let yourself* do the same."

"Am I allowed?" he whispered.

"Yes," she said firmly, finding his hand in the dark. "You have my permission and you have my support and Obi-Wan's support and Padme's and Luke's and all of our men. We'll help; we'll carry you if need be. But you can do this, Anakin. I believe in you."

His hand squeezed hers. "All right, Snips. All right."

CLIII.

When Ahsoka finally gives her report to the Jedi High Council from Tatooine about the liberation campaign, she speaks with confidence about their actions, unflinching and sure in the face of the wrongs that they have righted. There is debate about whether Luke has any right to invade Tatooine in the first place. Ahsoka calmly reminds the Council that if Tatooine counts as Republic space that is news to her, to Luke, and to the rest of the galaxy. The Republic and the Jedi Order hardly cared when it was the Hutts killing, brutalizing, and enslaving sentients, why should the Republic or the Jedi Order now protest that someone was *stopping* them?

Either the planet belonged to the Republic and the Republic could hardly invade its own planet to enforce the law or the

planet was outside of the Republic's jurisdiction, so the Order didn't really have any say in what happened there in the first place, Ahsoka logically points out.

"Be that as it may, Republic forces were utilized. The Republic has a treaty with the Hutts as part of the war effort," Ki-Adi Mundi reminds her. "This could start a war with the Hutts."

"The war is over," Ahsoka says in response. "The treaty with the Hutts expired the moment the war ended. This was not an invasion. There were no GAR forces on Tatooine. Everyone who went volunteered and gave of their own time and chose to visit the planet. It's a free galaxy after all, unless you're saying that the clones don't have the right to free time and to travel where they wish, Master?" she asks sweetly.

"No one is saying that. The clones have the same rights as anyone. But you are there, Ahsoka as is your Master. You represent the Jedi and thus the Republic. It makes a political statement that could have far reaching effects," Master Plo says.

It certainly will, Ahsoka thinks privately to herself. She has seen Hardcase's preliminary plans for liberating other Hutt planets and taking those troopers of the GAR willing to do so back into Zygerrian space. He was going to wreak havoc on the Rim and Luke and the men were fully committed to supporting his plan.

"It is in the purview of Jedi to take action in the face of violations of sentient rights throughout the galaxy. From a young age we are all taught that the Jedi Order upholds the law and that includes the laws against slavery, against torture, and against murder," Ahsoka argues with growing passion. "Master Skywalker and I have every right to be here and a *duty* to aid the local people in winning their freedom from slavers and the Hutts."

"And just *where* is your Master?" Mace asks. "We gave you a mission, Padawan. Why has he not come before this Council to explain himself and sends you instead? His long time connection to the Supreme Chancellor is well known. Why wasn't he the one to fight Palpatine or stand in defense of the Temple during the

attack? You were instructed to bring him back to Coruscant for questioning, not go on unsanctioned military campaigns in the Outer Rim.”

Master Yoda raises a hand, as if warning the Councilors to speak more softly. The gardens are full of other Jedi and clones and sound carries.

Ahsoka’s eyes narrow and she folds her arms across her chest. “Questioning? Is this Council *accusing* my Master of wrongdoing simply because he was in communication with Palpatine? Wer-
en’t all of you also in *constant* communication with the Sith Master?” she says, gesturing around her, unable to keep the derision in her tone concealed. “Didn’t you *all* meet with him privately, take orders from him, pass on intelligence to him, help save his life in a war *he* orchestrated from start to finish? Why then is it only *my Master* who must be questioned? Why is *he* somehow the *only one* responsible for *everything*? What about all of you? Why aren’t you questioning yourselves?”

“Padawan, you will control yourself!” Mace says sharply. “He has claimed to be the Chosen One—”

“No, he hasn’t!” Heads turn as one to look at Obi-Wan Kenobi’s icy expression lit in holographic blue. “The only people who have ever claimed that Anakin Skywalker is the Chosen One are the High Council and my own Master, Qui-Gon Jinn. *Not once* has Anakin claimed to be the Chosen One. He has never taken on such a title. It is each of us who have raised and debated that claim, who have demanded he measure up to a prophecy that I, to this day, have *never even seen nor read in full*. It is each of us who have censured him when he fell short of whatever imaginary and arbitrary expectation we set against him.”

“Master Kenobi—” Master Yoda interjects, but Obi-Wan does not back down. He stands instead, joining Ahsoka in the center of the circle. Ahsoka tries not to gape as Master Obi-Wan brings to bear his devastating way with words to debate the Council to a standstill the way she has only seen him verbally attack Separatists. Beyond the trees and the little corner of the gardens the

Council has claimed as its own, a crowd of Jedi and clones are gathering, listening.

“No. Enough. I will not be silent any longer. I will not bite my tongue and bow my head to the will of this Council when *it is wrong*. I will not allow you to censure Anakin for not being some promised messiah or some paragon of virtue. I am *sick* of this and if I had been a better Knight and a better Master I would have stopped this years ago. Anakin Skywalker is a Knight of this Order and entitled to all respect and rights thereto. Sheev Palpatine was a Sith Master and we were *blind* to it. We let him into the Temple and around our students. *I* let him near my Padawan,” he said, his voice suddenly soft as he remembers the past with barely concealed horror and shame. “We took orders from him and *never once* stopped to question anything until it was nearly too late. Ahsoka is right. Instead of focusing on Anakin and his imagined failings, we should be looking at ourselves and trying to figure out just when this Council grew more interested in keeping tradition, obeying the Senate, and enforcing its own will over the Will of the Force!”

“What you are suggesting is nothing short than upending centuries of tradition, precedent, and decisions by this Council in furtherance of your admitted emotional attachment to your former Padawan,” Master Mundi says. “The decisions of the past cannot simply be put aside because of your *feelings*, Master Kenobi. In times of upheaval, our traditions are what protect this Order.”

Obi-Wan sighs heavily, pressing his fingers against the bridge of his nose in frustration and then looks up, tucking his hands into his sleeves. “Why then are we bothering to even meet if all this august body plans to do is perpetuate the decisions of the past without a thought or consideration for the reality of the present and the shadows of the future? Why are any of us wasting our time sitting here when we don’t plan to do anything different than has been done for the last millennia? If we don’t care to make new decision to handle the problems we *actually*

face, then I see no point in even holding these meetings in the first place, Masters. When this Council is ready to discuss the *present* and make new informed decisions *for the future* for all Jedi everywhere please feel free to comm me and I will be happy to contribute. Until then, there is nothing more for me or any of us to say on the matter. May the Force be with us all.” He bows only once, barely a perfunctory nod of the head and his holo image winks out leaving Ahsoka’s blue image standing alone in the center of the circle of remaining Councilors.

Ahsoka looks around at the Masters, now that their number is reduced by one, at their shocked and yes, angry faces. She may be brave and fearless in a firefight, but she isn’t going to stick around for *this* fall out. “Masters,” she says with a quick bow. “I leave my report with you. May the Force be with you.”

And before they can utter another word, she cuts the comm.

CLIV.

Ahsoka takes a few steps back as the comm channel fades away. She can’t believe that just happened, that she just spoke to the High Council like that, that *Master Obi-Wan* had spoken like that! She feels like she’s just finished running for her life in full retreat from an entire company of battle droids. She looks over and finds Rex staring at her, wearing a look of disbelief.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Commander,” he says slowly, “But for all I’m just a clone bred to follow orders, I don’t envy you Jedi one bit.”

She is a bit taken aback by his candor. The Captain Rex she remembers meeting during the Battle of Christophsis would *never* have spoken his mind like that, especially about the Jedi Order. He was different now, more outspoken, less prepared to just accept an order without thinking. Just another thing altered thanks to Luke and Vader, but she thinks it suits him well. It lets her meet him half way, both of them putting aside professional-

ism to work as a team. "Is it that bad, you think?" Ahsoka asks in a small voice.

He snorts derisively. "First rule of combat we learn is adapt or die. Doesn't sound like your Council does much adapting."

"I think that's going to change because even if the Council isn't prepared to adapt, too many of us who've fought in this war have changed. We had to, to survive," she says. "After what we've all seen, we can't just go back to the way things were before."

Rex thinks back to all he has seen and done since first leaving Kamino, how much has changed since Umbara. "No, there's no going back," Rex says solemnly. "Do you think they'll order you and the General back to Coruscant?"

Ahsoka shrugs and the two of them walk out of the comm center at the Mos Eisley Spaceport, the only truly reliable galactic comm on the planet, not counting Jabba's Palace. "I don't know. I'm not sure why they would, except to censure me. Is there any word on when we may be leaving Tatooine?"

"No, Commander. Commander Olee and her medical corps have really helped, but last I heard Senator Amidala was still arguing with the locals on whether or not Tatooine should be a free port for all trade except slaves and spice."

"The people want the smugglers to stay?" Ahsoka exclaims in surprise.

"There's no other interstellar travel and trade with Tatooine *except* by privateer and smuggler now that the Hutts are out. We've managed to liberate and re-purpose more than a few hyperspace capable ships from Jabba and the slavers, but not enough to set up regular trade, and the rest of the galaxy has its own problems. The Senator doesn't like it, but she can't promise Republic aid. The smugglers just want to continue business as usual and are looking forward to not having to pay the Hutt's taxes."

"There's got to be *something* else that Tatooine can offer besides being a free port," she remarks as they head into the living area that Anakin and Padme have claimed for their family, nodding to the Noghri and the troopers standing guard.

(The men were more than a bit put out to learn that they had competition when it came to the privilege of guarding the General's family. They had started a game of one upmanship with Lir and Evr'shkimkh and the other Noghri to prove that clones were the better fighters. Where it would end, Rex didn't know, but for now he was letting it play out as the Noghri were keeping his men on their toes and it was good for morale).

Anakin is inside with the babies. At eleven weeks old the twins have started to recognize faces when they are close enough to see and wiggle in delight when they see someone they know. Ahsoka hurries over and picks up Leia, who's brown eyes light up when she sees the Togruta. Luke is resting against his father's chest, investigating his hand and fingers with his mouth, drooling all over his father.

"How did the Council report go?" her Master asks, not even bothering to conceal his anxiety.

"Obi-Wan comm dropped them," Ahsoka responds promptly. "I've never seen anything like it."

Anakin goggles. "He *what? Really?*" He turns to Rex. "Did you record it? Tell me you recorded the comm for posterity," he says urgently.

"Recorded and archived, sir," Rex assures his General, looking over Ahsoka's shoulder at Leia who manages to make an inarticulate noise of happiness at the sight of him.

"I thought Padme would be back by now," Ahsoka says as she sits across from Anakin.

He shakes his head. "Still arguing. I think Luke is wearing her down though."

"Well, I can see her point. There's got to be something else that Tatooine can offer and use as a basis for its economy."

Anakin huffs. "Like what?"

"I don't know! Uh... what does Tatooine have resource wise?" She looks over at Rex who just shrugs.

"Sand?" he offers.

She rolls her eyes. "Very helpful. What about eco-tourism or

something?"

"I can see it now," Anakin says in a deadpan voice. "Come to Tatooine. Be tortured and abducted by Tusken. Dehydrate and be robbed by Jawas. Now with no more slavery but extra womp rats. Book your tour today! Look, the locals have it right. The only thing to do is make it a free port, offer cheap power from the solar grid and make everyone pay through the nose for water."

"It'll be the haven of every lowlife in the Outer Rim," Ahsoka complains. "You can't blame Padme for wanting something better."

"At least if they're on Tatooine, we'll know where to look for them," Rex says, trying to look on the bright side. "And I think the locals are more than able to handle them."

"Give it up. We've stopped the slave and spice trade. Sand and smugglers; that's all that's left. Well, that and the racing," Anakin adds staring down at the baby resting against his chest, remembering.

(Luke had found some junked Skyhopper and somehow got it working and had gone racing the day before. He'd drawn quite the crowd and some of the local bush pilots had even come out to challenge him. He'd pulled so many crazy atmospheric stunts that Anakin nearly had tookas. Padme had whispered to him, "Now you know how *I* feel watching you fly. I blame your genes and your planet for this.")

Kickback had appropriated the 'hopper as soon as Luke landed and looked like he was planning on living in the cockpit permanently so long as they were dirtside.)

"You turned such an interest color watching the racing, Master," Ahsoka teases.

"Shut up, Snips," Anakin mutters.

"I'm just surprised you didn't get out there and join in, sir. He and Vader used to race all the time on whatever planet we were on," Rex says.

"There wasn't another ship and I was holding the twins," Anakin says defensively. "Besides, I used to race pods, not 'hop-

pers.”

“Well, there you go,” Rex says. “Free port and racing, that’s what this rock has to offer. 99 and the other Marshall Commanders have agreed we need a clone Home Base on a desert planet. The locals are fine with us staying and keeping the Hutts away. We can open up a flight school or something,” he suggests. “Who knows, this could be the new place in the galaxy to find the best trained pilots in a couple of years. If Tatooine gave us you, General, and Luke and Vader, that should be enough of a recommendation for *anyone* wanting to learn to fly.”

Bouncing Leia in her arms, Ahsoka smiles in agreement and then stills.

Anakin, Luke, and Vader.

Oh, stars!

Leia makes a distressed sound in her arms, unhappy that the bouncing has stopped.

“Commander?” Rex asks.

“Snips?”

She takes a deep breath, soothes Leia, and then looks over at her Master with eyes narrowed. “Were you *ever* going to tell me?” she demands angrily.

He understands without a single word of explanation as to what she means, his face going pale. Anakin looks away, ashamed. She bites her lip, regretting her outburst immediately. How could she expect him to tell her something like that? That in another time and place, he had Fallen and whatever happened after that was *so horrible* that a hardened Sith Lord and his rogue Jedi son made it back in time and risked it all to change things for the better.

“I should’ve *known*,” she says with a groan. “He never let up on how I use a reverse grip on my sabers. More than *two decades* later, Fallen to the Dark, and you *never* let that go!”

“Because it’s risky!” Anakin snaps back. “You could lose an arm fighting that way and I should know!” He says, raising his right hand off Luke’s back and waving it in the air as an illustra-

tive example. His frustration drains away as suddenly as it came and he seems to collapse in on himself. "Ahsoka..."

Ahsoka looks away, focusing on the baby in her arms. She wonders how Vader Fell. While she can well picture how the emotions she regularly feels from her Master could become the raging storm inside Vader, she can't imagine Anakin Falling if she was there by his side. She would have kicked him back to the Light, that is, if Obi-Wan didn't just drag Anakin away from the edge first! Then she imagines an Anakin with no one at his side, no one protecting his back and Palpatine just watching and waiting and grows cold at the thought. No wonder Luke had stuck to his father like glue during the brief time she had spent with both of them!

"I could never understand how Luke could love him. Now I can," she says at last. "I can *completely* understand."

Anakin meets her eyes and smiles, relief shining in his eyes. He loves her too. Then he remembers something and quickly says, "*Don't* let Luke know. Don't bother him or ask him questions. He doesn't need that right now."

"Sir!" Rex protested with a groan. "This is getting ridiculous."

"He's grieving for his... father and—and he has no one else," Anakin reminds them. Ahsoka looks down at the baby girl in her arms and thinks about grown up Luke without his father and with no mother or twin sister or friends and her heart aches in sympathy. "We need to give him time. He'll talk to us when he's ready," he insists.

She looks from Leia over to baby Luke who is now snuffling at his father's chest, hungry. She can't help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. "This is insane."

"Welcome to my life," Rex says sourly.

Ahsoka then stops and looks at Anakin. She can see it in his face. He is having the same thought that she is. Rex doesn't seem surprised at all to learn the truth about Vader and Anakin and Luke. How does *Rex* know the truth?

"Captain..." Anakin begins warningly. "Is there something you

want to tell us?”

“Yeah, like when and how you knew about all of this?”

Rex stiffens to attention, caught. Clearing his throat, he offers the only explanation he can. “It was the sand, sir.”



CHAPTER 18

In Which Words Fail Obi-Wan and Mace Decides It's Time to Take a Vacation

CLV.

Obi-Wan draws in a calming breath. He unclenches his hands and sits back down to stare at the dark comm unit. He wonders if his old Master had felt like this after he openly defied the Council. But then again, Qui-Gon argued with the Council so often it was hardly an extraordinary event for him. Regardless, Obi-Wan knows that he has done the right thing. The Force feels calm around him, ringing with a sense of hope and Light.

He can't remember the last time the Force felt like that.

He looks out the window. It is not quite dawn on Mandalore at the capital. His hand finds the small box in his cloak. It has been a long time since he spent a year on the run with Satine, but he hasn't forgotten the traditions he learned from her. Perhaps today is the day, he thinks. He certainly wasn't babbling when addressing the Council. Surely today he can manage to say the

words that he has long wanted to say to Satine.

Yes, today is the day.

CLVI.

Today is *not* the day.

As Satine takes her seat at the breakfast table on her private balcony, the sun illuminates her hair until it shines like a halo. She looks positively angelic. Obi-Wan rises politely as she comes in.

“Good morning. You look, your hair, I mean, the sun, the light—” he begins.

She freeze halfway into her seat. “If the sun is bothering you, we can switch places,” she offers.

“*No! No!* It’s fine, it’s not a problem at all. It’s just... your hair, I mean...”

She worriedly reaches up to pat her simplified hairdo, free from her usual ceremonial trappings. “Is there something wrong?” Satine asks.

“No! It’s just, I mean, with the sun... you look fine. Yes, fine,” Obi-Wan manages to get out. “I was just, uh, concerned. The sun can be so... drying.”

“Drying?” She says slowly as she shrugs out of her outer robe and takes several slices of fruit onto her breakfast plate.

“Yes, like-like with, er, tea leaves,” he explains, gesturing to his tea cup. “Are you familiar with the different methods of tea leave harvesting and preparation?” he asks weakly. At the slight shake of her head, he begins to expound on the process and how it varies depending on the variety of tea leaves and comes to a painful realization.

Arguing with generals and admirals in battle, talking down captors holding him at blaster point, debating Sith over saber blades, making jokes amid the constant pounding of canon fire, even conversing with his own brother and sister Jedi, *that* is easy.

Asking Satine Kryze a single question is still beyond him.

How does she keep *doing* this to him?

Obi-Wan feels a level of relief usually reserved for when Anakin manages a last minute rescue that doesn't lead to massive collateral damage when their breakfast is interrupted by a messenger.

(Tea leaves? *Kriffing* tea leaves? He is trying to propose marriage for Stars sake! Why has he spent the last ten minutes babbling about *tea leaves* when he could have been telling Satine how much he loves her? When he next sees Anakin he will apologize to his brother for every time he'd been horrified or amused by Anakin's ardent and simple declarations of love for Padme. At least his former Padawan could *communicate* what he felt!)

Satine, ever compassionate and understanding Satine, rises from the breakfast table upon reading the message.

"What is it?" Obi-Wan asks.

She looks at him for a long minute, as if evaluating and judging whether she should share the news she's received with him or not. He must have passed some sort of test because she deigns to tell him. "It is a message from the Jedi, 99. I'd asked him to inform me when his brothers were being... I suppose decanted is the right word, but I think in this instance, born may be used since they are being born to freedom."

Obi-Wan blinks. 99 is a clone designation if he'd ever heard one. A Force sensitive clone on *Mandalore*? Clones being decanted? "Are you saying that the missing clones, the ones still in incubators that vanished from the labs on Kamino, they're *here*? On *Mandalore*?"

Looking supremely pleased at his shock, Satine takes up her outer robe. "Yes, we have welcomed several of the clone brothers to our planet and are honored to be a safe haven for their growing brothers. It is a tremendous opportunity to protect the next generation of clones and give them the ability to live in freedom, not merely die as cannon fodder in some senseless war."

"I have *never* treated my men like cannon fodder," Obi-Wan

protests, standing to follow her as she leaves the balcony. “I *fully* support their independence and their rights as sentients!”

“I know, that’s why I invite you to breakfast with me, lectures about tea leaves notwithstanding,” Satine calls back over her shoulder tartly.

“Where are you going?” he asks, grabbing his own robe and hurrying after her.

“I wish to be there. While the clones desire to raise their brothers themselves, I consider myself something of a guardian over the little ones. I visit whenever I can. 99 and his squad have had to adapt the cloning tubes off of Kamino as best they can so there may be problems. I want to be there to welcome Mandalore’s newest citizens in person.”

“How many are going to be, er, born?” Obi-Wan enquires as the speeder is brought swiftly around and they both get in.

“One thousand,” Satine says with a warm smile. “I hope you ate your fill. It’s going to be a long day.”

CLVII.

The few stars visible with all the light pollution from Mandalore’s capital are just beginning to glimmer when Satine and Obi-Wan, damp, filthy, and exhausted, climb back into the speeder.

Obi-Wan has spent the day listening and taking gentle orders from a hunchbacked clone with a Force sense as serene as Master Yoda. 99 is old by clone standards, a genetic failure that could never be a “regular” solider, though he inexplicably wears a trooper graduation medal on his chest. He is also one of the most powerful Jedi that Obi-Wan has ever met. It is humbling and gut clenching in turns.

The Jedi Order has done such a great disservice to the clones, Obi-Wan knows that intellectually. Now, having helped decant a thousand unique souls, feeling them in the Force, born to freedom, mid-wived into the galaxy by their own brothers, he can

say that he at last fully understands the crimes the Republic and the Order committed against millions of clones, both living and dead. Obi-Wan admits he *was* reluctant to teach those among the troopers who were Force sensitive. He is reluctant no longer. 99 and his squad of cadets, were just as worthy of the title of Jedi as any other Order member that Obi-Wan has ever known.

Each baby is greeted with joy and love, and none are cast aside for being less than perfect. Two prove to be Force sensitive. The inhibitor chips are removed. They will grow up knowing only freedom.

(Holding a baby in his hands, splattered with unmentionable medical fluid, Obi-Wan wonders if this is how Anakin feels on Tatooine right now, liberating his own people. It is heady and exhilarating and the Force nearly sings with happiness. He's never felt anything like it.

"He's perfect," 99 says to him, eager and glowing. "Look at him, j-just look."

And Obi-Wan does, with his eyes and with the Force and sees the same bright firefly glow that was there when Luke and Leia were born. So much potential. So much life. He raises his gaze and sees the others lifting infant after infant out of the cloning tubes, laughing and eager. How could such children be used as weapons and nothing more?)

He leans back against the seat of the speeder. Satine doesn't hesitate to rest her head against his shoulder and he raises his arm to bring her in closer.

"Satine?"

"Hmm?" she manages sleepily. He dares brush his lips against her hair.

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she says with a little sigh against his chest.

He blinks back sudden tears. "Really? Despite... *everything*?"

She raises her head. "No, not despite. *Because* of everything. I love you. I'd hoped you'd ask."

He can't help the grin that stretches across his face. "I love you

too,” he says giddily. “I always have.”

Satine leans in to kiss him but he stops her. “*Wait!* Wait, I have a ring for you,” he tells her, proud that he can do this properly at least when he has nearly bungled everything else. Obi-Wan fumbles at his waist and then turns and looks down, realizing he dropped his cloak hours ago and the ring box was in his cloak pocket. Before he can help it, he lets out a string of Huttese curses that are *entirely* Anakin’s fault, causing Satine to sit up in shock. “I left it in my cloak,” he explains desperately. “It’s back – somewhere,” he tells her forlornly, gesturing helplessly behind them.

She laughs. “How many cloaks does that make now, Obi-Wan? Didn’t your Master tell you your habit of dropping your cloaks would cause you trouble one day?”

“I don’t think this is what he meant!” Obi-Wan sputters.

“It doesn’t matter,” she declares placing her hand against his cheek. “I am sure that 99 will bring it for the ceremony. Now kiss me, you foolish man.”

CLVIII.

The Galaxy figures out Anakin and Padme are married and have twins near the end of the Tatooine campaign. Not that they were hiding it, mind you, but it certainly doesn’t help that Hack Squad has set up several holomedia accounts and groups for clone brothers to post and share photos and stories and keep in touch with each other. Several of the troopers have holo cameras and like taking pictures of their Jedi General goofing off and being something other than a stoic Jedi. One 501st trooper in particular, CT-9779, has innocently and enthusiastically connected with a few people on the holonet who are not members of the GAR and that’s how it starts.

A single holo of Anakin embracing Padme and his children in front of beautiful desert sunsets goes viral without warning. CT-

9779 has tagged the holo which makes any denial by Padme or Anakin of their relationship utterly futile.

(#nofilter #sunset #amateurphotographer #moseisley#anakinlovespadme #jediknight #senator #naboo #loveacrossthestars #knownforever #soromantic #lifegoals #bestcoupleever #bestgeneralever #fightme #501rulz #whyisntshechancelloryet #twins #notclones #theymightaswellbe #millionsofuncles #tooman-
yhashtags #tatooineliberation #endslavery #huttssux #sarlac-
wellfed #notdoneyet)

For a solid ten-day the news is filled with nothing but stories of the Hero With No Fear and his clandestine marriage to Senator Padme Amidala. It is an even bigger story than the latest scandal from the Hapes Consortium's royal family. Then some enterprising reporter goes hunting through old holonews footage and finds images from the celebration after the Battle of Naboo, specifically the image of newly inducted nine year old Jedi Padawan Anakin Skywalker giving the Queen of Naboo a cocky grin and Amidala, beloved and stoic heroine of her people, breaking with all Nubian tradition to laugh and smile back, right under the nose of a young and handsome Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi.

The entire galaxy goes gaga.

"Damn, the General didn't waste *any time*, did he?" Denal says to his squad mates when he sees the images on his feed. "He's just a little thing and he's *flirting* with her!"

"*And it's working*," Jesse says with a laugh.

"I still can't believe this is a surprise to anyone," Kix says to Barriss incredulously, later on in the midst of their marathon surgery sessions. "How is this even news?"

Too embarrassed to admit that she'd been shocked to see Master Skywalker married and a father when she arrived on Tatooine, Barriss pretends to be engrossed in removing the detonator rather than answer the question.

Obi-Wan chokes on his evening brandy when he sees the footage from the celebrations after the Battle of Naboo. The Code

had never stood a chance, he realizes. It had been love at first sight. He endures several days of teasing from Satine on the subject.

The clones rib Anakin about it mercilessly, but he takes it with good humor. He will never be ashamed for falling in love with Padme, telling the men that he knew from the first moment he saw her that one day they would marry. It is very hard to tease a man that much in love. Anakin requests copies of all the holos the men have taken. When Luke hesitantly asks, Anakin also takes the opportunity to tell Luke a play by play of the entire Battle of Naboo and is glowing for days after Luke tells him how impressed he is with Anakin's flying.

Just when it seems that the commotion is dying down, *someone* posts a holo showing the intimate wedding ceremony of Obi-Wan Kenobi and Satine Kryze, (attended by Asajj Ventress, Quinlan Vos, Korkie Kryze, 99, and a squad of little clone brothers wearing cloaks). Then *someone else*, (CT-9779, it is CT-9779), reblogs and tags the image.

(#reblog #obiwan #negotiator #generalkenobi #duchesssatine #dukeobiwan #mandalore #warriorandpeacemaker #ourgeneral-diditfirst #haha212 #501stillrulz #wtfventress #vosandventress? #99 #littleones #squadgoals)

"Will someone get CT-9779 *off* the holonet?" Rex orders in despair. "How does he even have *time* to do all this and have that many followers or friends or whatever the hell he has?"

"What I want to know is how he's getting such good holonet reception on Tatooine," remarks Slice. "I've been dealing with dropped signal even in the towns and he's stationed out somewhere in the dunes."

Exasperated, Rex says, "Well, get him *back here* and you and the rest of the Hack Squad can figure it out together."

(And that is how CT-9779 gets reassigned to Hack Squad and is given the Name Hashtag by his brothers.)

The story of the wedding of the Duchess of Mandalore, notorious pacifist, and Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi, High General

of the GAR Open Circle Fleet, actually eclipses the signing of the Reconstruction Accords and the formal ending of hostilities between the Republic and the Separatist Alliance. First, Anakin Skywalker, the greatest Jedi hero of the war and now the Negotiator? If members of the monastic order were going to be getting married, the galaxy wonders who would be next? Could Master Koon, considered incredibly handsome by Kel Dor standards, be the next to wed? General Vos seemed very close to the Lady Ventress, could there be something brewing there? And what about Masters Fisto and Secura? Weren't *they* particularly close?

Gossip runs rampant from one end of the galaxy to another.

That's when Ventress, not to be outdone, tags Hashtag with a holovid she took of Luke and the 501st most epic Karaoke night *ever*, the one night when Ahsoka had gone crowd surfing and even *Vader* had attended. Hashtag promptly reblogs, tagging away.

(#reblog #karaokenight #luke #sonofvader #jediinblack #badassjedi #jediclones #myheroes @galaxysgottalent @galaxyvisionsongcontest #sotalented #legendary #heissingle #savedthegalaxy #diepalpatinedie #forcegifttothegalaxy)

The galaxy, that has been salivating over even the barest hint of footage featuring the largely unknown Heroes of the Battle of Couruscant, gets a hold of the vid and goes absolutely bananas.

"I *thought* the plan was to keep Hashtag *off the holonet*," Rex says slowly, rubbing his temples.

Hack Squad is conspicuous in their silence.

CLIX.

Mace had at long last come to the conclusion that what he needed was a vacation. Not even at the height of the war had the Council met so often or for so long. He had been listening to the same debate between his fellow Masters for over a week, (as had a rotating group of shameless eavesdroppers both clone and Jedi

alike, who weren't even *hiding* the fact that they were hanging around the gardens to listen in on what should be closed Council sessions).

Master Rancisis was arguing that the prophecy of the Chosen One and ensuring its fulfillment should be the priority of the Order. Masters Koth and Gallia were echoing Obi-Wan's comments, demanding to see a copy of the prophecy in full before making any decision.

(The prophecy was utter nonsense as far as Mace was concerned. With the death of Palpatine at the hands of the Sith Lord Vader it was obvious that the idea of *Skywalker* of all people being some sort of mystical messiah was totally false. Anakin Skywalker had nothing to do with the defeat of the Sith.)

Master Mundi was more interested in what the Order was going to do now that at least two of their number were openly married.

(Mace wasn't touching that one. The Order's most popular and beloved Jedi, the poster children for the war that the Order had allowed the galactic media to create in an attempt to bolster its flagging reputations when the war dragged on and on *and on*, were happily married in blatant defiance of the Code. To even consider expelling them now would be a public relations nightmare. Not to mention the fact that Mace had heard... rumblings around the Temple. He'd overheard more than one conversation since Obi-Wan's defiance of the Council weeks ago where his fellow Jedi were earnestly questioning traditions that had stood for centuries. Even if they only censured Obi-Wan and his former Padawan, it might fracture the Order in two. No, he wasn't going to touch that one with a ten meter pole).

Master Koon wanted to discuss the changes that the Order would have to make in the wake of the historic signing of the Reconstruction Accords. Were the Jedi going to continue to work with the reforming GAR, soon to be renamed the Republic Reconstruction Forces? What about the liberation of slaves on the Outer Rim? Was the Order going to join with the clones in fight-

ing the scourge, effectively declaring war on the Hutts and the Zygerrians, and eradicating slavery once and for all?

(Mace didn't have any answers. Mace had hoped to just see the Republic and the Order safely through the war. No one had said he would have to be on the Council during the biggest political upheaval since the Ruusan Reformation!)

Master Ti and Master Kcja argued that the Order should retreat from Senatorial and galactic affairs. Participating in the Clone Wars was a mistake. Those remaining of an entire generation of Initiates, Padawans and Knights seemed permanently tainted by galactic events. Initiates were questioning age-old teachings. Padawans were challenging their Masters. There were numerous instances of senior Padawans and Knights outright defying the Order, running around wild all over the galaxy. The example set by Master Kenobi and Knight Skywalker and this rogue Jedi Luke were not helping things.

Master Fisto countered that they could hardly expect Jedi who had spent three years in constant battle to not be fundamentally altered.

Master Ti remarked that any Order members who could not manage such stress and release such feelings into the Force were obviously ill prepared to serve as Jedi in the first place.

Before things could devolve further, Master Yoda raised a hand and both Kit and Shaak sunk back into their chairs like chastised Initiates, silent.

Master Kcja began to re-argue his point a fourth time in as many meetings.

(Funny how as soon as Mace stopped actually contributing to the discourse and sat and listened he discovered how utterly ineffective the Council was during peacetime. He had heard more intelligent and unique solutions to some of the gravest problems facing the Order and the galaxy from a group of clones, Padawans, and Initiates speaking candidly with Master Tera Sinube the other day in the Archives.)

Because Master Kcja was once again talking about reining in

members of the Order, that prompted Master Mundi on about the marriages again, this time wondering how soon the Order could test Skywalker's children and bring them to the Temple. Master Rancisis was all for that and *that* set off Master Koth on how he doubted very much if Skywalker would let his children set foot in the Temple so long as the Code remained in place.

Kriff it all, Obi-Wan was right. What the hell was he even *doing*? Mace wondered.

"I'm going on a meditative retreat," he said abruptly, interrupting the other Masters. "I plan to be gone at least a month." He stood, ignoring the looks of shock and growing worry his announcement had sparked. Maybe he would head out and meet up with the 187th. He could join Depa in the field, spend some time with her and his new Grandpadawan, Caleb. His former student always had a way with difficult problems. He missed her presence on the Council. "Whether you have meetings without me or not, is up to you. May the Force be with you."

Without another word, he walked out of the garden, not listening to the commotion ensuing behind him. He proceeded without hesitation to his quarters and then to the hanger bay. He wasn't sure what the Order would look like when he returned in a month, but he was afraid, (yes, afraid!) that he would find the same debate still going on without him. Since that was likely the case, he may as well get a vacation in now. It wasn't like he would be missing much.

CLX.

When Obi-Wan finally figured out who Vader and Luke were, he knew he had to tell his former Padawan. The problem was, Obi-Wan had no idea how he was going to tell him. It had been nearly eight years since That Day. When he met up with Anakin though, words failed him. He blathered on for a bit about the upcoming Hutt offensive and Anakin just stared at him in silence,

puzzled about why he was going over the plans again, until Obi-Wan finally blurted out: "Your son Luke is the same person as Vader's son, Luke. He's your son from an alternate future."

Anakin stared at his former Master like he'd gone mad. "I know that," Anakin said slowly. "What has that got to do with the mission to Nal Hutta? Are you feeling all right?"

Obi-Wan collapsed back onto the couch behind him. "You do?" he croaked.

"Yes, it's obvious." Anakin sounded just like his seven year old son when he said it like that, complete with eye rolls. "Wait, wait. *You didn't know?*"

Obi-Wan gaped at him in disbelief. "*How was I to know something like that?* Time travel is utterly unfeasible from a scientific perspective! It's *impossible!* And if you knew, *why didn't you tell me?*" he demanded.

"I thought you knew!" Anakin yelled back. "I thought you knew and-and it was all right, that you didn't... blame me," he finished looking away unhappily.

"I don't!" he insisted hurriedly. "Anakin, I would *never!* You are not to blame," Obi-Wan said firmly. "*Nothing* Vader did was your fault. You are not Vader."

Anakin swallowed hard and nodded, reminding himself to listen, that Obi-Wan would not lie to him, that he was telling the truth.

"I just can't believe you didn't say anything to me," his former Master said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"*Like I said,* I thought you knew. And how could you possibly not know? They look *exactly alike.* They have the *exact same name,*" he said slowly as if Obi-Wan was being deliberately dense. "I've had an honor guard of Noghri protecting the twins since they were less than a month old. You were there when they arrived on Naboo and pledged their blood debt to the family because of what *Vader and Luke* did to save their planet. Why *else* do you think they came? Luke grew up on *kriffing* Tatooine; that's why he went and freed the whole planet after everything

happened with Palpatine,” Anakin defended. “Who cares about the physics of time travel? It was obviously the Force that did it.”

“The Force doesn’t *work* that way!”

Anakin snorted, “Tell that to the Force!”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth and then closed it, realizing that to keep arguing was absurd. He pressed two fingers against the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath before continuing. “Luke, young Luke, I mean, he thinks he’s the *other* Luke, the grown up Luke’s clone. You may want to... talk to him about that.”

Anakin laughed. “Well, it’s as good an excuse as any.”

“He also thinks Leia is Padme’s clone. *Really*, Anakin, I don’t know where he gets these ideas, but a conversation may be in order.”

“Three months ago Luke believed that Artoo and Threepio were his godparents and that somehow meant that both he and Leia were part droid. This,” he said wiggling his prosthetic right hand, “didn’t help. I’m not too worried about Luke. He’ll figure it out.”

And Obi-Wan couldn’t help but agree. Luke Skywalker was an endearing child, a powerful beacon of Light in the Force. His older counterpart was unorthodox to say the least, but a good and gentle man who traveled the galaxy raining down equal measure of destruction and mercy upon people, a legend in his own right. Obi-Wan shook his head and smiled. “That boy...” he said fondly. It would be interesting when he formally took him on as his apprentice.

“*Leia*, on the other hand...” Anakin began meaningfully. “She wants to join the junior legislators like her mom for their summer program and they don’t accept anyone under the age of eleven. I don’t think it’s going to stop her though. She also told me she thinks that she and Luke are old enough to get tattoos like all the clone troopers do. She’s been eyeing the art supplies and Padme’s makeup with a very odd look on her face lately. I swear I’m going to walk in one day and find her doing Force

knows what to her brother or herself and knowing my luck it will be something horribly permanent.”

They have strayed off topic. Obi-Wan was not blind to that. He let Anakin do it. If his dearest friend didn't want to talk about it, he would not force him. He barely wanted to give voice to the truth either. There was a part of Obi-Wan that had parsed out how it must have happened, how Anakin came to Fall, how he became that armored clad terror that had once forced Obi-Wan to swallow a Forcestorm of pain and betrayal and anger, and his heart broke at the mere thought of it.

Instead Obi-Wan hoped that Anakin could hear his thoughts, and feel what he wanted to really say past the lump in his throat. *For my part in it, I am so sorry. You did nothing wrong, dear one. Believe me. You are not Vader, but even if some version of you became him, even then, Vader helped save everyone. He defeated the Sith. He protected us. He came back from the Dark. There was still good in him. His son believed in him. Please believe it too.*

There is so much good in you.

Instead he said aloud, “I am sure Leia will take the junior legislators by storm, much like her mother. She doesn't want to be Queen, does she?” he asked worriedly. Both he and Ahsoka were waiting until the twins were a bit older to start their training in earnest.

“No, she says being Queen is too limiting. Thank the Force for small blessings. I just don't know what Luke will do while she's away at the program.”

“I am sure we will think of something.”



CHAPTER 19

In Which Luke Comes Full Circle and Decides to Chart his Own Destiny

CLXI.

Being on Tatooine is bizarre. In some ways it is painfully familiar.

Nothing to see.

Sand.

Heat.

Thirst.

Squalor.

But things are different too. Freedom has come to the desert world.

Luke has fulfilled his father's last (*first*) wish.

He has traveled all night to reach the Lars homestead. He knows Padme (*he never knew his mother*), and Anakin (*Father/ not!Father*), have visited, but right now they are in Mos Eisley, preparing to travel back to Naboo. His aunt and uncle are the

only ones home.

(It is disconcerting to feel them through the Force, at once so familiar and comforting and also just... *not*.)

He is not here to visit the past, though.

He is here to lay his father to rest.

The last time he was here, the homestead was burned (*gutted, he'd felt gutted*), and he'd buried his family's remains with his bare hands and a broken piece of scrap durasteel. He navigates the deep dark before the dawn towards the family grave plot and kneels before a familiar stone.

"Hello, grandmother," Luke whispers, reaching out to touch the name inscribed, nearly worn away by sand and wind. "I brought your son back to you. He missed you. He *loved* you. He never forgot you." He reaches into his tunic and pulls out a small black bundle tied with a bit of cord. There was precious little flesh to reduce to ashes after his father's death, but he had wrapped it carefully and has kept it close to his heart for months now.

Luke digs a shallow hole in the sand atop his grandmother's grave and places the bundle inside, covering it gently. "You're together, now and always. Sleep in peace, Father. No more dreams. Tatooine is free now. It's free at last."

Luke looks up, expecting, hoping to see... *something*. He has completed his father's plans, honored the first promise his father likely ever made. *Surely now* there will be some sign that his father is at rest, not lost in the Dark. *Surely now* with Tatooine free and the physical remains of mother and son finally reunited, there will be some hint in the Force of what Luke is supposed to do.

But all is silent as the first light of dawn breaks over the horizon. Taking in a shuddering breath, he forces himself to rise and step back and then step back again, to leave his father behind, tear himself away from the very idea of him that has filled Luke's dreams for as long as he can remember.

(*My Father is truly dead.*)

He makes himself turn away, turn towards the domed homestead in the distance.

Luke dares not look back, but he finds he cannot go forward either. There is a terrible paralysis that comes with grief and Luke feels like he is drowning in it. There are no plans for him to follow. He cannot bring himself to walk towards Tosche Station to where the speeder is parked. He cannot bring himself to knock on the door. What can he say even if he did? There is no place for him here.

(Luke fears there may be no place for him *anywhere*).

He and his father had worked for months to create a new present and from it a new and better future. There was never going to be a place for him or Vader in that future. They were only ever going to have each other and now Luke doesn't even have that.

Unthinkingly, his feet lead him along familiar paths and he heads up to the south ridge where the same vaporators he worked on for years still stand, harvesting moisture from the air drop by drop. He cannot remember how many times he fixed these temperamental things, half fried by the burning suns and clogged with insidious sand. His hands know what to do and Luke finds himself mindlessly cleaning out the trap and tightening the cables, making the machine that much more efficient, eeking out just a few more nano-liters of higher grade product.

He tries to lose himself in the work, in the habits of his childhood, instead of facing the ever presence grief that follows behind him and he fears is now the only steadfast companion in his life.

The work is finicky and you have to be careful not to burn yourself on the exposed metal, superheated from the rising suns. It's harder than when he was younger. His right hand is a problem; it may be stronger, but it does not have the dexterity of his original hand, especially not after he has cannibalized it for parts to upgrade his father's own prosthetics.

He is so focused that he misses the presence behind him until a throat is cleared loudly. Luke whirls around in a panic and

stares at his uncle (*not his uncle*), so young, his face still unlined.

"I-I'm sorry," Luke manages to stutter. "I saw that it needed— I was just trying to help out. I wasn't siphoning," he adds quickly.

"I don't think a Jedi would siphon," Owen says pointing to the lightsaber at Luke's waist. "You know your way around vaporators. You're dressed like a local, but I don't know you and other than Shmi's son Anakin, I've never heard of anyone from Tatooine becoming a Jedi."

Luke brushes his hands down his borrowed desert whites. He may have worn his blacks when getting rid of Jabba and the slavers and while traveling with the troopers, but only an offworlder fool would travel the Jundland Wastes and the Dune Sea alone in anything but desert homespun, even at night.

Luke doesn't know what to say to Owen's pronouncement. He doesn't want to lie. He's so tired of lies; his life now feels like one big lie. All explanations die on his lips, unspoken.

Owen, ever practical, merely moves forward and checks his work and finding it up to his standards, asks if Luke will help him with the others. They spend the rest of the morning on the south ridge together. As he buries himself in the guts of another vaporator, Luke doesn't cry.

Crying is a waste of water.

When the worst of the heat bakes the land and it's time to eat, Luke follows along quietly. So little has changed from what he remembers of the homestead. When he enters the living quarters, he sees Aunt Beru in the kitchen, steaming greens and pouring blue milk. Luke half wonders if he has heat stroke, if this is a dream. An inappropriate laugh nearly escapes: what if it *has* all been a dream? The droids, the Force, the Rebellion, Vader, time travel, all of it.

But no, he clenches his right hand, (*metal, wires*). This is all too real.

He joins them for a meal during the late afternoon heat, managing to keep up with the local talk, (nothing much has changed/ will change about moisture farming or Anchorhead), and dis-

cusses what will happen to Tatooine now that it is free from the Hutts.

(All he can think about as he forces himself to swallow another mouthful of familiar cooking is that he skipped breakfast that morning to hunt down Artoo and he never saw their faces again until now.)

Luke doesn't call them by name.

He doesn't offer his name either and they don't ask. The people of Tatooine know better.

There is the sound of a speeder outside. "That will be Anakin," Beru remarks, going to get a place setting and another portion.

Anakin comes in and strangely doesn't seem surprised to see Luke sitting at the table. Luke, however, is surprised to see him. "I thought you were heading back with the Senator," he says awkwardly. "The offensive is done. I thought you would be heading home."

Anakin shrugs and digs into his meal, hungry. "Padme, Ahso-ka and the babies are taking the *Vigilant* back to Naboo, but the men are all still here. You're still here. Rex was telling me how you and your father would stay put for a few days after a campaign, explore the sights."

"There's nothing to see or do here," Luke protests weakly.

"I know, I used to live here too," Anakin says. "So what were you doing today to get yourself covered in grease?"

They spend the rest of the meal discussing water grades and vaporator output. Luke makes suggestions for future placement and spacing of the vaporators based on what worked during the worst of the drought Tatooine suffered during his childhood. After the meal, Luke finds himself outside, sitting on the stairs peering up at the slowly darkening sky. He supposes he could leave and spend the night away from the homestead. He knows he can protect himself from the Sand People and other threats in the night, but he can't bring himself to go.

Uncle Owen will be shutting down the power soon. Luke stays outside as long as he can, (he cannot bear another moment in-

side, surrounded by living reminders of everything he has lost) until Aunt Beru calls him in and shows him where he will be sleeping.

Somehow Luke spends the night curled up tight in his old room, staring at the familiar patterns along the surface of the walls. It is positively surreal. All Luke can think about is how many nights he had dreamed about adventure and excitement, growing up to be *just like his father*, in this very bed. Now he has had his adventure and nothing will ever be the same.

He balls up his fist and presses it against his lips, trying to be quiet, trying so hard not to cry.

Even though he doesn't make a sound, he must have caused some sort of disturbance in the Force because suddenly Anakin is *there*, hands on his shoulders and then holding him.

Luke freezes.

(He has only felt his father's arms around him once, during those terrifying painful seconds after he fell out of the window at the Senate.)

"I don't know what to say," Anakin whispers after a long moment. "So many good things are possible now. And I *know* why. I know about Vader and about you. I don't know how it came to be, but I know who you are."

And Luke lets out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. Anakin Skywalker knows. He knows the truth and has not recoiled from Luke and all that Luke represents by his very existence in the past.

(Present? Future?)

He struggles to explain. "It wasn't planned. We didn't purposefully choose to come back, but when we realized... *when* we were, we both agreed about what needed to be done. I don't regret it, any of it," Luke insists through a clenched jaw. "*I don't.*"

He feels Anakin shaking his head. "Just because you feel grief for what you've lost doesn't mean you regret the changes you've made, the lives you've saved. You're allowed to feel sad even in the face of victory. *I would*," he confesses quietly.

Luke laughs wetly, wiping back tears, trying to compose himself. "Allowed or not, it somehow feels... *wrong* to mourn."

"Wrong," Anakin huffs. "That's what Obi-Wan would say, but *you* know better. You've saved the lives of countless people and you lost one. It's not wrong to grieve, remember? Even for a Sith," he adds.

Luke feels the old familiar feeling of defensiveness rise within him. He felt it as a child when the freeborn children would mock him for his slave roots. He felt it as a teenager when Uncle Owen would discourage him from emulating his father. He felt it as a man when Yoda claimed there was too much of his father in him and that made him unteachable (*dangerous*).

Dead or alive, Jedi or Sith, Luke will defend his father's name.

"None of this would have even been possible without him. I would never have been able to defeat the Emperor alone or help the clones or do any of it myself. You have *no idea* the destruction he prevented and the lives he saved. Sith or no, there was *so much good in him*."

"I'll take your word for it," Anakin replies softly, sadly.

"Do," Luke reiterates. "Do take my word for it. He was many things, but he was my father, my family."

"You lived here then, with Owen and Beru," Anakin whispers. "You worked on the vaporators. Were they— were you... free?"

"Yes," Luke says, a measure of pride in his voice even now and Anakin seems to sag in relief. "The first freeborn Skywalker. It was touch and go some years if we would manage, if Uncle Owen could keep the homestead... but Ben, Obi-Wan I mean, he was out there in the Wastes, keeping watch."

"So you and Leia were raised here, on Tatooine."

Luke shakes his head sharply, feeling a renewed stab of pain. "I never knew of my sister," he rasps. "I didn't even know I *had* a twin before—" He swallows hard. "*He* didn't know either. He didn't even know about me until a few years ago after I left Tatooine, after the Empire came and Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru were killed—"

He trails off because he can *feel* Anakin's sudden shock and horror through the Force.

This is why he didn't want to have this conversation. How can anyone even explain or understand it all? How can anyone reconcile *two completely divergent timelines* both inexplicably real, without having lived through them both? Only Luke survives to tell what few stories he knows of an entire generation who suffered and fought and sacrificed to free the galaxy. It is a great responsibility and a terrible burden.

Luke doesn't want Anakin to bear this burden; it wasn't his to bear. He pulls away.

"Luke?"

"No, no more. No more questions. It's a time that is dead."

"Wait, I need to know—"

"No, you *don't*. You need to live your life with your family and let me be."

"Son, stop!" Anakin says and Luke stills, breath catching as if he's just been struck.

That *tone*, those *words*... Even without the vocoder...

But this man is *not his father*. He has his own children and a new, better future, Luke reminds himself sternly.

Somehow finding the strength, he manages, "No, my father is dead. I am not your son."

"Yes, *you are!*" Then quieter, "Yes, you are. And don't you *ever* say that to Padme."

"She *knows?*" Luke squeaks incredulously. First Anakin and now Senator Amidala?

"She's your mother, *of course* she knows. She figured it out before *I* did. She's smarter than just about everyone else the galaxy. You remind me so much of her," he says gently. "We want you to come home with us to Naboo. Padme's picked out a room for you. Ahsoka's is next door. Obi-Wan has a room too for when he visits. Once you're done with things here—"

"No," Luke interrupts. "Senator Amidala is beyond kind, but she does not have to open her home—"

"This isn't just some Senator asking," Anakin cuts him off in exasperation. "*I want you home. We're family. You grew up on Tatooine, you know what that means and it doesn't matter if I'm your father or not. I'm not leaving you behind or to—to wander the galaxy or vanish some day, becoming nothing more than some myth. You have a place, a home, people who love you—*"

"You don't even know me."

"I know *enough*," Anakin replies firmly. "I know what you've done and why. I can *feel* it. If that's not love, then I don't know what is."

Anakin's words make his heart ache with longing. It would be *so easy* to agree, but Luke fears that it will only cause problems and hurt for all of them and he doesn't want that. His father was right to keep his distance from Padme when he no doubt longed to see her and be with her. Luke must now find the strength to do the same. "You don't understand," Luke grinds out, trying to convince Anakin, (convince himself). "I don't *belong* here anymore. I don't belong *anywhere* anymore. You have a son. *I'm not him.*"

"No, you're not. You're your *own person*. I wouldn't treat you as the same any more than I would treat any of the clones the same. They're all brothers to each other, but they're also individuals. It's the same, don't you see? It isn't a question of either/or, one or the other. No one is being replaced; the family's just... a bit bigger than before. You have a brother now, and a twin sister, and a foster sister. You have a home and a place with us, *I swear it.*"

Luke must be practically broadcasting his vehement denial and conversely, his deep longing through the Force because Anakin doesn't say more, doesn't ask for an answer, nor press for agreement. Instead, Anakin begins to quietly speak about what the next morning will bring. There will be breakfast and more repairs and upgrades to do around the farm, the "tax rebate" being put to good use. Luke's students will join them at the homestead, and there will be lightsaber practice. Maybe they will be able to borrow a second Skyhopper or a couple of speeders from one of

the neighbors and they will take Kickback and the other clones who think they know flying, out to Beggar's Canyon and show them some *real racing*. They will check in with Rex who is helping organize the logistics of the space port and forming a local peacekeeping force to support the garrison that Dogma and Tup will command until more clones come to set up a Home Base on Tatooine.

They will take it a step at a time, a day at a time and Luke will not be alone, Anakin says softly. In the morning things will be better. But for now, in the dead of night, Anakin promises that Luke is allowed to mourn for his father and his sister, his aunt and uncle, his friends and all that he has lost.

It is late and Luke's throat is sore and eyes burn, but finally he falls fast asleep.

He dreams of flying.

CLXII.

A ten day later, Luke and Anakin say their farewells, both much more tan with matching blue eyes, hair shot through with gold. Luke is taking his students and whatever squad brothers want to come along to the Holy City of Jedha at Anakin's suggestion. There they will meet with the Guardians of the Whills and construct lightsabers, since kyber is always preferable to fabricated crystals.

(Anakin has effectively ceded command of the *Dauntless* and the *Pioneer* to the 501st, who have happily nominated Luke to be "their" Jedi when General Skywalker isn't around. But aren't the ships Republic property, you may ask? Anakin doesn't care. If the ships belong to anyone they belong to the men of the 501st who have made those ships their homes for the last three years. If the Senate wants them back, the Senate can damn well come and get them. On behalf of the 501st, Rex has also made it clear that all members of the Battalion have agreed to joint custody

arrangements over the Skywalker family with the Nohgri and will be taking care of their own).

Anakin is returning on the *Resolute* to his wife and children on Naboo, and together with his Padawan they will further reconstruction efforts and peace in the Mid Rim. Despite all the recent publicity, the Council on Coruscant is strangely silent and Jedi across the galaxy are figuring out for themselves where they can best serve those most in need. Even if the Council decides to formally expel him, it no longer matters. Anakin is a Jedi and Tatooine is finally free. He has his family and his men. It is enough.

Luke is taken aback when Anakin suddenly hugs him tight. For a few seconds he closes his eyes and just *feels*. He makes himself pull back, but before Luke can slip away Anakin stops him with an outstretched hand. "One more thing," Anakin says formally. "On Naboo, they eat later because they don't have to worry about the suns. It's a wet planet. The house is even on an island in the middle of a lake, so last meal is usually around 1800, sometimes a bit later. There will be food and water, as much water as you can drink. If we're aboard ship, same thing, just y'know more rations, less lake."

Luke looks at Anakin in total bewilderment. "All right," he answers slowly, not quite sure what to do with this information. Why is Anakin telling him all this?

Anakin gives him a strange look that Luke cannot interpret. "You're invited," he says slowly, "to dinner."

"Oh," Luke replies in a small voice. He had not expected that. It was the weirdest invitation he's ever received. Maybe it is some Mid Rim or Core world thing or maybe it is just Anakin, he thinks to himself. "Uh, when?"

This seems to upset Anakin, because he grows exasperated. "What do you mean *when*? Whenever we have dinner. Every night a place will be set for you."

Baffled, Luke doesn't know what to say. Finally he manages to remind Anakin, "I'm heading to Jedha."

"Yes, I *know* that," Anakin assures him. "But still, every night.

Dinner. Food. Water. Place setting. Your mom was very clear on that point and wanted me to tell you. We expect you there as soon as you can and as often as you can. Anytime. Every day. No matter where the family is. There is no need to comm ahead. Do you understand?"

Luke ducks his head and blinks in surprise. He feels a sudden unexpected sense of comfort hearing Anakin's words and Padme's message. "Yes, I understand," he says at last past the unexpected lump in his throat.

"Good," Anakin replies with a relieved smile. "Now, remember to answer your mother's comms when she calls and be safe," he says with a scolding tone.

Luke nods jerkily, a tremulous smile slowly spreading in spite of himself.

"May the Force be with you."

"May the Force be with you," Luke says.

CLXIII.

After Jedha, (and Luke could have spent *years* in the Holy City at the Kyber Temple, learning things about the Force and the history of the galaxy), they end up staying in the Outer Rim for some time, dismantling with extreme prejudice the slaver routes that feed both the Hutt Clans and the Zygerians. The 327th under General Secura has joined in their efforts and Luke's second meeting with Master Fisto is much more amicable than his first.

Luke remains in comm contact with Anakin and the *Resolute* and the other Force sensitive clones who are scattered around the GAR, and does not avoid messages from Senator Amidala.

He just avoids going into the Mid Rim and the Core.

(It's nothing personal. Luke just wants to avoid rabid holonet reporters. He's not avoiding anything else. He's *not*.)

But the men need a break; they should have the opportunity to visit one or more of the Home Bases. Not all the troopers want

to focus on their campaign and there are other brothers in different Battalions that conversely want to be out with them and join the fight. There are new students to train in the ways of the Force, and more Force users from different traditions to meet with. Luke also knows that his students will soon outgrow the *Dauntless* and the *Pioneer* as a training space.

If they travel towards the Core, Luke knows rationally that he will be welcome to go with the clones and he will also be welcome on Naboo, but he still can't shake the feeling that he is... out of place, just marking time, waiting for... *something*, he doesn't know what.

(Sometimes he fears that he will just vanish one day, just fade away– not into the Force, but into nothingness, the past that created him no longer there to serve as a foundation for his very existence. He doesn't fear this because he will no longer be alive, he fears it because *wouldn't that just undo everything he and his father have managed to accomplish in the past?* It is a terrible thought that haunts him. But no, the Force seems to whisper, his presence is fixed).

It is an unexpected comm from 99 that finally shows Luke the way forward when hours of Force meditation upside down does not.

99 tells of the first brothers born into freedom, granted citizenship of Mandalore before being taken to meet their older kin. He speaks of the little cadets learning and exploring on new worlds, of older brothers choosing to become troopers and those brothers laying down their weapons for the first time in their lives. He shares tales of troopers coming back to their new Home Bases for the very first time, having homes and families to *come back to*. He shares stories of Namings. There are so many more Names now. He talks about their plans to set up Home Bases on more worlds.

And then 99 tells him about the Home Base on Alderaan, the mountains and the lakes, and asks if Luke and the brothers will join them for the Summer Moon Festival.

Luke takes a deep breath and comms the bridge, telling them to set course for Alderaan.

CLXIV.

Hot summer evenings on Alderaan don't even approach a cool day on Tatooine, but Luke can smell the flowers in the air that remind him of that tiny bottle of perfume Leia kept, but never used.

Luke is a bit in awe of Alderaan. In a strange sort of way, he feels kinship to this world that he never saw or set foot on before. In every place he visits he can see his sister, her tremendous strength, her fiery determination, and her love. If anything can be a monument to an entire timeline lost, this planet can.

He and Alderaan are impossible things, defiant things that exist *in spite* of the Dark. It gives Luke a burgeoning sense of hope, for if Alderaan can find its way, then so can he.

He is standing a bit apart from crowds of people, young and old, clone and natural born, watching the fireworks on the shore of one of Alderaan's numerous lakes. He is so entranced by the sight that for a moment he doesn't notice the ripple in the Force, but out of the corner of his eye he sees a shadow of glimmering blue.

He turns and *there* is his father as Luke has never seen him before, (yet somehow matches every childhood vision and day-dream he has ever had).

His father's eyes are cast skyward, peering out from under his hood, and then they turn to meet his, blue on blue. His father smiles at him carefully, almost shyly, and Luke can only grin back.

There is another explosion of light above them. The instant Luke looks away, his father's ghost *vanishes*, but Luke is *sure now* that his father is just out of sight, beside him and watchful as always.

There is movement by his elbow and he turns to see 99 next to him.

“Was that your father?” he asks.

“Yes, yes it was.” Luke says.

99’s eyes dart around Luke as if staring at something only he can see. “He’s planning on staying with you.”

“I think so,” he says hopefully, unable to stop smiling.

99 pats his shoulder gently. “That’s good. It’s better when squads stick together.”

They watch the fireworks for a few more minutes in silence until their triumphant finale. They both applaud with the others when the show has finished. As the crowds begin to disperse to grab another bite to eat, to walk to the lake’s edge, or sit back at their picnic sites, 99 says, “I received a late comm from Seantor Organa. He thinks he’s found the perfect place for a new Home Base where you can train Jedi. I think it could work, but I-I wanted you to see it for yourself and help us decide if it is the right place to be.”

They don’t talk about Luke’s foreknowledge of a future that no longer exists, but 99 knows and ever diplomatic and tactful, finds a way to ask without asking. For Luke this just proves what he has known from the beginning: 99 is well on his way to being a great leader for his brothers and is a truly wise Jedi.

“That was quick,” Luke remarks. “Which planet does Senator Organa have in mind?”

“It’s just a moon, not a planet but it should be big enough. It’s a jungle moon in the Yavin system. There’s even some old ruins there we could re-purpose as our Home Base. Ever heard of it?” 99 asks nonchalantly.

Luke can’t help but laugh. His life seems to be all about going in circles. Tatooine, Alderaan, Yavin IV. Father to son to father to son. Future, past, present. “Yes, yes I’ve heard of it,” he says at last.

“Hmm, I thought you might’ve,” 99 says with a smile, but before he can say more his name is called by a few of the cadets

who want his attention. “We can talk it over more tomorrow,” he tells Luke. “Come help me with the sparklers before the little ones decide to start using them as lightsabers.”

CLXV.

In the three years that follow the signing of the Reconstruction Accords, the mopping up actions, and the implementation of reforms big and small, Yoda struggles to adapt to the massive changes in the galaxy. At nearly 900 years old he has long thought there was no storm or upheaval the Order could not weather serenely and calmly.

The galaxy is proving him wrong.

In his eyes, the Order that has stood for nearly a millennium seems... *diminished*, damaged just like the Temple. No longer does the Order and the Temple hold a monopoly on instruction, orthodoxy, and Light philosophy in the galaxy. Now Force users of all types, (Dathomir Witches and Night Brothers! Grey Jedi! Bendu! Guardians from Jedha!) work to teach others to use the Force. Using the unearned and unsanctioned title of Jedi, this Luke, son of Vader, has reached out to them all. He acts heedless of the consequences, breaking traditions that have kept the Order safe from discord. These Force users and those Luke has trained now work with peacekeeping clone forces throughout the galaxy, filling the roles that were once *only* Order roles.

Yoda worries. How can any sort of peace or order be maintained after a brutal galaxy wide civil war without a unified Light organization speaking in one voice? All his teachings and experiences tell him that what exists now can only breed chaos and Darkness. The current state of affairs is *dangerous*. Regardless of the immediate galaxy wide benefits that *appear* to come from this... *disorder*, Yoda is certain that it will only end in disaster. The Council and the Council alone is the only group strong and wise enough to decide who should be trained in the ways of the

Force and how Force wielders should serve the galaxy.

On the very few occasions that Yoda has had a chance to meet Luke in person, Yoda makes his position and feelings on this matter *very clear*. Yoda calls him reckless, arrogant, heretical, and dangerous. Luke's reaction to his words is just as puzzling as the fact that he and his Sith father once traveled light years to heal Yoda in the midst of the Clone Wars. Luke doesn't get upset, but listens to the lecture with all attentiveness. He won't even let his students defend him to the Grandmaster, even though they would very much like to.

("He has made peace. He stopped the war. He freed the Republic's slaves," Fives counters.

"He is *ten times* the Jedi you'll ever be!" Hardcase yells at Yoda.)

"To consider you for training, your master, desperate he had to be," Yoda tells Luke pointedly during one such meeting where reconstruction forces and the Order proper are required to work together, a comment which has even Master Windu taken aback.

"Very desperate, Master Yoda," Luke agrees with a small, sad smile.

It is not until Yoda unexpectedly runs into Anakin Skywalker in person for the first time since the Clone Wars have ended, Padme and their young children with him, and sees with his own eyes young Luke Skywalker that he finally understands the truth. It is not until then that Yoda comes face to face with his mistakes, his arrogance, and the folly of centuries of pride and cannot look away.

Yoda judged Luke and his father and all the clones they have trained as agents of the Dark, unorthodox and destructive to the Light.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

The answer was there in the Force from the beginning.

Only a student, a *Padawan*, could have healed Yoda when his heart gave out all those years ago.

Luke was not the end of the Jedi Order, he was its future.

After meeting young Luke Skywalker, Yoda retreats. He meditates for a long time and then, leaving his lightsaber behind, he takes a small ship to Serenno. When he returns to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, he makes his way slowly to the Archives where he updates the Order's records with a new entry:

NAME: Skywalker, Luke

RANK: Jedi Master

TEACHER: Yoda, Jedi Grand Master, Jedi High Councilor

STUDENTS: Fives, Hardcase, Chatterbox, Flare, Cooker, Kickback, 99, Vir, Boost, Shocks, Ollie, Waxer, Bats, Left Foot...

STAR WARS

CHAPTER 20

In Which They Lived, Happily

CLXVI.

Barriss Offee leads a group of medic clones and their squad brothers on mercy missions all across the galaxy. She walks unmolested through brutal firefights, crosses blockades, and defies all governments and treaties to treat the sick and the wounded. She ends up in command of the Medical Corp of the Republic Reconstruction Forces (or “RRF” for short), the organization that succeeds the Grand Army of the Republic after the Accords are signed and implemented.

She never returns to the Temple, but at Ahsoka’s insistence joins Ahsoka at her knighting ceremony on Naboo and receives official Knighthood herself. She masters Force healing on a genetic level and passes on her techniques only to a chosen few who are willing to devote themselves to healing and shun warfare.

Barriss never again raises her lightsaber and is happy.

CLXVII.

Ahsoka Tano delays her knighting deliberately. She sees no reason to rush through the process and instead savors every moment and every mission with her Master and with the clone troopers. After receiving her knighthood, she is awarded the rank of General and takes active command of the reformed Open Circle Fleet alongside Commander Cody and “Captain” Rex, (the title so much a part of his Name, it never alters regardless of his many promotions). The men of the 501st and 212th repaint their armor in a mix of orange and blue in her honor, mimicking her distinctive Togrutan markings. Humanitarian missions and the RRF’s anti-slavery campaigns remain her passion. She eventually takes Leia Skywalker as her Padawan.

She spends her life bringing democracy and freedom to the Other Rim alongside her family and is happy.

CLXVIII.

Fives is eventually promoted to Jedi High General and takes over the active military arm of the RRF. It is one of the proudest days of his life when he takes command of the new massive flagship of the RRF, an Eternity Class Super Star Destroyer named *Last Shadow*, (so named as when it is called into action, it is frequently the very last thing the enemy sees.)

With Echo serving with him and with the support of the Clone Marshals, he sets *the* example for future generations on how military service personnel should be treated and valued. Never again is any soldier’s life deemed expendable and all members of the military have a *duty* to disobey unlawful orders if given. Following Luke’s example, he takes many students and trains them in the ways of the Force. When he finally steps down from active

service decades later, it is to teach at the military academy and library at the clone Home Base located on Scarif.

Fives spends the rest of his days with his brothers by his side telling stories and is happy.

CLXIX.

Chatterbox remains a man of few words. He takes only one official apprentice during his life, a talkative little one name Rob, and finds a peace and contentment in teaching he never knew before. His gift of listening to the Force proves instrumental in reaching a peaceful resolution when the next major upheaval threatens the galaxy some fifty years after the Battle of Courscant. He gives an impromptu speech before the combined representatives of the Republic, the League of Neutral Systems, and the Confederacy of Independent Systems that is *so* persuasive and *so* profound it is remembered as *the* catalyst for peace. Chatterbox is named one of the most influential speakers of the decade, if not the century, (a fact that never fails to make his brothers' all laugh until they cry).

In the end when it counted, Chatterbox's words mattered more than anyone elses in the galaxy and he is happy.

CLXX.

Anakin Skywalker is never formally expelled by the Council, though he avoids most of the Councilors for almost a decade before enough change comes to the Order to allow for more cordial relations to resume. While Padme reforms the Republic as Vice Chancellor, Anakin wholeheartedly embraces being a father to his children, to his Padawan, and to his men, (though there is some debate about *who is taking care of whom*. Padme is just glad that with the clones building their own communities her

husband hasn't started *formally* adopting his whole battalion as she once feared). As the twins grow up, Anakin begins to take on more and more missions. He throws himself into the anti-slavery campaign on the Outer Rim. While he only chooses to train one more apprentice during his lifetime, he teaches and mentors many Force sensitive younglings and little ones.

He has his family and his freedom. At long last, Anakin is happy.

CLXXI.

As the head of the League of Neutral Systems, Satine pushes and prods, and very frequently drags the galaxy kicking and screaming towards peace through sheer force of will. Rather than be a politician, her only son chooses to take up his father's mantle as a Jedi. Anakin Skywalker himself takes the boy on as his second Padawan. Fortunately, her nephew Korkie is more than prepared to continue Mandalore's new tradition of peace and one day succeeds her as Duke of Mandalore.

Satine and Obi-Wan continue to bicker over the finer points of pacifism and the Jedi Code for the rest of their lives and are happy.

CLXXII.

Asajj Ventress always wanted revenge. It was what drove her to the Dark Side. Luke had once told her the best revenge was living well and she takes his words to heart. Her "friendship" with the largely moronic battle droids is frequently a trial, but being the "diplomatic" voice of the Confederacy is a joke that *never* gets old, especially when she comes face to face with members of the Jedi Order and they are *required* to treat her with respect.

She and Quinlan Vos never marry, but have four terrifying

daughters together. To her great delight and Obi-Wan's total despair, all four girls set their romantic sights on Satine and Obi-Wan's only son *and* young Luke Skywalker one memorable summer when she takes the to train on Yavin IV.

She watches with barely concealed glee as the teenage drama causes Obi-Wan's hair to start visibly graying at the temples.

(She isn't the only one who finds pleasure in all the chaos; Luke just laughs and laughs.)

Asajj has her revenge and is happy.

CLXXIII.

After causing mass chaos, (and permanent damage according to some Jedi) in the Temple creche and among the Initiates, Waxer and Boil visit Ryloth. There, an orphaned Numa remembers her brothers and isn't going to let them go again. They adopt her, (or perhaps she adopts them, they are never quite sure), and together they work with 99 and the Senate Refugee Committee, focusing their skills on aiding war orphans. They set up halfway houses and foster homes for younglings from Lothal to Corellia and help rehabilitate and find homes for the children liberated from the slave trade.

If you look just at Boil it can be difficult to be sure, but when seeing the three of them *together* there can be no doubt; they are happy.

CLXXIV.

Luke and Leia Skywalker grow up knowing the Force and using it from infancy. They are taught the rudiments of Force control first by their father and then later by their "older brother" Luke, when their parents manage to convince him to visit, (or when they visit him on Yavin IV). Ahsoka claims Leia as her apprentice

when she is only six years old.

(Ahsoka had watched in awe for over an hour as Leia played at ruling the entire galaxy– a galaxy made up of homemade and store bought clone and Jedi action figures, a host of stuff toys, Artoo, Threepio, and her twin. Ahsoka had loudly proclaimed then and there that *she and she alone* was capable of training a girl who had Anakin's fiery temper, Padme's sharp mind and sharper tongue, and Vader's indomitable drive. If Obi-Wan had a problem with it, he could *fight her*.)

Obi-Wan does not fight Ahsoka.

Obi-Wan happily plans to take Luke on formally as his Padawan learner on his 13th Name Day, going so far as to wrap the river stone that was *his gift* from Master Qui-Gon to give to the boy as a present. His plans are nearly upended when Master Yoda unexpectedly shows up to the celebrations to ask Luke Skywalker to be *his apprentice*. The discussion that follows is an *interesting* one to say the least, but Obi-Wan wins the day and Yoda resigns himself to teaching Luke lessons on the side whenever he is able.

The twins grow and learn together surrounded by family and by love and are happy.

CLXXV.

Obi-Wan divides his time between his beloved wife and son on Mandalore and wherever Anakin and his family may be when not visiting him on Mandalore– on Naboo, summering on Yavin IV, traveling to Tatooine, on Coruscant, or out in the field with the troopers. He and Anakin remain the unbreakable Jedi team, much beloved by the galaxy. After fending off Master Yoda and taking Luke on as his Padawan, Obi-Wan finds himself learning more about being a Jedi from teaching the boy than all his prior years of study and experience.

It is in embracing the attachments that he was taught to shun

all his life that Obi-Wan at long last finds happiness.

CLXXVI.

Captain Rex and Commander Cody spend the rest of their lives in the RRF working closely with Luke's Jedi Corps, (made up of a host of different Force sensitives from a variety of Force lineages, not all of them "respectable".) Like the rest of their mature brothers, their aging slows to a crawl for several decades before continuing on at a moderate pace. When they choose to take time off, Rex's favorite thing to do is to travel with Ahsoka and visit the Home Bases spread across the galaxy. Cody loves training the new cadets who are interested in joining the RRF someday, showing his younger brothers how it's really done. Cody is also one of the few active military clones that Duchess Satine welcomes to Mandalore and to her home as a personal friend of her husband.

Rex and Cody never actually retire from the military as long as they both live and are happy.

CLXXVII.

Over time, the 104th Battalion reforms, takes in members of the Coruscant Home Guard and becomes a permanent detachment protecting the Jedi Order. Plo Koon is the first Order Master to take a clone cadet (with Mandalorian citizenship) as a Jedi Padawan on the strict understanding that there will be *none* of this "no attachment" business.

Master Plo agrees and spends many years pushing for greater reforms within the Jedi Order. He couldn't be happier.

CLXXVIII.

It takes longer than Padme wanted for Luke to be comfortable

enough to regularly visit and take family dinner with them. But when he does and on those days when she has all her family under one roof, Padme, who lived through so much of her life physically separated from those she loved because of duty, is happy.

CLXXIX.

Hardcase is the first of the clone brothers to take an apprentice and begins training Loops as soon as he can. He is tireless in his efforts coordinating and leading the decades' long battle against the remnants of the Zygerrian empire and the Hutt families. In the end, Hardcase sacrifices his life to save his former apprentice and thousands of child slaves. With his last breath he deals an explosive death blow to the entire Zygerrian slaving civilization. Hardcase is memorialized with a statute at the Jedi Academy on Yavin IV, another in the Order's Temple proper, and several drinking songs written in his honor and still sung in cantinas throughout the Rim. Loops and Hardcase's many other students refuse to mourn their teacher and beloved older brother.

As Loops is quick to remind everyone, Hardcase died as he lived: happily.

CLXXX.

Luke opens a formal Jedi Academy and training facility on Yavin IV alongside a clone Home Base. With the aid of his students and his father's spirit, (who is never far from his side), they dispose of the Sith Ghost of Exar Kun before anyone moves into the old Temple structure. During his life he remains a tireless champion for sentient rights, traveling with his many students throughout the galaxy, helping those in need. Where he was once called a heretic, he will one day be remembered as the Jedi who reconciled the teachings of half a dozen different Force practic-

es.

On the more personal side of things, Luke finds time to keep up with flying and racing and ensures that when his old model X-Wing is finally released onto the market, he buys one for his personal use, though it is not the same without Artoo. He never replaces either of his droid friends, but whenever his family visits Yavin IV, his younger “brother” kindly lends him Artoo so they can go flying together. Over the years he “meets” many familiar faces, but any brief pang of pain or longing he feels for what once was is tempered by the certainty that there are so many more people alive, well, and happy now than ever were before.

Life isn’t perfect. Life is still messy and challenging and frustrating, but Luke takes a great deal of comfort in knowing he helped make everyone happy. That is more than enough and he is happy.

CLXXXI.

Even in death, the man who was once Vader, who was once Anakin, who was once father to a son and a daughter, defies all tradition, Order teachings, and dogma. He stays by his son’s side for the rest of Luke’s living days. He cannot always be seen, heard, or felt, but when it matters most he can. And when it *really matters*, he can even affect things in the physical living world, protecting Luke and the twins and once even Ahsoka from harm. It gives him a great deal of satisfaction to be able to help those that he loves even after his death.

While he doesn’t want his son to join him anytime soon, when that day finally comes, he embraces Luke at long last, and they are happy.



CHAPTER 21

In Which Padme Plans for the Nubian Day of Family and Artoo Hijacks a Ship and Spams Vader's Inbox

CLXXXII.

Padme has a problem. The Nubian Day of Family is coming and for the eighth year in a row she is planning on celebrating it with her husband, her children, her parents and extended family. It will be the third year Obi-Wan and Satine will be in attendance with their young son, Skander. Ahsoka has commed saying she was looking forward to it and has already put it on calendar just to be sure she won't miss out on the day of feasting and gift giving.

But there is just one problem.

There are two guests have been missing for the last seven years from the family table and she has had no luck at all getting them to come.

Padme admits the first year she didn't actually formally invite

either of them to the Day of Family. She just assumed they would be there. (It was reasonable to think that! They were there when she didn't even know she needed them, of course they would come to the Day of Family feast and gift giving!)

But the door chime never rung and neither Luke nor Vader had come.

The second year and third years she sent out formal invitations to which Luke sent formal regrets for both him and his father. They thanked her but they would not be able to attend.

The fourth year, as awkward as it was, she asked Anakin to invite them personally and hint *very strongly* that they were more than welcome, and that they both needed to be there. Anakin had done as she asked, (he swears he did, really! He hinted and everything!).

That hadn't worked either.

The fifth year, she arranged with 99 to schedule a reconstruction related conference on Naboo in the days just before the holiday and ensured that Luke and Vader would attend. They both came, but just before the end of the conference they left due to an environmental catastrophe in the Outer Rim.

Sixth year she prepared early. She spoke at length with Captain Rex, Commander Cody, Fives and all of Luke's students and made it very, *very* clear that there were to be no last minute emergencies and they were to ensure that Luke and his father could and would come and join them for the Feast.

They didn't come.

Padme really didn't believe Fives when he sent her a prerecorded comm about a catastrophe on some remote forest moon involving sentient teddy bears. She was raising two precocious Force using twins and was married to the Hero With No Fear. She worked around Senators and politicians for most of her life. She knew a fake excuse when she heard it.

She wasn't going to be defeated though! She had fought back and liberated her planet from invasion at age 14. She could do this!

The following year Padme arranged for the family to travel for the holiday and made sure they were celebrating wherever Luke's Jedi students were training. It took months of planning and pulling schedules (and some outright spying and coercion since Luke's students were very protective of him and Vader), but she had made it happen. At long last the entire family were all on the same planet for the Day of Family. The only problem was Luke and Vader went out exploring the day before the Feast and got stranded on the other side of the planet all on their own due to fierce weather.

She had come *so close*!

This year Padme decides the only way to ensure all her family attend is to invite the *entire* 501st and *all* of the Jedi training with Luke to dinner at her home on Naboo. Then there would be no excuses. Vader and Luke would have to come to dinner!

The problem remains though; how is she going to feed and fit so many people in her home and still maintain the intimate warm family atmosphere she *really* wants? She taps her stylus against her desk and tries to think.

Anakin places his hands on her shoulders, massaging gently. "Is it the new judicial reform bill?" he asks peering at the flimsi and data pad on her desk.

"No, it's seating charts for the Day of Family," she says despondently.

"That's months away, why are you worrying about that now? Threepio can help with that sort of thing."

"Not when there are this many guests attending," she says gesturing to mess before her.

"Who're you planning to invite?" he says with a laugh. "A clone battalion or two?" Silence greets his question and he stops his massage. "Wait, do you plan on inviting the entire 501st?"

"Don't stop," she orders him wriggling her shoulders and he takes the hint and resumes. "I plan to invite Luke and Vader. Inviting the 501st and Luke's students means they will both come this time."

Anakin sighs. “Padme, I don’t think–”

“I thought about just inviting a *few* of the troops and students, but then which ones do I *not* invite and how rude would that be to say to them that *some* of you are considered family to get an invite but not all of you, so I thought I would invite the entire 501st and all of the students, but now that I’m thinking about it, what about the 212th? What if I invite everyone from the 501st and then word gets back that I didn’t invite the 212th? And then there’s the 104th and I just don’t think even with Threepio helping that mom, Sola and I can handle that many place settings!”

Anakin hugs her from behind and presses a kiss to her hair. “Padme, I love that you want to invite every clone brother to our Family dinner. Well, there are a few we could not invite when I think about it,” he mutters under his breath. “But you need to accept the fact that they’re not going to come no matter what you do.”

She turns in his arms, indignant, nearly stabbing him with the stylus in her hand. “Why not? They have to know that they are welcome, Anakin. I know that no one likes to talk about it, but he’s– Luke’s our son and Vader is... well...” She struggles for a moment to find the words, but she is not Vice-Chancellor for the Republic for nothing. She rallies valiantly. “He is Luke’s father and in his own unique way he cares about this family. The children would be thrilled if they came. I can’t have our holiday every year knowing that they are out there alone in the galaxy!”

“I don’t think they’re really alone–” he begins to tease.

“Anakin!”

He winces. Somehow she manages to capture Obi-Wan’s scolding tone precisely. “Padme, I understand. I do, but as important as this is for you, imagine how it must be for them. There’s so much we don’t know but there is loss there. Luke doesn’t have his sister. And Vader... he may not be trying to take over the galaxy, he may be helping people, but he’s still Dark. You have no idea what that means.”

Anakin doesn’t like to think too much about Vader, about what

that means about himself. He does find comfort in the fact that Vader loves Luke. That fact gives him hope that even at his very worst, there is something redeemable in him. “Maybe they’ve been through enough and it is easier to be part of the family from a distance.”

“They do care, don’t they?” Padme says softly. “Both of them, they care for all of us so much. Look at what they did, look at all they accomplished.”

“So maybe they don’t have to come to dinner to still be part of the family, hmm?” he suggests with a small smile.

“Maybe not,” she agrees with a tired sigh, putting down her stylus. “I don’t think I would have managed to pull this plan off anyway and my only other back up plan was hiring that pirate friend of yours Hondo, to bring them to dinner.”

Anakin straightens abruptly. “Pirate friend? No, nononono, *No!* Hondo is *not* my friend, he’s not *anyone’s* friend. There will be *no* hiring of bounty hunters! Just— just send them an invitation so they know they are both welcome every year and with enough time, they will want to come.”

CLXXXIII.

Padme prepares her holo invitation for Luke and Vader some months later inviting them once again to the Day of Family. Anakin, spying it on her desk remembers their conversation and cannot help but want to make his wife happy. (That and he is terrified that his wife may in fact hire Hondo behind his back unless he does something about this *right now*.) He turns the message disc over and over in his hand and then has an idea.

CLXXXIV.

Today is the Nubian Day of Family.

How does Vader know this?

Because his calendar has been reminding him of it for weeks now with cheery beeping alarms complete with holographic animated confetti.

Because he keeps getting spam comm messages from pre-recorded vendors reminding him to buy gifts and flowers for his family and loved ones, (Shipping is only 19 credits! Act now to avoid the holiday rush!)

Because ever since Artoo has been conveniently “on loan” to the 501st Reconstruction Team he Has. Not. Stopped. Talking. About. It.

(At least Luke ensured that Artoo didn’t show Vader the holo message of Padme inviting them to dinner and to celebrate with her, Anakin, the twins, Obi-Wan and Force knew what other Order members she’d invited who Vader can barely stand the sight of. Vader frequently thinks that Luke is too kind, too softhearted, and too forgiving, but he cannot deny that his son’s caring nature works to Vader’s benefit from time to time.)

The final reason why Vader knows it is the Nubian Day of Family is that their transport ship has been hijacked by Artoo and they have just come out of hyperspace in orbit of Naboo.

“Why are we at Naboo?” Flare asks, coming into the bridge. “I thought we were heading for Sullust.”

In the copilot’s seat Luke sighs and continues to bang his forehead against the console.

Vader pulls out his lightsaber and turns to look at Artoo who is huddled, (as much as a droid can huddle) in the corner. Vader stands and Artoo whimpers.

“No,” Luke says firmly to his father from his face down position. “No killing Artoo.”

Vader hesitates for a long moment and then re-clips his lightsaber on his belt. He then looms over the astromech. “Release control of the ship immediately. We are going to Sullust, not to Naboo.”

Artoo dares to beep back a negative.

Vader points his finger at the droid. "We have already informed them that we are *not attending*."

"Not attending what?" Hardcase asked poking his head through the door and sees the planet through the viewport. "Naboo? Is there something happening on Naboo?"

"No!" Luke and Vader chorus together.

Artoo twitters back an affirmative and then perceiving Hardcase to be an ally in his mission proceeds to rattle on in binary.

"We're invited to a feast?" Hardcase asks excitedly rubbing his hands together. "Loops!" he calls back into the ship. "We're invited to a feast on Naboo! We can practice some table manners while we're there." Luke sits up and glares. "What?" he says, oblivious to the tension in the room. "He needs the practice."

Luke turns away from his incorrigible student and tries to reason with the droid. "Artoo, we can't go to the Feast. We have no gifts prepared. It would be rude. Threepio will have a fit," Luke explains, trying to remain calm.

"Son, telling Artoo that his conduct will cause Threepio stress is hardly likely to get him to change his mind," Vader mutters as he sits back down in the pilot seat to brood. (Not sulk. Sulking is different. He's *brooding*.)

"Gifts aren't a problem," Hardcase says easily with a wave of his hand. "There's like two crates of toys and clothes back there. I wondered what they were for."

"Artoo?" Luke asks with a warning tone.

The droid hums nonchalantly as they descend to the planet below.

"What's going on?" Cooker says from out in the corridor.

"We've been invited to a feast on Naboo," Flare responds. "I need to polish my armor."

"I don't think you wear armor to feasts," Cooker tells him.

"Well I didn't bring anything else to wear! I thought we were going to Sullust."

When they land, the clone Jedi, the squad brothers traveling with them, and their apprentices are eager to disembark. Vader remains where he is. He is *not* going. He doesn't care how absurd he is being. He may have been forced to land on this planet but that doesn't mean Artoo or *anyone else* has the power to make him leave the ship.

Luke stands but doesn't leave. He hovers, peering out the viewport. "Is this... is this where they live?" He asks quietly. It is green and beautiful. Luke can't even begin to imagine growing up in such a place.

"It is called Varykino," Vader answers. "The lakeside estate belongs to the Naberrie family."

Luke hears footsteps behind him and turns, breath catching, because there is Leia and her twin, Luke peering at them both. Vader hurriedly rises to his feet, looking for an escape and finding none, turns his back, refusing to even look at them. This does not stop the twins for a moment.

Luke quickly runs over and grabs his big brother's hand. "You came!" he sings out. "You came! You came! Mama said you wouldn't, but you did!"

Leia goes over to Vader. "Happy Family Day," she greets him and Vader cannot help but look at her though his heart breaks at the very sight. She doesn't flinch from his mask. "Why are you still on the ship? We're going to be eating soon! We can't be late."

"If we're late, everything will be *ruined forever*," Luke says seriously, blue eyes wide.

"I think Threepio is exaggerating a bit," Luke replies with a smile.

"Nu-uh! He took one look at all the brothers who came with you and said *we're doomed*," the boy tells him, echoing the protocol droid's voice.

"There will be no food left if you don't come," Leia says with determination. "And Mama won't even let you have dinner if you

don't wash your hands first so quick march!" she says pointing imperiously to the door.

Luke throws her a crisp salute. "Yes, General." He then looks at Vader. "Father?"

Vader at long last nods.

CLXXXVI.

As they traveled across the lake, the twins continued to chatter and talk. Vader remained silent, head turned, trying not to engage lest he forget himself and take both children into his arms and never let them go.

Leia, however, was persistent. She demanded his attention, telling him all about the creatures in the lake, how deep it was, how far she could swim and how fast.

Her brother was a bit quieter, only chiming once in a while, continuing to watch both of them intently as if trying to work something out in his mind.

"What is it?" Luke asked his younger "brother."

"Nothing, just looking," the boy answered hurriedly, cheeks coloring at being caught out.

"He's staring because he wants to know what he'll look like when he's older," Leia opined with a sage nod of her head.

"You won't look exactly like me," Luke said. "I took some damage from a wampa a few years back." He reached up and touched his cheek and his nose. "So we may not look perfectly identical."

"Wampa? What's a wampa? Did you *fight* it?" he asked eagerly.

"Did you win?" Leia added.

"It's a giant furry snow beast with claws and fangs that lives on an ice planet called Hoth. He was enormous," he said dramatically. "I managed to get away after reaching for my lightsaber with the Force at the very last moment, freeing myself, and cutting off its arm."

"I was not aware you were injured so severely as to leave per-

manent damage," Vader said, no longer pretending he wasn't listening to his children. Every time he thought he had learned of all of the insane situations his son had gotten himself into over the years, he was proven horribly wrong. Sometimes he thought the *real* miracle of the Force was not time travel but the fact that Luke had even lived as long as he had!

"It wasn't that bad," Luke hurried to explain, obviously sensing Vader's growing anger. "They patched me up just fine."

"First hypothermia, then a creature attack," Vader huffed. "It's a wonder you survived long enough for me to find you."

"How did it happen? Why were you fighting it? What did it want?" Leia demanded. "Tell us, please."

Luke thought back over what happened on Hoth. What happened before and after. He had no doubt that if he started to tell them anything, there would be questions that would prove very difficult to answer. That and he had a feeling that if he told the whole story Vader would be even less pleased and now was not the time. "Maybe later," he temporized. They were moving swiftly across the lake despite their combined weight in the boat.

"Over dinner," she insisted. "You have to sit with us at the fun table."

Luke nodded in agreement to his twin sister. "*Both* of you should to sit with us at the fun table." He eyed them again carefully, especially Vader. "You're very tall, though. It may be hard for you to sit at our table. Are you taller than our Dad?" he asked Vader. "I think you are."

"You're heavier," Leia said with a nod. "The whole boat tilted when you sat down."

Luke pressed his lips together trying to suppress a grin as the twins examined Vader from toe to tip inquisitively, not the least bit frightened.

"You're wearing armor, that's heavy." Fearlessly, Leia reached out to poke at one of Vader's arms. He flinched back as if her touch burned. "I'm sorry," she said quickly, brown eyes wide and anxious. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You can't just *poke* people," Luke hissed at his sister before turning to Vader. "Are you all right?"

"I *said* I was sorry!"

"You did not injure me. There is no need to apologize. And I am fine. I was merely... startled." Vader said. He received two dubious looks in response. Vader turned to Luke who was enjoying the situation too much to intervene and gave his father an innocent shrug. "You cannot hurt me," he tried again. "My arm is a prosthetic."

"Oh, *wizard*! You have a *droid hand* like Dad! He usually wears a glove over it too around other people," Luke said, eyes lighting up in interest as he stared at Vader's gauntlet. He looked over at his older "brother" realizing that he too was wearing a glove. "Do you have one too?" he gasped. "Do *I* get a droid hand when *I* grow up?"

"*No!*" Vader barked causing both children to jump in their seats. "No," he said much more softly. "Prosthetic hands are *not* for *getting*. You do *not* want one. It also hurts... a great deal to lose a flesh and blood arm."

Looking very solemn and sorrowful Luke asked in a near whisper, "Did it hurt very much? Does it *still* hurt?"

"Dad's arm sometimes hurts," Leia said. "He pretends it doesn't but Luke can tell when it does."

Vader had no idea how to respond. He'd missed raising his children and was still angry that he'd been robbed of his family, but he'd never imagined that having children would be like this! What could he possibly say to such a question? Tell them the truth? Lie? (But he had a feeling the twins would know if he lied). Luckily, before more questions could be asked, his son came to his rescue.

"It only hurts a little bit, like a pinch," Luke explained gently. "And only sometimes. You don't have to worry about us. We're fine."

The twins shared a look. Vader didn't think that Luke had managed to convince them but it no longer mattered, they were

almost to the dock and Fives was reaching out to guide their craft in so they could all disembark safely. Just beyond the clones he could see Anakin and Padme.

Vader wasn't sure he could do this.

Leia positively leapt out of the boat, deftly caught by Echo. Vader continued to sit, unable to move.

The faintest pressure rested on his hand. He looked and it was his young son staring up at him earnestly. "It's okay. You get to sit with us, remember?" Luke assured him. "You don't have to do any of the *boring* grown up talking stuff."

Vader tilted his head in acknowledgment. "Very well. Would you lead the way?"

Luke puffed up with pride. "Of course. Just follow me!"

CLXXXVII.

Padme considered the holiday a rousing success. There were some bumps along the way but nothing that she, former Queen of Naboo, Senator and Vice Chancellor could not handle.

There was the small fact that Vader didn't or wouldn't or *couldn't* eat, though Luke and Leia still insisted that Vader and his son should sit with them at the children's table to tell them the story of some snow monster.

There was the little matter of the 20 extra clones, big and small who showed up in armor and with ravenous appetites to make room for at the table, (so much for leftovers!)

There was the fact that in his zealously to complete his mission, Artoo had consulted *Threepio* on what gifts to purchase and Threepio had asked Luke and Leia for what they wanted and Artoo had taken them literally so the children were getting custom clone trooper armor for the holidays among many other gifts.

("I thought you said there were *clothes* in the crates," Luke says to Hardcase as he watches the twins engage in pillow fights

in full armor as the rest of the clones call out advice on how the twins can take each other down.

"I did. Armor's clothes, it counts," Hardcase insists).

Obi-Wan had taken one look at their guests and had reached for the entire bottle of Corellian brandy, foregoing the glass. Satine had to pry it forcibly out of his hands and instead gave him his son to hold.

Her parents and her extended family were baffled and kept trying to strike up conversation with the unexpected new family members in attendance which lead to some very... *interesting* discussions with the clones, who to this day had little experience with civilian life and children who were not Jedi or their own brothers, to say nothing of the language they used!

For all he was Padme's hero in this, Anakin was quieter than usual which the children, (especially Luke) picked up on, and then the older Luke sensed it, and then Ahsoka noticed it and then they all got quiet until Padme relented and let Anakin turn on the holoscreen to whatever annual podrace was going on. This of course lead to all the racing fans in the family, (the majority of them) watching raptly and yelling and groaning as their racers won and lost. Meanwhile the *sensible* people hid out in the kitchen eating ice cream and pie.

Vader did *everything possible* to avoid her and keep as great a distance as possible from Obi-Wan. This would have made dinner extremely tricky if it wasn't for the fact that Threepio had set up the children's table just off of the main dining room. Padme only managed to come close to Vader once to ask if there was any way she could arrange for him to eat and drink with them. He'd managed a strangled "no" and then literally vaulted over a window ledge and out into the garden to get away from her, a move that was so absurd and so very much like her husband that she just blinked in shock. Other than the actual dinner, the rest of the time he kept vanishing around corners whenever she entered a room.

Padme still didn't know how a man so big with a respirator

could move so fast and so silently when he wanted to.

Then there was little Skander. He decided that Vader's black cloak was the *best thing ever* and insisted that hiding in its folds made him invisible from sight. Obi-Wan had gone extremely still upon following after his precocious son and finding him hiding beneath Vader's cloak. Luke had ignored both his father and Obi-Wan and the growing tension between them to play peek-a-boo with the child. Skander's giggling very effectively broke the mood of danger and the threat of potential bodily injury.

Padme was also a bit worried that Luke (the little one) was getting confused about being a clone of the grown up Luke (Loops and Mouse were not helping things), and she had a feeling she was going to have to talk to him about that again.

These events all paled in comparison to the racing challenge Anakin threw down when the racing fans started arguing techniques, which led to some very tense moments and an impromptu speeder race that Luke won, beating out both Vader and Anakin handily.

(Apparently when it came to atmospheric flying and speeder racing Luke had years of experience on both men.

"You threaded the *Needle* in a *Skyhopper*? How is that even possible?" Anakin asked incredulously.)

When the festivities ended, and the twins had been put to bed, each of the clones thanked her politely and went back to the ship.

Vader slipped away with them, having stayed only long enough to silently watch the children fall asleep and extricate his cloak from Skander's sticky death grip with Satine's help.

Luke lingered at the door, his eyes taking in the estate house that had never been his home.

When she came near to him he smiled and leaning forward, pressed a careful kiss to her forehead. "Thank you, Mother," he whispered and then he too left.

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