

# **This War**

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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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## **The Beginning**

His eye lids fluttered. Almost imperceptible to those who wouldn't know what it meant. Not sleeping, just merely taking in the sounds and feelings around him. Clones were hard to figure out. The same faces staring at you continuously, but they were so different in the force. They felt like the individuals they were. Something which was so hard to perceive by looking at them. Anakin's eye lids fluttered again as he concentrated harder in the force. Calling on it to calm him and restore his energy.

Rex was close, Anakin felt him standing 20 paces away. He could tell his helmet was tucked under his arm and he was watching diligently. Rex barely left Anakin's side these days. Always there to take orders or to give his opinion on the next battle. He was a good friend, if that is what you could call him. War sometimes made strange partnerships of those who were thrown into it not of their choice, but the choice of someone who now sat on Coruscant wondering what was going on out here.

Anakin inhaled deeply. The air smelled of war. Here in the hanger bay, it's where he felt most at home. The solvents and exhaust had little to no effect on him. Many people found the smells too much. Anakin thought it smelled almost as good as Padme did.

"Captain Rex," Anakin called out opening his eyes and uncrossing his legs. He watched as the clone stalked towards him. He had been right, his helmet was tucked neatly under his arm. "Do you have a report?"

Rex stopped short and saluted Anakin. It was merely procedure. The only time Rex saluted was when they were on the ship. Always the picture of military procedure when the other clones were looking on. A role model of sorts. He never saluted when they were in the heat of battle though. Too easy to pick out the generals, Rex always said. Anakin smiled. Like he wasn't hard to pick out with a lightsaber in his hand, cutting down everyone in his path.

"There are several groups of men who will be rejoining the fleet today," Rex reported in his staccato military voice. "Shuttles are docking now, sir."

"Thank you Rex," Anakin said. His mind was elsewhere. Somewhere far away. "Ahsoka?"

Rex smiled. He had such a soft spot for Anakin's little padawan. "She is resting," he finally said with a chuckle. "She's a little pistol."

Anakin nodded distractedly. "That she is," he said. "Anything else Captain?"

"No sir," Rex said in crisp military precision. Once again the consummate soldier. "I was wondering if you would like to join myself and some of the 501st for dinner?"

Anakin wasn't surprised. He loved his men. They were the workhorses of this war. He loved to be around them. Hear what it was like to live a normal life. Well, if you could call the clones' life normal. "I would love to," Anakin said and they fell into stride together. "General Kenobi joining us?"

Rex shook his head. "Seems he has taken to eating with Cody and his men," Rex said

finally.

Anakin smiled to himself. Obi-wan was glad to be with someone besides Anakin for once. He could regale the clones in Cody's group with tales from when he was a young jedi. Stories Anakin had heard a million times, but wouldn't ever get tired of. Obi-wan had saved Padme and been one of the best masters in the temple. Anakin was thankful for those things.

"General," Rex said getting Anakin's attention again. It seemed Anakin was always lost in thought these days. War did strange things to the mind sometimes.

"Sorry," Anakin said rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I'm just in many different places right now."

"Should we ask padawan Tano to join us?" Rex repeated the question. He wasn't angry. The clones knew the pressure of war and they also knew the pressure the jedi were under. There weren't many of them to lead the clones. They were inexperienced, to say the least, in leading warriors. Many of the commanders and captains were patient with the jedi. More patient than Anakin could be at times.

"I'll comm her," Anakin said and reached for his comm. He activated Ahsoka's code and waited for her to answer.

"Yes master," her voice came through the small cylinder.

"Would you like to join me and some of the 501st for dinner?" Anakin asked her.

"I will meet you in the galley," Ashoka said and then Anakin heard the click of the transmission ending.

He continued along with Rex to the galley. There a huge group of clones, helmets off, were eating. It was like seeing mirror after mirror repeating the same face, but feeling all the individuals who were there. It was a good thing he had learned long ago not to trust his eyes. Otherwise he would be lost in this sea of humanity.

When he stepped into the doorway, followed closely by Rex, the entire group stood at attention. He felt embarrassed. "At ease," he said quickly and turned to look at Rex. "Do they really have to do that?" he asked under his breath. "I mean every time I enter a room?"

"Yes, sir," Rex said emphasizing the sir with a wry smile. Anakin rolled his eyes and continued to the chow line.

War food wasn't good. Everything was synthesized and proteins added. It was sometimes too bland to even choke down. "I'll take the nerf steak," Anakin said to the droid who was serving. He wasn't even hungry. There were things he could do without and eating was one of them.

"Hello master," Anakin heard the female voice from behind him. He turned and Ahsoka smiled up at him.

"Snips," Anakin said pushing his tray along to where the desserts were. They were almost cleaned out. Clones did have a sweet tooth. He looked over some sort of gelatinous

material with fruit floating inside, put the plate down and continued on to get a drink. "Stimcaf please," Anakin said to the droid serving the drinks. He'd been living on the stuff since they had left Coruscant.

"Everything okay Master?" Ahsoka asked as she followed in line. She picked up several fruits and vegetables to eat. Anakin didn't see how she continued to thrive eating the kind of stuff she ate. He hardly ever saw her eat anything besides vegetables. And these weren't the best. He needed a good meal. Something which was filling. It took all his strength to fight and use the force. All of his strength to make sure he returned home to her. All his strength to make sure his men returned from battle. It seemed like he was always using all of his strength and not for himself.

"I've got a lot on my mind," Anakin said truthfully. He didn't feel as though he could burden anyone else with his troubles. He couldn't even be truthful with those around him. It was hard to block out those he loved from knowing about his one true love. His secret life. He shook his head and smiled at Ahsoka. "Still have to make an appearance to keep up morale."

Ahsoka nodded her head. She was taking in so many things he said. She was picking apart every sentence he said, looking for the meaning in it. Anakin didn't think there was that much meaning in what he said.

He picked up his tray and headed to the middle of the table where there was enough room to squeeze in between a couple of the clones. The clones moved aside to give him more room. Anakin sighed and dug into his meal. He pushed the pieces of steak around on his plate, but didn't really feel like eating anything.

"You okay sir?" the clone next to him asked. Anakin snapped back to where he was and gave the clone a reassuring smile.

"I'm fine," Anakin said and finally put one of the pieces of steak in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully. Captain Rex pushed aside the two clones sitting across from Anakin and sat down. Rex was always watching after Anakin. He wouldn't be surprised if Rex stood outside his door when he was sleeping, or what passed for sleep.

"You need shore leave," Rex commented and dug into his meal. Anakin had never seen a clone who wasn't hungry. Rex ate as much as two grown men and sometimes Anakin caught him snacking later in the afternoon, before dinner. Possibly a side effect of rapid aging.

"I need a lot of things," Anakin said after he swallowed his steak piece. "Shore leave would be nice, but unless you know where I can find a shore to leave on, quit telling me to take it."

Rex laughed. "There are many things you can do for shore leave that don't involve leaving the ship," he finally said.

Anakin looked at Rex and Rex winked. "So," Anakin said. "Do you have ideas of what I can do to get my mind off of this war?"

"Nothing a little drinking and shouting couldn't cure," Rex said. It was known far and wide that like their Mandalorian brothers, the clones could 'tie one on' with the best of them. It didn't happen very often. When it did, it was the stuff of legend around the fleet.

Anakin remembered the last time he had found Rex, slumped in a hallway on the cruiser. He wasn't wearing anything but his helmet. A smile spread over Anakin's face.

"What?" Rex asked. He had a casual tone with Anakin now. As though they were comrades and Anakin was not his superior. Anakin liked it this way. More comfortable for everyone involved. Anakin lacked the elitism some other Jedi had. Maybe it was because he hadn't been in the temple as long as some of the others. He remembered what it was like to be around common people.

"I'm just remembering," Anakin said clearing his throat, "a certain Captain who maybe had too much drinking and shouting. What could possibly have made you think taking off all of your clothes was a good idea?"

Rex, a flush rising in his cheeks, busied himself with his food and smiled back at Anakin. "It's what you need," he said making it a ultimatum and not a suggestion. "Does wonders from the soul."

Ahsoka pushed in next to Rex and put her tray down on the table. She sighed.

"What took so long Snips?" Anakin asked taking another piece of steak and placing it in his mouth.

"Those droids always are trying to give me meat," Ahsoka said. "I don't want it and they always try to push it on me. I just spent five minutes trying to explain that I didn't want it."

Anakin smiled. Little things which taught patience were important to the Jedi. This was his chance to impart some knowledge to the Padawan who had been thrust upon him.

"Patience," Anakin said, somehow sounding like Obi-wan, "is the cornerstone of a Jedi's training. Impatience leads us..."

"To the dark side," Ahsoka finished exasperatedly. "I know master."

Anakin smiled again. The same comments came out of his mouth not too long ago. Now he knew what Obi-wan felt like. Although, to Anakin, it wasn't so much a slap in the face as it was to Obi-wan. Anakin always felt like Obi-wan was taking everything he said personally. He never meant to hurt his master's feelings. He knew he had though. Many, many times.

"I'm just teaching you what you need to know," Anakin said and took a sip of his stimcaf. "It's something you need to hear or I wouldn't have said it."

Ahsoka continued eating, staying very quiet. Rex smiled across the table at Anakin. He knew how it was to train soldiers and this was just another chance for him to give Anakin trouble. Anakin returned the smile with a sort of sarcasm and then returned to eating. It was peaceful, although there were many forks and spoons clattering against plates.

all around him. Peaceful in the middle of war.

Anakin's eyes defocused and he found himself thinking. Taken back to when he and Padme had been alone on Naboo. Peaceful. That was truly peaceful. There was no war. They were just there and she was the total universe at that moment.

"Sir?" Rex questioned. "Getting one of those feelings?"

Rex didn't know what they were called, but sometimes Jedi were far away and lost in their own thoughts. They were elsewhere. Rex didn't know if they were in the present or the past. They just had this look on their faces. He knew not to disturb them very often, but the klaxons sounding all through the ship were a good reason to disturb the general.

Anakin shook his head and the sounds of men scurrying to get to their stations flooded back to him and knocked him out of his reminiscent state. The smile, which he knew was there, faded quickly from his lips and Anakin became all business.

"Ahsoka," Anakin said and rushed to stand spilling his stimcaf all over his tray. "With me. Rex?"

"Yes, sir?" Rex snapped back to being the perfect soldier.

"I'll meet you on the bridge," Anakin said and sprinted out to the main corridor.

### **The Strategy**

Kenobi felt his former padawan rushing to the bridge before the door opened. The swirl through the Force was noticeable as Anakin's mind began to rush through all the possibilities. Obi-wan had grown used to the states of Anakin's emotions although he preferred Anakin not have them at all. There was something about Anakin which wouldn't let him be emotionless. Maybe it was his continued attachment to the mother he had left and lost.

"Master," Anakin said as he slid into place next to his former master. He wasn't even breathing hard. Anakin knew how to use his body to the peak performance. Many workouts in the Jedi temple had made it so he was in the fittest shape possible for a Jedi. "Why the red alert?"

Obi-wan turned methodically towards the holographic display which displayed the two cruisers of the Republic in shimmering blue along with the system and all the outlying planets and moons. "This," Obi-wan said stabbing his finger into the blue glow of the display. "There are two Separatist cruisers hiding behind that planet."

Anakin screwed up his face and looked at the display. He didn't see anything. Maybe Obi-wan was starting to get space sickness. Being at war made people do some strange things and they had been fighting rather hard lately. Maybe it was merely exhaustion which was plaguing his former master. Saying anything now would only cause trouble. Ahsoka was close by and showing any doubt in another Jedi would only cause her to doubt another Jedi. He didn't want her to doubt command when her time came.

"Don't see anything," Anakin finally said looking more closely and rubbing his chin thoughtfully. There was a stubble rising there. He hadn't shaved in days. If he didn't watch out, he would start to look like Obi-wan. Anakin peered into the display and was nose to nose with the shimmering blue holograms of the two cruisers which represented the Republic. Still he didn't even see a blip which would indicate enemy ships.

"You don't see it, but do you feel it?" Obi-wan asked looking at his former padawan with eyes that suggested Anakin should've thought of this himself. Obi-wan was starting to lose patience with the constant reminders he had to give Anakin. He was no longer Anakin's master, but felt like he had to keep training him. Anakin felt the exasperation from his former master.

Anakin stopped and regarded his master carefully. He knew that look and that feeling. He'd had it cast upon him many times during their training sessions at the temple. The look indicated Obi-wan wished Anakin would just try a little harder to be more like a Jedi. He never wanted to disappoint Obi-wan, but still, Anakin was not thinking before he spoke. He didn't want to be a typical Jedi. He cleared his throat trying to smooth over what he had missed.

Reaching out, eyes closed and body at rest, Anakin asked the Force to tell him what was behind the planet which shone on the display. It was hard to pinpoint the droids because they were not truly alive. Yes, they had thoughts, but not like humans. They were programmed. Sometimes the Force wasn't always clear about exactly where they were. So Anakin had learned to look for the space which represented nothing, a lack of anything living. Pushing around in the Force, he passed the planet, in his mind, and there laying in wait were two cruisers. They were not yet moving towards the Republic ships and Anakin didn't note any warming of laser batteries or engines.

"I don't think they've found us yet," Anakin said, opening his eyes and looking at Obi-wan. "They aren't moving towards us."

Obi-wan nodded thoughtfully. "Strategy?" he asked and looked at both Ahsoka and Anakin. The padawan had as much to say in this matter as anyone else, Obi-wan believed. How else would she learn to be a Jedi who could lead? He had always taught Anakin by letting him make decisions. He saw no reason to discontinue this with Anakin's padawan.

"I say we consult with Rex and Cody and see what they suggest," Anakin said. He didn't like to make such tactical decisions without asking the Captain to help guide him in the best combat information. Although Rex didn't hold all the answers, Anakin knew he wanted what was best for the men and Anakin wanted the same thing. Jedi had always been taught to seek the council of those who knew better than they did. That is where Rex came in and Anakin knew he wanted to minimize casualties and maximize the hit on the Seps. He wanted everyone to be able to go home, no matter what that meant to the individual.

"Commander Cody is already on his way to the bridge," Obi-wan stated. "I assume Rex is also on his way?"

"Yes master," Ahsoka chimed in. She was not afraid to speak her mind in front of the

older master, something Anakin admired in his padawan. Fearlessness, which he hoped would not lead to foolishness. Although, he was sure there would be many mistakes along the way. All padawans were gung ho at one point in their lives.

"Thank you padawan," Obi-wan said and then chided Anakin with a smile. He was happy to finally have something to get back at Anakin with. He had always told the Chosen One that one day he would get a padawan and he would see what it was like. It looked like paybacks were on the way. Obi-wan raised his eyebrows in a questioning look.

"Don't ask me," Anakin said. "She has a mind of her own. Maybe we are a good pair after all."

Obi-wan stifled a laugh. To say that Anakin had a mind of his own, was an understatement. The boy was stubborn beyond reproach. If you wanted Anakin to climb a wall just tell him you didn't want him to touch the wall. He'd be over it before you could blink. It seemed Ahsoka had the same mentality. She would be a treat for Anakin as she got older. He would have gray hair before she became a knight.

"Generals," Rex said as he approached the group of jedi followed closely by Commander Cody. They had their helmets on and they stood board straight. Their filtered voices rang through the command center. "What is the status?"

"Seems there are two Sep cruisers hiding behind this planet," Anakin said pointing towards the display. His finger stabbing into the hologram. "They haven't powered up or acted like they've seen us yet. Any ideas?"

Rex fiddled with the blaster on his hip. It was a nervous habit he had when he was trying to come up with an answer. Why hadn't the Seps gone hot as the Republic cruisers entered the system? "They are damaged," Rex finally said. The idea had come to him like a flash. It has something to do with the training he had received. Speed training made ideas speed into the brain. Or at least that is what he thought. Maybe he was just lucky sometimes and the generals were the ones putting the thoughts in his head. If that was the case, it gave him the creeps.

"What do you mean?" Ahsoka asked her voice growing slightly shrill. "They are waiting for us, it's a trap."

Anakin considered what Rex had said. "Commander Cody," Anakin asked looking at the replica of Rex, wearing yellow highlighted armor, who stood next to Obi-wan. "Your thoughts."

"I agree," Cody said through the helmet. "They aren't able to move or power up. Otherwise they would be hot on our tails by now. They can't maneuver or they are just as stupid as we thought them always to be."

This comment solicited a laugh from Rex and Anakin. Anakin gave Obi-wan a wary look and stopped laughing.

"If you two are finished. I say we pay them a visit," Obi-wan said punching a button and watching the display disappear. "Let's go over and say hello."



"Yes Sir," Cody and Rex said enthusiastically. They were always up for a chance to blow up some droids.

"You are either brilliant," Anakin said to Rex clamping him on the shoulder, "Or you are going to get us killed."

"I hope neither," Rex laughed with a wry sound to his voice. "I still owe you shore leave."

Anakin laughed as he and Ahsoka jogged to catch up with Obi-wan and Cody. "I'll keep you to that."

### **The Mission**

Anakin pulled back the yoke of his fighter, sending it into a spiraling dive towards Pelicd, a barren rock with only one moon. There was no cloud cover to hide the incoming fighters, but Anakin had come up with a plan. He thought the best course of action was to swing low over the planet and follow the gravitational pull as the planet rotated towards the position of the Separatist cruisers. It was risky, but if anyone could pull it off, Anakin was sure this was the group who could do it.

"Everyone report in," Anakin said keying his comm unit. He pulled back on the yoke and brought his fighter parallel to the face of Pelicd. He eased off the thrust, coasting easily through the thin layer of atmosphere.

"Gold one standing by," Ahsoka chirped through the intercom. He could hear the smile in her voice. She had become a much more competent pilot as the days had gone by. The Jedi trained in flying, but being rated for the use of all the equipment used during campaigns was something that took time. He was very impressed with her abilities and the way she caught on to everything quickly. It kept them from having to retrain her every time it was time to go up on a flight.

"Gold two standing by," Obi-wan said precisely through the intercom. Anakin thought he noted a tightness in his former master's voice, but he put the sound down to interference from the gravitational pull of Pelicd. Obi-wan had been in more skirmishes than Anakin could possibly imagine. Sometimes, Anakin had to remember that Obi-wan had been involved in the war on Naboo. He had seen more than Anakin could imagine. And then he had been made a knight overnight and become his master and he had to put up with everything Anakin brought with him. That was something to be commended.

"Gold three standing by," Rex said. The intercom cut off quickly. Either he was having a conversation with Commander Cody privately through their helmet comm or it was the training. Anakin shook his head and smiled. Rex was good company for Anakin. Someone who knew what it was like to lead troops. Someone who didn't ask questions when orders were given because Rex didn't talk back to those in charge. Rex didn't let Anakin get away with sloppy orders though and it felt good to be accountable to someone. Someone who understood.

"Gold four standing by," Cody said in the same voice as Rex. For all Anakin knew it could've been Rex, but he knew that the clones wouldn't do something like that, it just wasn't in their nature. They weren't the best at practical jokes and Anakin had seen some of their jokes go terribly wrong. Plus, Anakin hated to say it, it was bred out of them. It felt strange to think of them that way, like they were animals, but it was the terminology most of the Kaminoans used when talking about the clones. They were products and nothing more to the scientists who created them.

"You okay sir?" Rex asked through the ship-to-ship channel. Rex didn't want the others to hear what he was asking. "You seem distracted and now is not the best time to be that way."

"Thanks Rex," Anakin said after he had switched to the same channel. "Just getting some of that pre-boarding energy. Ya know the feeling." Rex laughed. His filtered voice ringing through the cockpit of Anakin's fighter.

"I do," Rex agreed. "It'll be all over soon and we will be blowing up some tinnies." Rex clicked off the comm and Anakin maneuvered into position. The other fighters formed a V shape behind him and they all slowed. It was crucial to catch the rotation movement of the planet. To slip into the orbit and wait to come around.

"We'll only have minutes to get into those ships," Ahsoka said. She was excited and running through the possibilities in her head. The nervousness and excitement playing a careful dance within her body.

"Just sit tight Snips!" Anakin said and slowed even more. The key was making it into the slot. Anakin checked his scope and the rotational information. "Insertion in three, two, one."

The seconds ticked away and Anakin angled for the planet, the rest of the group followed suit and they were in. Now they only had to wait to come around to where the ships were. Anakin powered down all non-essential operating systems and waited. His body was primed and tense for battle.

"Are you sure this will work?" Obi-wan asked on the ship-to-ship channel. "I know you have some great plans, but will we have enough time to get across to space to where the ships are?"

"I feel it master," Anakin said closing his eyes and meditating on the plan. He could see it there in his mind. All the things which the force would help him with and guide his hands to do. "I know I'm right about this."

"I'm right behind you," Obi-wan said. "As always."

Anakin smiled. His eyes still closed he continued to watch through the force. The planet shifting underneath his fighter. The two ships hiding out behind Pelicd were almost in sight now. Anakin saw it in his mind. His hands hovered over his controls waiting for the exact moment when he would blast his engines and head at break neck speed towards the two ships.

"I can't get a read on shielding," Ahsoka came across the comm. "How do we know if they are up or down?"

"Shhh," Anakin said, eyes still closed and concentrating. "We will know."

He was at peace. One with the planet, the moon and the fighters. Anakin knew where they were going and he knew now the precise moment to get there. "Fire them up!"

Leading the way, Anakin charged towards the ships, burying his yoke into the main console of his ship. Pushing the ship to its limit, even with all the modifications which he had made. He could feel the ship's engines pulsing under him as he made it perform a spiral towards the main hanger of the Sep ships.

The others followed behind Anakin spreading out into a staggered arc as they headed towards the landing bay. They were going to enter the bay hot and shut down once they had passed through the forcefield which stopped the atmosphere from leaking out of the ship. Anakin could never understand why this was standard on a Sep ship. They were mostly droids and didn't need to breath.

"We are almost there," Anakin said getting a bad feeling about the lack of laser fire. "Anyone see any droids?"

"None on the scope," Rex stated briefly his voice tense with the heat of impending battle.

They were almost to the portal. Something didn't feel right to Anakin. "Do you feel it Obi-wan?" Anakin asked in a concentrated voice. Something just on the edge of his consciousness, nagging at him, pulling him to stop.

"I do," Obi-wan said. "Pull up, it's a trap!"

Anakin yanked back on the stick and his fighter barely skimmed the hull of the other ship. Sparks spat from underneath his fighter as he fought to get control of it again. He wobbled to either side. Finally he leveled out and what he saw frightened him. A huge mass of vulture droids already in the air and waiting. How had they not seen them? Maybe a new shielding technology. Anakin couldn't imagine how he had made such a mistake.

"Master!" Ahsoka cried in a shrill voice. "Get out of there."

Anakin could see that the other fighters were already looping back around to head back to the cruisers and safety. Anakin, however, hadn't had as much notice to pull up and now found himself flying straight into the middle of the swarm of droids.

"Go back to the cruisers!" Anakin shouted snapping off volley after volley at the droids. "Get them out of here!"

Anakin twisted and turned, looping back on his own trajectory several times to get a better shot at some of the droids. This was an elaborate trap. There had been a lot of thought put into it. There was only one person who wanted them that badly. Grievous.

"We won't leave you master," Ahsoka said. She started to turn her fighter towards where he continued to fight the droids now baring down on his position.

"Ahsoka," Anakin snapped. "I'll be fine. Meet you back at the ship. Now hurry."

He wasn't sure how he would meet her back at the ship, but he had to say something to get her to go back. Anakin was trying to head back towards the cruisers without bringing too many of the vulture droids with him. It was proving to be a harder task than he had thought.

"Rex," Anakin said coming back around to take out several more vulture droids. "Make sure to get Ahsoka back to the ship. I'm fine. I'm almost out of here."

"Affirmative General," Rex said in a plain and flat military voice. He was worried. He only used that voice in dire situations and Anakin knew it.

Pulling into a steep dive, Anakin headed towards Pelicid at a rapid pace. The planet coming at him quickly in his viewport. He knew he could out fly the droids, but there were so many of them. He wasn't certain the odds were in his favor. Luckily, he never listened to what the odds said. Anakin skimmed through the atmosphere, hoping to get rid of another handful of droids, but they were coming after him in droves. He just had to hang on long enough for everyone else to get back the cruisers. Then he could make a quick escape and race toward the cruisers himself.

"Are you coming sir?" Rex said through the comm. "We are back and they are firing up for hyperspace. This boat is leaving so you better get on board."

"I'll be there as soon as my shore leave here is done," Anakin said chiding Rex.

"We'll be here waiting," Rex said and the comm snapped off. Anakin punched the drive as hard as he could and the engines whined in protest. He was careening towards the cruisers at top speed and several vulture droids were hot on his tail. He juked left then right to avoid their fire. Moving up and down to try and shake them before they could lock their cannons on him. He felt the sweat trickle down the small of his back, reminding him he was in danger.

"Open the hanger," Anakin said quickly. "I'm almost there."

Anakin pushed his fighter further begging it for more juice. He saw the hanger bay and then heard the turbolaser batteries open up with the loud thump, thump. They helped out by picking off several of the droids pursuing him, but one was still with him. Anakin didn't slow down as he hit the lip of the hanger. When he had crossed the threshold, he powered everything down and skidded across the deckplating jarring every bone in his body and making him bite his tongue as he braced for the inevitable crash against the other wall.

His fighter hit and instantly filled with collision foam. He was stuck, but not injured. This was going to be embarrassing when Rex and his men had to come and cut him out. He was sure they would have plenty of laughs at their general's expense.

"You are known for your landings," Obi-wan said through the comm a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Thank you master," Anakin said and sighed. He felt the ship jerk beneath him and knew the cruisers had gone to lightspeed.

## **The Disagreement**

The door chimed. Anakin shifted on his bunk as he sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the cot. It was not unusual to be awakened at strange hours. This was war.

"Come in," Anakin said. There was no privacy on a ship and Anakin was sure it was just another person with a report which needed to be signed. The paperwork of being a general was about as bad as actually having to figure out a strategy for the next assault.

Captain Rex stepped through the door, the light from the hallway silhouetting him from the back and spilling onto the darkened floor of the room. Anakin rubbed his eyes due to the bright light and the door swished closed behind Rex.

"Another report?" Anakin asked and held out his hand not even looking towards the Captain, waiting for Rex to shove the datapad into his hand so that he could look over the report. Rex didn't move and there was no datapad in his hands.

"No sir," Rex said sounding rather preoccupied. It wasn't like him to be thinking of something else when talking to Anakin. Clones were efficient warriors. They weren't mindless, but they didn't get distracted from the goal very often.

"Something on your mind soldier?" Anakin asked stretching to stand. Anakin was tall and just a smidge taller than Rex. He sometimes found the height difference to his advantage as he was calling out orders to the troops. He seemed a bit more intimidating although he didn't like to rule with dominance, he did want them to know when he meant it.

"There is sir," Rex said standing at parade rest with superior precision. He'd been drilled so much that standing that way just came naturally.

"Take off your helmet so we can talk," Anakin said and went to get himself a glass of water. He didn't want to talk to the faceless helmet of Rex. He wanted to see the man underneath. "You want something to drink?"

"No sir," Rex said keeping the military tone in his voice. Anakin raised an eyebrow at the clone who was now standing with his helmet tucked neatly under his arm. Still very precise and rigid.

"What is it?" Anakin asked and gulped the water. It felt as though he hadn't had a drink in months. Maybe he hadn't because he'd been living off of stimcaf for so long now. Or Maybe it was because he hadn't really slept in days.

"It's Padawan Tano," Rex said keeping the formality of his conversation. Anakin noted that his tone was still that of the Captain and not the Rex who was having a conversation with a comrade.

"What about her?" Anakin asked his eyes widening in worry. "Is she hurt?"

"No sir," Rex said shortly. "She could be though, in a way."

"What are you talking about Rex? And why all this military formality?" Anakin finally asked slamming his glass down on the sink. Rex didn't even flinch and continued to

look straight ahead at the opposite wall. Anakin was surprised it didn't break into a million pieces and shred the skin of his hand.

"I don't approve of some of the ways you are teaching her to be a leader," Rex finally said. Now Anakin understood the formality. If you were going to disagree with your superior, you better make sure you cross all your t's and dot all of your i's.

"What about it?" Anakin asked crossing his arms across his chest in a defiant stance. He had perfected the look after many attempts with Obi-wan. "I sent her back to the ship because I knew things were going to get hairy back there. I want her to be as safe as possible."

"She will never learn to lead," Rex said snappily. "If you don't give her a chance to do so and you continue to send her away when things get tough. Leaders are forged in the fires of battle."

"Are you questioning me Captain?" Anakin finally said after a short silence, his eyes narrowing at the clone. Rex had never been one to ask Anakin why he was doing what he was doing. Yes, sometimes he suggested other plans of attack, but he always did it in a way that Anakin could easily swallow. This was different. The affinity Rex felt for Ahsoka was shining through and Anakin wasn't sure he liked it. Rex's loyalties should be with Anakin and Obi-wan to some extent.

"I'm merely making a suggestion," Rex said.

"What do you suggest I do?" Anakin asked. "Let her get blown to bits in the middle of a vulture droid swarm and then cry about it later?"

Anakin paced back and forth in the small space which was his cabin. There wasn't much luxury here. The generals had bigger cabins than anyone else, but that wasn't saying much. "I can't do that Rex."

"She needs to learn how to lead the troops in a tight situation. You've let her lead before. She has done fine. It's the best way to train a good leader," Rex said in a stiff voice. He was emotional about this and Anakin knew it. "You have to let her go."

"Do you want to watch her get killed?" Anakin asked. "Is that what you want? To see her body laying on the combat field and bleeding as you are pulling away from the planet all safe and sound?"

Rex shook his head. "I don't want that at all, but we all must do what we have to for this war. She is no different than I was when I was newly appointed as Captain."

Anakin had never had a disagreement with Rex. They had always seen eye-to-eye on almost everything they had decided upon. That is why Anakin put so much stock in what Rex thought about the strategies they were using in the war. This was not what Jedi were meant for and Anakin was starting to feel the pressure of everything they were doing. His head was throbbing. He raised a hand to rub his temples. This was too much. He felt like his head might explode.

"What do you have in mind?" Anakin said through a tight mouth.

"I want you to let her lead the troops next time we go on a mission," Rex said matter of factly. "I think she will do a good job. She needs to learn."

"I really don't have time to clean up after her when it's a tight situation," Anakin said his patience wearing thin. "We are in the middle of a war, in case you hadn't noticed, which we will never win, if the tide does not begin to turn. I don't have time to field train her right now. We are doing the best we can to just hold on as it is. How many more of your men do you want killed?"

"I just would like you to consider the suggestion, The more jedi to lead maybe the fewer clones who have to die." Rex said and snapped to attention, indicating he was ready to leave the room. For him the discussion was over. "I don't want anymore of my men killed, but it's what we do."

"You're dismissed," Anakin said rubbing his temples again. He had never spoken to his men this way, but Rex was pushing his buttons. Maybe he should just let Ahsoka lead them. That would shut everyone up because maybe they wouldn't come back.

The door opened and Rex exited silently. Anakin took the glass from the sink and threw it at the door in a fit of rage at the way Rex had just spoken to him. It shattered into a million pieces. Anakin felt powerful.

### **The Conference**

"I hear you had a disagreement with Captain Rex," Obi-wan said to Anakin as they strode down the corridor toward main ops. They had been called to the bridge to take an incoming transmission from Masters Yoda and Windu. It had been marked as high priority, otherwise, it would've been cataloged into a report to be read later by both Anakin and Obi-wan.

Anakin rolled his eyes. It wasn't so much they had a disagreement, as Anakin didn't want to hear what Rex had to say. Anakin didn't disagree with the fact that Rex didn't know what he was talking about. He just couldn't bring himself to let Ahsoka be in harms way, if he could prevent it. "We just see things differently."

Obi-wan nodded his head thoughtfully and rubbed his chin. Anakin was prone to emotional outbursts and attachment. Yet another sign that Obi-wan's training had been insufficient. Obi-wan took all the credit for this lacking. Although he wasn't Anakin's master anymore, he still felt the need to try to show him the error in his ways. To suggest alternative strategies for the training of Ahsoka.

"You have to let her get her hands dirty," Obi-wan said in a quiet and respectful manner, trying not to stir up Anakin's emotions any further. "I let you lead things before you were a knight. I think I did a fine job in teaching you how to handle the troops. It shows in your ability to get the performance out of them that you want. That takes a general who is respected."

"You did what you thought best," Anakin said trying to keep his voice from seething

with anger, although it was hard to do. "I am going to do what I think best now. The war wasn't like this when I was a padawan. There is so much more going on now. So many more chances for padawans to come into harms way."

Obi-wan shook his head and clucked in his throat. "I seem to remember flying across Geonosis with a padawan learner and some clone troopers. Also fighting with a Sith Lord who had twice the skill he did. Where you not that padawan?"

Anakin shook his head. It seemed so long ago, such a different time. The war had become so complicated now. "Of course it was me," Anakin said sighing and clenching his mechanical hand inside its protective glove. Obi-wan had not feared for Anakin and therefore Anakin had learned the hard way not to take on those who had superior skill. "Okay, so I let her lead and she fails miserably, what then? She ends up with mechanical pieces like I have?" Anakin held up his hand for Obi-wan to see. It had to be a terrible reminder to his former master of the failure on Geonosis.

"You cannot focus on what might happen. Live in what the force wants from you now," Obi-wan reminded and looked away from Anakin's gloved hand. He was sounding like Qui-gon more and more these days. Perhaps it was something that came with age. If only the wise master had been around to give Obi-wan the knowledge he needed to deal with Anakin. Still Obi-wan had taken Anakin's training on and he was responsible for the continued imparting of wisdom. "She will be fine."

Up ahead, standing next to the doors to the bridge were Rex and Cody. They both had their helmets on. Anakin couldn't help wondering what kind of conversation they were having. He knew that Rex was probably filling Cody in on the disagreement they had over Ahsoka. Cody was probably giving advice on the best way to deal with a Jedi. Clones were able to hold a conversation with no gestures or movement of their body. A skill born of their need to speak to each other without Kaminoian involvement. Anakin envied them and their ability to get away and speak to each other in private. Something he didn't get the luxury of doing very often. Not that he had all that many people to talk to, except her.

"Generals," Cody said when they approached and he and Rex snapped to attention. They were magnificent to watch when they were showing their training, Anakin had to admit. Although he hated the inspection process, he wished he got a chance to see the clones do precision drill more often. It was beautiful to see.

"Cody," Obi-wan nodded towards the clone on his left and then acknowledged the clone to his right. "Rex."

"Good afternoon General Kenobi," Rex said precisely. Anakin wondered what kind of faces he was making under that helmet. He was sure they were all directed at him and some of them probably weren't nice.

"Rex," Anakin said. "If we could have a moment for a private discussion."

"I believe you are needed for the conference," Rex said nodding towards the bridge doors. He wasn't going to make this easy for Anakin. He wanted to make sure his point was taken seriously. That would be the only reason he was putting off talking to Anakin. The



transmission would not begin until Anakin and Obi-wan were present and Rex knew it.

"Afterwards then," Anakin said and clicked the button to open the doors. They slid apart with a quiet shush and they entered the bridge which was teeming with activity and noise. Reports were being given and tactical displays were shimmering and appearing and then disappearing above consoles all over the bridge. The clones were very efficient, which was what they were trained to be. They had several fronts to manage all at one time. It could be overwhelming.

"We've patched you through on the main holoprojector," a clone who was wearing a bridge crew uniform stated. Anakin wasn't sure he knew this clone particularly. He didn't know as many on the bridge as he would've liked. He had enough trouble keeping up with all the infantry troops he had to lead into battle.

"Thank you," Obi-wan said politely. If there was one thing Anakin wished to learn from Obi-wan and his leadership abilities, it was his constant ability to be polite and kind to those who were serving under him. Obi-wan didn't snap orders and always asked the clones to do something instead of telling them what he wanted done. He had a way with his men.

Anakin had tried to strike this balance with his troops, but in the heat of battle, his emotions became heated and he started snapping orders as quickly as he could. Calming himself during the battle to hear what the force had to say was becoming a top priority for him. He had been working on it recently during some of the combat missions. Jedi never stopped learning and Anakin would master this skill.

"Master Windu," Obi-wan said and bowed as the holoprojection shimmered to life.

"Master Yoda," Anakin said greeting the second holoprojection. Anakin noted the green master peering at him like he was staring into his soul. Something which always unnerved Anakin, ever since he'd been a small child in the council chamber being tested by the masters. When Yoda had proclaimed he wasn't fit to train.

"Good to see you both, it is," Yoda said in his distinct tone. "News we have of a new priority for your fleet."

Yoda deferred to Master Windu with a kurt nod. "A new shipyard has been spotted. It is being used to make most of the Separatist fleet." Mace explained.

Anakin's eyebrows raised as he heard the news. A chance to hit the Seps where they lived. He could feel the excitement rising inside of him. Then he began to regret telling Obi-wan he would consider Ahsoka leading the troops. This was going to be a hard assignment. Only the most skilled flyers would be needed to infiltrate and lay charges to the facility. His mind was racing a mile a minute as he thought of all the things he would need to prepare for the mission.

"Where will we be going?" Obi-wan asked in an even tone. Anakin noted that Obi-wan didn't get wrapped up in the details until the mission was completely explained. Another thing Anakin should be working on. He was always one step ahead of himself when considering strategy.

"The drive yards are located in the outer rim," Mace stated and his shimmering holoprojection pushed a button. They two jedi masters were replaced with a map of the region. "Hypori."

Anakin looked at Obi-wan and then back at the detailed map of the sector. "The Arkanis Sector?" Anakin finally asked after studying the map and scratching his chin. "That planet isn't inhabited."

"We have intel which tells us they are using it as a major droid factory," Mace stated in his business like tone. "They are also deploying large groups of droid fighters from this area."

"The key," Yoda added, "will be to destroy the factory itself. Bring the enemy to it's knees, this could."

Anakin considered carefully the information which he was presented with by the masters. This would be a multiple front raid. He would have no choice, but to put Ahsoka into action.

"Consider strategy, you must," Yoda continued. "Comm us when closer to the system you reach and a strategy you have."

"Thank you master," Obi-wan said and clicked the switch off. He turned to Anakin and gave him a grim look. "This is going to take all the guidance of the force we can muster."

"It's going to mean Ahsoka is going to be on her own," Anakin said grimly. His insides were boiling with fear. Not just for Ahsoka, but what would happen to him when something went wrong with her.

"She is tougher than you know," Obi-wan said reassuringly. "Let go Anakin."

## **The Practice**

Obi-wan's words rang through his mind as he sat cross legged on his bunk trying to meditate and relieve some of the tension from his body. Plus he needed to come up with a strategy for Hypori. It wasn't something which was going to solve itself. The problem was, he couldn't stop thinking about what his former master had said. To let go. He couldn't. There were some things he couldn't let go. One, letting his newly named padawan become an orange spot on the battlefield, and his wife. These were the two things in his life which meant the most to him in this place and in this time.

Anakin had said it in his mind so many times...his wife. He wondered now what she was doing, where she was and if she was worrying about him. Anakin even thought of trying to reach out and find her, but feared being caught by the two other jedi on the ship. He worried about her. She was never far from his thoughts, although when around other jedi, he tried to block her from his mind completely. It was hard to keep such a secret hidden deep inside when all he wanted to do was shout it from the top of every sand dune on Tatooine.

He attempted to close his eyes even tighter, willing the meditation to come, but it was really no use. There was no way he was going to make any strides towards strategy at this rate. You couldn't force meditation to happen. He had learned that a long time ago when he was trying to fool Obi-wan. He was going to have to do something to get his mind off of everything that had gone on during the day. There was so much to think over. There were so many details to what needed to be done.

Anakin was sure this would be a turning point in the war and that destroying the machine works and shipyards at Hypori would be just the thing to get other systems to join with the Republic and to fight against the Seps. How could they wish to continue this futile war? Although, Anakin had to admit, the Seps had some very strong holds around the galaxy. Plus, they had the financing and purpose that maybe the Republic was lacking. How could he think such things? He was loyal, as loyal as anyone else in the Republic. He just wanted to return to the temple and Coruscant where he was supposed to be. Where life wasn't always up and down and was more predictable. Where he wanted to be right now so that he could be closer to the one person who understood more than anyone else. He shook his head trying to clear everything from it.

Anakin rose from his cot and triggered his internal ship comlink above his cot. "Rex," he spoke into the speaker. "Meet me in the shooting range."

"Yes sir," Rex returned through the speaker in his brisk voice. "ETA five minutes."

Anakin slipped the glove over his recently replaced hand and flexed it. It had become a habit to remove the glove when he was trying to relax. To not feel the constrains of the leather around the limb. He checked to make sure the pommel of his lightsaber was clipped to his belt where it always was these days. Now was the time when he would find his calm. Lightsaber in his hand and deflecting whatever came his way, that would be where the answers would come to him. It would be the force which guided his moves and freed his mind from all these things that just kept clouding it up. This would be his chance to get away from the ghost of her which his mind brought into his dreams every night.

He moved towards the door and pressed the release button, the door slid open silently. Maybe he should call Ahsoka to come and workout with him, they hadn't had a chance to train recently. It wasn't very often during the skirmishes that they had time to hone their skills. Anakin was sure he wasn't doing as good a job as he should be with her training. He didn't consider calling Obi-wan, who never really approved of the methods Anakin used to find his answers. It was just another lecture that he wanted to avoid.

Anakin keyed his comlink. "Ahsoka," he said waiting as he flexed his hand inside the glove again. It was chaffing him more than normal today. Possibly a problem with the organic circuit interface. He would have to check it before he began any serious combat. There had been several upgrades to it recently and sometimes it took time for the flesh to adjust. It would do him no good to have an arm that wasn't working during a tense battle.

"Yes master," her voice said back.

"Do you feel like some lightsaber training today?" Anakin asked smiling. In his

mind, he pictured her face smiling at the thought. She really hadn't had much of a chance to stretch herself and use the skills which were taught her in the temple. War was strange in the skills it gave you and the things it took away. Anakin's mind drifted again back to Padme. He closed his eyes and just thought of her face for moment. It was a brief respite he allowed himself now and again.

"Where?" Ahsoka asked the excitement brimming in her voice. Anakin had no idea where she was right now. Sometimes she could be found tinkering with the clones as they repaired equipment from battle. He really didn't know where she was most of the time and that discouraged him. It seemed he was with Obi-wan all the time when he was a padawan. Or maybe that was what it had felt like to him at the time because he could never get a moments peace to do as he wished.

"Shooting range the guys rigged up over in Bay Q9," Anakin stated and stepped into the corridor and shut his door behind him. "You in?"

"Absolutely Master," Ahsoka said back to him with emphasis on master. She usually did that when prodding him or when she was really excited. "About 5 minutes."

"That's what Rex said," Anakin laughed and clicked off the comlink, leaving her to wonder why Rex was coming to lightsaber practice. Anakin smiled to himself. This may be the best workout yet. His muscles tensed at the thought of getting to use his skills.

The jedi strode purposefully down the hall towards one of the main turbolifts. He liked that his quarters were close to the lift because it was the true center of the ship and it made it easy for him to get to the bridge, or his fighter, in a hurry. Several clones stepped out of his way as he walked down the corridor, making way for him to get where he was going.

When he finally reached the bay, Anakin walked to the makeshift shooting range the clones had constructed. Not that they needed practice, but Rex explained that they thought they did because it was born into them. If they weren't shooting, Rex had said, they were bound to get in trouble and fights would break out. Anakin could understand. Sometimes he didn't need the practice with his lightsaber, he felt an overwhelming urge to use it.

The range consisted of a two plastoid walls which made a narrow hall. The hall was divided lengthwise with more plastoid walls to make places for several clones to shoot all at once. At the end of the gallery was a dissipation field. This was charged up to absorb blaster fire as it came down the gallery. It stopped them from shooting a hole in the ship or each other. A good thing, Anakin thought, because he would hate to have to explain to Obi-wan how he managed to lose clones to friendly fire.

Anakin thought the mock up was very useful at keeping the clones out of trouble and it really didn't take up much of the floor space in the bay. That was important too because the hanger was stuffed so full of equipment that it was hard to squeeze between some of the ships. There were many things needed to wage the kind of war they were waging.

"General," Anakin heard the crisp voice behind him. He made sure to turn around before addressing Rex. It had happened before that Anakin had said something to Rex and

it wasn't Rex. That is what he got for not checking the force before speaking. So Anakin made a conscious decision to turn around before opening his mouth and sticking his foot inside.

"Rex," Anakin said, noting the blue armor and the lack of hair. Plus the Kama Rex wore kinda gave him away. "Feel like shooting?"

Rex unholstered his blaster and pulled out the energy pack with a sharp click, checking the amount of shots he had left and then shoving it back into the hilt of the blaster with a snap. "I would like nothing better," he said and smiled widely at Anakin. "What do you have in mind?"

"I'll wait for Ahsoka before I explain," Anakin said gesturing towards the door where Ahsoka had appeared and was eagerly making her way towards the two of them. She almost skipped towards the two. A bright smile lit her face.

"You don't have to wait any longer," Ahsoka said and smiled at both Anakin and Rex. She pulled her lightsaber into her hands with the force and placed a finger over the activation button. "What are we doing, Skyguy?"

Anakin indicated the firing range. "We are going to stand where the dissipation field normally is," he said and looked at Rex. "Rex is going to fire at us at full power."

"I'm sorry sir," Rex said. If he would've been drinking, Anakin was pretty sure he would have spurted the fluid everywhere. It wasn't very often you caught a clone off guard. Anakin had succeeded and it brought a smile to his face.

"You heard me," Anakin said checking his lightsaber over nonchalantly. "I want you to live fire at Ahsoka and myself."

Rex stepped back two steps and holstered his blaster. "I can't sir," Rex said putting his hands up in a placating gesture. "It's in the orders."

Anakin's head snapped up to look at Rex. Orders? What orders? He'd never heard this mentioned before by Rex or a clone. "What are you talking about?" Anakin asked looking at Rex with a furrowed brow trying discern just what the captain was talking about. "I'm telling you this is what you are going to do."

Ahsoka stepped towards Rex. She was always very motherly with the clones, although she was younger than they were. She reached out to touch his arm. Anakin had never witnessed a clone act this way and he wasn't sure what to make of it. It felt strange and Anakin could feel the hair on the back of his neck start to prickle giving him the sense that danger was near.

"Rex," Ahsoka said in a soothing tone. "We won't be hurt."

Rex looked blankly at Anakin. "I could be in big trouble for this," he finally said the look in his eyes never changing. It wasn't Rex there, it was as though his brain had taken over and was giving the answers. Rex was on autopilot.

"I'm not turning you into anyone," Anakin said trying to comfort his friend. "I just

want to have live fire practice. I know you guys have done it. Why can't we be afforded the same luxury?"

Rex's faced changed. Anakin noted that his eyes became full of the life, which marked him as Rex. It was strange to note that for a split second, Rex seemed not to be there and not to be in control of himself. It was odd behavior. Anakin would have to ask the next Kaminoan he saw about it. Unfortunately, in the middle of the war, Kaminoans were few and far between. They didn't like to leave their home world.

"Alright," Rex said with the strength returning to his voice. "I'll do it, if that is what you are ordering."

"I'm ordering it," Anakin said and headed down to the end of the range. He could forgive a slight hiccup by his captain. They couldn't always be on. "Give it your best shot."

Rex breathed in and held his blaster at arm's length. He exhaled and pulled the trigger. He hoped this wouldn't end up landing him in the brig for killing his general.

### **The Showdown**

"How long has he been down here?" Obi wan asked as he knelt next to Rex, who had discarded his helmet next to his feet and was now wiping sweat from his face with a gloved hand.

"Well sir," Rex said his voice . "I've gone through six fully charged energy cells and I think there have been four other guys after me. It's been a long time."

Obi-wan stood and looked down the firing range toward Anakin. Anakin was deep in meditation, his blue blade whirling from side to side as he deflected bolt after bolt which was being aimed towards him by the skilled hand of a clone. His hair was matted to his head with sweat. Obi-wan thought it was time to call it off. Ahsoka had come to get him because she was concerned for Anakin's well being and he could see why.

"Cease fire!" Obi-wan called to the clone who had just stepped in to take place of the one who had emptied his energy cell. The clone lowered his weapon and turned to face Obi-wan. "Yes sir," the clone said and holstered his weapon.

"Anakin!" he called to his former padawan. "Don't you think you should give these clones a rest. They have work that they will need to be doing soon and having them be too tired is not good strategy."

Anakin nodded and strode towards Obi-wan, a scowl plastered securely on his face. "I'm just trying to work things out about Hypori," Anakin said and ran his gloved hand through his wet hair making it stand on end. He hadn't realized he had been fighting for so long. Time had slowed to a crawl when he had touched the force, minutes became hours.

"There are other ways we can think these things out," Obi-wan said clamping Anakin on the shoulder. "Maybe we should go up to the tactical command center and talk about it. Now that you have cleared your head with the force, the ideas will come to you easily."

Anakin shrugged. Obi-wan was obviously teaching him another lesson about the force. Anakin didn't go through his usual resentment routine though, he just felt weary and tired. "We should include Cody and Rex," Anakin said gesturing towards Rex who was sitting nearby.

"I think that we should talk privately first," Obi-wan said pointing towards Ahsoka. "Padawan Tano will need to be included."

Anakin looked from Obi-wan to Ahsoka and his eyes narrowed. This would be the lecture that Anakin had been waiting on ever since he had taken Ahsoka out of the leadership role. Ahsoka would have to command a large group of troops for this assault and he knew there was no way around it. Maybe that is why he had tried so hard to bury himself in the force, so that he didn't have to make this hard decision. The time had come though and he had to resign himself to the facts. It would take all of them leading troops to be able to come out the winner on Hypori.

"As you wish," Anakin said and stalked off towards the turbolift. It would be hard enough to plan the strategy without having to worry about what would happen to Ahsoka while she was leading troops. Obi-wan surely had this all planned out and now Anakin would be forced to follow along, like the good padawan, although he had stopped being a padawan a long time ago.

He was angry with Obi-wan for this whole situation and he knew he shouldn't be. There was no one else close by to blame and Anakin would be sure to let his former master know exactly what he thought of his plan when they were in private and Ahsoka wasn't eavesdropping. She didn't need to hear that he thought she shouldn't be in the lead.

"Are you coming?" Anakin asked as he entered the turbolift and faced them. He raised an eyebrow at Ahsoka and Obi-wan beckoning them to come along.

### **The Padawan and The Master**

Anakin bit his lip as Obi-wan laid out the details of the three-pronged attack they would be using on Hypori. It made the most sense for Anakin to lead the air assault (or so he was being told, which he didn't like.), being the best pilot in the group, that would herald the incoming detachments led by Obi-wan and Ahsoka. The problem was that Ahsoka had been given an entire detachment to lead and she had little experience. She would only have Rex by her side to help her and that was disturbing to Anakin. After all, wasn't he her master and responsible for her safety? What would he tell the council if she perished due to his lack of guidance?

He fidgeted as Obi-wan continued to explain where he was to be and how things were to go during the fight, as if he already knew how it would be in fact. It was hard to pay attention because the voices in his head were screaming for him to say something about this plan and his lack of faith in it. To voice his protest about what was going to happen on the surface while he was stuck in the air dropping bombs that would do little or no damage. Instead, he continued chewing on his bottom lip and tried to concentrate on the plan that

was to unfold above the droid manufacturing facility.

"As you fly assault," Obi-wan said in a calm tone, gesturing to the holographic display with his hand. "Ahsoka will lead her detachment in from this side and I will flank from the other side."

Anakin's eyes flew over the scenario taking in all the factors and making a map inside of his head of where he would be. Determining how the scenario would finally play out. There were so many things wrong with the projection of how the battle would be fought. "When do I land?" he asked still thinking about how he was going to save them from themselves. After all it was his mission to keep everyone safe because he was, as they had always said, the hero without fear and the Chosen One. If only they knew what he really was. Knew the fear that laid inside of his heart as he projected calm on the outside. It was there just waiting to spring from his body and consume him. This mission might prove it's chance to be released and the real Anakin Skywalker would then be known to all that he had fooled for so many years.

"There will be a rendezvous point three clicks from the battle," Obi-wan said highlighting a part of the blue colored map which showed a point outside of the true fighting. "Here you will refuel and restock armament for the second and third pass."

"I'm flying during this whole thing?" Anakin asked the worried tone in his voice rising as he thought of the consequences. He hadn't planned on not being able to be involved in the ground assault in anyway. He wanted to get his hands dirty. It was where he knew he could do the most good. This made Anakin unhappy. Obi-wan merely shook his head in the affirmative and clicked back through maps to the tactical display and began laying out the plan again.

Anakin rose and started pacing around the map trying to take in all the different perspectives and make a whole picture which he hoped would somehow start to make sense to him. Nervousness always got the best of him in situations where he felt like he couldn't control what was happening and this was one of those times. Obi-wan had engineered this whole plan and it didn't look good to his eyes and somewhere in the pit of his stomach, it didn't feel good either. There had to be another way to take care of this place. There just had to.

"I don't like the plan," Anakin said finally being deadly serious, his voice very low and controlled. If he didn't voice his opinion now, he would never get the chance and he would find himself soaring above Hypori and blasting a factory that was buried underground. It would do no good and those that he held dear in his heart would be underground dying. There would be nothing he could do to stop it.

"Excuse me?" Obi-wan said and looked at his former padawan. His mouth was a tight line as he looked at Anakin and raised his eyebrows disapprovingly. Anakin knew that look. It was the way Obi-wan tried to tell Anakin that they didn't disagree in public. "I didn't think this was negotiable."

Anakin laughed and then realized that it was out loud which he shouldn't have done.



His hand shot up and covered his mouth like a child who had experimented with his first curse word and been caught. Everything, and Anakin meant everything, with Obi-wan was negotiable. He'd learned that when he'd been 10 and trying to get out of some of the exercises which were remedial which meant that Anakin would've been in the classroom with children half his age. All it had taken was a little negotiating with the "great negotiator" and he didn't have to go to the classes. Anakin knew at that moment that there was always a way to negotiate with Obi-wan.

"There are better ways we can use our resources," Anakin said plainly, looking Obi-wan straight in the eyes. "Why could it not be a complete ground assault? Obi-wan we've been in one of these Bactoid factories before on Geonosis and they are underground. An air assault would just waste our time and the munitions that we do have."

Anakin walked around the holographic image and then stabbed a finger into the map. "This is where the entrance will be and we can use the exhaust vents like Padme and I did before. We can infiltrate there and make our move. It would save time and supplies that we really can't afford to waste."

Obi-wan's eyebrows arched at the mention of Padme's name and not her title. He had never liked the fact that Anakin was on a first name basis with a senator. It made him even more upset that he didn't always use the Chancellor's appropriate title either. Anakin didn't think anything of it because of the relationship he had with them. These were people he counted as friends and one he counted as the love of his life.

"I'm sorry," Anakin said a smile crossing his face at the reaction of his former master. "The senator and I went in through the exhaust vents. It would be easier with a large group of clones as back up. I got pretty far last time before I got captured. Can you imagine with firepower how far we could get?"

Anakin pointed again to the map. "See here is where we could land our ground assault and go through the vents." It all seemed very clear to him, but he was trying to make Obi-wan understand.

"I know what you are saying Anakin," Obi-wan said in a somewhat upset voice that was similar to the one he used when Anakin had been in trouble as a padawan. "I'm just thinking that my plan is a little better. The air assault will take them off guard. They won't be expecting it at all."

Anakin shook his head no. "Yeah because they would know that it is worthless to bomb something that is underground," Anakin said under his breath.

It wouldn't work like that, they were too far underground and the bombs would do nothing to the factory. It was merely to keep Anakin out of the fight. He knew it deep in his stomach, that Obi-wan didn't want him on the ground to mess things up with Ahsoka and her chance to lead troops.

"You don't want me down there," Anakin finally said, his arms crossing over his chest. "That is what this is all about."

Obi-wan stopped and looked at Anakin. His look the same as it always was and Anakin just stared back. He didn't flinch and he wasn't going to change his mind about this. The air assault was futile and Obi-wan knew it.

"Admit it," Anakin said his voice growing darker and angrier. "This is about keeping me in the air while you let Ahsoka get the experience that you think she so desperately needs."

There was silence that met Anakin's ears as he looked from Obi-wan to Ahsoka, who had been sitting quietly in the corner. "You two are in this together," he said, his eyes growing large as he continued to look from one to the other. "I can't believe this. My own padawan and my former master plotting against me."

Anakin began to pace around the holographic table and then turned back around to face them both. "She is my padawan," was all he said, the fierce tone in his voice rising. "She is not yours and you have to get over that. I'm not your padawan either, so stop telling me what to do."

Anakin turned his back on them and strode to the door, using the force to open it with a quick, angry gesture of his hand.

"Just give me a call when I'm supposed to begin this pointless air assault," Anakin said and then left the room.

"Well that went well," Obi-wan commented after he had left.

## **His Quarters**

"Enter!" Anakin shouted at the chime at his door. He was unhappy and couldn't stop pacing the room doing chores that he had done probably a thousand times already. His body burned with the anger he was feeling inside. Just thinking about the fact that his former master and his padawan were in this whole thing together, there weren't words for how he felt.

Ahsoka slid into his room, taking up as little space as she could making sure to stay out of the way of Anakin, who had made himself busy with tidying up. Something he did when there were no droids to work on or anything else to keep his hands busy. It kept him from thinking about how he was losing control of his emotions and right now he needed all the help he could get.

"Master," Ahsoka said in a small voice. "Master!" she shouted louder, getting Anakin's attention. He placed his hands on his hips as he turned to look at her small form. Anakin then returned to what he had been doing.

"Padawan," Anakin said nodding towards her as he made his cot. It was the second time he had done so in the last 10 minutes.

"I need to talk to you," she said approaching him. "We are not ganging up on you."

"I get it," Anakin said finally giving up with fixing the blanket on his bed and

flopping down on the cot. His hands on his head as he found the floor of his quarters quite interesting. "I'm not the best master and I don't have the experience Obi-wan has, but I'm still your master."

Ahsoka flopped down next to him. "There is no debating that," she said and punched him lightly in the arm. "I don't think Master Kenobi is better than you are either."

Anakin looked at his padawan. She was strong and he knew it. Her strength grew from somewhere deep inside. A place he was sure he had never had as a padawan, although he knew the force had been strong in him. He had always had the doubt that she didn't seem to possess. Ahsoka never backed away from anything she was asked to do and he admired her for that.

"Why do you want to get yourself killed?" Anakin finally asked sighing. He didn't feel he had the strength to have this discussion with her. "Leading a group of clones into this battle, well it's just hard. I'm not sure that you are completely ready for this task."

"I know that it will be difficult master," she said rising to her feet and moving to stand before him. "I'm only asking for the chance to do something. To change the course of this war so these men, our men, can be done fighting. They can be done losing their lives for a cause which will never benefit them. Don't you understand?"

Anakin had never seen the concern in Ahsoka that he now saw. Through the force he saw how she was feeling and he was depressed by what he saw. The clones had become her family, just as other jedi padawan in the temple had become his when he was her age. He, luckily, had not been made to stand by and watch them sacrifice themselves in the heat of battle, although now he was getting word that some of them had been killed in battle and it hurt. The perspective was new to him. Although he loved all the men who served him, she was deeply concerned about their well being. Anakin knew she felt that she must fight as hard as they did just to do justice to the cause for which they laid down their lives and without question to how it would benefit them.

"I've never thought about it padawan," he finally said looking her straight in the eyes. "You must beware of attachments though. They will cause you to do things that you shouldn't and put others in danger. You could be worse off for having this attachment to the men, and I sense, Captain Rex."

Ahsoka sighed and hung her head, her headtails twitching slightly. "I know master, but these men didn't ask for this," she said in a dejected voice. "It's hard not to look at all of them and want to make sure that they come back. Don't you feel the same way? They are like children. They've only even been alive for about 10 years and we ask them to give their lives so easily. My heart hurts for them."

Anakin leaned forward and put his chin in his hands. He had thought many times about the inevitable day when Rex would not return to the cruiser alive. This had pained him many times. Rex was close like a brother would be and sometimes Anakin had to step away and remind himself that he should not get so attached, if only for the fact that Rex may not be around long. It hurt and he knew that Ahsoka would suffer the same should Rex

not return.

"Sometimes," Anakin admitted his voice very honest. "Rex is a trusted ally and I don't know what would happen should something happen to him. I'm sure that you too would feel the pain of his passing. It's just that letting go, well it's part of being a Jedi."

"These men," Ahsoka finally said raising her head to look at her master again. "Are the reason I want to be the best Jedi I can be and having you be the best teacher you can be. Would you take that from me and make it something which means nothing?"

Anakin looked at her mournfully. Everyone had their reason for being a Jedi. The Force was good at picking those people who fit well together and worked well as a team. Each one brought their own piece to the puzzle. With Anakin and Obi-wan it had always been that Anakin was ready for action while Obi-wan studied the situation and looked at every aspect before acting. They complimented each other very well. The Force knew that and somehow the Council had known that all those years ago.

Ahsoka was the heart. She balanced Anakin's quick temperament with her caring abilities. She was the "mother" to them all. Or at least when she grew as a Jedi, she would be. Her disposition reminded him of Master Unduli or her Padawan Barriss Offee. Some Jedi were gentle and worked from the heart, letting the Force guide them into what they were to do and be, not letting emotion be their guide, but letting it set them on the path to what they were supposed to do.

"I have to admit, I'm not good at letting go either, Ahsoka," Anakin admitted. It was hard to say because he had been told so many times that he had to let go. He just couldn't ungrasp his fingers from the things which meant the most to him. Probably a throw back to the time when it had been nothing more than himself and his mother. She had been the only thing he could cling to and now, sadly, that was even gone. He had found many people to replace her in the hole he had in his heart, it was just too hard to let them slip from his grasp.

"That is probably why I don't want you to be hurt either," he sighed and looked at her. "What would I do if you didn't come back?"

"I'll be with Rex, Master," she laughed, her eyes dancing. "What would he let happen to me? He knows he'd have to answer to you and I don't think he would like that very well."

Anakin laughed, the anger inside of him leaving. Everything was easier to take, from a certain point of view. It was yet another lesson that he as the master was learning. "I guess we better get ready for that mission then," Anakin said standing. "I want you to be fully ready to take on those droids so that you make it back safely."

## **Preparing**

Standing on the wing of his fighter, Anakin stretched himself out to touch the Force, to feel the anticipation around him and all the minds which were busy trying to get everything done in the last minutes before the raid. The Force buzzed loudly with all the

minds thinking of the next steps to be completed. The hum resonated through his body, filling his cells with its cadence. The air was tight with the prospect of battle, he enjoyed this time, right before a mission. The anticipation was like a drug which ran through his blood.

Watching from this vantage point, he could see the troopers scuttling around as they busied themselves with final preparations of all the fighters which had been lowered to the deck. Gold group was larger than normal, taking in three extra flights from the red group and incorporating several bombers which were the latest in technology. Previously all bombing had been done with the fighters, but this latest inception made the bombers more powerful and the fighters would be the escort, picking off targets as they came in. The bombers were slower and heavy with the multiple munitions that they carried. Leave it to the Republic to try something new when his butt was on the line.

"Master," Anakin heard and turned his head to take in Ahsoka, standing on the deck below his fighter looking all the small size that she was. Anakin jumped down and landed easily on the decking, using the force to cushion his fall.

"Ahsoka," Anakin said and nodded at her. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Ahsoka nodded and smiled. He knew that she had just been waiting for a chance to prove herself. This was going to be her shining moment or her most heartfelt disappointment. Either way, Anakin would be there to teach the lessons that he was sure would come along with her mission. He had to be strong and to just surrender her to the force, hoping it would return her victorious.

"Captain Rex wants to have a word with you before you leave," she said relaying the message. Anakin would be leaving before the assault troops. The bombers and the fighters would make a short precision jump into Hypori's space before the infantry troops jumped in behind. The barrage would begin with the bombing. This would serve as the distraction of the landing of the ground troops.

"Thank you," Anakin said and headed towards the berthing area for the infantry men. Rex was standing at the head of a large group giving directions, pointing with his gauntleted hand at several of them and directing them where to go. The men scurried to complete the tasks he had assigned them. Turning, he smiled at Anakin.

"Rex?" Anakin asked and stepped near to the captain. Rex had recently shaved his head and the reflection of the glowpanels from the hanger deck on his scalp made Anakin smile. He had always said he wanted to bald so that anyone coming in from above would know him, without his helmet.

"General," Rex said acknowledging him. "If you don't mind, I would like a few words with you privately before you leave for your mission."

"Absolutely," Anakin said indicating a small office which was used by the receiving clerk of the deck crew. He followed Rex to the office and closed the door tightly behind him once they were inside. The room was merely a box with a neat and orderly desk square in the middle.

"What's on your mind," Anakin asked perching on the edge of the desk, swinging his free leg back and forth. Rex was usually very grave before a mission, but something about him now was even more serious than Anakin had seen before. Anakin's brows knitted together as he looked at the clone.

"Are you prepared?" Rex asked looking at Anakin in the eyes, not something he normally did. He showed Anakin respect, but didn't usually look him directly in the eyes when speaking with him.

"I've checked my fighter and the bombers have been double loaded," Anakin stated laying his hands out flat indicating he had done everything that was required of him. "Everything is running smoothly."

"No," Rex said gripping his helmet, which was sitting on his lap. "Are you prepared?"

Anakin raised an eyebrow at his Captain. Rex wasn't a cryptic person, that was more Obi-wan's responsibility. Something was eating at Rex. Anakin's face turned very somber and he spoke slowly. "You all wanted this," he said and held up his index finger to hush any words which might escape Rex's mouth before he had finished his thought. "I was the one who said it was not the right thing. Now you go back on what you said? I can't win with you people."

"I'm not trying to be brash," Rex said quietly. "I know that I've had to mentally prepare myself. I mean I'm going to be there, standing beside her if something goes wrong. So if I have to prepare, I know you do too. Don't give me this jedi stuff about being able to let go. I know better. You can't change who you are this easily."

Anakin sighed and stood regarding the man before him. There were no easy answers here, he just had to trust the force that Rex and Ahsoka would be fine and that they would do well as a team. It was something he couldn't explain, because he knew that Rex didn't even have a god. Someone who was a higher power, with which he could compare these things. He placed his hands on his hips and stared at the clone trooper.

"The force will guide you," Anakin finally said. What was he supposed to say anyway? Luckily the words that came out of his mouth sounded very jedi. The decision had been made and all the plans had been set into action. Things were moving. The future was shifting. He didn't have the ability of foresight which some other jedi had, unless it came in dream form and he hadn't dreamt in many months now.

Rex nodded his head in agreement. "Remember you can scramble call me at any time," he said standing to leave the room. Anakin nodded in the affirmative. Rex turned to leave.

"Make sure you come back with her," he said before Rex could depress the door switch.

"Will do sir," Rex said and left.

Anakin plopped back down on the desk and studied the gray floor beneath his boots.

Let go, he repeated in his head. All you have to do is let go. Grinding his teeth together, Anakin used the force to open the door back to the hanger deck. Things were about to get ugly and his padawan would be in the middle of it.

### **Surrendering**

The thunk, thunk, thunk, of the bombardment almost lulled him into a false sense of security. There weren't really that many tri-fighters who were coming towards the bombers and posing a threat. A few here and there peppered Anakin's display screen as he juked left and right, keeping them from getting hot on his tail. He was pretty sure they weren't really trying that hard either.

The targeting tone beeped loudly and Anakin pulled on the trigger of the fire control releasing two laser blasts towards the fighter. It erupted in a plume of fire and sparks which showered through the atmosphere. Anakin felt satisfaction and he smiled to himself. Alone in a cockpit, he could be who he had to be and make sure to take care of those who he had been assigned to protect. He could remove from his mind those people on the ground, well underground, who were fighting the dirty part of this invasion. The part that he wished he was in the thick of right now.

"Gold two," Anakin snapped on his comm. "Pull closer, there is another wave just ahead."

"Affirmative General," the voice came back through the speaker crackly and distorted. That tended to happen in the magnetic field of planets.

Anakin moved to the left, letting the bomber continue its run straight through and headed at break neck speed towards the incoming fighters. Not much of a fight considering there were only a handful of the enemy and he had five of his own flyers who were extremely skilled pilots. He passed through the fighters and threw his fighter into a steep climb, circling back towards the fighters with a twisting maneuver. Anakin never let off the thrust and could feel it pushing him into the seat. Good thing these had dampeners, or he would be completely squished flat.

Letting the force guide his hand, Anakin hovered over the first fighter's target mark. He waited for the tone and then pulled the trigger. He was rewarded with the explosion of the fighter and another fighter straight ahead had been hit with the shrapnel from the first. It was now spiraling down through the atmosphere towards the ground. Anakin was sure it would make spectacular mark on the planet when it finally hit, but he wouldn't get to see it from this vantage point.

"Just like pod racing," Anakin said under his breath, hitting several switches and using his rudder peddles to bring another fighter into his sights. The tone shrieked and he hesitated to pull the trigger.

"Leave some for us," a voice crackled through the comm. A smile spread across Anakin's face and he switched on his comm.

"The rest are yours, boys," Anakin said disengaging the target lock and neatly tucked himself back into guarding the bomber. He hated to take away from the clones what they did so well. It just felt so freeing to be in the cockpit flying high above the planet. It was something he wouldn't trade for the world, although he still worried about Ahsoka and Rex.

Switching to the scramble channel which Rex used during operations, Anakin listened into the traffic of the infantry which had just broken into the factory. They were deep underground fighting the Geonosians, who were known to protect most of these facilities.

"We are taking heavy fire," a clone said, maybe Rex, but it was hard to tell being this detached from the battle. "Everyone fall back behind the blast door. We need cover."

"Hold your ground," a female voice said with a strength that was born from the force. That was his padawan and he was very proud. She seemed to be doing very well and was having no trouble instructing her men. It was good she was getting the experience she needed and Anakin sighed from relief. She was still alive.

"Gold Leader," a voice broke in on the other comm. "We are at the rendezvous and will be taking on more ordinance."

"Copy that," Anakin said. "Gold four and five follow the bomber all the way in. Gold two and three, you are with me providing air support."

He kicked his fighter into a tight spiral and headed towards the perimeter of the refitting area. "Make this a slow circling patrol," he commented through the comm and started his run.

Suddenly the planet underneath vibrated so harshly, that he could feel it through the force, and a giant plume of superheated gas shot from the ground. Fire rolled from the vents the factory used to disperse steam. Anakin swallowed hard. Somewhere inside that factory, which appeared to be on fire, was Ahsoka, Obi-wan and Rex. He sagged in his seat, manipulating the controls of the comm over the scrambled channel. He was met with nothing but static.

Stabbing at more buttons as quickly as he could, Anakin contacted the cruisers above. "Give me a status on the infantry and landing parties," Anakin said in a tight voice that snapped when he talked.

"We've lost all contact with them sir," the clone returned the report.

Anakin gritted his teeth and sucked in his breath. This was what he had predicted would happen and now he was stuck trying to figure out just how to solve this problem and quickly.

## **Surviving**

Rex's gloved hand clawed at the rocks which had fallen on top of him. Just a few more and he would be lose enough to get out. He was buried about waist deep in what used to be the ceiling. There was no sign of Ahsoka and several of the men were busy trying to



pry their brothers from the mess, so no one was really looking for her.

Rex clicked to the command frequency and static shot through his helmet making him screw up his face and quickly click off the channel. He loosened two more stones and he kicked his right leg free from the rubble. Then he started working on his left.

"I need a report on padawan Tano, stat," Rex grumbled into the companies' own channel. At least they could still hear each other. Several voices snapped back, but there was no report on her status and he heard several calls for medics which were unrelated to his request.

Freeing his left leg, Rex stepped onto the dusty ground and looked around. His kama was shot, but he didn't take the time to rip it off. It hung like a dirty rag from his waist. Luckily he had armor that helped to protect him during the explosion. What had happened he wasn't sure, but he did know that he had to find Ahsoka. He had promised that he would look after her and now she was missing here in the factory. Hopefully she hadn't fallen into enemy custody, although he doubted that because she as pretty good with that lightsaber.

"Has anyone see padawan Tano?" Rex growled again through his helmet comlink with less than military precision. He was too worried to maintain the composure he normally had. He needed an answer.

Rex was met with thunderous silence. That wasn't a good sign on the battlefield. Silence, it usually meant something wasn't right and that some people already knew it was bad and they weren't responding.

Tearing through the throng of men tending to their wounded brothers, Rex headed for where he had last seen Ahsoka holding her ground against the winged creatures who were trying to keep them from entering the factory. There, gathered in a small group, where about five men, kneeling down around a large rock. They looked as though they were listening.

Rex grabbed one by the shoulder and pulled him away so he could get a look at who or what was there. Lying there under a large boulder, which was on her leg, was Ahsoka. She was speaking, but her voice was quiet and hard to hear over the shuffling feet and clacking armor of the men.

"QUIET!" Rex shouted and pulled off his helmet. He knelt next to her head and bent close to hear her. He thought he could feel her breath on his cheek, but wasn't sure.

"Tell my master," Ahsoka said her eyes wide as she looked at Rex's face, the regret passing over her features quickly. "That I'm sorry."

"Don't talk like that," Rex said trying to smile with encouragement although he felt nothing but cold in the pit of his stomach. "I'm just going to check what has happened and see if we can get you a medic over here. Everything is going to be fine and you can talk to General Skywalker yourself."

Rex looked at the boulder which was pinning her leg to the ground. The large piece of the ceiling had landed with purpose on her leg and probably had caught her off guard

because he knew that she could move things that were much bigger, easily. Things didn't look good for the leg, but if they didn't move it, she might bleed out without them ever knowing that she was hurt that severely. Ahsoka might lose the leg and that would be devastating for a Jedi. Rex hated to make the call on this one because whoever did, would have to answer to General Skywalker and it was sure to be a rain of anger.

"I'm going to need help," Rex said to several of the clones who had been standing around Ahsoka. "We are going to have to pick this rock up and move it. We can't roll it because we might do more damage than if we just picked it up."

"Why can't she lift it herself?" one of the men asked and tilted his head to indicate her. "She's a Jedi."

Rex rubbed his hand over his head and looked at Ahsoka. He would have to get her coherent enough to understand what he needed done. "Just get a medic over here nearby so that they can treat her," Rex finally said and knelt back down next to Ahsoka.

"Ahsoka," Rex said shaking her a little. Her eyelids were now droopy and she looked very sleepy. "I need your help. Wake up, I need your help."

"Rexie?" her small voice said as she tried to open her eyes to see him, but looked as though she was seeing him from very far away. A faint smile crossed her lips.

"Yeah," Rex said disregarding the snickers he heard coming from the comlink inside his helmet which was laying next to his feet. He was pretty sure it was the few men who were behind him, but he didn't have the time to look at them. He didn't like it when she called him Rexie when there were other clones within earshot, but right now he just needed her to wake up. "It's me."

She didn't say anything, but moaned rather pitifully and tried to move her head as it lolled from one side to the other. Rex knew she was trying to wake up enough to hear him, but she was going into shock and would be hard to rouse.

"Help me Ahsoka," he said a little more desperately than he would have liked to sound. "I need you to lift this boulder from your leg. Only you can do it without causing severe damage."

"Huh?" Ahsoka asked and licked her lips. Her eyes flew open, but closed again quickly. Rex knew there wasn't much time before he lost her completely to conscious thought and then he would have to take his chances with getting her out himself.

"Ahsoka," Rex said again, this time he added a hard edge to his voice. "Lift this boulder off of your leg so that we can help you."

She didn't move. He knew it was bad and his hand reached down to touch hers. She might be slipping away. He had to think of something to save her and something very fast. There would be nothing he could do for her, if the boulder wasn't moved from her leg and quickly.

Flipping through the channels on his comm, Rex heard a faint noise. He wasn't sure what it was and it looked to be on the command channel that General Kenobi used, but it

was gone too quickly. Rex was going to have to figure this out on his own. There was no one who would come to his rescue this time.

"We are rolling it," Rex said making the call and turning to the other clones still standing nearby. He wasn't sure, but they might be in shock themselves. "Every one on this side and push."

Rex leaned against the boulder with his armored shoulder and waited for all the men to get around. "MEDIC!" he shouted to be heard. His voice could be booming and full of authority when he needed it to be. Rex watched as a medic came their way and knelt next to Ahsoka.

"I'm ready," Rex said and levered his body against the boulder. "Everyone else ready?"

The helmet of the other men bobbed in the affirmative and the braced themselves against the boulder. Rex bit his lip and hoped that this wasn't the biggest mistake that he had ever made and that Ahsoka could forgive him for whatever shape her leg would end up in.

"On three," Rex said and breathed in deeply. "One ... two ... three."

He pushed with all his might, like he had never done before and prayed that Ahsoka would make it out of this.

## **Mending**

Rex had walked, no stumbled, half way up what was left of the rock shaft that had been the entrance to the factory. He had Ahsoka strapped tightly against his chest as he moved. She was small and luckily he had been able to fashion a rig to carry her and still be able to use both his hands freely because he needed them to claw his way to the top.

There were just a few more steps before they cleared the debris and then he could activate the beacon, letting the cruisers know that they were in need of assistance. He could see the light even now. Rex wondered if Anakin was making his way down to the planet now. He had heard the blast, Rex knew, and would be worried when he was unable to communicate with them. In fact, he would be frantic, being as this had been Rex's idea in the first place.

Rex had gathered as many troopers as were able to move and they had begun the task of leaving the factory over an hour ago. He was in the lead, moving through the broken stone with precision and purpose. Wedging fingers in a crack and getting a good foothold for his boots, before pulling himself up further. Rex knew he had to get Ahsoka to a medical frigate and into a bacta tank as soon as possible. Her leg was wound tightly with bandages that the medic had placed there. Rex could see a brown patch wearing through where she had continued to bleed and she hadn't been conscious since he had tried to get her to move the boulder from her own leg. She was in serious condition. Luckily he could feel her breathing as he continued his climb.

Breaking through into the light, he was thankful for the automatic darkening of the

visor, making it easier to adjust to the light which now poured over him. He turned and helped several of the other troopers up the last few steps. Ahsoka still hung around his chest like a limp rag doll. Rex hoped that he had done no further damage in carrying her in this fashion. He's only ever carried droids this way before.

Clicking through several comm channels he heard the constant static blaring back at him. There would be no way to communicate with the cruisers other than the beacon that he carried. He never had used a beacon during this war. Of course he knew how to work it, being trained in every piece of equipment imaginable and he knew many other troops had put it to use, but this marked the first time he had activated his. His hand hovered over the button almost to depress it for fear that it would mean his failure and he resigned himself to push it, letting the signal drift into the atmosphere to be picked up by the ships that were orbiting. There was nothing to do now, but to wait and he didn't like to wait.

"Help me get her to the ground," Rex motioned to another clone who was one of the least hurt of the group. They unstrapped Ahsoka and laid her on the ground. He made sure to try and make her as comfortable as possible, although this hard rock was not all that great to lay on. They had one thermal blanket, which Rex had ordered the medic to give him because a Jedi's life was more important than any clones. He wrapped her up in it and made sure to tuck all the edges in providing a seal against the wind which was picking up. It was too late, he was pretty sure, she was already in shock, but he had to try.

Waiting was the hardest part when you were with the injured and Ahsoka was not the only injured member of their party. Several clones were nursing injuries that looked pretty severe. Unfortunately, they would be put on hold for bacta until Ahsoka and any other hurt superiors were healed. It was the lot they had drawn in life as clones. Hopefully most of them would make it to fight another day. He was sick of losing men to hopeless activities which would never get them anywhere.

Rex's comm beeped and he tapped it. "Captain Rex here," he responded, not knowing who was on the other end.

"Captain Rex," a precise voice came through the comm. "Prepare for evac."

"Yes sir," Rex said and then sighed. They were going to be rescued. He looked at Ahsoka and hoped that she would be alright. Somehow, he felt as though his life might depend upon it.

Anakin felt the smooth glass with his good hand and peered inside the distorting liquid which flowed inside. When had he slept? He couldn't remember again. He made a mental note to stop by the mess hall for yet another large cup of caf.

"Standing here," Obi-wan said softly approaching Anakin from behind, "won't make her heal any faster."

Anakin turned to regard his former master. Obi-wan looked battle worn and just about as tired as Anakin felt. His men were in about the same shape as Anakin's and they had not been able to take the factory. As Jedi, it came as somewhat of a shock that they were not able to win. They were supposed to be above ability in warfare. Too bad they

weren't really that well trained in it.

Anakin, in fact, couldn't really bring himself to believe it. It was surreal, making all the rest of the things in his life seem different somehow. The world had a strange hew to it and this just didn't sit right with him. He couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong.

"I know," Anakin sighed and wandered over to the medical table leaning up against it just for strength. "Just thought I should be here in case she could see outside the tank and somehow knew that she was alone."

"The vigil that is being kept for padawan Tano is never ending," Obi-wan said. "The members of the 501st have been in and out of here at all hours. You really should talk to your men about getting some sleep."

Anakin rubbed his eyes and noted that he could do with some sleep. "I just..." Anakin started and then stopped. He wasn't sure that Obi-wan could understand. Not that Obi-wan was unfeeling, but the way he handled things was so passionless sometimes.

Obi-wan clamped him on the shoulder. "Tell you what," he said in the fatherly tone that he had to use so often with Anakin. "I'll stay here and you go and get some sleep. I just had about two good solid hours and I'm sure that Captain Rex will be by anytime now to relieve me. The captain has a fondness for Ahsoka."

Anakin nodded. He didn't want to leave, but he thought if he didn't, he might fall over from exhaustion. It would do no good for him to be so worn out when there was so much more war to fight. Keeping himself in good shape should be a top priority.

"Thank you Obi-wan," Anakin said and approached the tank once more, placing his hand on the glass again. "I'll see you later Ahsoka."

## **Recuperating**

"Hey little one," Rex said as he stood in the doorway to the medical unit leaning against the door frame, legs crossed. Ahsoka had been out of bacta for only a couple hours and she was still very drowsy. He had decided that she could use some company and since he had no pressing battles to fight, it was his pleasure to visit her. After all he was the one who had been responsible for her safety and now he would continue that mandate

"Rex," Ahsoka said her large eyes brightening as she smiled at him. "Come on in."

Rex moved around the cramped room towards the stool which was positioned next to the bed and noticed that it looked as though it had just been vacated. Anakin had probably just been there because Rex had passed him in the corridor outside and had summarily avoided eye contact with the general. They still hadn't talked about what had happened planet side. Rex was not exactly avoiding him and the conversation, just making sure to stay out of the general's way, should he be rather upset and wanting to take it out on someone.

"How are you feeling?" Rex asked plopping on the stool with a crunch of armor

rubbing against armor and placed his helmet on the edge of the bed, next to Ahsoka's slim form. She barely took up a third of the entire cot. They were made for clones who were much larger than she was making her seem even smaller than she was.

"I owe you a lot," Ahsoka said turning her head to look at him with a drowsy look in her eyes. "I would still be in that hole if it weren't for you."

"Just doing my duty sir," Rex said in his best military voice, but he knew there was so much more than duty behind his need to make sure she was safe. It wasn't even the consequences that he felt he would face from General Skywalker which had motivated him to carry her strapped to his chest. She was one of the few who had really taken time to befriend him. To find out what he was really thinking and he appreciated it. It wasn't often that a clone could call anyone who wasn't a brother their friend.

Ahsoka scoffed loudly at the statement. "Don't play perfect soldier with me Captain," she said a coy smile crossing her lips. "I know that you were worried about getting your backside chewed."

Rex laughed lightly and played with the comlink which was on his gauntlet. She could see right through him even if she wasn't using the force. He sometimes forgot that the Jedi used nonverbal and force queues to come to conclusions. It was eerie. Sometimes it made his skin crawl and he wasn't always convinced that it wasn't a side effect of someone using the force around him. This time though, she was further from the mark than he wanted her to realize.

"Well," Rex said and picked at the corner of the blanket which was covering Ahsoka, "I would hate for General Skywalker to need a reason to dispose of me."

She twisted her face into a strange expression. It was one between admonishment and contemplation. Rex always found a way to make her wonder about him. He sometimes loved the way he could get her going, but he didn't want to make her healing time any longer than necessary by getting her upset.

"Now," Rex said. "I don't want you to get all wound up about this. General Skywalker and I will work this out, there is nothing for you to worry about."

Ahsoka reclined against the pillows and her headtails twitched. She looked small and fragile, but he was always surprised at her abilities in battle. She was amazing to watch as she cut down tinnies being just a child and sometimes he had to remind himself to keep his eyes on what he was supposed to be shooting. Jedi were astounding and he wished that he knew more about them. The only thing he was really sure about them was that they were in charge. There was no question.

"No matter what you say," Ahsoka said and yawned. "Thank you."

Rex blushed. Such a strange feeling to be thanked for something he would do without question and was automatically programmed into him. Maybe he didn't understand being human as much as he claimed to. There were still things he didn't get about the emotional state of the species and he wasn't sure he would ever catch on to the art of being

anything but a soldier. Being bred and honed into a tool of the Republic didn't give you many points of reference for the normal things in life.

"Let's not talk about it anymore," he said trying to brush away what he was feeling. It was more uncomfortable than the armor he wore after 36 hours of squatting in a trench.

"Why," Ahsoka said lolling her head to look at him, "can't you take a compliment?"

Rex cracked his knuckles nervously. Yes, he was better equipped to deal with thinking on his feet than other clones. There was an extra component in him, but it didn't help. Interpersonal dialogue was sometimes beyond him and he just didn't think that there was a manual where it was concerned. If there was, he would have been the first one in line to read and memorize it.

"I don't want to have this conversation with you," Rex said and started to fiddle with the edge of his helmet. "Let's just leave it at that."

Ahsoka sighed. "Well at least I still have both legs," she smiled. "I won't forget this."

Rex smiled. He didn't want to say anything in reply, it would just open the same can of worms that his previous statements had cut off. It was good sometimes just to sit in silence. To reflect and be together.

### **Flashback**

Anakin stood, hood pulled up over his head, hot air washing over his face as he looked out over the volcanic planet of Mustafar. So much had changed, he had changed and it was, he thought for the better. A path he had proceeded down at full speed, never looking over his shoulder to see what was behind and trying to keep his mind on the prize ahead. Many had been trampled beneath his feet as he had trod this path. There were few he cared to remember, but two came to mind.

To think, with all the power he now had and all the things he knew that he would do, he thought of Rex and Ahsoka. Not just of them, but about what had happened to them and how it had changed who he was on the inside, even if it didn't show on the outside. Their deaths, the last breaths they had both gasped, had totally made him into something different. Something or someone who would not let death be the end. Someone who would fight until the bitter end to have what he thought was rightfully his.

Ahsoka's death had come first, it had dealt an almost catastrophic blow to the men of Torrent Company. Rex had been with her, waiting for evac to arrive, but it hadn't gotten to them in time. Ahsoka had bled to death waiting and Rex had carried her small form back to the bridge of the cruiser and stood, helmet off, looking at Anakin through angry and bloodshot eyes. Blaming him for something that wasn't truly his fault and that hurt him terribly inside. Didn't Rex realize this was hard for him too?

The days following her death were a mere haze. Anakin had not spoken to Rex or any of the other men and he had spent his days alone in his quarters quietly letting the hate and anger grow inside of him. No one there to tell him that he shouldn't be so attached and

no one there to watch as he fell apart. How they all fell apart. The ship was awash with anger and hate and all he could do was be bathed in it as he walked the corridors.

After Ahsoka was gone, Rex barely spoke except in the military voice which all the clones used when they wanted to keep someone at arm's length. Anakin figured Rex no longer had the will to befriend those whom would be cut down quickly and easily. Anakin felt the same. He no longer spent time with the men and never ate with them as had always been their custom before. Anakin merely cut himself off from all the things that would slow him down as he dove deeper into the pain and suffering he felt he deserved.

Rex and had become careless with his life and was willing to fight any clanker that walked within four feet of him. Anakin, on the other hand, was doing everything he could to make sure those around him were not hurt. They both were teetering on the edge of losing themselves. If he had only been there when Ahsoka had been hurt, maybe, just maybe she would have lived. It was what his mind told him, anyway.

Rex's death was by Anakin's own hand. Rex had been wounded during a fire fight and was laying in a small alcove of rock. His arm was blown to pieces and he was missing a leg. Anakin looked at Rex's face, his helmet tossed to the side. It was painful. His friend lay there crying out for help and Anakin knew that help would not come soon enough. It was a moral dilemma for them both.

*"Take care of me general Skywalker," Rex whispered in his gruff voice to Anakin as he bent over the body of his friend. "Don't let this happen to me. Don't make me suffer like I made Ahsoka. End this for me now."*

*Anakin had shaken his head and backed away from Rex. What was he asking of his general? This was not something Anakin could do for him. There must be a clone nearby who could end it all and Anakin would not have to live with the memory of Rex's death by his own hand.*

*He glanced around, but Rex was the only clone still living in the alcove. The rest had been blown to pieces by a shrapnel bomb. Anakin would have to be the one to do it. He felt the bile rising into his throat as he made the realization.*

*"I can't do this Rex," Anakin said kneeling beside him and trying to explain. "Help will be here soon."*

*He punched the comlink button on his wrist gauntlet, but there was nothing but static. Nothing at all. Anakin and Rex were completely alone and cut off from everyone. The war was going on without them. This war didn't have time for lives to be saved or make decisions. This war wanted everyone to fall into it's gapping maw so that it could eat them alive. It had taken Ahsoka, it was going to take Rex and Anakin was already too far into the mouth to fight his way back out.*

*"Your lightsaber," Rex said pointing at Anakin. Anakin held the hilt in both hands palms up to show it to Rex. "Turn it on."*

*Anakin did what Rex asked, but at that point, he had no idea what would happen.*



*Rex held his gauntleted good hand over Anakin's and flipped the sapphire blade over to point down. With a quick jab straight down, he drove it through his chest and into the rock below. Anakin gasped loudly. They had both shared the duty of ending his life so that no one had more blame than the other. Anakin had as much blood on his hands as everyone else.*

Anakin didn't remember being saved from that campaign. It was then that he was called back to Coruscant with Obi-wan to save the chancellor. It was then that his fate had been sealed.

Luckily, Anakin had died. Anakin had been killed when Vader had pulled the lightsaber from his belt and ended Mace Windu's chances of taking the emperor away from him. It was good Anakin was gone, because he would never be able to stand the thing Vader had become.