

# *Fall of the Sith*

*by Souderwan, based on characters created by George Lucas*

*as posted on [http://boards.theforce.net/The\\_Saga/b10476/20073250/p1](http://boards.theforce.net/The_Saga/b10476/20073250/p1)*

## **Part I**

**Date Posted: 6/3 1:42pm**

**-----The Chosen One-----**

Palpatine staggered, snarling, but the blistering energy that poured from his hands only intensified.

He fed the power with his pain.

"Anakin!" Mace called. His voice sounded distant, blurred, as if it came from the bottom of a well. "Anakin, help me! This is your chance!"

He felt Anakin's leap from the office floor to the ledge, felt his approach behind--

And Palpatine was not afraid.

Mace could feel it: he wasn't worried at all.

"Destroy this traitor," the Chancellor said, his voice raised over the howl of writhing energy that joined his hands to Mace's blade. "This was never an arrest. It's an assassination!"

That was when Mace finally understood. He had it. The key to final victory. Palpatine's shatterpoint. The absolute shatterpoint of the Sith.

The shatterpoint of the dark side itself.

Mace thought, blankly astonished, *Palpatine trusts Anakin Skywalker...*

Now Anakin was at Mace's shoulder. Palpatine still made no move to defend himself from Skywalker; instead he ramped up the lightning bursting from his hands, bending the fountain of Mace's blade back toward the Korun Master's face.

Palpatine's eyes glowed with power, casting a yellow glare that burned back the rain from around them. "He is a traitor, Anakin. Destroy him."

"You're the chosen one, Anakin," Mace said, his voice going thin with strain. This was beyond Vaapad; he had no strength left to fight against his own blade. "Take him. It's your destiny."

Skywalker echoed him faintly. "Destiny..."

"Help me! I can't hold on any longer!" The yellow glare from Palpatine's eyes spread outward through his flesh. His skin flowed like oil, as though the muscle beneath was burning away, as though even the bones of his skull were softening, were bending and bulging, deforming from the heat and pressure of his electric hatred. "He is killing me, Anakin--! Please, Anaaahhh--"

Mace's blade bent so close to his face that he was chocking on ozone. "Anakin, he's too *strong* for me--"

"Ahhh--" Palpatine's roar above the endless blast of lightning became a fading moan of despair.

The lightning swallowed itself, leaving only the night and the rain, and an old man crumpled to his knees on a slippery ledge.

"I...can't. I give up. I...I am too weak, in the end. Too old, and too weak. Don't kill me, Master Jedi. Please. I surrender."

Victory flooded through Mace's aching body. He lifted his blade. "You Sith *disease*--"

"Wait--" Skywalker seized his lightsaber arm with desperate strength. "Don't kill him--you can't just *kill* him, Master--"

"Yes, I can," Mace said, grim and certain. "I have to."

"You came to arrest him. He has to stand trial--"

"A trial would be a joke. He controls the courts. He controls the Senate--"

"So are you going to kill all *them*, too? Like he *said* you would?"

Mace yanked his arm free. "He's too dangerous to be left alive. If you could have taken Dooku alive, would you have?"

Skywalker's face swept itself clean of emotion. "That was *different*--"

Mace turned toward the cringing, beaten Sith Lord. "You can explain the difference after he's dead."

He raised his lightsaber.

"I *need* him alive!" Skywalker shouted. "I need him to save *Padme*!"

Mace froze. His lightsaber lowered imperceptibly as he looked at Anakin Skywalker in the Force. His blood curled. His eyes widened in shock. Seething around The Chosen One was roiling waves of dark energy interspersed with the light side of the Force. It was unlike anything Mace had seen. It was conflict like nothing Mace had ever imagined. It was if the dark side and light side of the Force were battling for the very soul of this young Jedi.

And then Mace saw it. As clearly as he had seen that Anakin Skywalker was the shatterpoint for the galaxy earlier, now he saw Anakin Skywalker's shatterpoint. The fault lines that connected him to Palpatine ran out of the Chancellor's office, across the massive divide and straight to a small apartment in 500 Replica. The apartment of Padme Amidala, Senator from Naboo. *Wife of Anakin Skywalker!* The Chancellor was somehow connected to their illicit relationship. Skywalker would never let him be killed! Anger poured fire into the Jedi Master's belly.

"How could you *keep* this from us?!" Mace roared. He didn't even recognize his own voice. The fire was building in him. Skywalker should never have been trained. Twenty-five thousand years of Jedi history rode on the shoulders of this Chosen One who was never really a Jedi. A man of power, to be sure. But a man who refused to be anything more than just a man. A man who refused to accept the Jedi as his family. A man built for betrayal! Why hadn't the Council *listened* to him?

Mace could see him now as he was those many years ago in the Temple chamber being evaluated by the Masters of the Jedi Council. Yoda fought to keep him from being trained and Mace was forced to agree. But the council defied their wisdom. Now the boy had an attachment so strong that he would never let go.

Mace Windu decided then. Anakin Skywalker can have his attachment. The Jedi Master would not let go of his love either. No matter the cost.

Suddenly lightning erupted again from the fallen Chancellor. The suddenness of the attack drove Mace back into the office, electrified by pure energy. Mace felt the pain but it didn't overcome him. He used it. He sank into Vaapad more easily than he ever had.

"Anakin!" The Chancellor rasped. He looked weak. The energy he was sending

forth was draining him and his horrific visage continued to morph. His transformation was extending beyond his face and Anakin watched in amazement as the Sith Lord's entire body seemed to be consuming itself...withering away slowly but surely. "You *must* kill him. To save Padme, you must *choose*! I cannot finish him myself. *Choose now!*"

It was a defiant roar. It was an order. It was a command from a man he knew he would call Master if he acted.

As the lightning continued to engulf him, Mace Windu--Korun Master, Jedi Master and second on the Jedi Council--*stood his ground*. With fire burning in his eyes unlike any Anakin had seen, he roared and dropped his lightsaber away.

Extending his hands before him, the Korun Master gathered the lightning being driven at him as if collecting water at a river and shaped it into a sphere of raw energy. The room crackled with power and the ball formed and grew--fed by the Sith Lord's hatred and fear.

Palpatine's yellow eyes opened wide in astonishment as that ball of energy suddenly shot toward him with astonishing speed. It engulfed him completely. The Chancellor fell to the ground, writhing in agony for eternally long seconds. Then he lay still.

"*Nooooo!!!*" Anakin screamed as he ignited his lightsaber in despair and charged at Mace. As he cleared the distance between them with the aid of the Force, Anakin Skywalker saw Mace do something he had never seen. It was as unsettling a maneuver as Anakin Skywalker could imagine. He felt it before he saw it.

Mace Windu smiled.

As rapidly as Anakin had been moving towards Mace, he suddenly found himself helplessly being sent backwards. The power that Mace Windu had driven at him was greater than anything Anakin had experienced. To his pure amazement, Anakin found himself pinned to the opposite wall as surely as if he were shackled by steel clamps.

Anakin tried to summon the Force to free himself, but the harder he struggled, the more powerful, Mace's invisible hold grew. Anakin was tired. He hadn't slept in days. And Windu appeared to be growing more powerful by the second. He was panicked. He was terrified. Then the vision appeared in his mind, as it had so many times over the last few days. He could see Padme, screaming for him and he was helpless to save her.

He blinked his eyes through the vision and could see Mace Windu calmly pick up

his discarded lightsaber and ignite it. Amethyst energy emerged from the handle as Mace calmly approached the Chancellor's prostrate form.

"Chancellor Palpatine," Mace hissed. His voice took on a new baritone that Anakin could barely recognize. "You have been found guilty of a pathetic plot to destroy the Jedi and a sinister plot to destroy my Republic. I sentence you to death."

Palpatine's regained consciousness painfully. His now-yellow eyes that had peered so precisely into Anakin's soul were bloodied and beaten. He could feel his death at hand. Anakin Skywalker, his great hope for the future stood pinned helplessly against the wall by a power that Mace Windu should not have. How could this have happened? It was all orchestrated so carefully! Mace Windu should be suffering at Anakin's hand by now! Where did the Jedi Master obtain this power? And then he understood. He looked at Mace Windu with acceptance and recognition.

"Unlimited power....Master Jedi..." Palpatine rasped.

Anakin couldn't let this happen. He *wouldn't*! With a reserve of energy that he barely had, Anakin Skywalker, The Chosen One ripped through the Force hold that Mace Windu had encased in him. The effect tore the wall to which he was pinned asunder. As he leaped to save his friend, his only hope to save Padme, the image of her death continued to play in his mind's eye.

Mace Windu could feel the Chosen One coming but made no attempt to stop him. Instead, he plunged his lightsaber into the Chancellor's head, exactly as the Sith Lord had done to Master Agen Kolar mere moments ago. He pulled it out with satisfying grin. The Chancellor of the Republic crumpled lifeless to the floor.

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Anakin felt the death in the Force and his leap brought him to stand in front of the Korun Master. Mace stood ready for an attack, but Anakin felt no rage to fuel him. No fear left to cling to. *Nothing*. He felt nothing but despair. He collapsed at Mace's feet and sobbed.

Mace turned and regarded the youth who kneeled before him, weeping.

"She's going to *die*, Master Windu," he cried. "Her only hope just died."

"Skywalker...*Anakin*." The voice was soothing. The anger that was there mere moments ago had evaporated. "Search your feelings and find the vision. Is it the *same*?"

Anakin fought back tears as the vision continued to play in his mind. He couldn't stop it if tried. Padme continued to scream as she had so many times. But something was different. The room she was in was different. Her eyes were different. She wasn't weeping as she called his name. She was in pain, yes--but she *wasn't* dying! Anakin watched, astonished as he saw the child--a boy--placed in his mother's arms and she was smiling! The image vanished as suddenly as it appeared.

He was overwhelmed.

"How...?" Anakin couldn't breathe. His confusion rose exponentially.

"Anakin." The soft voice spoke again. Anakin had never heard Mace speak so tenderly. He found it odd that suddenly he and Mace were on a first-name basis. It was all so confusing. "I am your friend. Sidious was using you. I could see clearly that you were going to join him. And if you did, your vision would have become a reality. I *saved* you, Anakin--from yourself. I saved *Padme*."

Anakin didn't know what to say...he felt weak..."Thank you, Master," he stammered finally.

"You're welcome, Anakin," Mace replied casually. "Now come, I must save my Republic from the rest of his disease-filled Senators!"

The order made Anakin's blood freeze. *My Republic?* Anakin looked up, for the first time since the Chancellor's death at Mace Windu. Mace was looking at him with eyes filled with fire. Eyes as yellow as the sun. Eyes that only moments ago, Master Windu had closed forever--*Palpatine's* eyes.

Anakin stood up and backed slowly away. He breathed deeply and searched for guidance. His only hope was the Force and he allowed the Force to flow into him and through him. As it did, his perception of the world shifted subtly. No longer was there a veil of darkness everywhere. He could sense everything. His senses were not limited to the confines of the Chancellor's quarters or the Senate building itself. They extended throughout Coruscant. He could feel every air taxi and speeder. He could sense every bolt of lightning that erupted in the sky. He could feel Padme, weeping on her balcony--*Padme!*

Anakin focused his new-found perception on Mace. And Anakin Skywalker could see the dark side in Mace Windu. It boiled around him like a volcano. It oozed out of his very skin. The man who flirted with the dark side to become a master swordsman had fallen. As he stared at him, Anakin saw that power growing. The shadow was building in power around a new master.

"What is it, Anakin?" Mace asked, soothingly. "Are you not happy that I've saved Padme from *you*?"

"Master..." Anakin stammered...he lowered his head carefully as he done in the Council chambers in an act of contrition. "I have violated Jedi rules. You should bring me before the Council. You should call Master Yoda to seek his guidance on what to do with me. You have destroyed the Sith! I am clearly not the Chosen One."

"I know," Mace smiled. "I am!"

"What?"

"Oh come, now, Anakin..." Mace smiled as he stepped casually over the body of the fallen Chancellor. Anakin noted that Mace was not closing the distance between them with some relief. "I destroyed the Sith, not you. Surely, you're not upset about such a little thing as being robbed of the title of Chosen One, are you? As I recall, you didn't even *like* being referred to that way. Well now, you have nothing to worry about."

"Besides, that's all irrelevant. I'm not going to bring you before Yoda, *or* the council," Mace said.

"You...you're...not?" Anakin needed to buy time. He recognized clearly that Mace Windu was slipping further and further. Anakin didn't know what to do. He only knew that he needed help. He slowly closed his mind down and allowed the Force to flow more readily through him. The more he allowed his mind to slip into the Force, the more the dark energies he could see around Mace intensified. Was his vision becoming clearer or was Mace becoming darker?

"Of course not," Mace replied, continuing the conversation as if they were discussing philosophy in the Jedi Temple gardens. "They *never* listen to my guidance anyway. Fools. They allowed the dark side to grow this powerful. They failed you Anakin--*we failed you*. But I can remedy that. I assure you...your secret's safe with *me*..."

"If..." Anakin understood. Mace would attempt to seduce him as Palpatine had. He had resisted Palpatine. He would resist Mace. He would tell the council himself and face the consequences. It was the only answer. He could see it in the Force now. With the darkness emanating from Sidious lifted, Anakin could see so much so clearly now.

"If," Mace finished. "You and I become *friends*." Mace's smile was almost convincing but Anakin could see it in the Force for what it was--the smacking lips

of a new predator about to devour his prey. "I will assume control of the Senate-- provisionally, of course. You will be my right hand man. We will bring order back to the Republic. We will bring back civilization!"

It all sounded so reasonable. In fact, it was probably necessary, Anakin conceded. After all, the war was not over. And now, with Dooku, Grievous, and Sidious gone, there was no one alive to stop the charade. But Anakin could hear the callings of the Force and it filtered Mace's words for him. His clarity was unlike anything he had ever experienced. He had heard Obi-Wan talk about it but he had never known it. He breathed it in. It gave him strength.

What Anakin saw most clearly now was that he could not stop Mace alone. Not now. Maybe not ever, but certainly not now. He needed backup. He needed the team. Anakin reached out in the Force and called. And just as suddenly, he felt every Jedi in the galaxy hear him. But only one mattered. Only one needed to answer. He could feel Obi-Wan Kenobi answer him and knew that he was on his way.

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## **Part II**

**Date Posted: 6/3 4:43pm**

**-----The Light Side of the Force -----**

Battle roared in the deep green undergrowth and along the white-sand shores of Kashyyk. Droid armies attacked the powerful Wookies from the depths of the seas and from the air that was once blissfully calm. The Wookies were fighting valiantly. The clones acted as they were trained. The battle would end, as most such engagements did--in a victory for the Republic. After all, droids can never match the cunning of a living mind or the gallantry of the living heart.

Master Yoda sighed as he watched the battle unfold from the relative safety of the command center, high in the trees. It was primitive by Republic standards. It was, Yoda noted with a wry smile, a rather large tree house. Of course, the clone commanders had customized it with communications equipment, sensors and computers to help coordinate their attack. The system allowed for virtually instantaneous execution of the directions from General Yoda and the Group Commander. But to Yoda, these machines were an intrusion. They ruined the vista surrounding the living, breathing world. All machines did this. They were an incursion in the Force.

Necessary, this is, Yoda thought. Necessary, but evil.

Yoda pondered the fate of his fellow Jedi Masters who were no doubt engaging Darth Sidious at that very moment. Yoda's leathery face creased even further into a contemplative frown. The Jedi Order was on a dark path--one that brought something to Yoda's heart that he knew was a path to the dark side. Fear.

Yoda had been unsuccessful in his attempts to probe the future. Hours spent in solitary meditation in the Jedi Temple brought no clarity to the decisions of the Council. Gone were the days when Yoda knew. As always, the Force would always guide him in battle, Yoda knew. No Sith Lord could cloud the Force that much. But guidance for long-term strategic planning was all but impossible. So the diminutive Jedi Master had relied, instead, on his years of experience to guide his decisions. He knew absolute consent in the Council was out of the question now. Now, he relied on the collective wisdom of his fellow masters to help steer his path.

But today was different. Mace Windu was going to face the Chancellor of the Republic. This had serious political ramifications. But that was not Yoda's concern. Yoda was concerned for his friend. So closely had he tread the dark side of the Force in battle. So often he had faced the darkness and returned unscathed. Mace

spoke with Yoda often over the last two years regarding his experience on Horun Kal and the loss of Depa Billaba. Yoda was convinced of his friend's ability to defeat Darth Sidious. But he worried, as he always did when his friend went into battle, that he may lose his soul.

Yoda leaned heavily on his gimmer stick as he hobbled across the control center, observing the battle rage on. It was going well. The Confederacy had not committed a large number of troops to this siege--perhaps expecting an easy victory over the primitive inhabitants of this small planet. The powerful Wookies and remarkable clones were teaching them the consequence of underestimating thier opponent in war.

No intervention from me, do they need, Yoda thought. Win this battle alone, they can.

Then Yoda felt his legs give out.

Opening yourself to the Force is much like operating a throttle. Most Jedi have a limited maximum flow of the Force. Midi-chlorian counts were the only corollary to this phenomenon and were naturally assumed to be the cause. A Jedi spends his entire life mastering the skill of controlling that flow. Very few people risk fully opening themselves to the Force--opening the throttle all the way. It can be an overwhelming experience. Clarity is achieved on an unimaginable level as you become one with your surroundings. It is...to say the least...disorienting. This is why Jedi Masters must exhibit control. They become flow regulators--opening the throttle slowly to allow the Force to take control. If one does not do this, he could over-drive his senses, which would never do in battle.

For years Master Yoda had opened himself more and more to the Force. The cloud of the dark side made it virtually impossible for Yoda to remain connected to the world around him. Yoda needed living things as much as the Force did. He needed the energy that life creates. It was all that was real to him. So Yoda had been opening his throttle valve to allow the limited light side of the Force to flow into him. With the dark side of the Force growing as much as it had over the years, Yoda found himself, on this particular day, with his throttle wide open--a throttle that had a much bigger maximum flow than any other Jedi alive, save one.

The Force flowed freely and readily. Yoda was on one knee with his palm barely holding up his weakened frame. Yoda concentrated, trying to slow the onslaught of knowledge that surged into and out of his fragile body.

"General Yoda," Clone Commander Jordy spoke. "Are you all right?" Jordy's helmet was on but Yoda could see him clearly in the Force as he looked at the clone trooper. He could see him more clearly than he ever had. It was a simple

thing. A trick of the Force that all Padawan learners master before the age of six--seeing a man behind a mask. It was a trick of the Force that Yoda had been unable to accomplish for over 10 years. Yoda smiled.

"Yes, Commander." Yoda struggled to stand and casually called his gimmer stick to him with the Force to aid him. "Quite all right."

The cloud of the dark side had lifted. The Force became again like a vast river and Yoda was swimming freely in it as he hadn't for over a decade.

Then he felt one current stronger than any. An urgent pull. He followed the current's call in the Force and found himself seeing the inside of the Chancellor's office. The dead Chancellor's body lay crumpled at the edge of a window, withered and decrepit. And there stood Mace Windu--his friend and fellow Jedi Master--standing above the body. Yoda watched in horror as Mace pulled his Amethyst blade from the Chancellor's head and smiled. Yoda felt his heart sink as he saw Mace turn to face his point of view. The Korun Master was awash in dark energies.

Anakin Skywalker was facing Mace alone.

"Commander, ready my ship." Yoda called as he centered himself in the now. "To Coruscant, I must go."

"But General," Commander Jordy replied, "The battle is not yet won."

"Now, Commander," Yoda replied in a tone that made it clear there would be no more discussion. "In your capable hands, this battle I leave."

Yoda's frown returned to his face as he looked out across the battle space and beyond it. No matter how quickly he arrived, he would be too late. The damage was already done. Now he must decide how best to handle the loss of his friend to the dark side of the Force.

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### **Part III**

**Date Posted: 6/3 4:44pm**

**-----The Call of a Friend-----**

Pau City was a cauldron of battle.

From his observation post just off the landing ramp of the command lander on the tenth level, Clone Commander Cody swept the sinkhole with his electrobinoculars. The droid-control center lay in ruins only a few meters away, but the Separatists had learned the lesson of Naboo; their next-generation combat droids were equipped with sophisticated self-motivators that kicked in automatically when control signals were cut off, delivering a program of standing orders.

Standing Order Number One was, apparently, Kill Everything That Moves.

And they were doing a good job of it, too.

Half the city was rubble, and the rest was a firestorm of droids and clones and Utapaun dragon cavalry, and just when Commander Cody was thinking how he really wished they had a Jedi or two around right now, several metric tons of dragonmount hurtled from the sky and hit the roof of the command lander hard enough to buckle the deck beneath it.

Not that it did the ship any harm; Jadthu-class landers are basically flying bunkers, and this particular one was triple-armored and equipped with internal shock buffers and inertial dampeners powerful enough for a fleet corvette, to protect the sophisticated command and control equipment inside.

Cody looked up at the dragonmount, and at its rider. "General Kenobi" he said. "Glad you could join us."

"Commander Cody," the Jedi master said with a nod. He was still scanning the battle around them. "did you contact Coruscant with the news of the general's death?"

The clone commander snapped to attention and delivered a crisp salute. "As ordered, Sir. Erm, Sir?"

Kenobi looked down at him.

"Are you all right, Sir? You're a bit of a mess."

The Jedi Master wiped away some of the dust and gore that smeared his face with the sleeve of his robe-which was charred, and only left a blacker smear across his cheek. "Ah. Well, yes. It has been a...stressful day." He waved out at Pau City. "But we still have a battle to win."

"Then, I suppose you'll be wanting this," Cody said, holding up the lightsaber his men had recovered from a traffic tunnel. "I believe you dropped it, Sir."

"Ah. Ah, yes."

The weapon floated gently up to Kenobi's hand, and when he smiled down at the clone commander again, Cody could swear the Jedi Master was blushing, just a bit. "No, ah, need to mention this to, erm, Anakin is there, Cody?"

Cody grinned. "Is that an order, Sir?"

Kenobi shook his head, chuckling tiredly. "Let's go. You'll have noticed I did manage to leave a few droids for you..."

Commander Cody was still smiling when he saw his General's eyes go distant and his face become drawn.

The Jedi Master had gone stone still and his dragonmount seemed to respond in kind. The creature no longer fidgeted, as creatures normally do. Its tail stopped swishing in anticipation and its head hung low to ground. Cody didn't quite know what to make of it.

He'd been working with Jedi now for the last three years of his life and his entire life in the GAR. In all the time he'd worked with the Jedi, however, Cody had learned one thing about them. He didn't quite know what to make of them.

The Jedi were fierce warriors, remarkable tacticians, and natural leaders. Cody could remember several engagements that were won only because a Jedi was with him. A Jedi had saved his life more times than he could count. They had his utmost respect.

But when it came to that thing they kept referring to as "The Force" with a capital "F"...well... Cody just accepted that as long as it kept them alive a little longer and the Jedi kept winning battles for them, the Jedi can believe in flying banthas if it makes them feel better.

On occasion, though, Cody had seen the Jedi do amazing things--things no living thing should be able to do. They leaped higher and ran longer and faster than any of his clones. But that is just impressive, not unbelievable. Watching a Jedi gesture

with his hand and then see a destroyer droid fly helplessly into a wall and dismantle itself--that was unbelievable.

The Jedi always seemed a little drained for a short moment after such an event. It would probably go unnoticed by most people it happened so quickly. But Clone Commander Cody wasn't most people. He noticed everything. Cody was a soldier first and foremost and that means knowing the weaknesses of potential enemies. However the Jedi accomplished these things, it took something out of them, somehow. That seemed to be their only weakness that he could find, other than overwhelming numbers. He hadn't quite figured out exactly how to exploit this apparent weakness yet--but he would.

The look on General Kenobi's face as he still sat motionless on his dragonmount was much like the look of the Jedi that Cody had come to believe was the Jedi connecting or disconnecting to this "Force." This process seemed to take their mind away for a moment. Normally, Cody would just wait a moment and the Jedi in question would be back and talking as if nothing had happened. Cody decided to stick with what works.

So Cody waited.

After several minutes without a change in either the General or his dragonmount, Cody began to consider the possibility that Kenobi's condition was permanent. The battle still raged around them, although it had been advanced into the Utapau sinkhole tunnels. He began re-evaluating his strategy to win the conflict without the Jedi present. He frowned inwardly at himself at the apparent coldness of his thoughts and disregard for a man he might call a friend in any other lifetime. But only for a moment. This is what he was trained to do. A quick assessment told him that the battle could be won with or without Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi. But, if he had the Jedi leading the charge, the engagement would be quicker and fewer of his men would die.

Cody decided it was time to wake the General.

"General Kenobi, Sir?" Cody said. "Are you with us?"

Obi-Wan's eyes immediately regained focus and the dragonmount stirred beneath him. Kenobi looked down at Cody and smiled.

"Ah, yes..." he smiled. "Quite." He looked around as if searching for something he'd lost. "It would seem, Commander Cody, that something rather urgent has come up on Coruscant. I'll be leaving shortly. Would you mind having someone tell my R-4 unit to come down with my ship and pick me up?" For the first time in his life, Cody was speechless. His mouth hung open for a moment before he was

able to regain his composure.

"Something...." He hesitated "Came up, Sir?"

"Oh, yes, Commander," Obi-Wan replied as if he had just remembered that he forgot to turn the oven off at the Jedi Temple. "Rather urgent. I really must tend to it immediately. I'm sure you'll be fine without me." Cody blinked twice in astonishment. Well, orders were orders.

"Yes, Sir!" he replied with a salute that wasn't nearly as mocking as his earlier salute and didn't have any of the friendly banter in it. "I relieve you of command." He punched a series of keys on his forearm. "Your starfighter is on its way, Sir."

"I stand relieved, Commander," Obi-Wan replied. His face grew serious. "And thank you, Cody. You showed up in the nick of time! I knew I could count on you."

"Very well, Sir." Cody replied.

The starfighter showed up moments later and after a brief farewell with the animal, Cody watched as he patted its backside-if that's what it was-and the creature headed off to wherever hideous lizard creatures go on this planet. Then the Jedi Master jumped into the starfighter and took off without even looking back.

Cody watched him go for a moment. He was a clone. He would execute his orders faithfully, without hesitation or regret. But, he was human enough to mutter to himself as he headed back toward to command center to oversee the rest of the battle, "I wonder if it would have been too much to ask him to leave me the lightsaber...?"

## **Part IV**

**Date Posted: 6/3 4:45pm**

**-----Korun Master-----**

Anakin was tired.

During his training as a padawan, Obi-Wan once had him run a twenty-mile obstacle course—carrying Yoda’s dinner! He had to run for what seemed like hours, carrying around this plate of the foulest-smelling concoction Anakin had ever experienced with express orders not to drop any or he would spend the day getting lightsaber “training” from Master Yoda, himself. It didn’t sound so bad a punishment until Anakin learned that this training involved learning how to avoid having a half meter tall master swordsman burn your backside with his lightsaber blade at minimum power as he hopped around the room using his Ataro fighting style—with you unarmed.

Needless to say, Anakin wasn’t about to risk the humiliation that such training would bring so he was extra careful. The task was difficult enough as it was without the additional hurdles to jump—some of them 10 meters high—or mountains to climb. He certainly didn’t find Obi-Wan’s later comment about him having trouble with the hills funny—not at all. The only reason the snow had melted off his feet was because the last leg of his journey had been through a desert. It was, as far as Anakin could remember, one of the most taxing things he’d ever been asked to do. But, being who he was, he accomplished the task in less time than anyone had in recent memory, and he didn’t spill a drop of Yoda’s dinner—a fact Anakin noted with hidden glee when he saw what appeared to be a look of disappointment on the Jedi Master’s face when his dinner was placed before him.

After that exercise, he thought he was tired. He thought he was so tired that he slept for almost an entire day.

Now, as he stood motionless in the now-dead Chancellor’s office, watching Mace Windu casually step over the Sith Lord’s body for what must have been the tenth time as Mace walked about as if inspecting a new home, Anakin realized that he had, indeed, merely been winded then. Even then he still could call on the Force to give him strength enough to take on a hoard of Maldorians, he was sure. But right now, the best he could hope for was to get out of that room with his head intact and time to regroup, rest, and figure out what to do.

The fact that he hadn’t slept in days and hadn’t eaten for a similar amount of time, coupled with the enormous amounts of energy he had expended in that time frame



would already have most men at the nearest medical facility.

But Anakin was more than just physically tired. That, he could deal with. The problem was he was emotionally drained. Anakin realized now that he had been feeding off anger and fear for so long that when they left him, he felt empty. The Force was flowing into him easily. He felt more powerful in the Force than he ever had. But part of him...missed his anger. Anakin frowned at the thought. He contemplated how close he came to a critical choice. He realized that had Master Windu swung his lightsaber instead of pausing to look at him, Anakin would have killed him! I might have joined the Dark Lord of the Sith! Anakin thought in amazement. Anakin breathed out slowly, trying to breathe his problems out of him, like Obi-Wan had tried to teach him on so many occasions. Tried to breathe out the betrayal of Palpatine and his sudden death. Tried to breathe out the terror he felt in Mace's presence right now. Tried to breathe out his mother's death. Tried to breathe out his failure to save her. He tried to breathe out his failure to save Palpatine. He was not very successful.

What is taking him so long? Anakin thought to himself. He instantly chided himself as he could almost hear Obi-Wan voice, Patience young one! Anakin shook his head slowly with a wry smile as he thought of his Master and friend. I guess he does have an entire galaxy to cross—ship's to commandeer, hyperspace vectors to calculate, space lanes to get into to get here—and I know he hates to fly. Anakin breathed in slowly. The Force flowed into him. It had been keeping him on his feet since the Chancellor's death. I just wish he'd hurry up.

The smile caught Mace's attention and it seemed to bring him out of his reverie. He looked sternly at Anakin for a long time, as if examining him. Anakin recognized the look. Mace always looked at him that way. It made Anakin feel as if Mace was always studying him, looking for a weakness, using his special gift to find Anakin's shatterpoint. Anakin always tried to avoid Mace Windu for that very reason. He was sure that if there was a Jedi alive who could see his connection to Padme, it would be Mace. Sometimes, I hate being right all the time. Anakin thought.

Mace broke his stare and shook his head sardonically as he headed over to the Chancellor's desk. He walked purposefully around it, looked Anakin directly in the eyes and slowly sat down. The chair seemed to mold itself around him. There was that smile again. Now it was just becoming disturbing. Anakin decided it best to make an exit while he thought he still could until help arrived.

"Master Windu," Anakin spoke. "I was wondering, Sir..."

"What, Skywalker?" Mace sounded almost irritated. He seemed to be working to keep the edge out of his voice.

“What are we going to do now?” Anakin continued. “I mean, we’ll have to explain this all to the Senate. I’m not sure we have any way to do that.”

Mace stared at him for a long time. Anakin could feel the stare burrowing into him as surely as a lightsaber through durasteel—very slowly, but inevitable just the same.

“I will deal with the Senate,” Mace said flatly.

“I understand, Sir,” Anakin replied. He’d been hoping Mace would send him on an errand or something. Maybe if he just kept talking, Mace would get sick of him and kick him out of the office. Of course, he could also decide he hadn’t had enough lightsaber practice for the day, too. While Anakin was confident of his skills under normal circumstances, today he wasn’t particularly interested in going up against the inventor and only master of Vaapad. Well, I suppose it’s annoy him or stand here with my hands stuck in my robe all day. Anakin considered the options.

“Sir...?” Anakin ventured.

“What now, Skywalker?” Mace was looking at several controls on the Chancellor’s desk. He seemed to be looking for something in particular, but Anakin just wasn’t interested enough right now to find out just what that was.

“What are you going to do about the body?”

Mace didn’t even look up from whatever it was he was doing. He kept his mind focused on his task. Anakin stood in shock as the Chancellor’s prone form rose silently off the ground and threw itself out of the broken window, falling hundreds of stories below, engulfed by the black night and the pitiless Coruscant skyline.

“What body?” Mace asked as soon as the Chancellor fell out of the field of view. “Skywalker, don’t you have something important to do? Go to the temple and tell everyone there to stand down. The crisis is abated. I will take things from here to ensure the Republic remains intact.” Mace seemed to consider his order for a moment and then smiled, seemingly very pleased with himself. “Yes...tell them that. Then I want you to contact Master Yoda and the other surviving masters. We need to have a....discussion...”

“Yes, Master,” Anakin replied, bowing in respect and utterly relieved. I’ll have to remember this strategy next time we meet. Anakin thought. Of course, next time we meet, I’d like to think he’d find my lightsaber more than a little annoying. Anakin turned to leave and was at the door when Mace called out after him.

“Oh, and Skywalker” he said casually. “No need for you to be at the Council meeting. With your appointer being...ummm...no longer available? And you not being a Master...well...I’m sure you understand...” Mace was smiling ear to ear. Anakin could hear it in his voice. He felt the anger bubble up in him in a rush. He felt his face flushing and his hand went immediately to his lightsaber. Anakin was frozen at the door. Anakin almost smiled inwardly. His old friend was back. He immediately felt the power surging into him. He felt the confidence. He felt his muscles grow taught.

“Is there a problem, Skywalker?” Mace asked in as sweet a voice as he could muster. But Anakin could hear more in that tone than concern—he could hear the threat. Anakin breathed in deeply and felt the Force flow into him; its energies bringing calm to him were rage existed only moments ago. Now is not the time, Anakin could almost hear coming from the ether. He nodded.

“No Master,” Anakin replied, releasing his firm grip on his lightsaber and continuing out the door. “No problem at all.”

As soon as the Anakin was clear of the Chancellor’s office door, he broke into a sprint towards his speeder. He had to put distance between him and Mace. More importantly, he had to put distance between Mace and Padme!

## Part V

Date Posted: 6/4 2:20pm

-----A New Republic-----

Mas Ameda was uncommon even among his own people.

The Chagrian, in general, were highly sensitive to the impact their imposing features had on the other species they met. The two large horns that grew from their heads, sometimes to lengths as great as 1.5 meters along with the other two horns that grew from appendages which grew from the back of their skull were reminiscent in many cultures of the very darkest of demons and evil creatures. The appendages were not unlike those worn by the Twi'lek and Torgata women. But somehow, for the Chagrian, their appendages weren't considered attractive. In fact, they were often considered repulsive. This, in and of itself, often led most species to be suspicious of them during first encounters. Added to this difficulty was their rather imposing height. The smallest full-grown Chagrin males were almost 2 meters in height. The largest grew to as much as 3 meters. For the Chagrin, the challenge of their appearance was often so great that they shied away from most public interaction with other species, preferring instead to communicate through intermediaries when conducting trade.

Mas Ameda was the exception. In every way, Ameda relished his physical self. He was once no different from the lesser Chagrian from his homeworld. When the senatorial elections had come up on Campala, Ameda only volunteered on a whim, considering his chances minimal at best. It had been a suggestion by his good friend Palpatine who, at the time, happened to be visiting Campala on a diplomatic errand for his Queen. Of course, Mas Ameda came to learn that by entering his name he had guaranteed victory. It's easy to win a race when no one else is in it.

What Mas Ameda found, when he came to Coruscant was that his physical appearance was his greatest asset. He commanded respect simply by walking into a room. When he stood to his fullest height and turned his head about the room, waving his horns in a show of force, he could quiet an army of senators with ease. This "skill" opened doors for him right into Supreme Chancellor Valorum's private circle.

It was then that his friend Palpatine began calling in favors. At first, Mas Ameda was little put off by the requests. In fact, he might never have helped Palpatine had Palpatine not revealed his plans. Palpatine was a genius. Mas knew that Palpatine would never reveal *all* his plans to him, but what Mas Ameda could see what that Palpatine would be in power for as long as he was alive. And he knew that as long as that were true, he would remain in power also.

So when it came time to tamper with Finis Valorum's files to create the appearance of impropriety, he was willing to oblige. When the time came to start the rumors that would result in the Chancellor's demise, he was ready. When called upon ensure that the Senate ignored the Trade Federation blockade of Naboo, he did his duty. He was certain, at the time, that somehow Palpatine's plan would fail. The Jedi were involved and were always able to sense these things. Palpatine assured him that the Jedi were not to be worried about—and he was right. In fact, the one thing Mas Ameda was convinced of, was that Palpatine seemed to know *everything*.

When Palpatine finally revealed himself to Mas Ameda as a Dark Lord of the Sith, Mas was hardly surprised. In fact, based on everything he had seen to date, it only made sense. Mas Ameda was a pragmatist. He was in a position of power that would *never* diminish and would only grow with time. He was not concerned about philosophical and theological differences between groups of people with remarkable powers. In fact, he told Darth Sidious—as he seemed to prefer to be called when they were alone together—that, as far as he could tell, the Jedi and the Sith were identical in virtually every way. He remembered Palpatine smiling thoughtfully at the comment and Mas Ameda remained proud of it. He had successfully ingratiated himself to a man with seemingly limitless knowledge and boundless ability to manipulate. Fortunately for him, he didn't have to perform much for Palpatine. His appearance was sufficient to dissuade people from asking him for “behind the scenes” information on Palpatine. Even the HoloNet news crews avoided him. All he had to do was ensure that the plans that Palpatine put in place that required action within the Republic were carried out.

Palpatine had Dooku among the CIS and Mas Ameda within the Republic. Mas Ameda was not bothered by this duplicity and the massive amounts of death and destruction that was going on. It was for a greater good, after all. Not the good Palpatine kept blathering about--something to do with the final destruction of the Jedi and his precious Order Sixty-Six. The greater good, was in fact, Ameda's accumulation of wealth and power, which had been considerable ever since the war began. He bought major holdings in every major industrial complex a year before hostilities initiated at Palpatine's urging. Mas Ameda knew that it was not by chance that the Dark Lord of the Sith chose to reveal himself only *after* the Chagrian had accumulated massive amounts of wealth during the war.

Well, the war was almost over. Palpatine had ordered him to report to his office two hours before sunrise to complete the final phases of his plan. He had a new apprentice, Palpatine had informed him to replace the loss of Dooku. This new Sith Lord would wreak havoc on the Jedi, distracting them while Palpatine ceased power. It was an elegant plan. If the apprentice was successful, combined with Order Sixty-Six, the only real threat to Palpatine's power would be eliminated. If

he was not, the Jedi would be in so much disarray that by the time they regrouped, Palpatine would have made them Public Enemy Number One—legally, of course. The legislation was already drafted and ready to be entered by Mas, if the time came.

All that was left was for the Jedi to make their move and everything would be in place. The Chancellor assured Mas that the move would be made during the previous night, which is why he purposefully walked slowly. He didn't want to interrupt the massive battle he was sure was taking place. He certainly didn't want to be caught in it. While Mas Ameda may *appear* imposing, he was a pragmatist. Fighting was for people trained in those skills. Mas Ameda was a *political* bully. And like all bullies, he didn't know what to do when the victim fought back. Mas Ameda turned the corner down the main hallway toward the Chancellor's private office. As he rounded the corner he was nearly bowled over by Anakin Skywalker running at near full speed. Mas Ameda quickly moved out of the way and attempted to bow a greeting to the young Jedi hero. But Skywalker didn't seem to notice he was there. The boy kept running without even breaking his stride. Mas Ameda decided that the Chancellor—no, *Darth Sidious* and his new apprentice must have thoroughly overcome the Jedi, and Skywalker was running in fear to find help. He always thought Palpatine thought way too highly of the child.

As he reached the double doors that closed off the Chancellor's private office from the rest of the building, Mas Ameda smiled to himself. To someone not of his species, it would seem like a vicious snarl. *Finally, we can end this war!* he thought. *With the Jedi on the run and a simple coded transmission from me, Chancellor Palpatine will be cheered into the office of Emperor!* And Mas Ameda would get control over everything left of the CIS planets. It was an excellent deal.

He listened closely behind the door and after hearing no signs of struggle, deduced the Jedi were dead and Palpatine was now ready to receive him. He opened the door triumphantly and stormed in, ready to do his master's bidding.

He was two steps in the door when he found himself frozen in place.

Sitting behind Palpatine's desk, in *Palpatine's chair* was Jedi Master Windu! Mas Ameda looked around the room fearfully, noting the clear signs of battle and the destruction of the main window. There were no signs of Palpatine but that was clearly because he was dead. Mas Ameda frowned inwardly. He was a politician, after all and his face showed nothing of his inner thoughts.

"Mas Ameda," the Jedi Master suddenly spoke. "Come on in. Glad you could join me. I've been trying to figure a few things out from this desk and it's just not coming to me."

“May I ask what you have done with the Chancellor?” Mas Ameda replied. A purple particle beam almost a meter in length slowly emanated from the Jedi Master’s hand.

“I put a hole in his head,” Mace said with a wry smile. “Would you like to try my lightsaber on? Or would you like to answer my questions?”

Mas Ameda was uncommon even among his own people. But one thing he shared with them was a clear sense of self-preservation. With the Chancellor dead, the Jedi would need his council to help them end the war and maintain control of the Senate. It was the only political solution and Mas Ameda was sure they would see it that way. He was, after all, pragmatic first and foremost.

“How may I be of service, Master Jedi?” The Chagrian asked, bowing slowly.

The amethyst beam disappeared. “I like the way you say that, Mas,” Mace Windu replied. “I like it very much.”

## Part VI

Date Posted: 6/6 7:27pm

-----Padme-----

(based on a scene in Matt Stover's novel „RotS“)

C-3PO paused in the midst of dusting the Tarka-Null original on its display pedestal near his mistress's bedroom view wall, and used the electrostatic tissue to briefly polish his own photoreceptors. The astromech in the green Jedi starfighter docking with the veranda below—could that be R2-D2?

Well, this should be interesting.

Senator Amidala had spent the better part of these predawn hours simply staring over the city, toward the Jedi Temple; now, at last, she might get some answers.

He might, too. R2-D2 was far from the sort of sparkling conversationalist with whom C-3PO preferred to associate, but the little astromech had a positive gift for jacking himself into the motherboards of the most volatile situations...

The cockpit popped open, and inevitably the Jedi within was revealed to be Anakin Skywalker. In watching Master Anakin climb down from the starfighter's cockpit, 3PO's photoreceptors captured data that unexpectedly activated his threat-aversion subroutines. "Oh," he said faintly, clutching at his power core. "Oh, I don't like the looks of *this* at all..."

He dropped the electrostatic tissue and shuffled as quickly as he could to the bedroom door. "My lady," he called to Senator Amidala, where she stood by the broad window. "On the veranda. A Jedi starfighter," he forced out. "Has docked, my lady."

She blinked, then rushed toward the bedroom door.

C-3PO shuffled along behind her and slipped out through the open door, making a wide circle around the humans, who were engaged in one of those inexplicable embraces they seemed so fond of.

Reaching the starfighter, he said, "Artoo, are you all right? What is going on?"

The astromech squeaked and beeped; C-3PO's autotranslator interpreted: NOBODY TELLS ME ANYTHING.

"Of course not. You don't keep up your end of the conversation."



A whirring squeal: SOMETHING'S WRONG. THE FACTORS DON'T BALANCE.

"You can't possibly be more confused than I am."

YOU'RE RIGHT. *NOBODY* CAN BE MORE CONFUSED THAN YOU ARE.

"Oh, very funny. Hush now—what was that?"

The Senator was sitting now, leaning distractedly on one of the tasteful, elegant bistro tables that dotted the veranda, while Master Anakin stood above her. "I think—he's saying something about the Chancellor—that he's a Sith Lord...whatever that means! And—oh, my goodness. Mace Windu has killed Chancellor Palpatine! Can he be *serious*?"

I DON'T KNOW. ANAKIN DOESN'T TALK TO ME ANYMORE.

C-3PO shook his cranial assembly helplessly. "How can Master Windu be an assassin? He has such impeccable manners."

LIKE I TOLD YOU, THE FACTORS DON'T ADD UP.

"I've been hearing the most awful rumors—they're saying the government is going to *banish* us—banish *droids*, can you imagine?"

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR.

"Shh. Not so loud!"

I'M ONLY SAYING THAT WE DON'T KNOW THE TRUTH.

"Of course we don't." C-3PO sighed. "And we likely never will."

"What about Obi-Wan?"

She looked stricken. Pale and terrified.

It made him love her more.

He shook his head. "He's on his way..." he replied. "I think..."

“But...” She stared out of the rivers of traffic crosshatching the sky. “Are you *sure*? It seems so...*unbelievable*....”

“I was there, Padme. It’s all true.”

“But what are we going to do? What does he want from us?”

“We’re not going to find out. I want you on the first transport off the planet. Take 3PO and Artoo with you.” Anakin’s eyes looked desperate. “I will follow as soon as I can. Tell no one where you’re going. I want you to go to Tatooine to my mother’s family in Mos Eisley. You should be safe there until I get there—and stay hidden.”

“Anakin,” Tears were flowing freely from Padme’s eyes. “I can’t leave you. I need you. The baby needs you.”

“I know,” Anakin replied. “And I will be with you. I promise, I have no intention of fighting any Jedi Masters, turned....whatever.”

Now, finally, she looked at him, and fear shone from her eyes.

He smiled.

“Don’t worry. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“I’m worried about *you*!” Padme responded exasperatedly. “If Master Windu was overcome by darkness fighting Palpatine, what’s to stop *you* when you fight him?” She was terrified. He could feel it without even touching the Force. She was afraid of what he might become.

Suddenly the bravado that he was maintaining in front of her collapsed. The enormity of the past few hours struck him like a wave and he felt grief....pain...sorrow...fear...anger. They welled up in him like a volcano and erupted from his eyes in a shower of tears. He tried to hold them back but was no more successful than if were trying to stop a star’s collapse. Anakin fell into a chair and wept into his hands. As he wept, he could hear the servomotors working even with so little motion. He wept more loudly. Soon Anakin was sobbing uncontrollably and Padme Amidala was seated by him with her arms around his shoulders.

“Talk to me,” She whispered.

“I loved him, Padme” Anakin replied. “Even after he told me what he was. Even after I realized that he had been manipulating me for years. Even after I knew that

his promise to save you would require me to give up everything I believed in...I still loved him. He was my friend.” Padme looked at him with concern.

On most days, Anakin Skywalker was every bit the Hero With No Fear. He walked and talked like a man above men. He was even greater than his legend. People flocked to see him wherever he went. But sometimes...when Anakin Skywalker was in the arms of the woman with whom he could be completely free...Anakin Skywalker would show that he was just a man. And on even rarer occasions—such as the one he suffered under now—he would appear every bit of his twenty-three years young. A man overwhelmed. A boy without his mother.

“I know,” Padme replied. The only answer she could give him would never bring him comfort.

“What’s worse” Anakin spoke again, as if trying to lift some heavy burden from his soul, “I almost *joined* him!” He looked up at her, his eyes red and swollen with tears. “Padme! I almost *killed* Master Windu! I *wanted* to kill Master Windu. I would have if he hadn’t sensed me coming and stopped me, somehow.” As Anakin watched Padme’s face, he was reminded of why he loved her so much. With anyone else, this revelation would have brought serious concerns and an inevitable discussion about his lack of control. With anyone else, he would have felt their disappointment before he was even done talking. But with Padme, just as when he told her about his massacre of the Sand People so many years ago, all he saw was unconditional love. And he wept.

“Ani...” She cried with him, “It’s OK...”

“No!” Anakin stood. He paced forward and wiped his face. “I won’t let you forgive me again!” He turned and looked at her with fire in his eyes. But she wasn’t afraid. His eyes didn’t burn with the anger she had seen so many times before. His eyes burned with determination.

“I was wrong,” Anakin announced firmly. “About...so many things.” He looked at her and his expression softened. “But I wasn’t wrong about you.” Anakin walked over to where she was seated and squatted in front of her, taking her hands in his. He looked into her eyes and smiled.

“Padme,” His voice was barely above a whisper but it somehow resonated all around her. “You and Obi-Wan may be all I’ll have left after I speak with the council. I may not even have Obi-Wan.”

“Ani, don’t talk like that...”

“Shh....it’s OK.” Anakin seemed so calm now. All the grief that was on his face

only moments ago seemed a distant memory. She could *feel* the power emanating from him. She had felt it many times before. But this time, she wasn't afraid of it. "I will face the council because that is what I must do. The council will decide my fate, and I will accept it. Either way, they will deal with Master Windu. I will join you on Tatooine."

Padme looked at the face of the man that she would love for the rest of her life. He wasn't afraid. For the first time in all the time they had been together, he seemed *accepting*. Anakin smiled at her.

"I am," he whispered. "I am accepting." Padme looked at him in shock. "It's OK," Anakin smiled, "The Force is my ally. It shows me all I need and more. I'm accepting because I can remember my mother's last words to me..." "You can't stop the change any more than you can stop the suns from setting." I seemed to have forgotten that until now."

Padme nodded.

"When will you join me, Ani?" She asked, hoping it would be soon.

"I'm always with you, Padme" Anakin replied. "Don't ever forget that." Anakin handed her a small device no larger than a button. It was a long-range communications transceiver that had been developed recently for the war. "Contact me as soon as you're on Tatooine and safe. I will be there when I can."

Anakin turned toward the veranda. He looked back at Padme. He felt the rush of emotions pulling her towards him. His thoughts became reality as Padme ran into his arms. He pulled her close and felt her lips against his. He held her in their infinite kiss with both arms tight around her. And then he let her go. She looked at him quizzically but he simply smiled.

"Have faith, my love" he said. "I love you. Wait for me, I won't be long."

Fresh tears streamed onto her ivory cheeks, and she threw herself into his arms. "Always, Anakin. Forever. Come back to me, my love—my *life*. Come back to me."

He smiled down on her. "If it is within my power, I will."

## Part VII

Date Posted: 6/7 5:25pm

-----Civilization-----

This is how it feels to be Anakin Skywalker, right now:

You sit helplessly in your starfighter idling, parked in the sky two buildings away so she won't see you. You watch the greatest love in your life board the skiff. She wasted no time at all; the skiff's repulsorlifts engage before the landing ramp has retracted.

You look at the empty socket where Artoo normally is and sigh. You hope she will be safe. As her skiff leaps for the sky, you watch the sunlight directed by Coruscant's orbital mirrors glint off the gleaming surface of her ship. You find it as beautiful as she is. It is her sanctuary. As the ship continues to lift into the sky and disappear from view, you shift your view to monitor the tracking device you placed on her. You know she would never have approved but you had to know she was safe.

When the device blinks out of existence momentarily, signaling the shift to hyperspace, you finally remember to breathe. All your hopes, fears, and dreams lay in that craft. That carriage is all that matters. And you breathe it all in.

So many times, Obi-Wan had tried to explain the Force to you. So many times you had ignored his words because you thought he was trying to explain something that couldn't be explained. You knew more than he did. You knew the Force.

You know you were wrong.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, your Master and best friend is the greatest Jedi Master you have ever met. All his teachings come rushing to you. All his words of advice. All his dire warnings. All his guidance over the years. All his love.

And you breathe it in.

The Force flows around you more strongly than before. You can feel the Masters as they board their ships hundreds and sometimes thousands of light-years away. The Jedi Knights are remaining in place and continuing the war. You *know* this but you don't know how. You can *feel* it as surely as you can feel the hum of your idling starfighter.

Three Masters are on their way. The strongest and best. But the one that matters to

you the most is furthest behind. You fear for his life and you chide yourself. *The fear of loss is a path to the dark side, young one.* He could hear Yoda's voice as clearly as he had those many days ago in the Jedi Masters quarters. *The shadow of greed, attachment is. What you fear to lose, train yourself to release. Let go of fear, and loss cannot harm you.*

But you know better. You know that the dragon that beats inside your chest is capable of immeasurable power in the name of love. You know you mustn't let go of that power. You know you mustn't let it consume you, either. You must channel it. You must focus it. You must let the Force guide you to protect the ones you love. You become a vessel for the Force to act on. Then no harm can come to those you love. With the Force as your ally, you know you are invincible.

And you breathe it in.

Time is of the essence but time is all you have as you await the arrival of your friends. You realize now that they always been your friends. You realize, with deep sadness, that it is a friend who has fallen. You grieve his loss. But you don't let the grief consume you.

Obi-Wan was right about so many things. He was wrong about one thing. You have learned to master yourself.

And you breathe it in.

Slowly your eyes close and your breathing becomes deep. You perform the Jedi meditation more effectively than you ever have. You feel your body mending the damage you did to it. You feel your strength returning as you rest better than you ever have. No dreams torment your slumber. No horrors await your lidded eyes. Only blissful rest.

All the pain is still there. All the fear resides in you still. All the anger and the frustration continue to smolder. And all the love you feel overwhelms them all.

And you breathe it out.

This is how it feels to be Anakin Skywalker, right now.

**Part VII continued**

**Date Posted: 6/8 6:04pm**

**(-----Civilization----- )**

Mustafar burned with lava streaming from volcanoes of glittering obsidian.

At the fringe of its gravity well, a spray of prismatic starlight warped a fleet of starships into existence. The fleet was massive, to say the least. Three star destroyers made their way, following a preprogrammed course toward the planet's lone installation, an automated lava mine built originally by the Techno Union to draw precious metals from the continuous rivers of burning stone. They were followed by several Republic cruisers and battleships, each with a large complement of individual starfighters. They moved as one unit in the deadly silence of space, their ion drives and interior lighting the only indication of their existence in that desolate region of space. If someone happened to be looking in just the right place at just the right time, that someone would be struck with awe and fear. This group of warships represented a formidable show of Republic might.

Upgraded with the finest mechanized defenses that money could buy, the settlement had become the final redoubt of the leaders of the Confederacy of Independent Systems. It was absolutely impenetrable.

Unless one had its deactivation codes.

Which was how the fleet could enter geosynchronous orbit without causing the installation's defenses to so much as stir.

The habitable areas of the settlement below were spread among towers that looked like poisonous toadstools sprung from the bank of a river of fire. The main control center squatted atop the largest. It was from this control center, mere moments ago, that a coded command had been relayed over every HoloNet repeater in the galaxy.

At that signal, every combat droid in every army on every planet marched back to its transport, resocketed itself, and turned itself off. The Clone Wars were over.

Almost.

There was a final detail.

The Republic warships moved into position.

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Bail Organa strode into his Senate pod with consternation etched into his face. As he walked through the doors he saw confusion on the face of his colleagues wherever he looked. He stared wide-eyed into the sea of creatures from every part of the galaxy. These powerful Senators that defined the Republic Senate—the will of the people—were all standing in their own pods trying to discern by some means the purpose of the sudden emergency session.

The large coliseum that housed the Republic Senate was referred to as the Senate Arena. It was an apt moniker given the intense political battles that so often ensued there. The room was massive by any standards, containing over ten thousand Senators and their aides at any time. With so many people milling about, it was understandable that so many of them failed to notice the large contingent of clone troopers posted at all the exits. And even if you did notice them, what was there to worry about anyway? It was good to see that the wise Chancellor had taken measures to ensure the safety of this hollowed body given the events of recent history.

The Senator from Alderaan frowned inwardly at the sight.

Something was very wrong here.

He searched the sea of pods, looking for the Senator from Naboo. She seemed to always have an inside track on the dealings of Palpatine and his lackeys. Perhaps she knew what this was about. Her pod was empty, save for the lone Senator representing the Gungan people, Jar-Jar Binks. Bail Organa's inward frown spread to his face.

*What on earth is this all about?* he thought with growing alarm.

His questions grew in number and urgency when the entire chamber quieted as the Senate Podium rose into view from below carrying Mas Ameda and Sly Moore. Sitting in the place where so many of them had grown accustomed to seeing the sometimes frail form of the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic was a hooded figure. The figure did not stir. For a brief moment, Sly Moore and Mas Ameda exchanged what appeared to be the briefest of glances as the podium attained its final height and came to rest. No one could see who the figure was, exactly...but it was clear that it wasn't Chancellor Palpatine.

The room erupted in a cacophony of panic and fear.

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Inside the control center of the Separatist bunker on Mustafar...



Wat Tambor was adjusting the gas mix inside his armor—

Poggle the Lesser was massaging his fleshy lip-tendrils—

Shu Mai was fiddling with the brass binding that restrained her hair into the stylish curving horn that rose behind her head—

San Hill was stretching his bodystocking, which had begun to ride up in the crotch—

Rune Haako was shifting his weight nervously from foot to foot—

Nute Gungray stared at the control center station with confusion consuming his thoughts. Sidious was up to something. Nute Gungray was a Neimoidian, which was to say he was a businessman first and foremost. He had gotten into this venture with the expectation that his financial prospects would be unlimited once this war was at an end and Sidious obtained absolute control of the Senate.

He had felt betrayed once in his lifetime. Of course, in his line of work, he was often deceived. But that is to be expected. Dealings with fellow businessmen usually meant that at least one person was going to lie or steal to get the best deal for himself. In fact, in his culture, if this didn't occur, it was almost considered an insult. But betrayal is something completely different. Betrayal meant deviating from what was *expected*. And Nute Gungray prided himself on being ready to expect anything.

On his sole occasion for betrayal, it had involved dealings with Darth Sidious who had promised him a rather large financial deal if he would just exercise his right to fair trade and blockade the unimportant planet of Naboo. Gungray expected that there was some ulterior motive behind this request but could see no downside from a business point of view. As long as Sidious kept his end of the bargain, Nute Gungray was assured a rather significant return on his investment.

He hadn't counted on a certain under-aged queen becoming such a formidable opponent. He hadn't counted on a pair of Jedi getting involved in so small a matter. And he certainly didn't count on a *child* destroying any hope of his battledroids had of maintaining control of the planet.

The feeling of betrayal had occurred when Darth Sidious simply disappeared. After his capture, he was dismayed to find himself fighting for his very right to continue to do business. He was *stunned* to find himself in court battle after court battle desperately trying to justify his actions. It was against his nature not to betray the Sith Lord. But something about the situation *encouraged* Nute Gungray. He hadn't

heard from Sidious during his entire incarceration and subsequent courtroom skirmishes. But somehow, just when things seemed bleakest, a critical decision would go his way. Just when he *knew* all his trade rights would be forfeited, a critical witness would fail to show up for the deposition. Whenever he was *positive* that on that day he would lose his viceroyship, the Trade Federation meeting would be postponed indefinitely.

And so, despite feeling betrayed by the Lord of the Sith, Nute Gunray had to concede that *someone* was working for him behind the scenes. His only concern was what would happen when that someone called in the favor.

When Count Dooku was that someone, Nute Gunray was convinced it was some kind of practical joke. The Count hadn't pretended with him like he did with the other members of the CIS. There was no discussion of principles or of the rotting cesspool that the Senate had become. There was nothing about how the time had come to rid the galaxy of this outdated and ineffective form of government. The Count simply informed the Trade Federation Viceroy who his master was and what was required of him with cold, aristocratic finality. Always an eye for bartering, Nute Gunray agreed with the understanding that the now-Senator from Naboo would die as a part of their bargain. He held firm to this desire even after the clone wars had begun. Padme Amidala had cost him a significant sum of money. But that sum was nothing compared to what he had spent in the last three years fighting this pointless war. His only solace being how handsomely he'd be rewarded in the end.

Now he stood in this antechamber with creatures he'd never associate with if not for their common business venture. Now, he stood confused beyond measure as to why Sidious had chosen to use the private code he had been given to deactivate the droids himself. Gunray had expected that the Sith Lord would give him the order to terminate the war directly. He had planned a speech asserting their common genius in getting the Republic to crumble to their will. He had planned to obtain assurances of expanded Trade Federation trade routes. He had planned on being congratulated on playing his role so well. This move was unexpected.

Something was very wrong here.

A single red light began to flash insistently just within the field of view of the Neimoidian. He crossed the room toward the display station as others in his group rushed toward the light.

*Perhaps, now we will get some results,* he thought, thinking that the light indicated a communiqué from Sidious. The light was designed to come on under two conditions—a message from the Dark Lord of the Sith or the arrival of an incoming ship with the security system deactivation codes. It was there to provide an alert, but not an alarm.

As several of the heads of the Confederacy of Independent Systems gathered around the console, confusion grew to alarm.

“What is the meaning of this?” Poggle the Lesser, Archduke of the weapon masters of Geonosis clicked. The others made similar noises in their native languages. Nute Gungray ignored them all.

He pushed the others aside and stared wide-eyed at the display. No less than twenty Republic ships were in geosynchronous orbit right above their location! Suddenly, he felt a familiar feeling come over him in a powerful wave as the first galvanized particle beam rained down from the sky and set the CIS ships outside afire. He watched helplessly as the entire cadre of CIS leaders ran pointlessly from the bunker toward the burning hulks.

*How had the Republic located them?* Gungray’s mind reeled. “It’s not possible!” He screamed aloud to no one in particular.

Sidious had betrayed them all. He had what he wanted. The war was over and now he was going to use them to solidify whatever power he had. Suddenly, a moment of clarity struck Nute Gungray as the roof caved in under another blast and the duracrete fell onto his head. He found it somewhat amusing that until now he had not understood. All this time, he couldn’t connect the dots and here, at the end, it was all so obvious.

As his blood poured down his face and he found that he couldn’t blink his eyes to keep them clear, the Viceroy of the Trade Federation finally saw that he was doomed from the start. He was just another piece in a galactic game of dejarik, doomed to be sacrificed in the end to ensure victory. As doomed as Dooku was. As guaranteed of death as Grievous was. As fire rained down on the bunker continuously and the screams of the heads of the CIS grew louder and then began to die out, Nute Gungray felt his consciousness slipping into the great blackness. Before the light left his eyes forever, he had a final thought....

*Palpatine is Sidious....*

With a barrage of firepower that would level some planets, the Republic warships continued to decimate the settlement below for over an hour. The orders were clear. Leave no sign that the place ever existed. The cannons brought the death and destruction. The unchecked erupting volcanoes destroyed the evidence.

The clone commander was disappointed in his assignment. It seemed like overkill to send this much firepower to eliminate so small a target—a target that couldn't even fight back. But orders were orders and as a clone, he simply didn't know how to question them.

He watched impassively from the sky for several minutes after the attack was complete. He frowned inwardly as he heard the reports come in. Nothing left the surface of the planet during the attack. Nothing was alive on the planet.

With an minute shrug he turned away from the viewing window and pushed a series of buttons to send the pre-planned two word transmission directly to the Jedi General who had ordered the attack. Once confirmation of the transmission was indicated, he allowed himself to smile proudly as the message played in him mind. It was the only message any clone wanted to ever report.

*Mission accomplished.*

## Part VIII

Date Posted: 6/9 3:22pm

-----The New Republic-----

“Senators, please!” Mas Ameda’s voice, amplified and retransmitted to each senatorial pod and to multiple auxiliary speakers strategically located throughout the large Senate Arena, reverberated with the strength and power that Mas Ameda was best known for. “We must have order!” His efforts had the same impact as spitting into a raging inferno in a vain attempt to extinguish the flames.

Thousands of Senators and their aides stood in their pods screaming, desperate to be heard above the din. Every man, woman and creature from every walk of the galaxy felt that his or her words were more important than all the others. But none of them really knew what they wanted to say. They all *felt* the same panic. They all shared the same thought.

*The Chancellor is not here! The Republic is doomed!*

Mas Ameda turned to look at Sly Moore in exasperation. She stood, as she always did—silent and impassive. Mas Ameda knew little of her, other than the fact that Sidious seemed to have trusted her at least as much as he trusted the Chagrin himself. That, in and of itself, was quite an accomplishment, as far as Ameda was concerned. Few people were able to escape discovery from him when his considerable investigative skills were brought to bear. He respected her, true. But he also *feared* her. The brutal coolness with which she dispatched her duties was unsettling to say the least...

The Korun Master was reluctant, at first, to engage the services of this Umbaran woman who seemed to be able to make just about anyone do her bidding. Rumors circulated about her rise to power under Palpatine. Rumors about how she callously ‘removed’ her competition in Sei Taria, Chancellor Valorum’s previous aide. Mas Ameda knew these rumors to be true. Mas Ameda knew her to be ruthless, cold, calculating and completely without moral compunctions. He was convinced that she would take the news of Palpatine’s demise in stride.

She did not disappoint.

If anything, Mas Ameda found himself even more unnerved by the pale, bald woman whose piercing pallid eyes stared out at him unfeelingly as he watched for a reaction while he delivered the news. If she was affected in any way, he could not tell. There was no change in her breathing. No shifting of her eyes. No flush of concern, if such expressions were even possible for her. Nothing. She simply

nodded and waited patiently for Ameda to tell her what he wanted.

She accepted her responsibilities under the Jedi Master wordlessly.

As Mas Ameda stared at her, she continued to gaze out at the myriad Senators, slowly scanning the panorama with her ice-cold glower that held an expression which made her look as if she were feeding off the noise and confusion that filled the massive auditorium. He turned in aggravation back to the crowd and began to futilely scream for control again.

As the noise in the chamber reached a crescendo of unimaginable levels, Mas Ameda felt the Umbaran woman's cold, hard hand on his left shoulder. He turned to look at her and saw that her gaze was not focused on him but on the flashing red light on the console embedded in the podium. He nodded slightly, with understanding, and activated the preprogrammed hologram.

Instantly, in every pod a hologram began to play. If one were stubborn enough to choose to ignore that hologram another one played in the center of the Arena high above the heads of the members of the Arena that had activated it. This hologram was fifty feet high and the audio blared high above the dissonance produced by the frightened Senators.

Not that the high volume was necessary.

Almost as quickly as the hologram began to play, the Senate became silent except for the sound that accompanied the hologram. Clearly taken from hidden holosurveillance of the Chancellor's private office, the hologram played the events of the previous evening.

Ten thousand Senators found their legs giving out from under them. Their breath taken away. Their heartbeats skipping. Their sweat glands seeping. Their eyes watering. The hopes and dreams disappearing.

As the best holographic technology that the galaxy had known played with cold precision, the men and women of the Galactic Senate watched in horror as their leader—no, their savior—calmly dragged a crimson lightsaber callously across the neck of Saesee Tiin. Their breath froze in their lungs as the gentle giant they had all come to love, sunk that same bloodshine blade into the hapless skull of Agen Kolar. Their eyes stung with tears as the apparently feeble old man that so often seemed like a kind uncle displayed his mastery of the Sith arts as his pitilessly swung his scarlet weapon in a beautiful arc and removed the head of Jedi Master Kit Fisto.

The world was caving in and the hologram continued to play.

The Senators listened in stunned amazement as the lone survivor, Jedi Master Windu gallantly fought against this most devious of beasts. How could they have been so wrong? How was this possible? They could feel their collective pulses quicken with victory as the Jedi Master sliced the villain's blade asunder and knocked him pitilessly to the ground. Their hearts soared with bloodlust as they waited for the killing blow.

What was this? The Jedi Master hesitated. He won't destroy a helpless man. He truly is a hero. The greatest of his kind. They could feel the assurance of this belief wash over them with such lucidity that they knew it better than they knew their own names.

They stared with shock and disgust as the treacherous fiend unleashed reams of lightning from his very hands at the brave Protector of the Republic as he was momentarily distracted by the arrival of the Hero with No Fear. Their spirits soared as they saw the images of the great Jedi Warrior repel the tormentor's weapon back at him with intense ferocity. Their hearts leaped for joy when the brute's form morphed under the counterattack's power to show the evil that was within him. And they thanked their collective Gods when the Sith Lord finally acquiesced under the superior Jedi's power. *Now* the Jedi Master was sure to end this beast's unholy life forever. Surely he was too dangerous to be left alive.

What was this again? Anakin Skywalker is pleading for the Chancellor's life. The Jedi Master appears to be listening. Is there no end to the mercy of the Jedi? Are they truly so naïve to think the Sith Lord will not attack again?

The Senators found themselves helplessly pleading for the Jedi Master to watch out as the Sith Lord renewed his attack. Bolts of lightning crackled from his fingertips into the diverted Jedi Master's body, driving him back.

The entire auditorium groaned in frustration as the hologram disintegrated before their eyes as the holorecorder seemed to suffer irreparable damage under the evil-doer's attack.

The silence in the amphitheatre was palpable. Representatives from thousands of worlds sat in disillusionment as the magnitude of what they had just seen sunk in. Every one of them wanted to speak. None of them could find the voice.

Collectively, they were awoken from their reverie by the calm, soothing voice of the man who now stood at the podium. The man who had apparently survived the most despicable and cowardly of attacks. The Jedi who had faced the most evil of men and survived. The *Jedi Master* who had saved them all.

His voice was as refreshing as a cool as a freshwater stream. Thousands of men and women drank in his words and felt the nourishment it brought with enthusiasm and hope. Representatives from all across the galaxy *felt* his words insinuate themselves into their hearts and minds to bring them the dream they so desperately needed to believe in.

Four words were all he said at first. Four simple words that encouraged the throng in the face of unimaginable loss. Four simple words that made everything achievable. Four uncomplicated words that put all their worries to rest.

“The War is over.”



## Part IX

Date Posted: 6/10 5:56pm

-----Cavalry-----

Anakin was startled awake by an insistent knocking sound on his cockpit window. He hadn't slept soundly in over three years. On the night that his life seemed to change forever, he had slept as fitfully as he could ever remember. There were no terrible dreams of death and loss. No panicked feelings of loneliness and helplessness. All that he had experienced over the last several hours was blissful nothingness.

It was very disorienting.

Anakin tried to focus his eyes to detect the source of the rapping noise. The orbital mirrors had directed the distant sunlight high in the Coruscanti sky. The moment he attempted to lift his sleep-ridden lids, he felt the powerful rays burrowing into his eyes as if seeking purchase in his retina. He squinted back the sunlight and put his mechanical hand above his face to shield the light. As he did this, the unrelenting tapping noise continued against his window.

Now he could hear a grunting noise accompanying the knocking. Whoever it was didn't seem interested in leaving him alone. Anakin didn't feel like explaining to some local constabulary why he was parked idling so close to Five Hundred Replica. He turned with an irritated face toward the rapping ready to chase the annoying person--or bird or creature or whatever--away with a Jedi mind trick...or ...something. Anything that would let him get back to the blissful sleep he had been experiencing.

His eyes popped open in surprise and he was wide awake.

Standing, perfectly balanced on the wing of his Jedi starfighter was an aged-looking green troll of a creature with large pointy ears on either side of its head and big moss-green, bulbous eyes that looked deep into his own with irritation...and a little mischievous playfulness. In this creature's gnarled hands was a wooden gimmer stick that the creature had so often used to great effect and annoyance to those who were subjected to its point. Now, it was the head of this stick that reached out, once again and rapped on the windshield persistently—right in the face of the startled Jedi Knight.

Anakin was more elated than he had been in a long time. *How did Master Yoda get here? How did he find me?* Anakin thought excitedly as he turned quickly in his cockpit and engaged the controls to open his cockpit window. *Who cares? He's*

*here now!*

Yoda was often looked at as the kindly old Jedi Master of the Temple. All the new younglings learned from the Jedi Master their very basic Jedi skills from the first moments they entered the Temple until the day they were given the great honor of being selected as a padawan by one of the Jedi Knights. He was loved. But more importantly, he was respected. It was well known that he was the most feared Jedi Master in the Order. Few, if any, ever felt brave enough to face him for lightsaber practice. Those who did, usually paid the price. Painfully.

Yoda did have a impish side to him and had been known, from time to time, to play a practical joke or two on a recently knighted Jedi. It was also quite well known that the Jedi Master was very adept at spotting just about any outrageous thing a young padawan might try to inflict on him long before the child had a chance to even begin the planning stages.

But there was one thing about Yoda that everybody knew. He didn't like people talking to or treating him like a child. It was not uncommon for people to make that mistake, on occasion. He was only 1.5 meters tall and from behind, with his hood up, it was an understandable mistake to make. Once while on a mission to the Rigula system, a rather large salesman patted Yoda on the head in a condescending manner and offered Yoda a treat. The man found himself floating in the air throughout the entire transaction and then summarily dropped from almost ten feet in the air when the transaction was over. This was the other lesson *everyone* knew about Yoda. *He didn't like to be touched!*

Yoda's eyes popped wider than they had ever been as he suddenly found himself abruptly hoisted off the starfighter wing and into a large unabashed hug from an overly excited Jedi youth.

"Master Yoda!" the young youth seemed to be howling. "You're here! You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

Yoda was at a loss for words and was rapping the Jedi Knight desperately on the back with his gimmer stick in a vain attempt to be let go.

"Yes, yes, young one!" Master Yoda gasped. "Arrived, I have. Pleased to see you, as well, I am. Overcome by emotions, you must *not* be!" This last announcement was virtually a howl as he continued to beat the excited Anakin Skywalker in the back.

Anakin seemed to finally come to his senses with another sharp rap on the back. He looked sheepishly at the ancient Jedi Master. His face flushed with embarrassment as he gently put the head of the Jedi Order back down onto the

starfighter wing.

“Sorry,” he smiled awkwardly looking down at Yoda. “I guess I got carried away there.”

“A gift for understatement, you have” Master Yoda replied as he straightened his Jedi robes and attempted to regain his composure. Yoda looked around at the traffic lanes above and below the starfighter on which they stood.

“A better location for discussion, perhaps we should find.” He looked up at Anakin with the return of the wizened old Jedi teacher’s face firmly etched into his leathery green skin. Anakin shrugged.

“I don’t suppose you have a transport, do you?” Anakin asked seeing clearly that no transport seemed to be present.

“Dropped off at the Temple, I was.” Yoda replied. “Left to find you, I did. Return to the temple, we must. Much to discuss, there is.”

Anakin and Yoda gazed dubiously at the tiny cockpit of Anakin’s starfighter. “I suppose,” Anakin said reluctantly, “if you don’t mind riding on my lap...” Yoda’s eyes narrowed and hardened as he stared at the precocious Jedi Knight who would dare suggest a thing.

“A better idea, I have.” Yoda replied.

Moments later, the starfighter took off toward the temple at high speed. Inside the cockpit, the wise old Jedi Master expertly worked the controls as if he flew the ship every day. He made a direct path for the tall spires that indicated the Jedi Temple on the horizon. Outside, hanging on for dear life, Anakin Skywalker rode shotgun in Artoo's empty slot.

## Part IX continued

Date Posted: 6/11 12:21pm

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Gate Master Jurokk and Jedi Master Shaak Ti sprinted through the empty vaulted hallway, clattering echoes of their footsteps making them sound like a platoon. The main doors of the Temple were slowly swinging inward in answer to the code key punched into the outside lockpad.

The Gate Master had seen them on the monitor and alerted Shaak Ti who had been elatedly meditating in the council chambers.

Anakin Skywalker.

And Yoda.

The huge doors creaked inward; as soon as they were wide enough for the two masters to pass, they slipped through.

Anakin stood tall, shoulders back and chin raised high. The diminutive Jedi Master Yoda stood at his side with both his hands resting on top of his gimmer stick. Shaak Ti's face was alight with unbridled joy. Anakin was at a loss as to why she seemed to happy but he said nothing. He was stunned when, as soon as she cleared the doorway, she ran to him excitedly and hugged him. He looked to Master Jurokk in confusion, but the Gate Master only smiled widely.

"Anakin!" She exclaimed exuberantly. "You did it! You truly are The Chosen One! The cloud of the dark side is gone! We all felt it lift! I heard you! A calling in the Force! I didn't even know that was possible! We *all* felt it! It was amazing!"

Realization dawned on Anakin slowly.

They had heard his call but they didn't understand it. It seemed that only Yoda had.

*And Obi-Wan*, he reminded himself. He had felt his old Master respond to his call as clearly as if he had been standing next to him. He could feel Obi-Wan calling to him even now.

Because the deep darkness that had clouded the Force for so long had lifted, the other Jedi must have misinterpreted his plea for help as a message of triumph. Now, with the news that the war was over permeating every HoloNet, it was not surprising that they were excited.

Anakin scowled.

“What’s the matter, Skywalker?” Gate Master Jurokk interjected when he saw the change in expression on the Jedi Knight’s face. “You certainly don’t seem as pleased as we might expect. You have ended the war! You have every right to be proud.” Anakin and Master Yoda exchanged a wary glance but said nothing further for the moment. Anakin started to open his mouth when Shaak Ti seemed to suddenly notice the conspicuous absence of some of her friends.

“Where are the other Masters?” she asked slowly. “We know that Master Windu is addressing the Senate in closed session as we speak. What of the others?”

“Gone!” Master Yoda interjected while giving Anakin a sharp rap on the shin with his gimmer stick that quickly shut the Jedi Knight’s mouth. “Joined the Force they have. Discuss the actions of Master Windu, we must. The other Masters on mission, their location, tell me.”

“The entire Council is on its way, Master Yoda,” Shaak Ti replied, her exuberance severely tempered by the news. “Everyone except Master Kenobi. He reported moments ago that he is having...trouble...but assures us that he will be here when he can.” She looked up at Anakin and saw the dark expression on his face. She began to suspect that something was amiss. Surely the news that the war was over had reached them!

“Very good, Shaak Ti,” Master Yoda replied as he began to hobble through the open doorway. “Very good.” His entry into the hallowed Jedi Temple halls was halted by Shaak Ti’s now very worried tone.

“Master Yoda?” She asked nervously. “What has happened?”

Yoda’s eyes seemed misted with unshed tears and his face appeared almost a hundred years older than it had mere days ago. Lines of consternation creased his already weathered face, his mouth drawn and his ears drooped in an expression of deep sadness.

“Lost more than Masters, we have today, Shaak Ti,” Yoda replied, grief filling his voice. He turned and continued into the Temple, leaning heavily on his gimmer stick. “Lost more than Masters, we have.”

Anakin began to follow him in when Shaak Ti grabbed his right arm, just above the joint where his flesh ended and his mechanical arm began.

“Anakin,” She said with desperation in her eyes. “The war is over! Surely you

know that Masters Tinn, Fisto, and Kolar would not want us to mourn their joining of the Force on so happy an occasion. Master Windu and you have saved the Republic from certain doom! I have never seen Master Yoda so troubled. *What is going on?*”

Anakin felt a certain sadness creep into his heart as he realized how ignorant the Jedi Masters who looked up at him were. They had no idea that the Master second only to Master Yoda had fallen. They did not comprehend that this same Master was likely taking action as they spoke to gain control of the galaxy. They knew nothing of how close Anakin had come to joining Palpatine on a quest for ultimate power. They were oblivious to Anakin’s inner demons that he was continuing to fight even now.

Anakin’s frown deepened on his face and in his heart. He could feel the dragon suddenly uncurl itself inside him and smile.

*Cunning, indeed!* The contemptuous thought arrived so quickly that it attacked his mind like a hungry Rancor. Anakin rebuked himself immediately, breathing in the powerful currents of the Force, and the dragon curled back into place.

“Masters,” Anakin answered as he placed his hand of flesh and bone on Shaak Ti’s. He looked into her eyes as he spoke with a wisdom and calm she had never seen in him before. “I must take my lead from Master Yoda. All will be explained, I assure you. Let’s go and prepare for the arrival of the other Masters.”

Shaak Ti’s eyes widened as she looked into Anakin’s face. He seemed so different.

So...in control.

It was unlike anything she had seen from the young Jedi Knight in all his years with the Order. She had fought hard to keep him from Mastery because of the lack of control she had seen in him on so many occasions. She had feared him and for him for so long that she didn’t know what it was like to feel anything else.

But not now.

Now, as she looked into his eyes and felt his warm hand on hers, she felt something she hadn’t felt in over a decade. She felt assured. She felt the calming currents of the Force wash over her like a cool breeze.

Shaak Ti looked to Gate Master Jurokk and saw acceptance cross his face. He would know what he was to know. He nodded briefly to confirm that understanding. Shaak Ti followed suit and added a brisk, respectful bow.

“Perhaps,” Jurokk announced, “We should go inside.”

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At that moment, on the other side of the galaxy, Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi was more frustrated than he had ever been. He stared into the resolute face of the Republic Cruiser Clone Commander’s face with incredulity pouring out of his every pore.

“Commander,” Obi-Wan said, fighting to keep the impatience out of his voice. He searched the Clone Commander’s uniform for the clone’s designation number. “ARC-270...”

“Maverick, will do, Sir,” the clone interrupted, unperturbed by the General’s exasperation.

“Maverick, right,” Obi-Wan replied. He shook his head sardonically. “As I have explained to all your underlings on several occasions, my hyperdrive ring is missing and I need to get to Coruscant now. It’s very important. Do you understand? As a General in the GAR, I am giving you a direct order to take me to Coruscant in this...” he looked around inside the behemoth cargo bay housed in a vessel that currently held four thousand clone troopers and his starfighter with distaste, “...vessel,” He finished as if he had vomited the word out.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Maverick replied. “My orders were quite specific. We were to destroy all hyperspace rings as well as maintain position until ordered to return to base. I have not been ordered by a superseding authority to return to base. Therefore, I cannot leave.” His look hardened as he stared at Obi-Wan intensely.

“Do *you* understand?” The two stared at each other for several seconds. “...Sir.” He added after a moment and looked away.

Obi-Wan digested the new information slowly. *Destroy all hypespace rings?* Obi-Wan contemplated the words. *Maintain position until called?* Obi-Wan considered the meaning. *Palpatine wanted me out of the way!* he concluded.

“Perhaps,” Obi-Wan offered with renewed concern, “If you’d contact Coruscant and request permission to return to base—“

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Maverick interrupted. “My orders were clear. We are to maintain strict communications lockdown until contacted by main base. We’re going to have to stay here.”

“Even though,” Obi-Wan continued incredulously “I can assure you that this order

will never come?”

“Yes, Sir.” The clone replied instantly.

“Even though,” Obi-Wan tried again with increasing frustration, “Every single combat droid has shut down and we have no reason in the galaxy to be out here any more?”

“Yes, Sir.” Maverick replied as if the question itself were ridiculous.

Obi-Wan’s eyes widened. *I will never understand the military!* he thought to himself in frustration. *I don’t have time for this!*

“You will take all the ships back to Coruscant,” Obi-Wan said while flicking his hand in a slight wave. The clone commander turned instantly and began giving orders.

“Let’s get these ships in gear!” He announced. “We’ve got to get the ships back to Coruscant.”

“You will leave the others here so you can arrive first,” Obi-Wan said in almost a whisper.

Maverick spoke again even more sternly than before.

“I’m not waiting on the rest of the ships! Relay the order so we can get out of here!” Maverick activated a small communications device on his wrist. “Command crew! Get us back to Coruscant, now!”

Obi-Wan smiled contently as he felt the pitch of the hum in the ship change to indicate a change in the ship’s vector. Soon the pitch changed again and he knew that the ship had launched itself into hyperspace. He could feel Anakin in the Force and that feeling grew stronger with each passing moment.

He was getting closer.

*I’m coming, Anakin* Obi-Wan whispered into the Force. *If you can hear me, I’m coming.*

Obi-Wan walked back to his Jedi starfighter and nodded to Arfour.

“As soon as we come out of hyperspace,” Obi-Wan announced to the astromech droid, “I want to be off this hunk of metal, understand?” A series of short bleeps from the machine which had none of the spunk of Anakin’s astromech indicated



that the droid got the message.

Obi-Wan jumped into the cockpit and waited impatiently. He began to meditate to calm himself and reached out to Anakin again in the Force.

He felt him instantly. Anakin was safe. He was at the Temple with Master Yoda. Obi-Wan breathed a sigh of relief and continued to breathe deeply.

*I'm almost there, Anakin* Obi-Wan spoke into the currents of the Force in a voice he knew that only Anakin Skywalker would ever hear. *Don't do anything until I get there...please.* He felt Anakin's smile in the Force and it warmed him.

"I'm coming..." he sighed aloud and leaned back into his cockpit seat.

"I'm coming..."

## Part X

Date Posted: 6/12 12:08am

-----Birth Of An Empire-----

The Galactic Senate was a maelstrom of cheers and celebration. Inside the Senate Arena the excitement was palpable and the euphoria echoed across the resplendent walls in the form of unbounded praise for their new savior—Jedi Master Mace Windu.

The Senate Area was filled with Senators and their aides standing in their pods screaming as loudly as they could. Each was desperate to be the first one to go on record congratulating the Jedi Order in general, and Master Mace Windu in particular, for their heroic acts in saving the Republic.

They all *felt* the same relief. They all shared the same thought.

*Mace Windu has saved us all!*

Well, not quite everybody.

Bail Organa remained seated, stunned into submission. He was still recovering from what he had just seen. He had never truly trusted Palpatine. The man was simply too good a politician to have failed so terribly to negotiate a truce with the Separatists before it came to war. It was common knowledge that the Chancellor had secretly tried to pin the war on the Jedi. No one had taken the rumors seriously though because the Jedi had no motive. But the pang of doubt had remained. Many were ready to outlaw the Jedi Order—although they would never have publicly voted that way.

Now, Senator Organa noted sadly, these same Senators were standing tallest and shouting loudest in support of the very same group they had planned to betray.

*Politics!* his mind spat angrily.

Thousands of creatures from all over the galaxy were gathered together in this place for the express purpose of ensuring the safety and security of the Republic. So many men and women whose ideal was to be the common good. And yet, these creatures only knew how best to serve themselves.

He shook his head with increasing dismay at the way his beloved Republic had spiraled out of control.

The room suddenly quieted in the only way that it could be under the circumstances. With the firm, but gentle upraised hands of the Vanquisher of Evil. The Grand Convocation Chamber became as deathly quiet as it had been prior to the uttering of the most famous four words spoken in Republic history.

The silence was broken almost as quickly as it began.

“I move that we elect a new Chancellor immediately as the next order of business!” Announced the Senator from Sullist. “I nominate myself for the position.”

As quickly as the cacophony had ended, it erupted again like the volcanoes of Mustafar. The entire auditorium was alight in heated debate as each Senator tried to convince the one closest to him why he should be selected as the next Chancellor.

Bail said nothing. Instead he watched the Jedi Master, who nodded in apparent resignation. He looked saddened by the display. He screwed his face into a look of pure disgust and turned from the podium as if about to leave. The room quieted quickly as the Senators noticed the Jedi Master’s actions. One lone Senator from Manda spoke.

“Master Windu,” she said in a voice that was calm and sincere. The room silently listened weighing every word she uttered. “We beg you not to leave. There must be some way to maintain control without sinking into a political war. What wisdom does the Jedi Council provide?”

The Jedi Master’s shoulders visibly slumped as if this beautiful young Senator had just laid the heaviest burden of all on his shoulders. He turned slowly and faced the podium again. In place of the smiling face he had produced for the Senate body upon his earlier announcement was a face of deep sadness, yet acquiescence. He looked out across the field of creatures that encompassed representatives from the thousands of worlds that comprised the Galactic Republic.

He smiled.

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This is what it’s like to be Mace Windu, right now:

You don’t know where the words are coming from. You know your mission but you don’t have the political acumen to achieve it. And yet, here you are getting them to eat out of the palm of your hands.

You realize now that the clone troopers stationed at every exit are unnecessary.

The Senators are easily swayed. The masses always are. They will give you what you want—no! They will give you what you *deserve*.

You realize that you are the Chosen One. You don't know how you didn't know this before. It is as obvious to you as it is obvious that you will rule the galaxy and restore order to it like it had never existed before.

It is your duty.

It is your birthright.

You hear the words coming out of your mouth and you no longer question how it is possible. The Force is a powerful ally, you decide. And, in the end, it doesn't matter. All that matters is results.

You assure the Senators of how you have no interest in politics. You placate them with promises that were you not thrust into these circumstances by events outside of your control, you wouldn't ever consider assuming the mantle they are now discussing providing to you. You mollify them with assertions that you have only an interest in ridding the galaxy of the evil that permeates it—an evil personified in a man willing to destroy billions of lives in a pointless war to achieve his selfish goals.

You tell them everything they need to hear to give you the power once held by the now-deceased Chancellor Palpatine.

In other words...you lie.

And it doesn't bother you.

You're not weighed down by pointless guilt about the choices you're making. You're doing what's best for them, even if they don't realize or like it.

You're going to bring order.

And they will thank you for it.

Or they will die.

---

The Senator from Alderaan couldn't believe his ears. Bail sat in shock as he heard the motions passing one by one. They were now voting on a new resolution on the floor. Thousands of Senators were moving as one to vote Jedi Master Windu into the position of Interim Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic.

Bail was scanning the document before him.

*How is possible that a resolution is already drafted?* he asked himself. *How can they want to vote for something they haven't even had time to read?*

But vote they did.

One by one, in a voice vote that hadn't occurred in over a decade, the Senators voiced their support for the new Supreme Chancellor of the Republic. As Bail continued to scan the document, he saw that the Jedi Master would have all the same powers that had been granted to Palpatine.

Then something caught his eye.

There, buried in a subparagraph under a meaningless heading.

*The Chancellor shall be granted leadership of the Jedi Council and all its subordinate organizations, both military and religious.*

Tears welled into his eyes and he felt a lump form in his throat. He knew nothing about Jedi politics, but he knew this was wrong. Master Windu was wrong. If they voted him into power, they'd be exchanging one ruthless dictator for another. The Galaxy would be destroyed.

*I have to stop this!* he announced to himself. He looked at his colleagues and wondered how they couldn't see it. His eyes caught Mon Mothma's. He found Chi Eekway's stare. He searched the crowd and caught the saddening face of Terr Taneel. Fang Zar's head was in his hands.

And in those faces, he saw fear. They knew they couldn't speak out. They were going to vote *for* the resolution! It was outrageous but he could see it in their eyes. They had decided to live to fight another day.

In Bail Organa's mind, there was no other day.

He screwed up the courage and moved to stand. The voice vote was still over one hundred pods from getting to him. As he left his seat and began to rise, the room went silent.

Bail looked up to see the Jedi Master glaring at him from the Chancellor's Podium. His eyes were ablaze but the Korun Master said nothing. Bail looked into the man's eyes as they bored into his soul as easily as a lightsaber through duracrete.

Then the Jedi Master spoke with a smile and a gleam in his eyes.

"During this pause in the voting," Master Windu said, his eyes never leaving the Alderaan Senatorial pod. "I wish to remind the honored Senators that should you elect me through this resolution, I will make it my number one priority to find the traitors who conspired with Palpatine to destroy our great Republic."

Bail froze in place.

*Was that a threat?* Bail couldn't be sure. As he turned to search out the faces of his fellow Senators who had joined him so many times to fight injustice, he could see nothing but sadness and loss on their faces. When his search rested on Mon Mothma, the Chandrilan shook her head in a barely perceptible manner.

"Don't" she mouthed. And Bail understood. They would give Mace Windu whatever he wanted. The voice vote was just a formality.

He fell into his chair, defeated. Mace Windu's stare left him the moment he was seated and went back to the center of the auditorium.

"The battle with Darth Sidious left me *scarred*. He scarred my heart. I will never be the same again. But he could not scar my *integrity*! He could not disfigure my *resolve*! The remaining traitors will be hunted down, rooted out, wherever they may hide, and brought to justice, dead or alive! All collaborators will suffer the same fate. Now is the time! Now we will strike back! Now we will *destroy* the *destroyers*! *Death to the enemies of democracy!*"

The Senate roared.

Bail Organa slid further into his seat, more alone than he had ever been in his life.

In the center of the Grand Convocation Chamber, the Korun Master leaned upon the Chancellor's Podium as though he drew strength from the Great Seal on its front. "This has been the most trying of times, but we have passed the test. The war is *over*!"

The Senate roared.

"The plot to destroy this great Republic has been utterly defeated, and the *Republic*

*will stand!* United! United and *free!*”

The Senate roared.

“Now we have left that darkness behind us forever, and a new day has begun! It is *morning* in the Republic!”

The Senate roared.

“Never again will we be divided! Never again will sector turn against sector, planet turn against planet, *sibling* turn against sibling! We are one nation, *indivisible!*”

The Senate roared.

“Grant me the power I need to ensure that we will *always* stand together, that we will always speak with a *single* voice and act with a *single* hand. Grant me the power to *change* the Republic into what it needs to be. We must *evolve*. We must *grow*. We have become an empire in fact; let us become an Empire in name as well! We *are* the first *Galactic Empire!*”

The maelstrom that had begun so much earlier was eclipsed by the pandemonium that now erupted. Cheering in every language mushroomed into an annihilating cloud of elation. Virtually everyone was consumed.

“We are an Empire ruled by *laws*, not politicians! We are an Empire devoted to the preservation of a just society. Of a safe and secure society! We are an Empire that will stand *ten thousand years!*”

Bail Organa’s tears began to flow freely. His comrades sat in disbelief as the Senate took on a continuous boiling roll of cheers like the inside of a permanent thunderstorm.

“We will *celebrate* our Empire for the sake of our *children*. For our children’s children! For the next ten thousand years! Safety! Security! Justice and peace!”

The Senate went berserk.

“Say it with me! Safety! Security! Justice and Peace. Safety! Security! Justice and Peace!”

The Senate took up the chant, louder and louder until it seemed the entire galaxy roared along. The closed session meeting of the Senate had at some unknown point become open to the public. Hundreds of HoloNet news reporters were broadcasting this historic event live across the entire galaxy.

Bail Organa wept.

*So this is how liberty dies,* he thought with tears streaming down his face. *To the sound of thunderous applause.*



## Part XI

Date Posted: 6/12 12:21pm

-----Fear of Loss-----

The sky-blue prismatic colors of the hyperspace lane rotated in a fantastic kaleidoscopic fashion around the shining silver skiff as it burrowed through spacetime with cool efficiency. Few who traveled these lanes bothered to stop and watch the roiling cloud-like beauty that was afforded them like a gift from the Force. So anxious were they to arrive at their destination, they never bothered to appreciate the splendor of the journey. So wrapped up in the past or the future, they never learned to take pleasure in the now.

The occupants of the skiff were no exception. A small astromech droid and a much taller protocol droid observed the displayed HoloNet news coverage somewhat impassively, unsure of what to make of the coverage.

The petite human female, however, watched with tears in her eyes. The droids remained as quiet as they could. The ship was so still that the droids' servomotors could be heard working continuously as they executed the hundreds of autonomic functions they were designed to.

C-3PO had tried unsuccessfully on several occasions to try and get the Senator to rest or to have something to eat or drink. He fussed about her continuously. Artoo watched his droid friend make a nuisance of himself with growing frustration. No matter how often Artoo told the gleaming protocol droid that the Senator wanted to be left alone, C-3PO would respond with a string of reports on his superior capabilities with respect to interpreting human behavior.

As such, it was not without some personal satisfaction that Artoo whistled contentedly when the Senator threatened to deactivate the bothersome servant--*permanently*--if he didn't leave her alone.

This had been several minutes into the beginnings of the voice vote. Since then, Padme watched in horror as Jedi Master Mace Windu, a man who did not like Anakin and for whom Anakin had no warm feelings, took control of the Galactic Senate, The Republic, and therefore the entire Galaxy.

Where were the Two Thousand Senators? Why did they not speak up? What were they afraid of?

The tears streamed down her cheeks but couldn't assuage the pain that she felt in her heart. She wept more and more but the pain just continued to build. It was a

pain born from a life dedicated to an ideal. An ideal that was being ripped to shreds.

The pain of loss.

The pain of fear.

The pain of betraying her husband's wishes.

Padme Amidala was a powerful woman in the Galactic Senate. She obtained that power, in part, because of her drive and initiative. But the quality that made her most beloved in the Senate was her idealism. She held firmly to her beliefs even in the face of her own destruction. Everyone knew how she fought for her planet when the Trade Federation occupied it. Everyone knew how she battled on Geonosis, side by side with the Jedi in the name of freedom.

*I am not just Anakin Skywalker's wife and mother to his child, she reminded herself. I am the Senator from Naboo. And I will die before I stand by and do nothing while democracy crumbles!*

It was decided.

She stood and walked to the main controls. She changed the hyperspace coordinates with practiced ease and allowed the navigation computer to calculate the new vector. When the computer was ready, she ordered the ship to alter course in the hyperspace lane to the new destination. The flowing sky-blue beauty of the hyperspace lane altered subtly and the ship vectored on a new approach to its new target--it's port of departure--

Coruscant.

*Anakin, I'm sorry, she called out to him with her heart. Please forgive me.*

## Part XI continued

Date Posted: 6/13 6:45pm

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Plo Koon never liked Anakin Skywalker.

He found the young Jedi Knight to be arrogant, abrasive, impulsive, and entirely too driven by emotions. He also found him to be an incomparable pilot and a phenomenal warrior. Anakin Skywalker was the perfect Jedi Knight for the moment. In a time of war, the light side of the Force needed warriors. Anakin Skywalker was the ideal warrior. This Plo Koon respected. This, the Jedi Master feared.

What does one do with a warrior when the war is over? How does one tame the beast that is necessary in a time of war? How does one take all that raw destructive power that makes Anakin Skywalker The Hero With No Fear and turn it into the power of a mediator? Could Anakin Skywalker settle a dispute without a lightsaber?

Hidden behind the breathing apparatus that covered his nose and face to give him breathable air in the oxygen rich environment he was in, the Kel Dor Jedi warrior frowned. Perhaps he never liked Skywalker because he saw too much of himself in the young Jedi Knight. No, he decided. That was simplistic and inaccurate. The Jedi Master understood his flaws and accepted them in himself and others. He disliked Anakin Skywalker because he was an unknown. He disliked the Jedi Knight because he was never sure what the Jedi stood for.

The Kel Dor worldview was very binary. Master Plo Koon in particular saw things in terms of winning and losing; black and white; light and dark. Anakin Skywalker, for the Jedi Master, represented a conundrum. He was capable of undeniable compassion. He would risk his life willingly to save anyone. In fact, he risked his life constantly in a vain attempt to save *everyone*. And this is was the conundrum. *Why* did this Jedi act this way? *Why* could he not learn to let go and accept the will of the Force? His actions were of greed and selfishness. They *seemed* like compassion. But those feelings were taking him to the dark side.

The Jedi Master had sensed this all long ago and issued a warning to his fellow Council Member Obi-Wan Kenobi. Obi-Wan seemed to be too attached to the young warrior to correct this egregious flaw. So Master Plo Koon accepted the Jedi for what he was—an unknown. And Master Plo Koon did not like unknowns.

Now, as he found himself hurtling through space aboard the confiscated CIS

starfighter that had the remarkable advantage of having its own hyperspace drive, the Jedi Master pondered his fate.

How was the young Jedi Knight able to call him through the Force from as far away as Coruscant? How was that even possible? Why was *he* called at all? The Jedi Master had never made his feelings for Skywalker a secret. Certainly a call to Master Kenobi or Yoda would have been far more appropriate.

Never one much for meditation, Master Koon considered his other mystery instead. This one required no use of the Force, but rather deductive reasoning and deep thinking—something he wasn't much for either.

*At least it will make the next hour go by quickly,* he mused.

He thought back to the decision to go to Coruscant. He remembered questioning whether or not he had truly experienced what he believed he had. Once he had accepted the truth of the call to arms, the decision was made. But he had found himself stymied by clone commanders refusing to return to Coruscant and missing hyperspace rings. He remembered the conflicted emotions running across the clone commander's face when he simply hopped into a nearby CIS starfighter that had been brought down by Plo Koon during the battle.

He remembered telling the clone commander that it would be wise not to try and destroy the hyperspace drive on his current ship or the commander might find himself on the business end of a very bright, very hot, and very deadly Jedi Master's ire.

His words had the desired impact, but Master Koon was concerned as he ripped apart the fabric of space in his commandeered craft toward the city world of Coruscant.

*Why were the clones trying to keep me there?* he asked himself for perhaps the third time. *Where's Adi-Mundi when you need him?*

The Jedi Master continued to ponder the situation as a light on his panel came alive, alerting him to his arrival at the prescribed coordinates. With ferocious suddenness, the azure clouds of hyperspace extended and contracted in a horrid distortion before his craft settled neatly into real space. The view through his cockpit became a portrait of distant pinpricks of light filled far below with a giant metal ball with billions of its own pinpricks. Plo Koon looked down at Coruscant with the frown forming beneath his mask again.

He hoped somebody down there would have some answers for him.

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Yoda sat quietly in the Jedi Council chambers deep in meditation. He had said nothing further to anyone after entering the Jedi Temple. He had watched Master Windu's speech live via HoloNet but said nothing. Occasionally, he would nod. His ears would droop a little lower and the creases in his weathered face would grow deeper.

Long after the Korun Master had walked away from the podium, the applause continued. Several minutes after he took his seat with Mas Ameda and Sly Moore on either side of him, the dissonant cheering remained. When the final vote was passed hours later, the head of the Jedi Order gestured casually and shut the HoloNet broadcast down.

Then he began to meditate.

Shaak Ti had watched the proceedings in silence, pushing the limits of her patience but waiting nonetheless. Inside, she found herself fighting to restrain the urge to join the jubilant behavior of the Senate as they gave control of the Republic to the Jedi Order.

*No!* she had to remind herself. *They have given control of the Empire to Master Windu.*

She didn't know what had happened. She wasn't sure when she would know. She wasn't sure what they were waiting for. But when Master Yoda closed his eyes and began to meditate, she took his lead and did the same.

Anakin Skywalker was not so lucky.

The Hero With No Fear was afraid of one thing—that they'd run out of time! Already, Mace had gained control of the Senate and the Republic. In one fell swoop he managed to command more power than Palpatine ever had. But that was not what Anakin feared most.

Mace Windu was growing stronger.

Already the dark cloud that had infected everything for so long and had been lifted with the death of Sidious was growing again. Anakin could see it in the Force as clearly as he saw the two Jedi Masters deep in meditation. He didn't know how to *not* see it.

Mace Windu was not only consumed by the dark side, but he didn't seem to be in

control of it. It was as if the dark side was using the Korun Master as a vessel to pour out its evil on the world.

And the flow was growing stronger.

Anakin stared in disbelief at the Jedi Masters who seemed completely unperturbed by the danger that all this represented for the Jedi Order and the Galaxy. He could feel the dragon unfurling in his chest again. Slowly at first, the tail extending and stretching as if it were waking from a long slumber. Anakin decided it best to meditate.

Slowly, the Jedi Knight closed his eyes and began to inhale the Force like a breath of fresh air. He reached out and quickly found the Jedi Masters in the multitudinous currents of the Force. He extended his reach and found Master Plo Koon exiting hyperspace high above the Temple. He reached out and found Obi-Wan meditating in his starfighter hours away from Coruscant but getting closer. He felt—

“Padme! No!” Anakin’s eyes flew open and he found himself standing with his fists clenched. The dragon was fully awake and the furnace that kept it warm was fully aflame.

Master Shaak Ti awoke from her meditation with unbelievable grace and was standing with her lightsaber ignited, looking about for the unseen danger.

She saw only Anakin Skywalker paralyzed with fear.

“Anakin..?” she whispered. “What is it?”

“Fear, Master Shaak Ti,” Yoda replied calmly, his eyes still closed. “Fear of loss. Drives this young Jedi Knight, it does. On the edge of the dark side, he is.”

Yoda’s words made Anakin blink. His fists unclenched and the light side of the Force flowed into him again as he opened himself to it. He used the Force to quench the fire in his heart and sooth the powerful dragon back into its slumber.

Within moments, Anakin was calm, passive, and at peace.

Yoda seemed to sense this as he opened his eyes and looked up at Anakin. So many times Anakin had seen disappointment in those dark green pools of light. So many times he had seen sadness and...sometimes...even fear. But now, the eyes of the most respected Jedi Master in the Order, Anakin Skywalker saw something new—compassion.

“A fear unnamed,” Master Yoda said calmly as he pointed his gimmer stick to the seat next to him, indicating for Anakin to sit down, “a powerful thing, it is. More powerful than any Jedi. To destroy a fear, alone you must not be. On your fellow Jedi and friends, you must lean, if victorious you wish to be.”

Anakin nodded. He had known this instinctively all his life. But he had always been afraid to show his fear to his fellow Jedi. Palpatine had been the perfect solution. He had been the friend he could lean on. Now that friend was gone. Now that friend never really existed. Anakin felt the tears rush to his face in deluge of pain and terror.

“No pain do you know,” Yoda said softly as he placed his hands upon the weeping Jedi’s shoulders, “that experienced we all, have not. Present your pain to the council, you will. Help you rid yourself of it, the Council can.”

Shaak Ti did not understand what was happening. But she knew that Anakin needed something that the Jedi had never given before. Perhaps it was something the Jedi didn’t have the ability to give. As she sat beside Anakin and placed her hand warmly on his other shoulder, she vowed that if it were possible, she would try.

## Part XII

Date Posted: 6/14 3:39pm

-----Power Struggle-----

Master Plo Koon stood at the entrance to the council chambers in puzzlement. He wasn't sure how long he had been standing there but he knew that it should have been long enough for the three figures inside the room to sense his presence. It was not their collective lack of acknowledgement of his arrival that had the Jedi Master confused. What startled him into the frozen position he maintained at the door was the sight of Yoda and Shaak Ti sitting cross-legged on hassocks in the center of the chamber, deep in meditation—with Anakin Skywalker.

Master Koon racked his brain as his mask filtered the noxious oxygen from the atmosphere in quiet efficiency. He couldn't recall seeing Skywalker meditate like this. In fact, he couldn't remember ever seeing Skywalker meditate at all! He recalled arguments between Skywalker and Kenobi about the very topic. Obi-Wan seemed to think that Anakin didn't meditate enough and Anakin thought that meditation was all Obi-Wan ever seemed to want to do.

Koon meditated often. It was how he was able to contain and focus the warrior spirit that resided in him effectively. His natural heightened sensitivities as a Kel Dorn gave him remarkable skill with the Force. He was capable of powers in the Force most other Jedi could only dream of. But it was not without cost. Each time he used the Force to congeal the air around an enemy to make it cold or hot; every time he used his "Electric Judgment"—a power that resembled the Force Lightning generated primarily by the Sith—he felt a little closer to the dark side.

It was his only fear. It was a fear he had shared with only two people. Qui-Gon Jinn didn't truly understand why Master Koon would call on these powers considering the danger they posed to him. Mace Windu, on the other hand, understood completely. The Korun Master had ventured far closer the dark side than Plo Koon ever had and came back on many occasions. Plo was never confident that he could accomplish the same thing.

So he meditated. Prior to every battle. After every fight. During every conflict. It was a battle for control. Control of the battlespace, yes. But more importantly, control of himself.

Seeing Anakin Skywalker so deep in meditation made the Jedi Master reconsider his thoughts on the youth. There was no doubt that Anakin's lack of emotional control was his greatest weakness and greatest strength. The council had discussed it on many occasions when the subject of the Knight's promotion to Mastery came



up. Skywalker could destroy a battle cruiser in the quest to save the ones he loved. But he could also destroy himself, too.

Now, the Jedi Knight seemed centered. Calm. Passive. All the traits that the Jedi call for. Master Koon wondered if that state would limit his power.

“You don’t say much, do you Master Koon?” The voice of Anakin Skywalker broke the Jedi Master’s reverie and pulled him into the present. Anakin’s eyes remained closed, as if still deep in meditation. “I never realized that until now,” he continued.

The Jedi Master blinked in astonishment as he looked at Anakin in the Force. The light side of the Force completely engulfed the young Jedi Knight. Energy seemed to swirl around him in dancing tongues of blue flame that ebbed and flowed in beautiful regular patterns that seemed to coincide with his breathing. Master Koon had seen something like this once several years prior when he had walked in on Yoda in the council chambers while the diminutive Jedi Master was deep in meditation. But the sight had been very brief. Once Yoda had become aware of Plo Koon's presence, he seemed to lose his connection with the Force that produced this remarkable state.

Koon looked at Yoda and Shaak Ti. They had the characteristic light-blue spheres of energy surrounding them in the Force that he had often observed in Jedi Masters deep in meditation. Master Yoda's sphere was larger and much better defined than Shaak Ti's but this was also not uncommon given their relative powers in the Force. The sight of Anakin Skywalker however, was unsettling. The Knight may have been more centered, but he was still an unknown.

“But an unknown filled with the light side of the Force,” Anakin said as a single corner of his mouth turned upward in that arrogant half-smile Plo Koon had seen on him so many times.

Yoda and Shaak Ti’s eyes opened immediately as they looked at Anakin in bewilderment. His eyes remained closed and his harmony with the Force seemed undisturbed.

Master Koon’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Master,” Anakin said. “I just wanted to assure you that I’m on your side. Now and forever.” Master Koon said nothing.

“Use of the Force to probe the minds of others, difficult this is,” Yoda almost whispered. “Accomplish this skill on a Master, unheard of.” Yoda looked at Anakin deeply in the Force and could see the Jedi’s powerful connection to the

ever-flowing currents of energy as they extended from one end of the galaxy to the next. Yoda blinked. After a moments hesitation, Yoda seemed to call on the Force for an answer to an unspoken question. Finally he opened eyes and spoke again.

“Perform that skill again,” Yoda said firmly, “You should not.”

With a suddenness that surprised all three Jedi Masters, the blue flames of energy dissipated in the Force as Anakin disconnected himself from his meditative state.

“Yes, Master,” Anakin replied. He turned to look Master Plo Koon in the eyes, unfurled his legs, stood and bowed in respect. “I’m sorry, Master.” A curt nod from Plo Koon was all Anakin got. He seemed to find this amusing as he broke into a smile.

“You *really* don’t say much, do you, Master?” He said almost laughing aloud.

The filter mask that Plo Koon wore did not muffle his response. He used no vocabulator as many of his species did. He believed that he looked enough like a machine already wearing the mask. He didn’t relish the idea of sounding like one.

“Some people talk much,” He said as he moved towards his seat, “And say little.”

**Part XII continued**  
**Date Posted: 6/14 7:40pm**

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The deep darkness that is space shimmered momentarily then exploded for an instant with intense illumination. From that burst of energy arose the shining silver skiff of Senator Padme Amidala of Naboo.

She looked down sardonically at the gleaming orb that was Coruscant and found no joy in its glimmering lights. She watched it turn slowly beneath her ship and found no sense of being home. As her ship descended into the atmosphere and made way to enter the traffic lanes that would take the ship to her apartment at Five Hundred Replica, the former Queen could only find sadness in her heart. And dread.

Gone was the planet that she had left only hours earlier. Gone was the galaxy that she had believed in all her life. Gone were the principles of democracy. Gone was the meaning in the billions of deaths that had occurred in this great galactic war over the past three years. Gone was all meaning.

Save one.

Anakin.

She wept again, as she silently turned over the controls to C-3PO for the third time in the past hour. Her heart ached for her love. Her heart bled for her lost Republic. She watched with deepening sadness the thousands of beings in the capital of a Republic that had stood for one thousand years.

They milled about their lives completely oblivious to what they had lost. They continued to honk at each other in the skyways as if having to reverse thrusters to avoid collision was the worst thing that had happened all day. They continued to go in and out of bars and restaurants eating pointless meals and drinking pointless drinks. The death stick dealers continued to push their narcissistic product on the weak-minded. No hallucinogen ever created could wash away the horror that had befallen the galaxy. She watched them all through tear-stained eyes and envied them.

Then the anger took hold. At first she thought she was angry at them. They should care more! They should shout and protest! They should understand the tragedy that had befallen them and rise up to stop it before it was too late.

But the Senator from Naboo knew better. She was angry at herself. She was furious at her fellow Senators. The Senate existed so that the common man could mill about his life without worry. The Senate breathed life into the Republic so that everyone could eat pointless meals and drink pointless drinks. If the masses were afraid, then the Senate had failed. *She* had failed.

“I shouldn’t have left,” she said aloud to no one in particular. There were no tears in her eyes. She had none left to shed. Instead a fire burned in them as fiercely as the distant sun that lit the sky.

“Begging your pardon, Ma’am,” C-3PO responded, tersely. “But I am quite certain that we shouldn’t have returned. Master Anakin was quite specific about the danger you might face by remaining here. While Master Anakin is not always the most cordial of the Jedi, he often tends to be right about these sorts of things. Why, I remember on one occasion—“

“Shut up 3PO!” Padme yelled much more harshly than she intended. She considered this a moment and decided that she didn’t feel much like apologizing to a machine. “Shut up and fly.”

Threepio’s photoreceptors locked onto the Senator’s face for a long moment. If he had the ability to blink in surprise, he would have. Instead, he ran all the subroutines he knew about human behavior and found none that would explain the Senator’s sudden outburst. She was normally a very gracious owner and generally lovely person to know. He had found no fault in her formality and geniality. This behavior, his subroutines told him, was entirely out of character. Threepio looked to Artoo who remained stationary behind them both, quiet for a change.

Artoo’s dome swiveled to look at the Senator and then back at Threepio. Threepio turned away from the astromech droid and started to ask the Senator what was the matter. A series of beeps and whistles from Artoo cut him off.

SOMETIMES, DISCRETION IS THE BETTER PART OF VALOR, C-3PO's translators told him the droid was saying. Threepio considered this for a moment.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Threepio replied as he turned back to the flight controls.

“What was that Threepio?” Padme asked distractedly as she continued to stare out of the viewport at the sea of people below. Asking Threepio to repeat himself was normally an invitation for the protocol droid to go into a virtually unstoppable harangue that would inevitably result in the machine being told to shut up. On this day, Threepio seemed to sense that this was not the time—a skill he was only now beginning to develop.

“Nothing, my lady,” C-3PO responded after a moment’s hesitation. “Nothing at all. Shutting up and driving as requested.”

Padme hadn’t heard a word.

Inside her intense mind, plans were formulating. She may have to take part in a battle with a Master in the Jedi Order. She was prepared for that. Anakin would have to handle it.

But her first fight would be a political one. A fight she was eminently qualified to engage in.

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“What now?” Plo Koon had asked.

Several moments had passed while the other two Jedi Masters seemed to be meditating on this question. Anakin had gathered them all there directly or indirectly, so they looked to him. Anakin could feel their stares burrowing into him and found that he was only slightly more comfortable than the time he and Obi-Wan were surrounded by Giant insectoid creatures on some backward planet during a border dispute five years ago.

“I suggest we hold a council meeting?” Anakin offered weakly. The others continued to stare at him unblinkingly. “What?”

“A council meeting, we shall have,” Yoda answered. “But missing, several Masters are. To contact them, too dangerous that would be. Who may be listening, one may never know. But without knowledge of where the Masters are, or what they are doing...dangerous it is to proceed.”

“Obi-Wan is about five hours away.” Anakin said.

“Anakin,” Shaak Ti interjected with widened eyes. “How could you know this?”

“I sensed him during my meditation,” Anakin replied matter-of-factly. “Ki-Adi-Mundi, Stass Allie and Pablo-Jill are each heavily involved in humanitarian efforts on the planets they were on. The devastation wrought during their battles is enormous. There are skills that our Masters bring to the table that can ease the burden of search and rescue.”

All three Jedi Masters sat speechless. Yoda’s eyes narrowed slightly. Slowly, the Jedi Master closed his eyes and seemed to center himself.

“Sense this all, can you?” Master Yoda said finally.

“Yes, Master,” Anakin replied.

“More powerful than any Jedi, you have become if across the galaxy your influence spreads.”

“I can’t influence them, Master,” Anakin replied. “Only sense them.”

“Anakin,” Yoda replied as he opened his eyes and looked up at the Jedi Knight who seemed to grow in power by the moment. “No limits on the Force exist, but what we put on it. Size matters not. Distance matters not.”

Anakin looked at Yoda in disbelief.

“Discuss this further, alone we will,” Yoda said abruptly as he sat up and looked around the room, taking control with a simple lift of the chin. “Discuss our situation first, we must. To do this, a report from you we will need, Anakin.” Anakin stared at Yoda for a long moment. He hung his head.

“In these chambers, a report you will make,” Yoda said with a genuine smile. “Your rights and wrongs, tell us you will. Your connection to Palpatine. Your connection with the Senator. Your connection with the dark side.”

Anakin could feel the dragon extend inside his chest and coil its barbed tail about the bases of his brain. He could feel the fear rushing to the surface as he now faced the council, in truth. He stood and walked to the center of the council chamber from where all reports to the council were made. The council chairs slid into place as the council members present took their respective positions. Anakin’s legs were weak but he remained standing. His chest felt constricted but he continued to breathe.

*I must face this* he thought. *There is no other way.*

Six words were the first to leave his mouth. They were words that had haunted him for three years. He would speak for almost an hour more after he had made his opening statement. But the relief that came with those words made all the others easier. No reaction from the council would be obtained until he was finished, he knew. So the Jedi Knight decided that the most important and relevant thing he had to report was a secret he needed to tell them to free himself of the chains that he had allowed Palpatine to wrap him in. He spoke the words softly.

“Padme Amidala and I are married.”

The Chosen One finally stopped talking nearly an hour later, his sudden silence a conspicuous reminder that he had been the only speaker. He looked from Master to Master attempting to gauge their reactions.

He had told them of his relationship with Padme. He had detailed his massacre of the

Tusken Raiders following the death of his mother. He had explained the actual nature of Count Dooku's demise. He had revealed the intimate particulars of the attempt by Palpatine to seduce him to the dark side of the Force. He informed them how close he had come to being seduced. He mentioned the dragon that raged within him even then; how his mind clenched around the furnace of his heart to hold in the seemingly inevitable explosion.

Shaak Ti's eyes had widened to resemble the plates Anakin had dined on with Padme on Naboo early in the conversation and they widened even more as he had continued to speak. Her mouth had taken on a similar shape by the time he had completed his report—

Plo Koon sat impassively, watching the young Jedi Knight with piercing and dissecting eyes throughout the report but said nothing—

Yoda was an impenetrable mask of tranquility—

“How long, this dragon, have you wrestled with?” Yoda asked. His movements were slow and deliberate, his gimmer stick back in his hand and pointing at the Jedi Knight. Anakin hadn't even realized that the head of the Order was missing his sometimes impromptu pointer until he saw the Jedi Master call it to him casually.

Anakin's face darkened as he considered the question. It wasn't the question he was expecting. He anticipated a severe scolding and possible removal from the Order for the unsanctioned marriage. He expected a lecture from the Council regarding friends outside of the Jedi who might want to abuse that friendship. He had prepared for someone in the Order to yell or scream at him about how stupid he had been all these years. He certainly believed that after telling them about his massacre of the Tusken Raiders on Tatooine they would at least send him to his room!

Instead, the Jedi's first question was about something that Anakin was convinced

he had under control.

The dragon lurched in his chest and spread its wings. Anakin could feel it gain power from its lair as the furnace that was Anakin's heart ignited. His fear had woken the dragon at the start of his report. Now, his anger fueled it.

"It is under control, Master," Anakin replied through clenched teeth.

"Under control, you say, hmmm?" Yoda replied with widening eyes and a definite scoff. "Under control? Feh!" Yoda slid from his seat and hobbled over to Anakin without grace and with seemingly great effort, his gimmer stick sharply rapping on the highly polished duracrete floor with each step.

"Control is a skill, you never honed!" Yoda said sharply. "With your power, destroy a planet, you could. Destroy the passion that fuels that power, you can not. Our help you must accept, or grapple with this creature you will, all your life. Defeat it you will not!" The last sentence was punctuated with a series of gimmer stick pokes for emphasis that ended on Anakin's increasingly sore shins.

"Now, answer the question, you will. How long, this dragon have you wrestled with!?"

"As long as I can remember, Master." The answer was immediate and completely sincere.

Plo Koon's eyes widened and he leaned forward in his seat. Anakin turned to face him. The two looked at each other for a long moment. Plo Koon saw many things in Anakin Skywalker's gaze in that moment. But what the Master connected with most was the fear that he and Anakin shared. The fear of losing control.

"How have you managed to keep it at bay, Skywalker?" Plo Koon asked. The intensity of his question was palpable.

"With my will, Master Koon," Anakin said unabashedly. There was no pride in his words. This was simply a report of fact.

"And my fear of the consequences if I fail." Anakin added softly.

"Your greatest achievement, that is," Yoda said as he struck his gimmer stick to the floor. "A struggle for power, I sense in you Skywalker. Fighting for purchase in your heart, the light and dark are. To end this conflict, *choose* you must."

"But Master, I have already chosen," Anakin replied.



“No!” Yoda replied. “*Delayed* the choice, you have. Delayed to fight a war or to marry the Senator or to help your friends or to destroy the Count. *Reasons and excuses*, you give your heart, so delay the choice you can.”

Anakin blinked at the thought. It was a test! A test he would have failed if had been able to stop Master Windu from killing Palpatine!

“Why would I want to delay any choice, Master Yoda?” Anakin responded. “If I had the power to end my pain, *why* would I not choose to do so?”

“Afraid to lose the *dragon*, you are.” Yoda responded with pity in his eyes.

A silence filled the room as Yoda stood looking up at Anakin. They stared at each other for several moments.

“*Afraid*, you are that your power will diminish. That most powerful of the Jedi, no longer will you be. Afraid that nothing you are, if not most powerful you are.”

Anakin Skywalker stared at the minuscule leader of the Jedi Order unable to speak. In a single sentence, Yoda had opened Anakin bare and examined his innards with a powerful beam of light. Yoda turned curtly away from Anakin.

“But...” Yoda continued as he hobbled back to his chair. “Hope, there is. Accept the light side of the Force you have. Control this dragon of yours, the Force can, better than you. The dark side would feed it. *Choose* you must, to free yourself of this darkness in you, or destroy you it will.” Anakin stood motionless.

“Master Yoda,” Plo Koon said. All eyes turned to look at the quiet Jedi Master who spoke so infrequently that his words carried enormous weight. “I believe the Jedi has chosen already. The kind of discipline you ask of him—the kind that requires he destroy the darkness within him—takes a *lifetime* to learn. Simply because the darkness *exists* doesn’t mean it cannot be *controlled*.”

Rarely had anyone ever contradicted the ancient Jedi Master who sat at the head of the Jedi Council. When the council was unsure of what direction to take, his choice was always the one the council agreed on. It had been that way for over a hundred years.

Yoda pondered Plo Koon’s words.

“I am forced to agree with Master Koon,” Shaak Ti interjected a moment later before Yoda could respond. “He’s here with *us* and not up there with Mace. Master Windu obviously had darkness within him too. But don’t we *all*?”

Yoda closed his eyes and sank into the Force. A moment later he opened them and looked at the two Masters.

“An excellent point, both of you make.” Yoda answered after a long moment. “The decision, perhaps already has been made. Greater strength of character, none of us can ask. Thank you, Masters.” He paused and pondered the exchange. Then smiled.

“Much to learn, I still have.”

Plo Koon and Shaak Ti relaxed back into their seats and Anakin felt his arms again. But Anakin still had concerns.

“Master,” he said before he even realized he was speaking. “What of my dishonest actions with respect to my marriage to Padme? What of my actions on Tatooine and on the Invisible Hand?”

Yoda sighed.

“Aware of your relationship with the Senator, I was,” Yoda replied.

The other two Masters and Anakin found themselves rigid with surprise.

“Of this affair, only Master Kenobi and I knew,” He continued. “The secret marriage, unknown of this was. But the love you shared, not blind to it, were we.”

“Then why...?” Anakin found himself stammering.

“To gain Mastery of the Force, accept himself, one must.” Yoda replied. To join the Jedi Council, trust his council members, he must. Decided, we did, that when ready you were to report your relationship, ready we would be to support the council’s decision to grant you the rank of Master.”

Anakin blinked in surprise.

“But...I thought I would be banned from the Order!” Anakin found himself struggling to keep the frustration out of his voice. He wasn’t sure if he should be elated or furious.

“A poor decision, this marriage was,” Yoda answered. “The consequences of this choice, already you can see. But...exceptions to rules can be made when requested. Master Ki-Adi-Mundi, five wives he has. Made an exception for him, the council did. Expect less for you, you should not.”

“But that was different—“

“*No!* Not different.” Yoda answered. The Jedi Master was frustrated. “Always with you, how *different* things are! Look for harmony, you must. Find the common ground, you should. A prison, the Order is not! A police state, this is not! Dedication, this is! Honesty, this is! Accept this lesson, you must, if hope you do to grow.”

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This is how it feels to be Anakin Skywalker, right now:

You have just learned that all your life you’ve been wrong about the Jedi. Everything you thought you knew was a distorted vision brought about by the warped lens you used to view the world.

You realize that you never counted on Jedi compassion. You never trusted the Jedi. You chose to mistrust them because you believed they mistrusted you.

Now, you stand with three Jedi Masters before you and your respect for them grows beyond anything you had felt before. You see them, for the first time, as the entity that Obi-Wan and Padme kept insisting they were—your family.

All the fears that the dragon had used to feed it were baseless. All the anger you had directed at Obi-Wan was wasted. All the venom you had spewed at the Order in your silent moments alone, were for nothing.

Knowing what you know now and knowing how close you came to becoming a Dark Lord of the Sith to quench a fire that should never have been burning makes you shudder.

You were a fool.

You look at the Jedi Masters with a new lens for the first time. You see their inner beauty. You see their undying compassion. You see their forgiveness.

But most importantly, you see the thing that you believed only Darth Sidious was prepared to give you—

Acceptance.

And you love them for it.

## **Part XII the end**

**Date Posted: 6/15 1:52pm**

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Anakin felt a tremor in the Force as palpable as sensation one gets upon sighting an approaching thunderstorm. The black cloud of the dark side was in motion and Anakin could feel it disrupt the smooth currents in the Force.

“He is coming.” Anakin announced.

The three Masters looked at each other in surprise, searching the faces of each other to find some form of confirmation of Anakin’s report. They found none.

“He is hiding himself in the Force,” Anakin explained. “But I can still feel him. He just left the Capitol in the Chancellor’s shuttle. He should be here within minutes.”

“Sense his intent, can you?” Yoda asked as he pondered what to do next.

“No, Master,” Anakin replied. “But I know that he wants his arrival to be a surprise.”

Yoda nodded. It was a nod of resignation.

“Prepare for his arrival, we must,” Yoda declared. “Invite the other Masters to our meeting, we must if suspicion of our actions we are to avoid.” With a nonchalant wave of his hand, Yoda called on the Force and the missing Jedi Master’s chairs slid into place. Shaak Ti stood.

“I will contact them and inform them of the meeting,” Shaak Ti offered as she headed for the door. Anakin stopped her gently.

“I just did,” he told her. She looked at him with unabashed awe.

“You can do that?” She asked, her eyes widening and her mouth agape.

“Apparently,” Anakin shrugged as he looked over at Ki-Adi-Mundi’s chair. In it, holoemitters produced the form of the Jedi Master from Cerea seated comfortably. Pablo-Jill materialized next, looking confused with his large fish-like eyes wide. Stass Allie and Obi-Wan Kenobi appeared almost simultaneously in their respective chairs carrying similarly bewildered looks on their faces.

Of all the newly arrived Jedi Masters, only Ki-Adi-Mundi seemed at ease. The

calling of the meeting in this unorthodox manner seemed to assuage concerns he had rather than raise any.

Obi-Wan's bewildered look only lasted as long as it took him to spot Anakin. Then he seemed to relax completely and smile.

"An interesting trick, you've picked up there, my old Padawan" Obi-Wan said. Anakin turned quickly to his former Master with joy emanating from the very fiber of his being. He smiled and bowed respectfully.

"Only because of your training, my Master," Anakin replied.

"How were you able to call this meeting?" Jedi Master Allie interjected. The interruption annoyed Anakin as he wanted nothing more at that moment than to confabulate with Obi-Wan. He admonished himself for his reaction and turned to answer the Jedi Master.

"Much has occurred, since last we met," Yoda intervened before Anakin could speak. "Discuss it now, we will not. A meeting for appearances only, this is."

The absent Masters looked from one to another and then back at Yoda.

Obi-Wan's right eyebrow arched high onto his forehead. Ki-Adi-Mundi tilted his head slightly as he so often did when pondering a thought. Anakin always pictured a ball rolling from one side of the Cerean's extended skull to the other and had to stifle a giggle when he saw him do it. Pablo-Jill nodded in acceptance, as did Stass Allie.

Obi-Wan appeared to be about to argue the point when Anakin's eyes widened in surprise.

"He's here!" Anakin announced.

"Who's here?" Obi-Wan asked in confusion.

The doors to the Council Chambers swung open abruptly but no hands touched them. The man responsible obtained the desired effect. Every eye in the room, corporeal or otherwise, turned immediately to look directly at him.

In the entranceway to the Jedi Temple Council Chambers stood a 1.88 meter tall, dark-skinned and smooth-headed man. He was dressed in dark flowing Senatorial robes of black and red. His hands were spread in a manner that indicated he was receiving adulation from the gathered assembly.

Then he smiled.

He was a man that every person in the chamber had fought alongside at some point in their life; a man that each of them respected not only for his skill and power but also for his compassion; a man that most of them called friend.

He was also a man that radiated power from every pore. He was a man who suddenly stopped hiding himself in the Force so that every Master in the room could now sense his presence.

The presence of the dark side.

Seemingly satisfied that his entrance was adequate, Mace Windu stepped slowly into the Council Chambers. Anakin watched him in the Force and saw the dark energies ebbing and flowing about the Jedi Master in random, chaotic patterns. The other Jedi Masters sat in horror as they watched their friend strut across the room with slow, deliberate steps.

Each step, Anakin could see, sent a ripple in the Force that emanated from the Korun Master before him. Each stride sent dark waves of energy through the temple walls. Anakin winced at the sight but said nothing.

After an interminable period that in fact, lasted only moments, Mace Windu came to a halt in the center of the circle that made up the Jedi Council.

“Now what, pray tell,” He began as he turned in a circle about the room, eyeing each Master carefully. He stopped on Anakin and held his gaze for several moments. The corner of his mouth curled into a mischievous smile. “Have you all been up to?”

## Part XIII

Date Posted: 6/16 8:07pm

-----Return of the Sith-----

Senator Amidala stood in the center of her apartment holding room surrounded by a dozen Senators. They had all been called personally by Padme the moment she had arrived at Five Hundred Replica.

These were the leaders of the Two Thousand. These were the Senators who had called her in a desperate hope that she would join their political rebellion against Palpatine. Terr Taneel stood quietly with hope in her eyes. Fang Zar trembled openly, constantly looking about the room as if looking for spies. They looked at her expectantly. Some with dread and others with hope.

She gave no preamble.

“Senators,” she announced in a voice clearer and stronger than any of those gathered had ever heard from her. “We have lost the war.”

The room immediately erupted in small grumblings as the gathered Senators bickered amongst themselves about the accuracy of the Senator from Naboo’s outrageous proclamation. Two Senators said nothing. Instead, Bail Organa and Mon Mothma hung their heads and averted their eyes in shame.

“I made the mistake,” Padme continued, raising her voice slightly to quiet the small throng. “Of believing that my life was more important than the Republic. I left my home to flee the approaching storm and by doing so, I was not here to help you beat back the torrents of winds and rain that has assaulted our great democracy. Now, I stand here before you with a broken heart as I watch the greatest social achievement in Galactic history get washed away in a tidal wave of fear and misplaced nationalism.”

The other senators had stopped speaking. None of them knew exactly what to say but all were moved to say something. Padme Amidala was not done.

“But only watch, I will do no longer!” Her voice was filled with vigor. “No longer will I sit back idly and allow the power of the people to be shifted into the hands of a single man—Jedi or not! No longer will I watch from the stands as we demolish our freedom in the vain hope of security! I will not go silently! I will not let this Republic die without a fight!”

The room was silent. No one spoke as her words echoed through the room and in

their hearts. They felt the surge of patriotism. They felt the power of her words. But they also all felt the fear. Each Senator looked up at her and each averted his eyes when they saw the fire that burned in hers.

The silence in the room was tearing into Padme's already broken heart.

"Will none of you join me?" she asked quietly. She looked from one senator to the next and saw nothing but fear in their eyes. She nodded briefly to herself. She understood their fear but she wouldn't bow to it.

"Very well," she replied to the unspoken affirmation of their apparent cowardice. "I will fight alone. I will die alone, if need be. This Republic is bigger than all of us—and it's bigger than my fear." She turned from the gathering of Senators and began to head to her private room to prepare the legislation she intended to introduce.

"I will join you!" Bail Organa from Alderaan announced, standing tall. His shoulders squared broadly.

"And so will I!" came the melodic timber of the voice of Mon Mothma as she stood tall as well.

"Thank you Senators—"

"We have to fight now!" sang from the voice of Fang Zar as he joined the others.

"It's now or never!" said Terr Taneel and she marched to join the throng.

"We'll follow you wherever you lead," said Giddean Danu.

Padme watched, awestruck as one by one, each Senator in the room stood tall and brave in the face of insurmountable odds. She nodded again at the group.

The realization hit her when the last Senator stood and vowed his allegiance to their cause.

She was now the de facto leader of a Rebellion.

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Rage.

The dragon thumped its tail with increasingly powerful strokes against the chest of Anakin Skywalker. He could feel the rhythmic drumbeat of his pulse as it pounded



against his temple. His mechanical arm was clenched so tight that the servomotors squealed in protest. Energy in the Force boiled around him as the furnace that fed his power churned in response to his anger.

Mace Windu smiled.

Immediately Anakin realized his emotional state. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply into the Force. The light side of the Force became a deluge on his heart, quenching the fire that had erupted so easily and drowning the dragon into unconsciousness. In the Force, the Jedi Knight felt the refreshing coolness of the calm brought to him like a mineral spring bath under Tatooine's twin suns and he breathed out the rage that threatened to consume him. He opened his eyes to find the Korun continuing to stare at him with a malevolent smile.

Anakin Skywalker smiled.

Immediately the new Chancellor of the Galactic Republic's face contorted into a look of pure hatred and he broke the gaze he had held for so long. Anakin could see the roiling dark side energies manifest themselves more clearly about the Jedi Council member who stood before him. In the Force, Anakin saw the dark flames take on a blood-red hue and the fire in Mace Windu's heart seemed to extend about him with increasing luminosity. Anakin could feel the Master fight down the urge to draw his lightsaber and strike.

"Discussing your actions," Master Yoda interjected a response to Mace's question, "the Council has been. An explanation, perhaps, you will provide? Hmm?" Yoda pointed his gimmer stick at Mace accusingly.

"I don't think there's anything to explain, Yoda" Mace replied calmly. Anakin noticed that the fires around the dark Jedi Master seemed to be subsiding into a smoldering heat that radiated power.

"Palpatine was a Sith Lord," he said matter-of-factly, "So I killed him."

"So simple an action, this is not," Yoda responded. "To kill a defenseless man, Sith Lord or not, murder this is! Action of a Jedi Master, it is not." Mace shot a glare at Anakin who held the stare defiantly.

"There was nothing defenseless about Darth Sidious," Mace responded. "He was more powerful than any of us could ever dream."

"And what of your decision to become Supreme Chancellor without consulting the Council?" Shaak Ti asked, recognizing that the line of discussion would be pointless.

Mace twirled in her direction with sudden ferocity in his eyes. He stared at her for a long moment before seeming to calm himself. The entire council exchanged wary glances. If Mace noticed, he said nothing. Instead he sighed deeply as if answering a precocious child.

“Last I checked, Shaak Ti,” Mace replied after exhaling loudly. “There are no rules preventing me from accepting a position in the Republic Government. Is our mandate, after all not to *protect* the Republic? What better protection can the Republic hope for that to be in my tender care?”

Yoda’s eyes widened at the comment as if seeing his old friend for the first time.

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This is what it’s like to be Yoda, Fountain of Light, right now:

You’ve been in this room with him more times than you can count. You have discussed the intricacies of the Force on hundreds of occasions. You have leaned on him when you felt weak—an act you could do with no other. You watched him grow from an impatient petulant child into a Jedi Master virtually unmatched in power and skill. You have been amazed by his wisdom for one so young. You have been impressed with his ability to defuse a situation without ever drawing his lightsaber. You have been delighted with his presence when the darkness felt like it was overwhelming you. You have been proud to call him your friend.

And you don’t know him anymore.

You realize the man before you is merely a shell of the man you once knew. The man you once knew was the greatest Jedi the Order had seen in three generations. You know this because you’ve seen them all. You watched them come forth from the Force and return to it for nearly a millennia. The loss of friends is nothing new.

But never has a loss burned so deeply.

A lightsaber thrust to the heart would bring less pain.

You look at your former friend and companion in the battle against the dark and realize now and forever---

He is lost.

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Yoda watched the conversation begin to escalate in stunned silence. The recognition of the fall of Mace Windu was only slowly working its way through him...

“*Your* care?” It was Obi-Wan. The Jedi Master, hundreds of light-years away rocketing toward Coruscant, was incredulous. “What have you *done*? What of the *Order*? What of *peace*?”

“*I* will bring peace!” Mace shouted as he whirled toward the hologram. “*I am* peace! There is no Order without me! I am the Chosen One!”

The room stood silent as the darkness erupted from the Jedi Master. They could all feel the dark energy flow from him and permeate every corner of the room like a river of fire that burned without end. Anakin stood and called on the Force.

Power poured from the youth in a continuous flow and disrupted the dark inferno that had consumed the chamber. The other Masters sat paralyzed by the energies fighting for purchase. Anakin and Mace stood facing each other in a battle for control. Alone, they stood as the other Jedi Masters were frozen in a daze. Ki-Adi-Mundi, Pablo-Jill and Obi-Wan Kenobi could only watch helplessly as Anakin battled the power of the dark with the power of the light. It was a battle he was winning.

Mace glared at Anakin with pure hatred. The eruption ceased as suddenly as it had began. Anakin stood firmly glaring directly into Mace’s eyes, the dragon within the Jedi Knight fighting for purchase but held in chains by his will.

Mace Windu smiled.

The other Masters blinked in surprise in surprise as if awakening from a nightmare. Obi-Wan, unaffected by the exchange and able to see it all, finally understood what had befallen Master Windu.

“The Jedi Order is now under my control, as decreed by the Senate this afternoon,” Mace Windu proclaimed, his smile widening. “As head of the Order, *I* will decide who is on this council and who is not! *I* will decide who is to be trained and who is not to be trained. I will *never* be overruled by your *pathetic* votes.”

Yoda started to respond but found himself speechless when Mace finally turned to look him directly in the eye. The fire of the dark side burned in the eyes of his friend. On his face was pure malevolence and hatred. In his eyes was nothing but darkness.

“You have lost your control, Master Yoda,” he grinned. “You have lost your power.”

“No power, have you, to give or take from me,” Yoda replied with resignation. “Stripped of your Mastership, you are. Removed yourself from this Order, you have...On the path you now walk, we will not.” A deep sadness entered the Jedi Order's leader as he spoke barely above a whisper. "Leave now, you must.”

Mace Windu blinked.

“You can’t do that!”

“Done it, I have,” Yoda responded as he struggled to his feet in his chair using his gimmer stick to aid him. “No further discussion with you, will we have today.”

“YOU ARROGANT TOAD!!!” Mace screamed. “IF YOU ARE NOT WITH ME, THEN YOU’RE AGAINST ME!”

“Only the Sith deal in absolutes,” Obi-Wan announced from behind the former Jedi. Mace looked at the hologram enraged. The chair that contained the Jedi Master’s visage rose from the ground.

“I won’t argue with you!” Mace seethed. “You’re not even here!”

The other Masters stood as one as the chair threw itself across the room so rapidly that it became a blur hurtling towards the far wall. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun its flight, the chair stopped in midair and rested itself neatly on the floor.

“He stays.” Anakin said impassively. “You go.”

Sky-blue light emanated from the Jedi’s gloved mechanical hand. A moment later, the song of his lightsaber’s hum was joined by the hiss of the igniting of Plo Koon’s and Shaak Ti’s bright blue blades. The smell of burnt ozone filled the room.

A lightsaber fell from the sleeves of Mace Windu’s right arm and pure amethyst fire exploded from his fist.

“So be it!” He snarled.

“No!” Master Yoda’s voice resonated throughout the room, amplified to deafening levels by the Force. The floors shook with the impact of his gimmer stick as it struck the seat of the chair upon which he stood. A look of anger was etched in the face of the Jedi Master that caused Mace Windu and the warriors ready to engage

him to stop and stare.

“Defile these halls with battle,” Yoda announced. “You will not!”

The three Jedi looked back to their new opponent and lingered for a moment. In their hearts, the battle called. Anakin, used to controlling his rage, deactivated his lightsaber first. Then, as one, the blue light from the other two Jedi Master's weapons retreated into their respective power cells, leaving only purple light burning in the center of the chamber.

Mace Windu looked from one Jedi to the next one after the other and stopped on Anakin. His glare was piercing and powerful.

“You were told that those in power are afraid only of losing it!” Mace said.

Anakin's blood froze.

“You were told that you were not to be here,” he continued.

Anakin felt the energy that fueled him dissipate and his knees weakened.

“You were warned,” Mace finished as he deactivated his lightsaber and stood upright. Rage no longer peppered his face. The former Jedi stood tall and stalked the room.

“Every single Jedi is now an enemy of the Republic!” The Korun Master announced. “If I am no longer a member of this council, then the deaths of the Jedi will be on your heads.” He paused to ensure his words had the desired effect.

"Starting with *his!*"

A bolt of lightning shot from Mace Windu's left hand and struck Plo Koon in the chest. Within seconds the energy engulfed the Jedi Master in blue-white flame. Lightning burned the Kel Dorn's flesh and tore away his breathing mask. Anakin screamed and charged at the fallen Jedi only to be struck by an equally powerful blast from Mace Windu's right hand, hurtling the Jedi into the far wall, writhing in pain.

Before another Jedi could move, the lightning ceased and Plo Koon fell to the floor, gasping for air and writhing in agony. His features had been burnt beyond recognition.

Within moments, the great Jedi Master was motionless as his spirit joined the Force.

As the others watched in horror, Mace Windu turned to leave.

“They may follow your Orders, Yoda,” He said over his shoulder. “But I don’t! The Jedi is no home for me anymore. I guess I’ll just have to create a new one.”

Shaak Ti crouched next to her fallen comrade, grief filling her being and tears filling her eyes. She stared through a watershed distortion of the world at the man she once respected and tried to bite back the hatred in her heart. Mace Windu was at the door when he was stopped by Yoda’s voice.

“Mace....” Yoda called out. It was a plea to the man he once knew. It was a cry for a return of the love he once felt for him. It was a clinging to an attachment the Jedi Master never knew he had. Then, in testament to how great a Jedi Master he was, Yoda let the attachment go. He sighed his acceptance. “Chosen a Sith name, have you...?”

Mace seemed to ponder this for a moment. He didn't care what the Order did. He would rebuild the galaxy into one that was greater than it had ever been. With his back to Yoda and the others, he smiled at the thought. He would save them all.

“You may call me...” The new Dark Lord of the Sith paused again as he called on the Force to provide him a name. The answer was immediate and it pleased him greatly. Without turning to look at any of them he continued his exit calling out his new name to the world—

“Darth Salus!”

## Part XIII continued

Date Posted: 6/17 7:27pm

-----Even Stars Burn Out-----

A scream of rage and anguish exploded from Anakin's lungs as he propelled himself across the room with the aid of the Force to the door, his lightsaber alight and burning with the same fury in his heart. He grabbed the doors with such Force, ready to rip them apart to get at the fleeing Chancellor of the Republic.

"Anakin! No!" Master Yoda's voice was barely above a whisper. "Chase him now, you should not. Fight enraged, and lose your soul, you may. Join Shaak Ti and grieve for our fallen friend, you should. The pain, release, or consume you it will."

The words struck Anakin like an anvil.

*Grieve?! Fallen friend?!?*

Anakin turned around and collapsed to the floor when he saw the decimated Jedi Master's burnt form still smoldering from the new Sith Lord's vicious attack. How many more friends was he going to watch die? The tears Anakin wanted to shed did not come. Instead, a determination overcame him as he stood and walked over to the dead Jedi Master's deteriorated body. He knelt next to Plo Koon and placed his hands on the Kel Dorn's head.

"Anakin," Shaak Ti said with concern as she watched the Jedi Knight close his eyes and call on the Force. "What are you doing?"

"No limits on the Force, exist," Anakin replied, his face contorting in concentration. "I'm doing what the Sith seemed to have learned to do. I'm going to save him."

Shaak Ti's eyes opened wide with fear. "The...Sith..?" she whispered.

But Anakin Skywalker was not listening. He summoned the Force to him like as if he were a powerful magnet. He envisioned the man beneath him coming to life. He searched the body in the Force at the same time, looking for any sign of success. When no sign came, he summoned the Force into him with greater strength. He *would not* fail! More and more energy poured into him and yet he could feel nothing from the fallen Jedi but the cold hand of death surrounding him.

Frustrated, Anakin felt the dragon rage inside him. He let it. The light side of the Force was not powerful enough. He called on the Force and the dark energies

poured into him. He wasn't afraid. He pulled them into them and drove them into his fallen comrade.

*I will not fail!*

Yoda watched Anakin with a knowing look, a hand on Shaak Ti's shoulder to silence her protests. He saw the sweat bead on the young Jedi's face. He felt the surging dark energies pour into and out of Anakin. But still, he watched. Anakin's face continued to twist with increasing concentration. Soon, the entire chamber was filled with energy that Anakin was pulling into him.

*I cannot fail! Nothing is impossible! I AM THE CHOSEN ONE!*

The energy he was pulling into him was beginning to overwhelm the young knight. He could feel the dark side energies destroying him. He could feel the dragon devouring him from within. Images swirled in his mind as he exerted all his will on this one task. A task that neither the light nor dark seemed capable of achieving. He called on his rage. He called on his love. He pulled energy from every region of his being and from the very fabric of space itself.

Power began to visibly crackle around the Jedi Knight as blue tendrils of lightning formed around him in a sphere of pure power. Yoda watched without expression. Shaak Ti began to move toward Anakin, feeling there was *something* she should be doing but Yoda's aged hand held her shoulder firm with surprising strength. Yoda seemed to be waiting for something.

With a scream of frustration, Anakin collapsed. Exhausted, the Hero With No Fear's shoulders slumped in despair as he knelt next to his fallen comrade. Tears filled his eyes as he sobbed from exhaustion and despair.

"I'm not strong enough!" he wept. "I'm...not...strong..."

"No one is." Yoda was now standing beside him with his hand on Anakin's shoulder. There was nothing but sympathy in the great Jedi Master's eyes. "A path to stop death, no one can walk."

*Palpatine.*

Fire burned in Anakin's chest.

*Liar!*

The dragon, still not tamed from Anakin's call, burned fire in his heart.



“Anakin,” Yoda said softly as he held tenderly brought the Jedi’s chin and pulled Anakin’s eyes to look into his. “A promise of power, always a price there is. To seduce one with great power, greater power still, you must offer. Wanted your power, Sidious did. *Feared* your power, he did. The greatness in you, for himself he wanted. But the promises he made, lies they were. Accept this you must. Once done this is, let go you can.”

The dragon wanted revenge.

It wanted to destroy.

*No!* Anakin screamed in his mind. *I will NOT be consumed!*

With a flick of his mind, the light side of the Force came rushing into him. With it, he felt the acceptance of Plo Koon’s death. He felt the acceptance of his mother’s death. He felt the acceptance of his own inevitable death. He could not stop it.

*I am strong in the Force*, he smiled in the light, *But not that strong.*

One day, twilight would be upon him, then night would fall.

That is the way of things.

The way of the Force.

All things die.

Even stars burn out.

And the thought brought him peace.

Date Posted: 6/17 10:12pm Subject: Part XIII continued... Everybody...I'm glad you seemed to enjoy that last part.

Here's the second section of Part XIII. Hope you all enjoy.

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For the second time in less than twenty-four hours, the Senate was in emergency session. The Grand Convocation Chamber was filled to capacity as thousands of species from the far reaches of the galaxy gathered to hear a petition by the Senator from Naboo. There was a palpable feeling of euphoria throughout the senate chambers as Senators congratulated themselves for their role in winning the Clone Wars and bringing peace and justice to the galaxy by placing their fate in the hands

of The Greatest of the Jedi. Gentle murmurings were heard throughout the chamber as Senators basked in the glory of their collective genius.

A hush fell over the Senate Arena as the Chancellor's pod rose dramatically from below to take its position center stage. A few Senators marveled at the genius that was Mace Windu as the pod continued to rise past its customary stop at the center ring. They cheered themselves and their new Chancellor as they watched him rise high above to the very top ring of pods and then slightly higher. His presence was so great that he belonged in the clouds.

When the pod finally came to rest, Mace Windu rose to take the main podium wearily. Concern covered the faces of the gathered Senators as they saw the look of sadness on the great man's face. What could bring so exalted a Jedi so low that he would be saddened on so happy an occasion as the liberation of the Republic from the treacherous jaws of the Separatists? What horrible event could prevent him from celebrating the dawning of the age of the Galactic Empire?

Mace Windu bowed his head for a moment as his hands grasped either side of the podium he stood at, as if the support from the Great Seal was all that kept him on his feet. He was desperately holding back the tears in his heart that begged to be shed. The Senators loved him all the more for it.

"My fellow members of the Galactic Empire," he finally began. "I realize we are here to hear a petition from our esteemed colleague Senator Padme Amidala. Unfortunately, I must take this opportunity to make a vital report to you all. A great tragedy has befallen our fledgling government. A tragedy, I'm afraid, I have played an unknowing part in."

The gathered Senators became concerned and worried grumblings began to rise among them in a tidal wave of fear. The Chancellor waited patiently as the representatives of the men and women of the Galactic Empire voiced their concern to each other. After several moments of increasing noise, the Supreme Chancellor raised his hand to silence the masses.

"When I went to arrest Darth Sidious in his quarters," Mace Windu said sadly, his voice cracking slightly with emotion, "I was joined by three of the greatest Jedi I had ever known. Their deaths haunt me even now." He bowed his head again as if in respect for the fallen great ones.

"Their deaths haunt me because their great sacrifice was in vain," he announced finally. "I had believed, as they did, that the target was only the Sith Lord. But I have since learned, that the target was the Republic itself!"

Screams of outrage and contempt erupted in the chamber. Pronouncements of

“Impossible!” and “I don’t believe it!” and “Not the Jedi!” resounded throughout the room. Master Windu looked even sadder than before. Again he raised his hand for silence and the Senators granted it without protest.

“I didn’t want to believe it myself,” he announced. A small gesture by Mace Windu silenced the throng as an audio file began to play on every speaker in the room.

*[the following is a transcript of an audio recording presented before the Galactic Senate on the evening of the first Empire Day; identities of all speakers verified and confirmed by voiceprint analysis]*

YODA: Now we shall see. At last. The waters will begin to clear.

KI-ADI-MUNDI: Have you considered that if Palpatine refuses to surrender power, removing him is only a first step?

MACE WINDU: I am not a politician *[garbled sounds in background. Words unintelligible. Possibly “This is enough for me” (?)]*

KI-ADI-MUNDI: But it will not be enough for the Republic. Palpatine’s dictatorship has been legitimized—and can be legalized, even enshrined in a revised Constitution—by the supermajority he controls in the Senate.

YODA: Filled with corruption, the Senate is. Controlled they must be until replaced the corrupted Senators can be, with Senators honest and—

MACE WINDU: Do you hear us? How have we come to this? Arresting a Chancellor. Taking over the Senate--? To save the Republic we have to destroy it...?”

*[recording ends]*

The entire Senate was silent. Could it be true? It wasn’t possible. Wasn’t Windu in that conversation too? What’s going on here? How is this possible? They think the *Senate* is corrupt? How can they think that when they hold secret meetins planning the Republic's downfall?

“It was at great personal risk, that I was able to retrieve this recording,” Mace Windu proclaimed. “I recovered it with the intent to make the Senate aware before the Jedi attacked.” The Senators hung on his every word, desperate for an explanation. Desperate for hope. The Korun continued.

"After Sidious' death and my election to Chancellorship, I reported to the Jedi Council of my success. I expected them to be pleased. Instead, they ordered me in secret session to dissolve the Senate and then I was to turn over the Empire to Yoda. When I refused, they attacked me viciously."

He paused as he relived the betrayal by the only family he had ever known. He gripped the podium so hard the Senators wondered if it wouldn't collapse under the strength of his traumatized soul. They wept with him as they considered the feelings of betrayal they shared with the Korun Master. Choking back the tears that he refused to shed, the Supreme Chancellor continued.

"I fought as hard as I could, using the very training they had given me to my advantage. But they were relentless. Only the accidental death of one of their Masters during the fight gave me the time to gather this small piece of evidence and flee for my life."

The Senators now understood. They were amazed at the integrity of the man that stood high above them. He had fought the Jedi throughout. He had fought for the freedom of the galaxy. He had fought his family. He cared more about the people than his own life. Could a man have a greater love for the galaxy? The recording showed clearly how he fought against their plans. The anguish in his eyes showed the depths of his pain. The fire in his eyes showed the determination of his convictions.

"I am no longer a Jedi," Mace Windu announced. "I renounce them and their subversive ways! I am yours! The Empire's! I pledge my life to you and in service of you!"

The Senate erupted in a torrent of applause. Thousands of Senators vied for the opportunity to scream the loudest and cheer the hardest! What chance did the Jedi have against the one that was greatest among them? Would they even dare attempt their plan, knowing that the Empire had the most powerful army the galaxy had ever seen at its disposal? Could they be so brazen?

"To prove my loyalty is to the Empire first above all," Master Windu continued, raising his voice preternaturally above the din but allowing their cheering to continue in a rumbling thunderstorm of approval, "I have just declared the Jedi and all who support them Enemies of the State!"

The cheering grew louder. Yes! Attack them first! Pre-empt their attack! Hit them before they can mount their inevitable campaign! The former Jedi Master was a tactical genius. He would rid the Empire of the disease of the Jedi.

"In twenty-four hours," Mace Windu announced, "I will take the Imperial Army

into battle and strike at the very heart of the Jedi. I will wipe them off the face of Coruscant! I will free this great planet of their scourge! Then we will hunt them down wherever they hide. No corner of the galaxy will be safe haven for them! No planet would dare harbor them. I will root them all out and free our great Empire!”

Of the thousands of Senators in the room that screamed and cheered and hollered and celebrated, two thousand sat motionless. One Senator in particular marveled at how easily swayed her colleagues were. How hunger for security had blinded them to the obviousness of the half-truth they had been told. How could they not wonder if the recording had been edited or tampered with? How could they not consider that Mace Windu was a coconspirator in this alleged crime? How could they be so blind as to give this man the power to eliminate the one group of people with the power to stop him if he chose to hold on to power?

Padme Amidala would weep no more. Gone were those days. She would fight now and forever. She closed her eyes and envisioned her child. She called to Anakin with her heart and hoped he would always know how much she loved him. Padme was aware that the volume in the Senate Arena had lowered substantially. It was time. She placed a tentative hand on her swollen belly and felt the child inside her move. She poured all her love into that child and drew strength from that love knowing that it was for her child that she had to fight. She breathed in deeply and rose when she heard the Supreme Chancellor speak--

“*Now*,” announced the Supreme Chancellor with a malicious grin emblazoned on his face, “The chair recognizes the Senator from Naboo.”

## Part XIII the end

Date Posted: 6/18 8:29pm

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Anakin Skywalker was now seated in the council circle, completely depleted of all energy. He had never felt so weak and disconnected. His body ached in ways that he didn't think were possible and his mind ached even more. He tried to call on the Force to help him, but he couldn't concentrate. He could feel the soft tendrils of the light side dancing on the edge of his consciousness but he couldn't bring that power to him.

He needed help.

"Master Yoda," Anakin breathed weakly, "What are we going to do?"

Yoda seemed to ponder this question seated comfortably in his chair. The Jedi Master looked to Shaak Ti and watched her expression closely. He was unnerved to see the fear in her eyes. She had watched a dear friend fall to the dark side and murder another dear friend with a power unlike any of them had ever seen.

"More powerful than Sidious, Windu has become," Yoda whispered. "Cause death with lightning born of the Force, never have I seen and know not, do I of ever having it been done."

It was an incredible statement. The small green creature that dominated the Jedi Council for over three hundred years seemed to know everything that could be known about the Jedi *and* the Sith. If what Mace Windu had accomplished so casually was unheard of before, then Mace represented an even greater threat than any of them believed.

"No doubt," Obi-Wan's voice interjected from across the galaxy, "He is solidifying his power in the Empire even as we speak. I'm sure he is finding a way to vilify us. It won't be long before the Jedi are under attack." Yoda nodded at this as did the other Jedi Masters.

"But how do we counter him?" Shaak Ti asked. "We don't have a political voice to defend ourselves and I'm not sure any of us can match his power." The room quieted for a long moment.

"Two separate questions," Master Yoda finally said though his voice did nothing to lessen the growing tension, "deal with, we must. A fight in the arena, win, we cannot. The attack from Master...*Darth Salus*, inevitable it is. Protect the Order at

all costs, we will.” Yoda’s voice seemed to be breaking under the emotional weight of the situation.

His eyes were full of tears, but he would let none fall.

He turned to Shaak Ti. “The younglings and padawans, gather you will,” he began. “To Iillum, take them and their training you will continue. In the caves, you will hide until safe it is to return. Master Drallig, Nu and Jurokk, take with you.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan announced. “An excellent idea. Might I also suggest that they safeguard all available data in the Jedi archives? It’s a monumental undertaking, but Jacosta can do it.”

“Iillum is too obvious a choice,” Ki-Adi-Mundi spoke up. “If I were this Darth Salus, it would be the first place I’d look for wayward Jedi. We must select a hiding place more difficult to find. One that would hide the Jedi even from those most powerful in the Force.”

Yoda nodded. “Know of a place like this, I do” Yoda responded. “Bathed in the dark side, it is. To hide the future of the Jedi, a perfect place it is.” He turned his eyes back on Shaak Ti.

“To Dagobah, take them,” he said sadly. “Prepare them you must. Go.”

Shaak Ti stood and headed out the door in almost a run. The tasking she had been given was momentous and daunting. The Jedi Temple housed almost a hundred younglings and padawans. Transporting all the holocrons and the children alone would be challenging enough. But she also had to find a way to get them all off-planet without alerting anyone outside the Order. This would be a true test of her cunning. It was a test she intended to pass.

“I will come to Coruscant immediately,” Ki-Adi-Mundi announced as Shaak Ti left the room. “I believe every Master available should be there to face this Darth Salus.”

“No,” Yoda replied shaking his head. “Too important the Order is to risk losing all its leadership. Remain hidden you and Pablo-Jill must. If fail our efforts do, the only hope for the Jedi, you will be.”

“But with Shaak Ti gone,” Pablo-Jill said “And taking with her the rest of the Masters on the planet, that will leave you and Anakin alone to face Mace. Is that wise? Should not our goal be to defeat him, not just survive?”

“Master,” Anakin spoke up. “I’m simply not strong enough to face him now.

Perhaps Master Ki-Adi-Mundi is right. And besides, this is a task for Masters, not knights.”

Yoda looked at Anakin with wide eyes. He had never heard the knight speak so humbly or admit his failings so freely. He looked at Anakin in the Force and could see the exhaustion that had enveloped the young man. He was, indeed weak but his strength would return.

“Face Salus alone, I will,” Yoda sighed. “If fail to destroy him, I do, give time for Master Kenobi to arrive and you to recover, I will.”

“Obi-Wan,” Anakin said sitting up. “You have to get off that ship of yours. Salus controls this Empire of his, which means he owns the clone army. No doubt they will be his fighting force. We can’t risk you being the first casualty of this conflict.”

Obi-Wan nodded in agreement. “I had thought the same thing, Anakin,” he replied. “I will...persuade the clone commander to give me a smaller ship for myself with hyperspace capability. It may delay my arrival by an hour but I will be there as soon as I can.” The Jedi Masters nodded in acceptance and prepared to carry out their assigned tasks.

“Before end this meeting does,” Yoda said, “A matter long overdue, resolved must be.” He turned to Anakin Skywalker with serious eyes. “Several openings, there are, in the council now. The one left by Salus, Master Kenobi will fill. The one left by Kenobi, Master Skywalker will fill.”

And with those simple words, Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker was declared a Jedi Master. The entire council leadership nodded assent and the decision. Anakin sat wide-eyed in shock at the words.

He wasn’t ready.

He wasn’t worthy.

He was dangerous.

He was accepted.

He was honored.

“Thank you, Master Yoda,” Anakin replied finally after composing himself. He looked over at the now-vacant location where Plo Koon had fallen. He didn’t remember when the body had been taken out of the Council Chambers. He decided



at that moment that he would find a way to honor that man's death with the rest of his life.

It was settled. The battle plan was in place. The order to execute, given.

The light began to prepare for the war with the dark.

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"My fellow Senators," Padme began. There was no shake in her voice, although her innards tore at her with fear. "Our Republic, that so many of us have fought and died for is dead." She paused for a moment to let the words sink in. No rumblings emerged from the delegates. No outcries of dismay at the inflammatory words.

Padme Amidala realized in that moment that she had already lost the first battle in her rebellion. *They know!* her mind reeled. *They know what they have done and have accepted it! They think they can win security by giving up liberty and so they are giving it up willingly! They aren't being deceived! They are deceiving themselves!*

Padme didn't know what to say now. Any words against the Supreme Chancellor—soon to be named Emperor—would not just be political suicide. She would most likely be labeled a traitor and executed. While death did not scare her, she knew that she needed to lead the Rebellion until someone else could take over. The Jedi may not be able to help them win this fight. *People* she reasoned, *Will have to resist...not politicians or ideals or religious groups—but people. The men and women of the galaxy.* She would organize them. Someone had to. She was no good to anyone dead—martyred before her cause was even known.

She made the decision.

"Perhaps it needed to die," she said. Her voice cracked at the words that she didn't believe. She saw the pain in Mon Mothma's eyes as she said them but knew the Senator understood. She felt the stab in the heart of Bail Organa but prayed he would forgive. "Even stars burn out, don't they?"

*Even stars burn out* she thought. *But maybe I can stoke the first embers here.*

"But how do we replace so great a democracy as the Republic?" she asked. Before she realized it, her own fires were stoked. "Do we end a thousand years of representative government with a dictatorship? Is this what we, the representatives of the people of this galaxy, think is in their best interests?"

The murmurings began. Senators shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Ever the politician, Padme saw an opening and decided to go for it. She would not risk treason but she would find a way to get them to question themselves. It would be her first effort at recruitment in her rebellion.

“The great Mace Windu,” she continued, “Has graciously taken the mantle of leadership *temporarily* while we settle our differences. How long will we lay this burden on him for? A year? Two? For the rest of his life? Is that fair to him? Is that fair to the galaxy?” She paused a moment to gage their collective reactions. When she saw them grow even more uncomfortable, she pushed her attack.

“The Jedi, it seems, have betrayed us. Can any one of you here not personally attest to how much you trusted the Jedi before today? Would any of you not place your lives in their hands without question before today? And what of Palpatine? Did we not all trust *him*?” Now her words began to have the desired effect. Senators began to grumble audibly. This seemed to cue several Senators, including Bail Organa, to begin to fan the flames Padme was building. Short shouts of outrage would waft across the Arena.

“How can we risk putting all our trust in any one person or organization again?” Padme asked to the crowd. “How can we give absolute power to anyone? And it’s absolute power that you have given our new Chancellor. You have named him Emperor in deed and will name him Emperor in fact! Surely, Master Windu is the most incorruptible of us all! But what of his successor? Surely there will be one. How much power will *that* person have? When will it end?”

Now the concern that began to form in the Senate Arena began to build upon itself. She had made her cause known. She had chosen her words carefully. *Perhaps* she thought *There is still hope*

“Senators!” She yelled as the noise level began to rise exponentially, “We must ensure that betrayal can never cripple our Empire. We must guarantee the people, that our government cannot be broken. We must fight! We must win!” The Senate became a maelstrom of pandemonium. Senators cheered and jeered the speaker who had the floor. They called her a traitor and they called her a patriot. They screamed of her bravery and they decried her cowardice. Senator Padme Amidala stood solemnly in her pod, smiling proudly within.

After several minutes of the cacophony of dissent, a wave of quiet gripped the Senate Chamber with a simple gesture from the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Empire. His right hand was raised as he smiled at the horde.

“Thank you, Senator Amidala,” Windu announced, “For a truly inspiring and

honest presentation to this most hollowed of bodies in the galaxy. Truly inspiring.” With a dramatic raising of his other hand, Mace Windu brought his hands together in a resounding clap. After a moment, he brought his hands together again. He repeated the maneuver over and over again, developing a steady rhythm of applause. As he continued, the Senators began to join him. Within moments, the entire Senate Arena was filled with the steady rhythmic applause directed at the Senator from Naboo.

Padme stood in her pod, unsure of what to do. She brought her eyes up to Windu’s and met his gaze. It was then that she realized that no one was looking at him. *Everyone was looking at her.* Had they bothered to look, they would have seen the malevolence embedded in the eyes of the Supreme Chancellor. They would have seen the threat that seemed to come with his every breath. They would have known the silent declaration that he made to her.

After several moments, the Chancellor ceased his clapping and the rest of the Senate followed suit. He continued to smile but the malevolence in his eyes remained. Padme wondered if she was the only one to see it.

“Truly inspiring...” Mace Windu announced. “But...I’m afraid...*the Senator’s time has expired*”

## Part XIV first section

Date Posted: 6/19 11:34am

-----WAR!-----

Mace Windu's eyes were alight with the fire of rage born in the depths of the dark side of the Force. He stared at the hologram of Clone Commander Maverick in disbelief as he felt the fury building in him like a thermal detonator set to explode. The clone was talking in the same voice of the feared Jango Fett—a warrior of unspeakable skill. Mace felt the anger in him ebb slightly as he relished the memory of how he had summarily removed the bounty hunter's head from his shoulders on Geonosis. He filed away in the back of his mind a plan to train clones to fight him in the future so he could relive the moment whenever he wished. Mace listened to the clone, trying desperately to control his frustration enough to hear the report.

“And you just *let him go*??” Mace asked incredulously.

“Well, Sir,” Maverick replied across the depths of space, “It seemed like such a reasonable request at the time... All he requested was that we drop out of hyperspace and provide him a ship with a hyperdrive. We had confiscated some of the CIS personal craft to give to the Republic's...I mean Empire's scientists. He was so nice about the whole thing, it seemed reasonable to give him one.” Mace shook his head in disgust.

“And I assume,” Mace growled, “That it seemed reasonable to disable your own hyperdrive system so that you couldn't pursue him even if you wanted to...?”

“Yes, Sir...at the time”

“And what do you have to say for yourself now, trooper?” Mace's rage was beyond measure as the thermal detonator exploded in his mind.

“Sir, I...ahh...aaacch...ahh...” The clone commander's hands went to his throat as if trying to remove something clutching his neck. The eyes of Jango Fett bulged as he struggled to draw precious air into his lungs but that was no longer possible. The power of the Force crushed his windpipe and collapsed his lungs.

“You are a weak-minded, pathetic excuse for a commander,” Mace spat through clenched teeth, his power and anger seething. The clone struggled to free himself from this unseen attack. This was something that no blaster could stop and no missile could destroy. Within moments, the clone commander's world went black as his body slumped but remained held aloft by the neck by some unseen power.

“You’re fired, Commander.” Mace said dryly. With a flick of his mind, the dead clone’s body flung itself across the control room that he was in and out of the hologram’s view. When the hologram dissipated, a small green ancient elfin creature appeared from the shadows, standing in the doorway to the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic’s holding room.

“More training,” Jedi Master Yoda announced, “Your guards require, if hope to protect you, they do.”

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Padme seethed with righteous indignation as she stormed down the hallway toward the new Chancellor’s Senate holding room. She understood the risks that now faced her and her baby. She knew that to face Windu now would risk her life and the life of her child.

She was afraid.

But courage is not a measure of how much fear one has. Fear is a natural part of life. Only those who were unconnected to reality can live without fear. She had tried to explain this to Anakin who had once been proud of his moniker “The Hero With No Fear.” She understood what fear was. She had lived with it every day since she and Anakin married secretly. Would they be discovered? Would Anakin’s life be destroyed by their love? Would her life as a Senator be ruined by their relationship? Would the world she knew continue to crumble around her in a war that should never have begun? Would she die in childbirth?

The fears of the past three years swarmed her heart and mind like buzz droids on a hapless ship. She felt the fears mount in her with increasing intensity with every step. Would she ever see Anakin again? Would she live to hold her child? Would Anakin forgive her for choosing to fight than run? Would the fledgling Rebellion that was in place survive her death? Was she strong enough to lead them if she lived?

Fear feeds the darkness. Its power is not in its ability to weaken the body, but in its ability to weaken the heart. Fear has driven great people to do horrible things. Fear has made men of steel cower in the face of danger. Fear drives younglings into their mother’s arms, hoping that the grown-up could stop the danger. Fear could make the strongest of all too weak to fight.

Darkness feeds the fear. The power of the darkness lay not in its ability to obscure the hidden dangers. Its power lay in the ability to feed the fear of the unknown. The danger need only exist in the mind of the fearful. Darkness brings terror for

out of darkness all evil comes. Darkness hides intent. Darkness hides the threat. Darkness clouds everything.

But Padme Amidala, Senator of Naboo continued to stomp through the corridor despite the growing fears in her heart and mind. She tightened her fists with increasing strength to beat back the fear she felt. She breathed deeply as she marched pulling strength of will from the very air around her. She would not stop. No matter the cost.

This is courage. Not an absence of fear. Courage is facing the terror in your heart and embracing it. Courage is walking into the horde of droids, knowing you may die. Courage is believing in something so much, that if sacrificing your life is what it takes to achieve your vision, then that is what you will do.

Courage is Padme Amidala Naberrie. Senator of Naboo; Wife of Anakin Skywalker; and first warrior in the Rebellion.

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Jedi Master Anakin Skywalker sat on the floor in the center of the Jedi Council Chamber deep in meditation. He called on the Force to restore his power. He could feel the energy filling him slowly and he siphoned that energy to repair his bruised body and tortured soul. The dragon rested in his chest, curled around the furnace of his heart waiting to be awoken.

As the Force began to heal him, Anakin looked into the currents of the Force. He was searching for his wife. He could feel her presence on Coruscant and knew she planned to face Windu in a political war. He knew that by making that choice, she was risking all their lives. He knew that she could die. He knew that his child in her womb could die.

*That is the way of things* a voice called to him. *The way of the Force.*

“Qui-Gon?” Anakin’s eyes opened in surprise. He looked about the room and saw nothing. The voice was unmistakable, the tone undeniable. He hadn’t heard the voice in over thirteen years and still he immediately recognized its melody. Anakin called on the Force and looked about the room to see the unseen.

A shimmer of blue light materialized directly in front of him. It was immaterial and insubstantial. Anakin focused the power of the Force on that light and tried to give it form. He looked into and beyond the light. Slowly, the light began to grow and take shape. Anakin watched in amazement as the light took on the appearance of Qui-Gon Jinn, the man who brought him into the world of the Jedi.

Qui-Gon stood impassively for a long moment, shimmering in the blue light of the Force and examining the Council Chambers as if seeing them for the first time. He seemed to take in every detail as he stared out at Coruscant through the window and watched the dying sunlight from Coruscant's orbital mirrors. His eyes widened when he looked at the site where Plo Koon had died and his face grew sad, as if remembering a horrible dream. Finally, the ghost turned his eyes back to Anakin and smiled.

*My goodness, Anakin, Qui-Gon smiled. You've grown.*

"How...is this possible?" Anakin stammered in awe.

*Well, Qui-Gon replied as if considering the question, That's a long story and one we don't have time for. You're the first person to be able to actually see me and this is the first time that I've been able to see the world as I did so many years ago. But for now, let it be enough that I'm here.* Anakin nodded in acceptance. He breathed in the Force again and felt it continue to fill him.

"Why are you here?" Anakin asked numbly.

*Anakin, Qui-Gon answered stooping down to face the newly promoted Jedi Master, I have to deliver a message. A message from the Force, I believe. I don't know what it means but I'm hoping you might. I've watched you for years and I've never seen you grow as much as you have the past few days. Something special is happening with you. You are the Chosen One. I have no doubt of it. But I admit, I may have been mistaken about what exactly that means.*

"How so?" Anakin asked. "I thought it meant destroying the Sith and bringing balance to the Force. Are you saying that's not it?"

*No, Anakin. I'm saying that the Force is mysterious. Bringing balance to the Force could mean many things. I believe only you can really know when you've done it. I no longer believe it is simply destroying the Sith. I just don't know what else it could be.*

Anakin nodded considering the words. Then he felt the tremor in the Force. He could see Padme marching down the corridor. He could feel her determination. He could sense her courage. He felt her fear.

"Can I save her?" Anakin asked solemnly. "She means everything to me. Does the Force require that I let her die?" Qui-Gon Jinn looked at Anakin with sad eyes. His ghostly eyes went distant as he seemed to search the cosmos for an answer.

*I don't know, Anakin* he replied after a moment. *No one can ever really know the*

*future. The ghost stood again and turned his back to Anakin. But I know you will try, Anakin. This is your way. Just ensure that in your quest to save your wife, you don't lose your soul.* He paused for a moment. *Like you almost did on Tatooine.*

The words stung Anakin deeply. No one in the Order really knew how consumed by the dark side Anakin really was on that day. Even now, Anakin wasn't really sure how far he had fallen. He only knew that he had allowed the dragon to wreak havoc in his name and he couldn't control it. He had felt the power swirl about him and he couldn't contain it. He had been drunk with rage and might but hadn't found away to restrain it. Only his isolation had saved him. In his heart he knew that anyone in his path on that day would have died. In the deepest, darkest place in his mind that he kept secret from everyone, including Padme, he knew that had not the remoteness of the Tusken Camp prevented him from raging longer, he would have been lost.

"What is the message, Master?" Anakin whispered. He welcomed the opportunity to change his line of thought.

*One word, Anakin,* Qui-Gon replied, turning back to face the young Jedi Master. *Accept.*

Anakin considered the word and turned it over in his mind. He *couldn't*! Padme was his wife and mother of his child. He *wouldn't* just stand by and watch her die. He had to *save* her!

*And destroy everything she believes in?* Qui-Gon interrupted. *Could she love you if you lost your soul to save her life? Could she walk a dark path with you?*

"I'm going to help her, Master," Anakin responded. "I will guard her with all the power at my disposal." Anakin stood and looked Qui-Gon Jinn in the eyes.

"If it is the will of the Force," he continued with fierce determination in his eyes, "That Padme die, then I will be there with her when it happens and I will love her in this life and the next." Qui-Gon Jinn's ghost nodded but said nothing. Jedi Master Anakin Skywalker was already walking out the door.



## Part XIV continued

Date Posted: 6/19 5:37pm

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“Master Yoda,” Mace smiled behind his desk as he leaned back in his chair nonchalantly, placing two hands behind his head and putting his feet up. “I certainly didn’t expect you to be hanging around. I mean, I did give you a twenty-four hour head start, didn’t I? Shouldn’t you be off packing your things or something?”

“Leave the galaxy in your hands,” Yoda replied, unfazed. “I can not.”

“And what do you propose to do, exactly?” asked the new Dark Lord of the Sith with genuine curiosity. “Challenge me to a clash of lightsabers? Throw some furniture around in a show of our power over the Force? Perhaps even a clash of lightning between two Masters?” A bored look crossed his face. “How mundane.”

“Only a master of evil, you are”

“Perhaps...” Mace replied slowly. “Perhaps that’s true.” He pulled his hands from behind his head and righted himself by placing his feet on the floor. With an attentive look one might expect on a child seeing a new toy for the first time, Mace clapped his hands together and placed them firmly on the desk, leaning forward in his seat.

“You know, Yoda,” he said enthusiastically. “I’ve been dying to ask you something and never had the guts to until now...” Yoda frowned inwardly. Mace Windu was never this playful. This creature of the shadows smiled more than Mace ever did. Yoda pondered this thought then put it away. Any delay in the battle bought time for Anakin to recover and Obi-Wan to arrive. Yoda wasn’t sure, but he thought he might need their help.

“Your question, ask” Yoda replied, eyeing the Chancellor carefully. “Answer it, I will if I can.”

“How is it exactly that you know how to handle Force lightning so well?” Mace asked. “Come to think of it, how is it that you seem to know so much about the Sith in the first place? I mean, the Sith hadn’t been around for over a millennia, as far as we knew, but you seemed to have a handle on all their procedures and practices. You even know how to defend yourself against our attacks!” Yoda listened to Mace’s rant but gave no sign that the question surprised him.

“To defeat the Sith,” Yoda frowned. “A difficult task it is. Understand their ways, you must, if hope to succeed you do.”

“Sort of a ‘Know Thy Enemy’ kind of thing, eh?” Mace replied. “Hmm...I don’t really buy that. Doesn’t sound too plausible to me. You *know* when everybody else just *thinks*. Dooku attacked you in the hanger with everything he had and you just shrugged off his attack and told him to go back to school. That’s pretty impressive for an old guy. You want to know what I think?”

“No.”

“Well, I’ll tell you anyway,” Mace replied, laughing. “I think...you’ve walked on the dark side once or twice in your eight-hundred year life! I think you’d sort of *have* to at some point, no? Maybe you met a Sith or two in your wanderings. Maybe that’s why you were the only one who wasn’t surprised when Qui-Gon suggested that they were still around. You weren’t surprised ‘cause you *knew*, didn’t you?” Yoda said nothing.

The two stared at each other—Mace smiling broadly and Yoda frowning deeply. Yoda leaned heavily on the twisted piece of wood that he used for walking and instructing. He opened his eyes in the Force and saw the swirling red flames of hate dancing around his former colleague. Yoda remembered how uncomfortable he had been when Mace first told him about Vaapad and all its potential. He remembered warning Mace that dancing with the dark side was like playing with fire. Life, it would seem, was not without irony.

“Many journeys taken,” Yoda finally responded, “have I, to arrive at this point. In the light, am I now, is all that matters.”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Mace smiled contentedly. A moment later, the smile was gone. He stood at his desk and pushed the chair behind him with his legs. “I suppose we should get this over with, don’t you think? You don’t really think you can win, do you?” Yoda contemplated the question and realized he hadn’t truly considered failure as a possibility.

“If the will of the Force, it is” Yoda answered, “destroy you, I will.”

“I’m not sure you could have beaten me *before* I became Sith,” Mace retorted as he walked around the desk to face Yoda. “Now, there is no question in my mind that you’ll die here today.”

“A test of your confidence,” Yoda said, “Then let this be.” Yoda pulled back his robe and his lightsaber flew to his waiting hand like a lover’s embrace. A fraction of a moment later, green energy radiated in a two meter long sword of power.

“Begin our dance, let us.”

“Let’s”

The Dark Lord of the Sith spread his arms wide and became the darkness. He opened his eyes in the Force and saw the fountainhead of light that Yoda was. The Lord of all Sith and the Master of all Jedi squared themselves facing each other. One, the mirror of the other. One darker than the blackest regions of space. One lighter than the brightest of stars.

Blue-white electricity spewed from the hands of the Korun Master.

The battle for the galaxy had begun.

---

Padme’s breath caught in her throat when she saw the prone forms of two Red Guards outside the Chancellor’s holding office in the Senate Arena. She felt the fear rise in her as she realized that she would not stop the impending battle with words or passion. She could only fight or run away. She walked more slowly towards the prostrate warriors.

She looked down at them and noticed the two cauterized holes burned neatly in their chests. One of their battle staffs had been sliced neatly in two. She reached down and grabbed the second. She looked at it skeptically knowing that in the battle to come, it would do her no good. She needed a blaster.

She reached into her robes and pulled out the weapon she had brought in case she needed it. Checking the settings carefully, Padme confirmed it was set to kill. At that moment, she felt the baby kick and her heart broke. She touched the child inside her with her heart and promised she would save him if she could.

Carefully placing her ear against the door she heard the crackling sound of electricity being dispensed at phenomenal levels. A maniacal laughter could be heard coming from the belly of the new Supreme Chancellor as the intensity of the energy seemed to increase behind the door. Padme felt nothing but death behind that door.

This was a battle she could not win.

This was a battle that perhaps no one could win.

She couldn’t save the Republic tonight.

The Republic was dead already.

Going in there during this battle amounted to suicide.

She leaned against the door and sighed.

“Anakin...” she whispered to the air. “I’m going to wait for you for one minute. Then I’m going to let that maniac know that he can rule the galaxy, but he will never take my heart!”

---

A speeder raced through the skies of Coruscant at speeds so fast that the entire skyline was a blur. The pilot of that speeder had the preternatural ability to skirt any obstacle, moving or stationary while traveling at any speed. He could do this for fun. When doing it to race to the person he loved more than anything else, he would do it better than he ever had before.

Anakin had the throttle on the speeder engaged to its maximum level. When that wasn’t fast enough, he engaged the red line setting, guaranteeing that the speeder engines would never be usable again once it had stopped. It didn’t matter. He *had* to get to her.

Anakin flew over an angry taxi and under a stunned personal carrier. He blazed past a balcony of onlookers and around a communications tower directly in his path. He never blinked. He never slowed. His entire focus was on getting to Padme as quickly as possible.

Then, he heard her through the wind. The Force brought her words to his heart with more clarity than pressure waves ever could.

One minute.

Anakin called on the Force and took control of the flow-rate of fuel in the speeder’s engine. He took control of the engine itself, controlling every piston and every power regulator. Then he pushed. He pushed the fuel into the engine faster and he pushed the regulators past their limits. And he held them all together with his mind. And the bike rocketed forward even faster than before. Only hints of the skyline existed as Anakin ripped through the dusk.

One minute.

*All the time in the world.*

## Part XIV continued

Date Posted: 6/20 3:10am

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This is what it feels like to be Padme Amidala, right now:

Fear is weakening your will. You can feel the cold door that you lean against drawing heat from your body and you wonder if it's warmer than death. You place your hand lovingly across your swollen belly and feel the child within. Your heart aches for the life you cannot give. Your soul cries for the galaxy that has been wrecked by devastation. Your mind reels because deep down inside, you know you cannot stop any of it.

You close your eyes against the fear and try to call for the man you love. You don't know where he is. You never felt his powerful connection to the Force. You don't know that he's seconds away racing toward you. You realize that every moment you stand at that door you weaken your will.

You grip the handle of the blaster in your hand more tightly. Life held in one hand and death in the other. Only a woman can understand how tragic and monstrous this is. You tell your child that you love him. You whisper to him all the words you hope you can tell him in years to come. You squeeze the blaster tightly against your chest and your other hand leaves your child to join its partner on the blaster grip.

Death in both hands, now.

The decision made, you push yourself away from the wall to face the door.

*I'm sorry, Anakin, You whisper to the wind. I cannot wait any longer...*

You stare at the door as you find the courage to fight again. The blaster shifts to your right hand with practiced ease and you disengage the safety device. You put your hand on the door release mechanism to enter the fray. You will not run. You will not hide.

*I'm sorry, Anakin...*

You engage the door and it starts to open. Then your eyes open in surprise as the door immediately shuts itself and the door release mechanism tears itself from the wall next to you. You stare in bewilderment but are not deterred. You take careful aim with your blaster at the door and your finger begins to pull the trigger in

resignation. Then you feel the blaster pull itself from your hand and you watch in horror as it sails down the hallway from which you came.

You watch its path and then your heart leaps.

The blaster finds a new owner who doesn't break stride as he grasps it from the air. Running down the hallway at impossible speeds is a man. Not just any man. *Your* man. You feel yourself lifted from the ground and pulled towards your lover. You do not resist. You feel the love flowing from. You see his passion. His eyes are alight just for you. You realize that behind those smoldering eyes lies the man who would do *anything* to save you.

And you love him for it.

---

The speeder had left the skies of Coruscant and raced towards the door to the Senate Coliseum. The mildest brush of the Force in Anakin's mind had ripped the door from his path and sent the speeder racing inside. His superior Jedi reflexes helped him slip and turn through the hallways on the inexorable path to his only love.

*Hold on...* He had whispered to himself. *I'm coming, Padme.*

Then a whispered warning from the Force told him the speeder could no longer hold itself together under the strains he had put it. The Force had launched him from the bike like a cannon. He had landed on his feet with his legs already driving him down the hallway like runaway cruiser. He ignored the explosion that soon followed behind him. He didn't stop to pay attention to the powerful waves in the Force that surrounded the center of the building. All that had mattered was Padme.

He had seen her as he came around the corner. Distant. Deciding. He had tried to call to her but his throat was frozen with fear.

*She will die, you know,* the dragon has whispered.

He had seen the blaster in both her hands as she faced the door. He could hear her tell him that she loved him and feel the sorrow in her heart. He would have gotten to her but she was going in thirty seconds early. The fury of the injustice of it overwhelmed him as she activated the door mechanism.

His mind pounded the door shut without a moment's hesitation. His heart had ripped the controls from the wall to stop her from leaving him. His hand reached for the blaster and pulled it to him.

Pulled her to him.

Their eyes met.

Their hearts met.

As she fell into his arms whispering his name and telling him how much she loved him, he fought the tears that begged to come. He held her tightly against his chest and kissed the top of her head tenderly. He squeezed her into him wishing he had the power to pull her inside him. He heard her voice and it was a melodic symphony from the greatest of all opera houses.

“What took you so long?” she asked with a friendly open-handed thump on the chest. Her head lay on his chest a moment longer absorbing all the love he could give her.

“Well...” he said, “I had to find the right speeder, then I had to get the right color...”

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## **Part XIV continued**

**Date Posted: 6/20 5:19pm**

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In the holding office of the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Empire two Masters battled.

A Sith Lord poured blue-white flames of electricity from his hands.

A Jedi Master more powerful than any that had come before him called on the Force to aid him.

This battle was personal.

This battle was more than personal.

One friend was using his newfound powers to try and destroy the other. The Lord of all the Sith was attempting to decimate the Master of All The Jedi. Drawing power from the Force, Yoda shunted the massive amounts of lightning being showered at him through his green blade, through the power crystal and into his lightsaber's power cell. The more he shunted, the more lightning seemed to come. Soon the weapon's handle began to burn hot in his hands but the lightning didn't stop.

Yoda pushed against the lightning but his strength could not stop its onslaught. The force of the attack was pushing the diminutive Jedi Master. Even with both hands tightly gripping the lightsaber's hilt, Yoda felt himself being driven back like a dust ball caught in a thunderstorm. The seemingly never-ending attack pushed the tiny aged Master farther and farther back. But Yoda would not yield. The lightning would not yield.

The Sith Lord continued to belt the green creature that had dared to face him in battle. The dark Shadow grinned in victory when the little toad found itself pinned against the far wall of the circular room. Lightning on one side, solid duracrete on the other, and a lightsaber in between. It was a pity this fight would be over so soon.

With unexpected speed, Yoda released his left arm from his lightsaber and outstretched his small hand to grasp the lightning attack him as if plucking a splinter from a child's hand. Now Yoda shunted the lightning through him and into the nothingness from which it came. Within an instant, his lightsaber was deactivated as it found purchase on his waist with the power of the Force. His other



hand free, Yoda used it to call on the Force to drive the Sith Lord back.

Completely caught off guard by the counterattack, the lightning ceased as Mace Windu rocketed wide-eyed backwards into the far wall. Duracrete pounded his back and head like a full-grown orray's charge. The wind left the former Jedi Master's lungs and he fell limply to the floor.

The two Masters called on their respective sides of the Force to help them catch their breaths.

After a moment, Mace got to one knee, a broad smile across his malicious face. Yoda eyed him carefully but continued to draw the power of the light into his frame. Mace stood up and casually began to brush himself off, despite no dirt to be found anywhere.

"Very nice, Yoda," Mace chuckled. "Very nice, indeed. An excellent opening salvo, don't you think? I have to admit, I thought I had you there for a second. I guess I should know better, eh? Probably not a good idea to go with the Force lightning again, huh? I'm sure you'd just catch it and throw it back at me. You're a very difficult guy to kill, did anybody ever tell you that?"

"Talk too much, you do," Yoda replied. "If so powerful you are, words you need not."

"Good point."

With a leap aided by the Force, the Dark Lord flew into the air and purple energy ignited from his hands in a solid beam of power aimed directly for the small green creature.

Power, the color of life appeared and faced the new assault.

-----

In the hallway outside the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic's office, two lovers embraced.

A Senator held the only man she ever loved more tightly than she could imagine possible.

A newly appointed Jedi Master wanted to never let her go.

"Padme," Anakin whispered as he felt the maelstrom that was the battle between light and dark behind the door begin to build anew. "I have to get you out of here."

It's too dangerous for you and the baby." Padme hugged him closer for a moment. Ever the protector, Anakin still didn't understand. She held him close before stepping away.

"I'm not going anywhere," she said after a short silence.

"*What?*" Anakin was stunned.

"I'm *not* going anywhere!" she repeated. She could see the disappointment mixed with fear cross Anakin's face. He clearly had forgotten who he had married. It irritated her.

"What did you think would happen, Ani?" she asked with exasperation. "Did you think you would just you'd rush right in, lightsaber blazing, and I'd leap into your arms so you could carry me off into the sunset while the fate of the galaxy was decided by a nut-case megalomaniac?!"

Anakin spoke without thinking. "Umm...something like that, yeah..."

The fire in Padme's face told him that he had just said something *very* wrong. She glared at him for what felt like an eternity with an intensity that would melt durasteel. Anakin stared at her open-mouthed unsure of what to say. He struggled to find something soothing and comforting...something apologetic, although he wasn't sure what he was apologizing for...something loving. The Jedi Master was not very successful.

"What...?" he muttered. "I...don't understand...what're you so mad about?"

"Anakin Skywalker!" Padme belted out. "I am not going to sit by and watch this galaxy be destroyed by him" she pointed at the door "or any of your little Jedi friends!" The comment struck Anakin like a hammer in the chest and he stepped back in shock.

"My...little...what did you say...?" The politician in Padme immediately saw that she had stepped over the line. She could see the hurt in Anakin's eyes and knew him well enough that if she didn't diffuse this now that hurt would turn to anger. She didn't handle him being angry very well. *He* didn't handle being angry very well. She stared at him for a long moment and saw Anakin do something she had *never* seen him do when he was about to get angry.

He took a deep breath and smiled.

"I'm going to pretend we didn't just do that," Anakin announced. "I understand your frustration, Padme. I really do. I'm sorry." His voice took on the tone of a sage instructor. "The fact of the matter is that you won't do the galaxy any good if

you're dead. You need to live to fight another day. Mace Windu is more powerful than anyone the Jedi have encountered. To top it off, he knows *exactly* how the Jedi think. Right now, he is battling the most powerful Jedi Master the Order has ever known. Do you think you and your blaster are going to stop him?"

Padme looked at Anakin in surprise. His words were sobering and his tone, astonishing. She pondered this all for a long moment, and then reached out to Anakin with all of her heart. She had never felt closer to him or loved him more than in that moment.

"Ani," she practically cried into his chest, "What are we going to do?" Anakin placed both of his hands on her cheeks and stared into her eyes. She was still the angel he had met so many years on Tatooine. The angel that was a handmaiden. The angel that was a queen. The angel that was a warrior. The angel that was his best friend in the entire galaxy. The angel that was his wife.

"You're going to live," Anakin whispered softly in reply.

---

Blade-to-blade, they were identical. After thousands of hours in lightsaber sparring with the only person capable of presenting a challenge to these Masters of swordplay, they knew each other better than brothers, more intimately than lovers; they were two halves of the single greatest warrior the galaxy had ever known.

Neither gave ground.

Yoda was a green blur of excited energy slashing and striking, parrying and blocking.

Darth Salus was an amethyst haze of intensity twirling and striking in staccato.

Mace Windu didn't just sink into Vaapad, as he had on so many occasions when the light of the Force shone from inside him. Now that he lived in the darkness, he *was* Vaapad. Every strike was a killing blow. Every attack would have destroyed a lesser opponent.

But Jedi Master Yoda was not a lesser opponent.

The room in which they exchanged flashes of particle energy was seemingly built to house to great warriors locked in heated battle. The desk that the Dark Lord had sat behind lay sliced in two by a strike from Mace when Yoda had landed gracefully on it mere moments ago. By the time the blade had reached Yoda's location, he was already several meters in the air slashing powerfully at the

Shadow's exposed neck.

Yoda's blade was caught by an overhead block by his opponent who pivoted and locked sabers with the Jedi Master. Salus' eyes burned with the fury of the dark side. In place of his deep brown eyes were a ghostly yellow monstrosity that didn't even hint at the Jedi Master that lay within. Yoda's eyes endless pools of calm passivity, engaging the former padawan with abandon. Each pushed hard against the other but neither would budge. Power crackled between them as the burnt ozone smell stung both their noses. They looked into each other's eyes and knew that neither would surrender.

"You must know..." Mace Windu breathed, "that you cannot win, Yoda. I am more powerful than any Jedi."

"An odd color for a Sith," Yoda panted in reply, "your lightsaber is."

With a surge of strength, Mace Windu pushed. Yoda felt the intent in the Force and leaped away simultaneously. The combined effect had Yoda hurtling towards the opposite wall at tremendous speed. Yoda called on the Force and bounced off the wall from one end of the room to the next, coming to an elegant landing several meters away from Salus on the other side of the room.

Mace eyed Yoda intently then smiled. He looked at his blade appraisingly.

"I like purple," Mace replied with a grin. "It's *definitely* my color. It's...regal."

At that point, Yoda leaped again in, his blade a cloud of green power. Darth Salus' grin was replaced by a menacing snarl as he brought his lightsaber to the ready. But Yoda never intended to attack with his saber. At the apex of his flight, Yoda grabbed the former Jedi Master from the ground with the Force and hurled him into the opposite wall. Mace's head smacked the wall with a sickening thud, his lightsaber falling from his limp hand, deactivated at the same time Yoda landed lightly on his feet and turned to face the Shadow.

"Owww..." Mace exclaimed, rubbing his bruised bald scalp as he began to stand, his back to Master Yoda. "That *really* hurt, Yoda! What're you trying to do, kill me?" Yoda's already cavernous frown drew even deeper into his face.

"Never mind..." Mace said blandly. "Don't answer that." As Yoda plunged at him with his lightsaber swinging, Mace pulled his fallen lightsaber to his waiting hand and attacked.

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“What about Master Yoda?” Padme asked with concern etched in her face. “If Master Windu...or Darth Salus...or whatever he calls himself is as powerful as you say, won’t Yoda need your help?” Anakin looked at her and his love for her grew even more. He hadn’t thought it possible. But then, he hadn’t thought it possible on any of the hundreds of days they’d been together and every new day would prove him wrong.

“Yoda will be fine,” Anakin smiled. “If he can’t handle Mace Windu, no one can.”

“But aren’t *you* the one who is supposed to bring balance to the Force and destroy the Sith?” she pressed. “You can’t do that if you’re protecting me, can you?”

“I don’t even know what bringing ‘balance to the Force’ means,” Anakin replied. “My priority is to protect you and the baby. As soon as you’re safe, I’ll come back and fight, if necessary. Will you *please* just trust me and come with me before you get hurt?”

Padme Amidala looked into the eyes of the man who she would willingly die for. She searched his face and found nothing but love. There was no anger, no hatred, and no fear. It was the most serene she had ever seen Anakin. She didn’t know what to make of it but she knew that she liked it. Her hand reflexively touched his cheek. Before she knew what she was doing, that hand reached behind his head and pulled his face to hers.

A stolen moment.

An eternal kiss.

A shared love.

“I’ll go anywhere with you, Ani,” she whispered as she broke the kiss and his forehead rested on hers.

Then the wall behind them blew out.

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There came a turning point in the clash of the light against the dark.

It didn’t come from a flash of lightning or slash of energy blade, though there were these in innumerable supply; it did not come from a flying kick or a surgically precise punch, though these were traded, too.

It came when Yoda found himself alone against the dark.

In that lightning-speared tornado of feet and fists and blades and bashing walls, his vision finally pierced the darkness that had consumed his friend.

Finally, he saw the truth.

This truth: that he, the avatar of light, Supreme Master of the Jedi Order, the fiercest, most implacable, most devastatingly powerful foe the darkness had ever known...

just—

didn't—

*have* it.

He'd never had it. He had lost before he started.

He had lost before he was born.

The Sith had changed. This Sith had grown, had adapted, had invested a thousand years' intensive study into every aspect of not only the Force but Jedi lore itself, in preparation for exactly this day. The Sith had remade themselves.

They had become *new*.

While the Jedi—

The Jedi had spent that same millennium training to refight the *last* war.

The new Sith could not be destroyed with a lightsaber; they could not be burned away by any torch of the Force. The brighter his light, the darker their shadow. How could one win a battle against the dark, when battle itself had become the dark's own weapon?

He knew, at that instant, that this insight held the hope for the galaxy. But if he fell here, that hope would die with him.

*Hmmm*, Yoda thought. *A problem this is...*

As Yoda continued to batter away at the Shadow, pushing his frail aged body to its limits and beyond, he could feel Windu weakening, but not fast enough. Yoda knew he couldn't kill him. He didn't have the power and the risk to his soul was too great. He might suffer the same fate his friend and opponent experienced when

that friend struck down the *last* Lord of the Sith.

Mace Windu was growing tired. He could feel the Jedi Master weakening but not fast enough. He couldn't risk falling to the little green monster that had invaded his life with green fury. Mace reached out in the Force and found the answer he needed.

*Skywalker!*

With a powerful surge in the dark side, Mace pushed Yoda across the room and away from his blade. The Jedi Master used his momentum to bounce off the wall and head directly back at Mace, but the Dark Lord was ready for him and grasped him with the Force and used it to add to the miniature warrior's momentum to hurl him into the wall behind the Dark Lord. Yoda slumped to the floor stunned for a moment.

It was all the time, Darth Salus required.

The air crackled with power as electricity surrounded the Shadow's powerful hands. Yoda mentally braced himself for the impending attack, calling on the Force to help him shunt the lightning that he knew would be coming. But the lightning was not directed at him.

Tendrils of electrical power fired from Mace's hands and tore through the wall behind which two frightened lover's stood. As the decimated wall collapsed to the floor leaving a gaping hole that framed Anakin Skywalker and Padme Amidala, Mace Windu grinned.

"Skywalker!" Mace yelled smiling ear-to-ear. "Care to decide who lives or dies? Your Master or your wife?" Anakin's eyes widened in shock and fear.

*She will die you know,* the dragon whispered.

Lightning spewed again from each of Windu's hands. One hand directed the power at the now-distracted Jedi Master and engulfed him in raw power. The other hand directed the electricity around the surprised Anakin and grasped his wife in a vice-grip of energy.

Anakin didn't hear her scream. The dragon had loosed the furnace of his heart in a blur of fury and fear. He didn't see Yoda writhe. The furnace he had contained for so long exploded with rage. Anakin didn't hear his own voice as he screamed in outrage.

His world had gone black.

Power erupted from Anakin's left hand in a surge of energy so bright that the Dark Lord reflexively shielded his eyes.

He would have been better served shielding his body.

Power engulfed and swarmed around Darth Salus and sent him surging backwards in so mighty a blast that he tore through the distant wall behind him. His body lay limp a moment later.

As quickly as the power had come, the power was gone. Anakin was drained and the dragon quieted in his chest. Regaining his thoughts he saw his Master and his wife, prone on the floors.

"No!" Anakin screamed.

"I will NOT *accept* this!" he howled. He dragged the Force into him as he lifted them both in the air and began to run.



## Part XV first section

Date Posted: 6/21 3:27am

-----Fear of Death-----

He doesn't remember arriving at the medical facility with his friend and wife in tow. He doesn't know how he got them there. He doesn't remember what it felt like to pull their limp forms in the Force through myriad obstacles. He doesn't remember the frustration he felt as time after time he almost lost his concentration and lost them both. He just knows what he feels right now.

Torment.

This is what it feels like to be Anakin Skywalker, right now:

A thousand thoughts are flying through your head at maximum thrust. You're standing between the Master and your wife who now lay on either side of you on medical beds gasping for air as droids scurry around trying to stop the inevitable. You can feel it in the Force better than any scanning device will ever do.

*She's going to die, you know* you hear the dragon whisper.

And the tears flow freely.

You cannot imagine a world without the Master. As long as you've lived in the Order, he was there. He taught you how to hold a lightsaber. He showed you how to feel in the Force and control the flow. He instructed you in the intricacies of the currents of the Force. But you hadn't listened. You had known better. He was just a crazy old creature that could never *really* fight and everyone was just afraid to tell him. He was the old timer he had met at Mos Espa who used to fly spaceships and never really let the memory die.

Regret washes over you. You see the Master for what he really is--the bravest and most powerful Jedi ever. His very existence in the Force is a source of light in the darkness. Your heart tears open in agony as you consider a world in which that light is extinguished. You place your flesh hand on his and let the tears come. You don't fear them. They don't make you weak. They give you the release you need to one day carry on.

You see your wife through the morbid distortion of your tears. Burns scar her body and her breathing is shallow. Salus had attacked her with absolute ferocity. You can't imagine her death. You don't want to. She would be concerned about the baby, you realize. You reach into the Force and touch her swollen belly,

searching.

Muted joy and surprise find you when you hear the two heartbeats pulsing in perfect harmony. A boy almost as strong in the Force as you. A girl that will have the determination and strength of her mother aided by the power that is her birthright. The idea of not sharing this great joy with the greatest love any man has ever known causes your throat to close tightly and your chest to heave. The pounding pain that her death will bring is beyond your ability to face.

You place your mechanical hand on her womb and try to draw sustenance from your children resting there. They are safe. They will live. Your hand extends upward to her face and rests there gently, desperately trying to avoid the severe burns that scar her beautiful face. She still remains the most beautiful woman in the galaxy to you—the only woman you could ever love. You touch her warmly and whisper to her unconscious form that everything will be OK. But she can't hear you. You can't hear yourself. All you can hear is the rasping wheezes coming from the Master to your left and your eternal love to your right.

In the Force you feel him walking around. Your attack stopped him but he survived. You can feel him stalking. You can feel his twisted mind searching for an answer as he considers his failure. The dragon tears at your chest begging for release. You call on the Force and the dragon goes to sleep. You're not just angry with the Dark Lord.

You rage at the Force. It's too much to accept. You don't know how.

There is no greater danger than a Jedi in despair.

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## Part XV continued

Date Posted: 6/21 1:07pm

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Darth Salus was a predator, prowling the cityscape of Coruscant in the Force. In the relative safety of his private office, the Dark Lord bent the Force to his will and sent it out in thin tendrils of power that emanated from his dark soul and burrowed into the sky, desperate to do his will.

He was searching for his prey. The hunter had found a quarry worthy of his efforts. A victim that presented the greatest threat to his newfound power. His prey had hurt him. Not worn him down or fought him to a standstill. The adversary had simply willed his pain and it became a reality. He had proven himself a target that *had* to be destroyed.

*What if he could be turned...?*

There was the incessant Guide again. On so many occasions he had heard its call, begging to be listened to, begging to play a role in his plans. Darth Salus listened when it suited him. The Guide had been useful at times, offering solutions to problems he hadn't considered. It had also proven distracting. Too often it wanted to complicate the plan. Too much detail that Mace considered unnecessary. Besides, a Dark Lord of the Sith is not ruled by his unconscious. But the thought *was* intriguing regardless.

"Is it possible?" he wondered aloud, his chin in his hand.

*The groundwork has been laid, the Guide answered him. He would be a powerful ally...*

"This is true," Mace responded rising and walking around his desk to look out at the Coruscant skyline that was littered with the evening lights of millions of homes on the city-planet. "But he's different, now." Mace turned to look at no one in particular. "He won't be easy to manipulate."

*You killed his love and his Master, the Guide pressed on patiently, He will want revenge. Let him take it. Give him the power to defeat you by making him release his hatred. Only then will he be ready to be turned.*

"I'd just as soon destroy him," Mace replied. "I know I can."

*Perhaps. You'd win the battle, of course. Maybe even the war. But you still don't*

*have an apprentice. Don't you want one worthy of you?*

"I'll consider it!" Mace shouted to the empty room. "Now leave me alone! I have to *find* to destroy him *or* turn him!"

Mace Windu's mind went silent. He was happy he had learned how to shut up his overactive mind. Perhaps a talkative unconscious was some kind of side effect of using the dark side. Perhaps he should have considered asking Yoda about that before he fried him. Then Mace chuckled to himself at the thought—

"Fried toad..." and his chuckle grew into a laugh. It began with the hearty tenor of humor and joy but grew maniacal and soon became filled with the pellucid hatred of the dark side.

Alone in his private chamber, the Dark Lord of the Sith and ruler of the galaxy laughed.

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"Ana...kin..." came a raspy voice to the left of the young Jedi Master whose eyes were red with tears and whose heart was filled with sorrow. Anakin turned in surprise and saw Master Yoda's eyes open with difficulty as the Master of the Jedi regained consciousness. Anakin turned back to look longingly at Padme. Her vital signs were slipping but very slowly. His arms ached to hold her and his lips begged to kiss her. He leaned over gently to his wife and brushed his lips tenderly across her forehead. Then stood and turned to Yoda.

"I'm here, Master" Anakin replied as he crouched next to the medical bed and grasped Yoda's hand tenderly. "Shhh...you mustn't talk. You need your rest."

"Soon..." Yoda wheezed. Then he closed his eyes and Anakin could see the Force flood into Yoda with incredible power. Within moments Yoda opened his eyes again and smiled at Anakin. "Soon, will I rest. Forever sleep. Earned it, I have." Yoda's voice was strong again, though not as powerful and containing none of the vibrant life that Anakin had so often envied.

"Master Yoda," Anakin responded forcing an incredulous laugh in his voice that he didn't feel. "You can't die."

Yoda seemed to smile, though only his eyes could display it. "Strong am I in the Force...but not that strong. Twilight is upon me..."

"And soon, night must fall..." Anakin finished as he remembered the words that had entered his mind while he knelt next to Plo Koon's vanquished frame. He

looked into Yoda's eyes that were widening in surprise. "That is the way of things. The way of the Force."

"Yes..." a weak cough interrupted. "Yes... wise, have you become. Truly a Master, are you." Anakin found no comfort in the words. All that he found was the torment that had been with him since he saw their bodies consumed by white fire. Anakin squeezed Yoda's hand in his and bit back the tears that pleaded to be shed. If Yoda would die, then Padme...he couldn't bring himself to think it.

"Save her, you can," Yoda responded to his unspoken pain. "The power to save her, in you it lies." The young Jedi Master's eyes widened in surprise. Yoda looked up into Anakin's eyes. Concentration burned there as the old Jedi Master forced the smile that had eluded him to etch itself into his wrinkled and burnt face.

"But..." Anakin stammered. "You said..."

"Alive she is," Yoda's voice now barely above a whisper. "More powerful in the Force than any Jedi healer, you are. The Force, you must use and save them you can. Save them, you must. Hope for the future, in her womb lies."

"What...?"

Yoda struggled to lift his head from his pillow, but the strain was too great. He called on the Force to aid him, but his body was failing. His head fell back onto his pillow in exhaustion and the Master's breath began to become raspy again.

"Master Yoda," Anakin said with genuine concern. "You have to rest."

"No..." Yoda responded, the effort to speak etched into his face. "To...Qui-Gon I have spoken. Taught me much...he has..join the Force, I will...."

"I've spoken to him, too," Anakin replied. "But what does that have to do with you getting some rest? How are we going to stop Salus if you don't get better?" Anakin was desperate. He didn't want to accept. He refused to accept.

"Pass on..." Yoda gasped. "...what learned I have...I...must. In the Force, Anakin...my mind, find. My experience...take. My...knowledge...learn."

"But..."

"No!" Yoda coughed again and the pain in his body rose forcing his eyes to shut tightly. Seconds passed before the coughing ceased and the pain subsided. "No, buts. Know what I know, you must...if destroy Salus, you intend."

Anakin felt Yoda's determination. He knew that by connecting with Yoda in the manner he intended, Yoda would have to use the Force to help pass to him what he needed. He understood that this would mean that Yoda wouldn't be able to use the Force to keep himself alive. He realized that by doing as Yoda requested, the Master of the Jedi Order would die.

Anakin nodded solemnly as tears poured from his eyes.

He reached into the Force and sought the Jedi Master's mind. With an ease of a padawan performing Form I lightsaber drills, Anakin Skywalker opened his eyes in the Force and saw the source of light that was Yoda. He reached out to it and connected with the Master's mind. The light between them grew as, with Yoda's control of the Force to aid him, the power between them burgeoned.

At first, Anakin could sense only peripheral thoughts. Concerns for the future. Wounded pride. Feelings of failure. Feelings of hope. Then with sudden intensity a deluge of knowledge spewed forth from the Jedi Master. Anakin fell to the floor in surprise and intense pain but the connection was not lost.

Yoda maintained it.

In an instant, almost nine-hundred years of knowledge and experience poured into the mind of the youngest Jedi Master on the Council. The strain on Yoda was incredible, but the Master would not stop until he was complete. All that was Yoda became the wisdom that Anakin could now draw on. After what seemed like an eternity, Yoda broke the connection and gasped desperately for air. Anakin struggled from the floor to kneel by his Master's side.

"Saved the Order..." Yoda whispered weakly. "you have..."

The Jedi Master's eyes were closed. Anakin watched his chest but did not see it rise. He reached for Yoda in the Force and found nothing. He looked at Yoda in the Force and saw no light. He saw no life. He saw nothing.

The brightest light in the galaxy had gone out.

A moment later, Anakin stared in amazement as Yoda's tortured body faded from the world along with his powerful soul.

Anakin Skywalker wept.

Darth Salus stared at the disruption in the Force in utter confusion. He looked out of his office window across the cavernous depths that separated his sanctum from the rest of Coruscant—indeed the rest of the galaxy. It was a stunning display in the Force—billowing clouds of blue-white energy ebbed and flowed in a thunderstorm of power. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the energy coiled in on itself and died away. He had stood there studying the spot he had seen the spectacle emanate from for several minutes, trying to discern the meaning of it all.

“What was...that?” he whispered to himself. He called on the Force with his special gift to see if some fault line would bring him to an answer. When he saw nothing leading to that point, he frowned. *Something* was there, he knew. He called on the darkness and pulled it into him. With a surge of power, he directed his power on that point, trying to learn what was there.

He saw nothing.

“Now *that* shouldn’t happen!” Mace said more loudly this time. “What is going on, here?”

*This is unexpected... the Guide announced. A disturbance in the Force that masks itself to even the greatest of the Sith! I don’t know what’s happening here...*

“Of course you don’t know,” Mace replied. “If *I* don’t know then *you* don’t know! You’re nothing but a reflection of me!”

*If you say so.*

“I do!” Mace replied testily. “Whatever that was, it had to have something to do with Yoda. Maybe that little explosion in the Force is him finally giving up the ghost!” A grin appeared on his face. “I don’t suppose I’d be that lucky....”

The silence in his mind was deafening. The Korun Master frowned deeply and searched the Force for some sign of life in the building but he felt nothing. The entire building was shielded from his power by something unknown. Mace looked at the other building that surrounded the one he was focused on and immediately recognized the sector. How could he have been so stupid as to not think of this?

“The idiot actually took them to a MedLab!” Mace shouted with glee. “Maybe he

isn't worthy to be my apprentice after all. But...he did do a pretty neat trick by hiding an entire building from me. There might be hope for him yet!" Mace turned to his right and pushed a hidden button on his desk. Immediately a clone commander donned in full uniform stood a meter tall on his desk.

"Yes, Chancellor, Sir?" The clone commander responded after offering a perfect salute.

"Ready my shuttle immediately, Commander," Darth Salus ordered with a sinister smile. "I have found my prize."

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In a MedLab several kilometers from the Senate Capitol, a Jedi sat on a cold floor weeping. It all came crashing in on him. Now he *knew* how much Yoda had cared for him. He could feel how many times the Master had been disappointed in him. He grasped how much the Master had *feared* for him. Yoda never feared him. He had feared *for* him. Anakin tried to control the flow of tears but his emotional walls had been torn asunder. The very thought that his wife lay in the other bed awaiting the same fate as his Master made his heart ache even more.

"What am I going to do now?" Anakin asked the air surrounding him. "How can I hope to fight Salus without Yoda?"

*Yoda will always be with you, Anakin,* the ethereal voice of Qui-Gon-Jin said as his shimmering form walked from behind a medical monitoring panel. *And so will I.*

Anakin looked up at Qui-Gon who was smiling broadly. Anakin could immediately feel the pain seeping away and the flow of tears ebbed. He stood and faced the ghost of a man he had only known for a few days but had changed his life forever. Qui-Gon walked over to Padme's bedside and looked down at her with deep sadness. Her face was burnt badly and her breathing was very shallow.

"Yoda said I could save her," Anakin said finally. "But even with all his knowledge swirling around in my head, I don't know how...I don't think..." Anakin seemed to be searching his memories, "I don't think *he* knew how." Qui-Gon nodded in agreement but said nothing for a long moment. Then he walked back to the Jedi and looked at him sternly.

*You have grown so much, Ani,* Qui-Gon smiled. *I'm so proud of you!*

"Master Qui-Gon, please..." Anakin's eyes were filled with pain. "If you know how I can help her, please tell me. I can't live without her! If the Force expects me to accept her death—" "



*Anakin, you're going to learn, Qui-Gon interrupted, That the Force is a mysterious and complicated part of all our lives. Even as a part of it, I still don't understand it. I'm not sure what it is, exactly, that you're being asked to accept, Anakin. I only know that it has nothing to do with Padme...*

Anakin blinked.

Anakin had not been entirely truthful with Qui-Gon. He didn't need training to try and save his wife. [i]Focus determines your reality[i] was the lesson that he had never forgotten. He *knew* he had the power to heal her body. He *knew* that if he called on the Force, she would be made whole. He hadn't attempted it because he was still afraid. Afraid of failure. Afraid of rebuke. Afraid of losing his connection with the Force. Afraid that he might save Padme and his soul. Afraid that she might hate him because of what he might become. No. Anakin Skywalker didn't need to be taught how to save his wife. He didn't realize this until Qui-Gon had spoken. Qui-Gon Jinn had given Anakin Skywalker all he need—

Permission.

*She's going to die, you know,* the dragon whispered yet again.

*Yes...I know,* Anakin responded deep within his mind. Determination swept over him as he glared at the dragon that lived within him. *But not today!*

Anakin laid his flesh hand gently on Padme's forehead. Qui-Gon Jinn stepped back respectfully and watched from a distance as Anakin called on the Force and its currents poured into him with increasing intensity. Anakin continued to call, his eyes closed tightly, his mind deep in concentration.

Qui-Gon Jinn's luminous eyes were fixated on the spectacle before him. In the Force, the insubstantial Jedi Master watched in awe as blue-white energy emerged from Anakin's hand and into Padme Amidala. The energy had the appearance of a blue mist that soon enveloped the Senator. As the moments ticked away, the energy grew in brightness, continuing to build in her broken body.

Then it began. At first it was very subtle—an imperceptible change in her breathing that only the former Jedi Master would have noticed. In mere moments that raspy breathing was gone to be replaced by the compression and expansion of a healthy diaphragm. As Anakin submerged himself in the white energy of the Force, the light seemed to cascade from him and into Padme.

The more the Force flowed, the stronger her heart became. The more the Force surged, the smaller her burns became. Anakin continued to pour energy into his

wife and she continued to heal. Her wounds were gone. Her lungs were repaired. Anakin continued to dispense the Force into his wife until—

She opened her eyes.

“Ani...?”

## Part XVI

Date Posted: 6/22 4:07am

-----Caliginosity-----

In a MedLab on Coruscant a Jedi held his wife in his arms. The smile on his face shone more brightly than any star in the galaxy. The feelings of joy that washed over him were beyond anything he had experienced in his short life. Since he was a boy, he had known nothing but heartbreak with fleeting moments of happiness interspersed throughout.

As a boy he had lived as a slave on a desert planet that baked his skin and marred his soul. He had seen his mother reduced to working for a loud Toydrian creature that flitted about yelling and screaming. He had gained improbable hope when the Jedi Master who now stood solemnly beside him had won his freedom. Only to have that hope dashed and replaced with insurmountable anguish when he learned he had to leave his mother on that malignant, twin-sunned planet. He had loved the Jedi Master who had freed him. He had found unlikely pleasure in his life when he used his formidable skills and phenomenal luck to destroy a ship and save a planet. Only to find that joy extinguished, to be substituted with overpowering grief when he learned that the man had been killed in battle and he was now to be taught by a man who didn't believe in him—a man who was just a boy himself.

He had been trained in a world where everyone he met was amazed with his skill but were terrified of his power. He had only two friends—one he couldn't trust with his deepest fears and one who betrayed his most trust. One who loved him more than he should and one who never loved him at all. He had watched colleagues die in a fruitless war. He had seen entire systems destroyed in cataclysmic violence. All for nothing.

The single shining light in his life—the one thing that had ever brought him peace and joy in a galaxy that was nothing but a harbinger of pain was the woman he held in his arms right now. A woman who was openly weeping in confusion and happiness. He felt her tears stream down her face—each like a rare jewel that belonged only to him.

He pulled her closer still.

“Shh...It's OK...” he whispered to her. “I'm here...I love you.”

*You've learned a valuable lesson about the Force today, Ani, Qui-Gon Jinn spoke from the Force. You have always known...on an instinctual level...how to bring death with the Force. But now you've learned how to bring life. Any man can*

*destroy. This is a power so many seek but it is impermanent. But to save life...that is true power. It's immeasurable in its value and unstoppable in its strength.*

Anakin nodded and pulled Padme closer still.

He felt the disturbance in the Force. He had been using an infinitesimal part of his mind to shield himself and Yoda from the watchful eyes of the Chancellor. He had held this shield in place despite assaults on his mind and heart. Even now, he felt the rampart engaged about the facility. He also felt the approach of the Korun Master.

*Why can't I be free of him?* Anakin's mind reeled in frustration.

*You cannot escape your destiny, Ani,* Qui-Gon responded. *Any more than you can stop the sun from setting. You must destroy the Sith.*

"Qui-Gon...I can't destroy him on my own. Will you help me?" Anakin whispered, his face buried in Padme's hair.

*I'm afraid I can't do that, Ani,* Qui-Gon replied. *I can only be a guide now. I can't fight your battles for you.*

Anakin nodded again, in acceptance. Padme had pulled away and was looking at him quizzically.

"Who are you talking to, Ani?" she asked, bewildered.

"An...old...friend," he replied trying to find the words. His face grew serious. "We have to go. Darth Salus is on his way here and I can't fight him and protect you at the same time."

"Who is Darth Salus...?"

Anakin stood and pulled her from the bed easily into a standing position. He felt the pang in his heart as he looked into her wondrous eyes and pulled her to him again in an embrace that transcended the physical and entwined their souls in perfect love.

"He is the Dark Lord of the Sith that now rules the Senate," Anakin breathed next to her ear. "And he's coming for me. He means to destroy me or turn me to the dark side." Padme pulled away and began to move, pulling his hand as she started toward the door.

"Let's go, Ani," she begged. "Don't face him. I couldn't bear to lose you—to death

or to the dark side!”

“You could never lose me, Padme,” Anakin replied patiently. “You are my reason for being. You are the soul I always needed. You are my life; My best friend; My queen; My universe; I would do anything for you—“

The applause that interrupted Anakin came from the far window in the corner of the room. It was loud and it dripped with sarcasm. Anakin turned to face the corner and saw nothing but the deepest of shadows. He searched the Force and his heart sank.

Sitting casually on the sill with one leg dangling and another bent neatly to rest his foot on the ledge was the Dark Lord of the Sith and Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Empire. A broad smile was spread across his face in malicious satisfaction.

“Very sweet, Anakin...very sweet indeed,” Mace announced as his smile grew and the shadow about him seemed to melt away. Sky-blue energy ignited but the Korun Master didn’t flinch. Instead he casually raised his right hand and blue-white electricity crackled around his open palm.

“Let’s not do that, Anakin....” Mace smiled. “How many times do you want to try pulling her from the brink of death? I’ve got all the time in the world. Do you?” The light from the saber went out.

“Anakin! No--” Padme screamed but she was silenced a concussive blast that drove her into the wall, unconscious before she slumped to the floor. Anakin calmly felt her in the Force and knew that she was alright. He concentrated on the now.

Mace Windu smiled broadly. “You really are a very impressive guy, Skywalker...” Mace laughed heartily. “Did you know that? I mean...you chose to save your wife—who is powerless against me—and allowed your greatest weapon to die. Now *that* is commitment!”

“What do you want?” Anakin replied tersely.

“I want to talk...”

## Part XVI continued

Date Posted: 6/22 12:30pm

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The Imperial Shuttle for the Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic lifted off silently and smoothly from the roof of the MedLab building carrying as passengers two of the most powerful beings in the galaxy. The shuttle was opulent by any standards. The lush lavender carpeting was shaded just slightly darker than the bright amethyst hue of the Chancellor's lightsaber. Anakin, seated across from the Dark Lord, looked around at the comfortable surroundings and frowned. The Mace Windu he knew was a minimalist.

Anakin's mind drifted to Padme as the shuttle began its flight in earnest back toward the Senate building and the Chancellor's private office. Anakin, always preternaturally connected to machines—even for a Jedi—had placed the order in the med droids' brains to care for his wife and keep her safely sedated. He couldn't afford to be afraid for her. Not with the galaxy at stake. Now, he hoped that he could somehow survive what he was sure would be an intense battle. His main concern was to get back to her.

But it wasn't his only concern. Something had changed in him, Anakin realized. He was concerned about everything. He cared about the political consequences of Mace's actions. He worried about the fate of the galaxy. He feared for those closest to him and those farthest away. Somehow he *had* to stop Darth Salus. Somehow...

"You know, Anakin..." Mace smiled while sipping a glass of some kind of wine Anakin didn't recognize. "I realize that I agreed not to begin our discussion until we arrived in my office...but...well...since we're here, there's no reason we can't just talk, is there? I mean...am I really all that bad? What have I done?"

Anakin stared at Mace with disbelieving eyes. "What have you done??!" He responded reflexively. "Are you serious?! Look at you, Mace! You're a Sith Lord."

"If you're going to refer to me by that name," the Shadow responded calmly following a sip of his drink. "I'd appreciate it if you put the word Master before it. I did *earn* the title, after all—"

"Earned it, yes but then you abandoned it when you joined the Sith!" Mace considered this for a moment then leaned forward in his luxurious couch. He placed both elbows on his knees and looked Anakin in the eyes.

"Are we really that different, you and I?" He asked. "You seem pretty quick to

judge, Skywalker but you seem to forget that *I was there!* I *know* you intended to betray me. I *know* that you were trying to save Palpatine. I *know* where you get your power from. A simple twist of fate and I'd be dead and gone and *you* would be the Sith Lord as Palpatine's apprentice."

"I would never join the Sith!" Anakin felt the heat of blood rushing to his face.

"Oh, come now, Anakin!" Mace replied with a wry laugh. "It's just the two of us here. You can be honest with yourself, if not me. Had I not known that you were going to attack, you would have killed me on the spot. Palpatine would have finished me off and you would have *had* to join the Sith. You wouldn't very well have been too welcome at the annual Jedi dinner, now would you?" Anakin's head slumped slightly.

"I was wrong..." Anakin whispered.

"No you weren't!" Mace responded enthusiastically. "How could you be wrong? You were protecting a friend in need. A Jedi Master was about to slaughter the only friend you ever had—and for what? A philosophical dispute! Come on, Anakin...you know better than that! Have I taught you nothing?"

Anakin winced at the words but said nothing.

"You have to trust your feelings Anakin," Mace pushed on. "When you do that, you'll be more powerful than any Jedi." Anakin felt his heart stop in his chest. He scrutinized Mace Windu in the Force. The Korun Master didn't seem to notice.

"You've turned to evil," Anakin said, continuing to eye Mace warily, looking for...something...familiar?

"Anakin..." Mace said looking as earnest as he had ever before. "Listen to me...I am bringing peace to the galaxy. Is that evil? I am protecting the Republic just like you were trying to protect Padme!"

"By destroying it?"

"By reshaping it. Remolding it. Making it what it should have been in the first place." Mace sighed. He heard the Guide suggest something to him. He listened to the words and finally spoke.

"Do you know the story of Darth Plagueis the Wise, Anakin?"

Anakin felt the floor drop out from under him. His lungs caught the air in his chest and would not let it out. *That* was the feeling he had. Anakin couldn't breathe. His

throat closed tightly and refuse to let him speak. Mace Windu merely smiled.

“Pal..pa...tine...?” Anakin managed to gasp. Fear gripped him and held him tightly.

“Well...” Mace grinned. “Not...exactly...”



## Part XVI continued

Date Posted: 6/22 4:58pm

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Anakin's eyes squinted against the light inside the Chancellor's office. His head ached and he felt nauseous. He brought up his mechanical hand to shield his face while his eyes adjusted to the brightness and he took in his new surroundings. He wasn't sure, but his body felt like it had been drugged. As he finally began to see more clearly, a shadow loomed over him and blocked the light.

The Shadow was smiling broadly and was trying to hand him a glass containing the liquid he'd seen the Sith Lord drinking earlier in the imperial shuttle.

"Here," the Shadow said softly. "Drink this...it'll make you feel better." Anakin sat up with some difficulty. "Sorry about the neurotoxin, Skywalker. But I needed to ensure you didn't try something stupid like cutting a hole in my shuttle and leaping out onto some rooftop. I assure you, your headache and nausea will pass after you drink this." The Shadow's hand continued to proffer the drink.

"I'm...fine..." Anakin responded with a gravelly voice.

"Suit yourself," the Shadow responded with unconcerned as it turned sharply away to head back to its desk, leaving Anakin on the far side of the room sitting alone in a comfortable chair. It placed the drink on the desk casually and beckoned Anakin over.

"What...do...you...want?" the young Jedi Master breathed.

"I told you, Anakin," the Shadow answered with a smile. "I just want to talk. We used to talk all the time. Why would you want to limit our discussions now because of a little thing like me putting a little electricity in your life?" The Shadow seemed amused by himself. Then it smiled invitingly. "Come on, Anakin...let's just talk. We can clash lightsabers if you want later. Right now...I just want to give us a chance to talk things over."

"So...you are Palpatine...?" Anakin asked in amazement.

"Well..." the Shadow answered. "Palpatine is here but not in the way you're thinking. I am *definitely* still in control. Palpatine is...a Guide, shall we say? Come sit with me and we can discuss it."

Perhaps it was the neurotoxin. Perhaps it was the fact that the Shadow sounded so

much like the friend he had loved for so long--not the one that had betrayed him, but the one that had loved him unconditionally since he was a boy. Perhaps it was a hope that by sitting with him, he would give Obi-Wan more time to get to him. Perhaps it was fear.

Perhaps he felt alone.

In any case, Anakin found himself walking over to the chair that stood before the Shadow. The Shadow had moved to sit on the desk casually and patiently waited for the young man to join him. Anakin soon found himself seated as the Shadow retrieved the discarded drink. The Shadow proffered the drink again but said nothing. Anakin's head was pounding mercilessly and the drink was enticing. It appeared to be the most delicious drink Anakin could possibly hope for. The smell wafted into his nose and it smelled like the sweetest nectar Anakin had ever tasted.

"Anakin..." the Shadow smiled condescendingly. "Do you really think I would *poison* you? That's not very honorable now is it?"

"Well..." Anakin responded. "You...*are*...a Sith Lord."

"Oh please! Fine!" The Shadow put the drink to his lips and swallowed a generous amount. He drank with fervor and allowed several drops to slip out of the corner of his mouth and onto his chin. The drops looked as savory as cold water on Tatooine. Anakin looked away as the Shadow wiped the drink from his lips and offered it to Anakin again.

"Feel better now?" the Shadow asked. "Please...take a sip. I want you to be level-headed as we discuss the fate of the galaxy."

"No..." Anakin whispered though he felt no conviction. He looked at the drink as the Shadow set it down gently on the desk within arm's reach.

"Very well," the Shadow replied. "It'll be right here when you change your mind."

"I...won't..." Anakin gritted down the surge of nausea that hit him.

"I'm sure, Anakin. I'm sure."

"How...are you here?" Anakin asked. "Palpatine died...I...watched him die. How...is it possible?"

"Anakin, Palpatine mentioned the unlimited power of the Sith," the Shadow responded as it walked around the desk. "He wasn't exaggerating. When Sidious told you the story of Darth Plagueis the Wise, he neglected to mention that

Plagueis was listening in on that conversation.”

Anakin continued to look at the drink on the desk with longing. The Shadow watched him with deep satisfaction. The headache was getting worse. It was hard for Anakin to concentrate and he could feel the nausea growing in the pit of his stomach. After a long moment, he tore his eyes away from the drink and directed them back at the Shadow. The Shadow smiled knowingly and continued.

“A millennia ago, the Sith were vanquished by the Jedi and their selfish urges, Anakin,” the Shadow explained. “All were destroyed except one—Darth Bane. He was the most powerful Force user I have ever known of....Until you, of course.” The smile seemed genuine, like a father doting on a successful child.

“Anyway...” the Shadow continued. “Bane decided it best to limit the Sith to just two—A master and an apprentice. Always two. No more. No less.”

“I...already know this...” Anakin was growing impatient. The drink sat within reach and was calling to him. He could feel his will giving way as his body begged for release from its torment. Anakin broke his gaze again. “Tell...tell me...something I don’t...already know.”

“What you *don’t* know, my young apprentice,” the Shadow smiled, “Is that Bane was the ultimate strategist. He realized that the Rule of Two, while convenient for preventing internal strife had one fatal flaw. In every case, the apprentice was likely to slay the Master. Most likely *before* the Master had the opportunity to pass on all his knowledge. Treachery *is* the way of the Sith, you know.”

“I’m...not...your...apprentice,” Anakin gasped.

“Yes...quite right,” the Shadow responded. “Well...not yet, anyway. But we digress. Back to our good friend Bane. Darth Bane decided that it would be best to have a fail-safe in place. He taught himself everything he could about the dark side before taking on an apprentice. This took years of study. He was most intrigued to find that he should be able to maintain his consciousness inside the mind of another. Of course, if he did this, his body would be vulnerable to attack. The other downside to this particular process was that if someone else were to try the same thing, his consciousness would be forcibly booted out of the host mind and dissipate into the nothingness--a not altogether pleasant experience, I’m sure. But it did provide an advantage. If...at the moment of death, he executed this particular maneuver, he would be able to extend his life and influence for another generation. Until, of course, his apprentice got killed and entered the mind of another. But...it was a plan. It’s a plan that has worked for a thousand years!”

Anakin sat still desperately thirsty, his mind addled and his body weakened.

“A thousand years of knowledge,” the Shadow gleamed wistfully. “Imagine it, Anakin. The cumulative knowledge of the Sith could one day be yours as it is mine now. If you manage to find a way to strike me down, I’ll just inhabit you. You’ll put up a good fight to limit my influence, I’m sure. But I’ll have the rest of your life to turn you.”

Anakin was gasping for air. The words were working on his mind and his heart pounded against his chest. The dragon licked at the back of his mind where the pain was greatest. The drink called to him like a lost lover. He could feel the sweet nectar passing down his throat.

*The Sith have evolved... The new Sith could not be destroyed with a lightsaber; they could not be burned away by any torch of the Force. The brighter the light, the darker their shadow. How could one win a battle against the dark, when battle itself had become the dark’s own weapon?*

“It’s pointless to resist, Anakin,” the Shadow continued. “Don’t make me destroy you. Join me and we can rule the galaxy together--Master and Apprentice. I’m not asking much. Just for you to trust me. Now...please...” the Shadow picked up the drink. “Just take a drink...”

*No!* Anakin thought. *This is insanity!*

With sudden ferocity, Anakin leapt to his feet and backed away from the desk. The Shadow’s eyes widened in surprise.

Anakin bowed his head, closed his eyes and summoned all his will to bring the light of the Force into his beleaguered body. Torrents of energy poured into him and cleansed him of the toxin’s effects in moments. Anakin breathed in the Force and felt its power surging in him. A few short seconds followed and Anakin’s eyes opened while his head remained bowed. He had the look of a predator about to attack his prey.

White fire with a tinge of blue cast a dark shadow on the Jedi Master’s face as he stared at the Shadow.

“I will *not* turn!” Anakin said menacingly. “I am a Jedi. Come at me if you dare!”

Mace Windu regained his composure after a long moment and his face took on a look of dark resignation. He sighed heavily and brought his malicious smile back to his face. *This* was what he wanted. He would destroy this “Chosen One” and prove once and for all that *he* was the galaxy’s savior. He would recruit a more fitting servant—one worthy of the Sith. Not this *child*.

“So be it...Jedi,” Mace snarled. “Now, Anakin Skywalker...you will die.”

Lightning arced from the Shadow's hands and burned into the lightsaber in Anakin's hands.

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## Part XVII

Date Posted: 6/23 3:50am

-----Fear of Failure-----

The Coruscant skyline is often admired by engineers and derided by lovers of nature. At night, it becomes a sea of darkness populated with millions of lights as far as the eye can see. It is like the stars in space brought down to a planet to live among the mortals. Creatures from every walk of the galaxy come to visit the city-planet at least once in their lifetimes. Many creatures chose to relocate to this central metropolis.

On this night, like every other, the skyline was littered with lights in every building. Moving lights, attached to flying vehicles of every kind, scurried about the skyline like bioluminescent bugs found on any planet except Coruscant. On Coruscant, very few naturally occurring living creatures existed. Coruscant had been tamed over a millennia ago by the powerful creatures that inhabited her now. They had tamed her beaches and her waterways. They had destroyed her trees and replaced them with atmospheric controls systems that were more efficient and longer running. They had eliminated the millions of species of animals that had roamed this planet thousands of years before and drove the survivors into the bowels of the streets. Rather, they had built their buildings to keep the animals far below—with the rest of society's rejections. On Coruscant, you either lived among the clouds or you died among the refuse.

In the clouds, high above the wretched existence that the lowest of the low experienced every day, light burned from one window more powerfully than any other. In one window, bright blue-white energy was surging and receding with intense power. A closer inspection would reveal flashes of white hot electricity clashing harmlessly against a white flame that refused to go out. Inside that window, the fate of the galaxy was being decided...

"You cannot win, Skywalker!" Mace Windu snarled. "I killed Yoda. I'll kill you!" More lightning poured from his hands with intense power. The young Jedi was a picture of concentration—every bit of his power was focused on stopping the attack that was being driven at him. But he didn't budge.

"That may be, Mace," the Jedi responded. "But there's something you should know..."

"And what, could you possibly tell me that I might care to know?" Mace breathed as he fired another bolt at the Jedi, circling him slowly. Anakin pivoted with each footstep that Mace made, keeping his lightsaber steady in front of the Sith Lord.

Anakin waited patiently for a moment. As if on cue, the Korun Master fired another bolt directly at Anakin.

With impossible speed, the blue-white flame emanating from Anakin's saber disappeared and attached itself to Anakin's waist. In one fluid motion, Anakin raised a gloved hand and caught the electrical attack in his hand and it became a ball of pure-white power. Before the Sith Lord could complete his blink of surprise, the energy shot back toward him with unimaginable speed. Before he could consider mounting a defense to this counterattack, he was blasted by the unseen hand of the Force and driven into his office wall. Before his battered body began to slip to the floor, the ball of power created by his own hand struck him intensely in the chest and electricity engulfed his surprised frame.

"I already have a thousand years of knowledge!" Anakin shouted as Mace Windu slumped to the floor. "I don't need your *disease* in my head!"

Mace sat up on his knees and shook his head in an attempt to clear the explosions of light that were going off behind his eyes. He stood up a moment later and eyed Anakin closely.

"That's a neat trick, Skywalker," Mace said flatly. "Now...where have I seen that before? Hmmm...you wouldn't happen to have a little green troll running around in your head, now would you? I mean, I know he's small...but this is ridiculous!"

"Shut up and fight!" Anakin retorted. "You really *do* talk too much!"

Purple fire burned brightly in the Dark Lord of the Sith's hand.

Anakin Skywalker held his lightsaber at the ready in his right hand and lifted his left to point directly at the Korun Master. A smile crossed Anakin's face at the look of outrage on Mace Windu's face when Anakin turned his hand open-palmed to the s.ky and beckoned the Chancellor toward him.

Rage erupted from Darth Salus in the form of a primal scream. A purple blur of energy raced toward the young Jedi Master.

## Part XVII continued

Date Posted: 6/23 4:41pm

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The space above Coruscant was littered with thousands of ships milling about, each with its own mission. Each ship desperately fought for purchase in the massive thoroughfare that represented the nexus for commercial traffic in and out of the massive planet. Billions of citizens lived on a planet that didn't have the ability to sustain itself.

Coruscant had very few, if any, real exports to the galaxy. The planet's largest industries were service-oriented. With no land to support agrarian pursuits, the planet had no farmers and no livestock. With the millions of tons of garbage that were produced on a planet without the ability to naturally break down biodegradable material, the hazardous waste disposal industry was one of the most lucrative, if not attractive, businesses on the planet. Coruscant was the beautiful city-planet that it was, primarily because few people ever saw the conditions necessary to make the planet look that way.

One of the things few people saw was the far side of the planet. In this area of space, high above the service sectors of the planet and thousands of kilometers from the Capitol building, the entire service industry flew vital cargo ships to the various authorized commercial ports and hauled the refuse off the planet from any of the multitudinous official garbage disposal sites. Ships visiting Coruscant normally didn't see this side of the city planet because all inbound traffic that was not of a commercial nature entered hyperspace coordinates to enter the planet's system on the Capitol side of the planet. The less savory traffic was directed to the *far* side of the planet.

This system of traffic control had developed over a thousand years and few people ever deviated from it. The merchants and disposal units liked it because they didn't have to worry about sightseers interfering with the traffic pattern and the citizens of Coruscant like it because they didn't need to see the unseemly characters that were frequently involved in the cargo transport system.

The traffic lanes were regular and very well marked. Hyperspace jumps were only authorized to and from the authorized hyperspace jump points. This was designed to prevent any unexpected collisions between two ships in the tightly packed cargo area as one of them emerged from hyperspace. In the rare event that someone accidentally entered the incorrect hyperspace coordinates, the commercial traffic control system had an answer for that, as well.



Moments before a ship egresses from hyperspace, there is a tiny warping of space around the point that the ship will emerge from. It is an infinitesimal effect but it's there. Thousands of sensors were strategically placed throughout the commercial lanes that would sound an alarm, halting traffic to prevent collision. This system of sensors was based on the knowledge that a ship would emerge from hyperspace several thousand kilometers away from the planet before it began its approach. When a ship approached from hyperspace closer than ten kilometers from the space lanes, additional alarms would sound to initiate emergency evasive procedures. In the hundreds of years since the system had been developed, the alarms had never sounded—until now.

With sudden and dramatic impact, every alarm signal sounded. Proximity sensors on hundreds of ships in the traffic lane alerted simultaneously and ships began to surge down toward the planet to avoid the catastrophe everyone knew was about to occur.

A moment after the alarms had begun, space tore itself apart and spat out unceremoniously a small fighter bearing CIS markings. The ship miraculously swerved to avoid all manner of spacecraft in its way without slowing down. Communications circuits were immediately flooded with the irate chatter of disgruntled merchants describing locations that the pilot of the invading craft should go to learn how to fly. If the pilot had heard them, it wasn't apparent. Seconds after arriving in normal space, the ship had crossed the transit lane and was now rocketing across Coruscant on a vector toward the Capitol. One pilot's voice was heard over the communications net that managed to sum up the feelings of the entire merchant fleet.

“Damn Seppies!”

## Part XVII continued

Date Posted: 6/23 6:42pm

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Nearly two thousand combined years of Jedi and Sith knowledge of lightsaber combat and command of the Force clashed in an arena that had held a similar battle only hours before. Amethyst fire burned brightly against sky-blue plasma in powerful and dazzling slashes and strikes. The owners of the flames never lingered for a moment. After each attack was foiled, a counterattack was mounted. Following each exchange of slashes and cuts, a new flurry would follow.

Sweat poured from their faces but neither man faltered. Power poured through them into their blades, amplifying each strike and parry. Every thrust was sufficient to destroy. Every lunge carried the power to end the battle. But in the end, there was only parity.

Anakin frowned inwardly as he considered the situation. He was younger than Mace Windu and could theoretically outlast him in a competition of endurance. The only problem with that approach is that Salus didn't seem to be weakening at all. In fact, the Dark Lord seemed to be growing in power by the second. Anakin could see him clearly in the Force. Darth Salus was a roiling cauldron of red fire that seemed to be growing by the moment. Anakin decided that he needed a different approach.

Form V lightsaber combat is one of the most powerful of all the seven forms of lightsaber combat. The Shien fighting style relies heavily on the combatant to engage in powerful strikes against his opponent, overwhelming his defenses through raw power. It had proven effective for Anakin Skywalker throughout his Jedi career. He had used it to devastating effect on Count Dooku on the *Invisible Hand*. But against a master of Vaapad, Shien was a liability. While Shien was very effective at defensive blocks, similar to the Soresu style practiced by Obi-Wan, it had its vulnerabilities. The fighter utilizing Shien ultimately looks for an opening in the opponent's defenses and strikes with immense power. This is the key to the power that Shien can bring.

The conundrum that Anakin faced was that Vaapad was anything but predictable. The strikes that came were many and they varied in intensity and direction at such blinding speeds that predicting an opening was rarely the opponent's primary concern. One facing a Vaapad master was usually focused entirely on survival. The crucial problem Anakin was dealing with was that Mace Windu wasn't simply *a* Master of Vaapad—he was *the* master.

“I can feel your fear, Skywalker,” Mace snarled from a meter away. “You stink of fear!”

Anakin responded with a series of feints to draw Mace into a counterattack. He slashed his lightsaber repeatedly at Mace’s right side causing the Dark Lord to focus his defensive strategy there. Anakin knew that it wouldn’t take long for Mace to become frustrated with the game and lash out at Anakin’s exposed left ribcage. The gambit worked. As Mace lunged for Anakin’s side, the Jedi Master sidestepped and pivoted around, bringing his lightsaber down hard towards the Korun’s head.

His lightsaber’s arc was brought to a sudden halt as Mace dropped to one knee and brought his blade above his head. Mace swung his legs from his kneeling position and kicked Anakin solidly in the stomach, driving him back hard against the far wall.

Anakin paused to catch his breath as Mace calmly stood and turned to face his foe.

“What are you so afraid of Anakin?” Mace taunted. “Are you afraid you’ll lose? Are you afraid that the “Chosen One” just might not be good enough? Or maybe you’re afraid you’ll win. Whatever will you do if you manage to kill me and end up with a Dark Lord of the Sith running around in your putrid little head? It’s a lose-lose proposition for you, Skywalker. Get it through your thick skull—You! Can’t! Win!”

*Now!* Anakin’s mind screamed.

With a burst of power from the Force, Anakin leapt in the air and came down hard on Darth Salus’ blade in a classic Shien attack. Mace blocked the attack with a look of disgust which quickly turned to surprise when Anakin began leaping about repeatedly driving strike after strike at the former Jedi Master. Mace was only barely escaping the slashes being delivered by Anakin. Each one was crisp and pure. The power that he had been striking with was severely diminished but was replaced with a more rapid and unpredictable attack.

This was the essence of Form IV lightsaber fighting—Ataro. In all the time that the Dark Lord had known Anakin Skywalker, he had never seen the young Jedi move as he moved now. Under normal circumstances, someone attempting to use Ataro against a Vaapad master for the first time would quickly find himself with a lightsaber burning into his chest. But Anakin Skywalker was just effective with the technique. *He was a Master!*

Darth Salus began to give ground. Anakin jumped high in the air but not at Mace. Instead he flew across the room to the far wall. Mace turned to attack, but Anakin was no longer there. He had leaped onto the Chancellor’s desk and was already in

mid-flight before the Dark Lord even saw where he was. A moment later, Salus saw the blue-white energy coming at his face with astonishing speed. A short, quick sidestep resulted in the lightsaber passing by his nose by millimeters instead of through his head. The lightsaber was so close that Mace could feel its intense heat lapping at his skin. Mace brought his lightsaber up and knocked the offending blade away. As soon as it was clear, Mace leapt onto the Chancellor's podium and away from Anakin.

"You are absolutely full of surprises, Skywalker," Mace announced with a growing smile as he looked up and saw the Senate Arena above. "You know...it's getting a little tight in here. How about we take this outside?" With that, the Dark Lord jumped up into the Senate Arena.

When Anakin reached the podium he could see the Chancellor leaping from pod to pod to gain higher ground. Anakin remembered some advice a long time ago Obi-Wan had given him about attacking an opponent with the high ground. Anakin couldn't remember exactly what the advice was but he knew it basically meant that it was a bad idea.

Anakin considered his options for a long instant before following the Dark Lord. Anakin watched the Sith's path and began leaping to follow—on the opposite side of the Arena. Mace Windu was moving rapidly but Anakin was moving faster. As the Sith Lord traversed the arena, Anakin began to gain on his height. The two were also closing on each other along the circumference of the arena. The senate pods became their stepping stones in their elaborate game of leapfrog.

Then the Sith Lord had the bright idea of throwing one of those stones.

**(Part XVII continued**

**Date Posted: 6/24 3:33am ) ----**

Anakin felt a surge of fear as he felt three senate pods surging at him in staccato fashion. He jumped up several levels to avoid the pods, which crashed violently below. The impact shook the entire room and the intense thunderclap produced echoed throughout the empty Senate Chamber.

Anakin surveyed the scene from high on the opposite of the Senate Arena. He now stood higher than Darth Salus, but the Sith Lord seemed undeterred. Instead, he was standing tall below with power pouring out of him an intense red inferno that could only be seen in the Force. Then Anakin Skywalker began to do something Obi-Wan always asked him to do but never during battle—think.

Salus was right. Anakin really was in a lose-lose situation. He was likely to fall before the Sith Lord's power. Anakin could admit to himself that Salus seemed to have more power at his disposal than Anakin did. The Dark Master also seemed to be growing in power throughout the combat while Anakin could feel his energy slipping. Falling to the Dark Lord was not an option. Unfortunately, Anakin conceded to himself, destroying Darth Salus presented a significant risk to himself. If a Jedi Master as disciplined as Mace Windu was so easily overcome, then what chance did *he* have to prevent an invasion of his soul?

*This, Anakin thought to himself, could be a problem.*

Anakin was leaping again to avoid a new surge of senate pods hurtling towards him from across the room. Darth Salus was laughing vociferously as he easily grabbed pod after pod and hurled them across the vast chamber. Anakin was leaping to avoid each attack but Salus seemed to be getting smarter. The pods were now beginning to be fired ahead of Anakin's path, impacting where Anakin was going to be. A flick of his mind deactivated Anakin's lightsaber and put it away on his belt. The Jedi Master watched carefully out of the corner of his mind and felt another ten pods lift themselves from their docking bays and begin the rapid transit across the room towards him. Anakin leaped—

But this time, he did not run away from the attack. Instead, his leap brought him *toward* the first of the surging pods. Anakin's right foot landed smoothly on the edge of the missile and pushed his body high in the air. The Jedi Master tucked himself into a tight forward roll over the next three pods to land fleet-footedly on another pod. He bounced again and was two pods away from the end of his makeshift, rapidly moving bridge. Darth Salus bellowed as he picked up another forty pods and hurled them at the Jedi in frustration. As the pods took flight, Salus' eyes widened in surprise. It was not the reaction he was expecting from Anakin Skywalker. Instead of more fear and anger painted across his youthful face, Anakin

now wore an expression that Salus found extremely unsettling.

Anakin Skywalker smiled.

Seconds later, the Dark Lord of the Sith understood why. At the apex of his flight, Anakin leaped off to the left towards the solid purchase of undisturbed senate pods on the far side of the room. As he leapt, he turned in mid flight and reached out with the Force. All forty pods that were chasing him came to a sudden halt and reversed course—at twice their original speed! It was all Darth Salus could do to avoid being crushed by the string of pods that came rushing after him.

He jumped from his comfortable fighting location down several flights to land on a senate podium several meters below. Checking himself briefly, he looked around him to determine the best course of action. He didn't have time. Salus could feel the disturbance in the force like an onrush of wind before a freight train barreling down the track at full speed. He looked up a second later to see Anakin Skywalker's boot landing directly in his face.

The kick knocked the Sith Lord back several meters and into an adjacent pod. As Salus began to recover, he had only a moment to ignite his lightsaber before the young Jedi Master was on him in a flurry of attacks and blazingly fast speeds. It was all Salus could do to protect himself from the Jedi's intense power.

Mace opened his mind in the Force to see Anakin in the Force. His special gift was brought to bear as he watched the young Jedi Master. And there it was. Skywalker's shatterpoint. It wasn't his anger, as so many of them had thought in the Council. It wasn't his love for Padme, as even the Jedi might have thought. It wasn't his need to save everyone as Obi-Wan had opined. It wasn't his loyalty as Darth Sidious had believed. The thing that would break this Jedi Master and win this fight was the one thing that Anakin Skywalker had never known how to face—

His fear.

*Words*, Salus heard the Guide say. *Words are better in battle than any lightsaber...*

A blast of Force energy knocked Skywalker back away from the Korun Master and up onto a senate pod several meters up and away from Mace. As soon as Skywalker regained his footing, Mace deactivated his lightsaber and stared at the young Jedi Master. Anakin eyed him suspiciously and held his lightsaber at the ready.

"I concede, Master Jedi," Mace announced, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "You are the greater fighter." He reached up and touched the blood that was trickling from the corner of his mouth. "I no longer wish to fight you." Mace paused to let

the message sink in.

“What’re you playing at, Salus?” Anakin continued to stare at him warily. The Jedi Master was not prepared for this course of action.

“Well, Skywalker, it’s simple,” Mace replied. “I’m done fighting. I’m going to head back to my office now. You win.” With that, Salus turned his back on the Jedi Master and jumped down into the center of the arena and into his holding office. Then, without even glancing in Anakin’s direction, he walked into his office and sat down.

Anakin’s mind reeled in confusion. He didn’t know what was going on. But he had to stop Salus somehow. A few moments of further thought and Anakin was in the Chancellor’s holding room again. Salus didn’t budge when Anakin appear, although a satisfied smile crossed his face. The Dark Lord seemed to relish the confusion that painted the young knight’s visage.

“Ohh...I see your problem now!” Mace smiled as if discovering some previously undiscovered star. “You can’t let me go...but you can’t just kill me in cold blood. We’ve already determined that you can’t capture me unless I do it willingly and we both know *that* doesn’t matter because no prison in the universe could ever hope to hold me! So...what’s a Jedi to do?”

“I will stop you,” Anakin responded, his lightsaber still at the ready.

“And then there’s the problem,” Windu continued, “Of what I’m going to do once I’m free. I can be vindictive sometimes.” His voice sounded mockingly sympathetic. “I might decide to kill myself a doting wife and her newborn child. Don’t you get it, Skywalker?”

You—

Can’t—

Win—

You have failed!!!”

*“Noooo!!!”*

The dragon awoke in Skywalker’s chest and took control. Power surged from the Jedi Master but it was completely uncontrolled. As Anakin charged the seated Sith Lord, who had still not moved, he realized his error but was helpless to stop it. He felt the lightning engulf him before he even saw it.

Pain seared through his body at unimaginable levels. The white-hot energy surrounded him and drove him to his knees. Anakin called on the Force to limit the damage being done to him, but he could already feel his consciousness slipping away and the darkness threatening to engulf him. As Anakin slumped to the floor, he felt the lightning dissipate. As his world turned to darkness, he heard the Sith Lord laugh.

As the fear swarmed around him, the Dark Lord of the Sith stood tall above him with an amethyst blade at the ready, high above his head and he was talking...

“Such a waste...”

Then the lightsaber was moving downward in a graceful arc.



## Part XVII continued

Date Posted: 6/24 1:10pm

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Just prior to death, it is said that most sentient species experience a peculiar sensation that is often referred to as “life flashing before your eyes.” Of course, this particular experience is not very well studied or understood given that the vast majority of people who would be able to articulate the sensation don’t live to tell their stories. Essentially, it is said, the dying individual experiences a rushing sensation during which important moments in their lives replay like a HoloNet story. This is believed to occur so rapidly and with such intensity that time seems to stand still. The truly remarkable thing about this experience, it is believed, is that the dying person loses all sense of time and the life experiences don’t shoot past in a blur, but rather they are observed and felt and considered for seemingly extended periods of time.

Darkness swirled around Anakin Skywalker’s prone form. The anger and fear that had consumed him only seconds before continued to drag the dark side energies around him in a cloud of pure darkness. As Anakin tried to focus his mind, he could see that energy assume the red flames characteristic of the dark side that Anakin had come to learn. On the horizon of the light cast by those flames, darkness beaconed to him like a temptress ready to devour her prey.

A burst of intense light appeared out of the nothingness. Energy seemed to be coming from everywhere but Anakin was not afraid. He could see the bright sky-blue light of the Force emanating from a single point and growing to phenomenal size. As Anakin squinted through the light, he could see two figures approaching—one a very tall male figure with long flowing hair and the other, a short stubbly creature that walked with the aid of a twisted piece of wood. As they walked closer, the darkness receded more and more. Before long, the red flames of the dark side had dissipated and the darkness was gone. All that stood in its place were two Jedi Masters who had joined the Force.

*Rise, you must,* the voice of Yoda resonated in Anakin’s ear. *Give up, you can not. Destroy the Sith Lord, only you can.* Anakin felt himself rising and opening his eyes but knew simultaneously that he remained unconscious on the floor of the Senator’s office.

“What...?” Anakin heard himself saying.

*Anakin,* came the voice of Qui-Gon-Jinn. *We don’t have much time. What you’re experiencing is a moment in time. It is a gift of the Force and you must accept it*

*and move on. We have much to discuss with you.*

“Ok...” Anakin said slowly. “I’m having some kind of vision. I can accept that. What is it that you have to tell me?” Anakin was standing now, though he couldn’t see himself. He felt completely disembodied, yet rooted to where he was. He tried to take in the environment but all he could see was the pale blue light of the Force in every direction.

*To defeat the Sith Lord, Yoda said intensely, your fear, you must let go.*

“I’m not afraid...” Anakin replied without conviction.

*See through you, we can, Yoda answered. Much fear, sense in you, I do. Fear of loss...fear of death...fear of failure.*

“What does that have to do with anything?”

*Everything! Yoda answered. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.*

“I have already suffered enough!” Anakin said hotly. “What am I supposed to do? If he wins, the galaxy turns to darkness and he destroys it all to remake it in his own image! Who knows what he will do to the ones I love? If I manage to destroy him, he will enter my being! For the rest of my life, I will fight this battle over and over again! He’s right! I can’t win! What am I supposed to do?!?” Anakin was shouting, the anger was welling up inside him with great intensity.

*Accept, Qui-Gon replied softly. His voice was soothing and empathetic. The Jedi Master stood there in ephemeral blue transparency and began to fade from sight. As Anakin pondered the word he felt the light of the Force surrounding him and infusing him with tranquility. The dragon rested and Anakin sighed.*

“I will try...” he answered.

“No!” Yoda answered tersely as he, too began to fade. “Do or do not! There is no try! Accept, Anakin Skywalker.” Then the Jedi Masters were gone. The bright light-blue horizon on which they all stood began to dim.

An instant later, Anakin’s eyes popped open and he felt the Korun Master standing above him with a purple blade of fire held high above his head bringing it down with resounding quickness and power.

*All that insight, Anakin thought wryly, and I’m still dead!*

Anakin could almost feel the blade tear through his back. He prepared himself for the inevitable. Then he heard the distinct crackling sound of energy exchange between the powerful blades of two lightsabers. Anakin turned onto his back quickly and stared in disbelief at an azure plasma blade extended directly over his recumbent form and blocking the amethyst fire that threatened to tear into his body. His eyes wandered along the blade, along the hilt, hand, and arms belonging to the owner of the fire. His heart leaped at the familiar beard and sardonic smile. Anakin's eyes flitted to the Dark Lord's face, on which there was the same look of shock that Anakin felt. Anakin and the Dark Lord spoke their surprise at the same time—

“Obi-Wan—“

“Kenobi?”

“Hello there!” The Jedi Master smiled broadly. The Dark Lord was so focused on the Soresu Master's face that he didn't see the backhand fist skyrocketing at his face until it was too late. The Dark Lord of the Sith found himself propelled by the power of Obi-Wan's fist combined with a significant power in the Force into the far wall, the wind knocked from his lungs.

“Sorry I'm late, Anakin,” Obi-Wan smiled as he reached down and pulled his former padawan to his feet. “You wouldn't believe the traffic in this town!” Anakin was speechless and stared in mild amazement as Obi-Wan surveyed the ruined décor in the Chancellor's office. Obi-Wan nodded curtly to the large hole in the wall on the other side of the room that Anakin had created in his attack against the Korun Master to free Yoda and Padme. “It would seem you've been busy.”

“A little,” Anakin found his voice. “Just trying to hold down the fort until you got here.” The two men that were closer than brothers looked into each others eyes and felt the connection deep in the Force. In spite of the misery that they had experienced together; in spite of all the betrayals they had both experienced; in spite of the fact that The Dark Lord of the Sith was regaining his composure only meters away from them both—the two men smiled warmly at each other. This was the love they felt for each other. This was what made them compatriots. This was what made them friends. This was what made them brothers.

This was what made them *The Team*.

“You know...?” came the voice of Mace Windu filled with embittered frustration. “This being thrown into a wall thing is really getting old!”

The Sith Lord stood up and called his fallen lightsaber back to his hand but he didn't ignite it. He surveyed the room carefully as if sizing up his options. It

appeared he'd decided that his chances were better than average.

"Nice of you to join the party, Kenobi," Mace said with a disturbing smile. "Your timing could be better...but I guess there's no time like the present, eh?"

Obi-Wan and Anakin looked at each other and Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow. "He does that a lot..." Anakin smirked. "Lot's of talking in between slashes and clashes. You get used to it after a while, but it's still annoying." Obi-Wan seemed to take this all in quickly and nodded with a smile.

"I see," Obi-Wan answered. He looked back at the Dark Lord of the Sith and brought his lightsaber before him in the classic Soresu stance. They both watched Mace closely as the Sith Master slowly ignited his own lightsaber and its purple power filled the room. "Anything else I should know before this begins?"

"Umm...yeah..." Anakin said slowly. "Well...it's a long story but he's got Sidious in his head and I'm not sure it's such a good idea that we kill him or he might end up in ours." Obi-Wan froze for an imperceptibly short moment as he absorbed the words. Then the Jedi Master turned to Anakin with his eyebrows raised high on his forehead.

"Is that all?" Obi-Wan said incredulously. "Well...I suppose that will make this somewhat of a challenge."

"I agree," Anakin replied.

As if on cue, all three Masters of the Force leapt toward the center of the room, lightsabers arcing gracefully.

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## **Part XVIII**

**Date Posted: 6/25 11:30am**

**-----Anakin & Obi-Wan 3-----**

The Chancellor's holding room was a sea of blue peppered with a torrent of purple flashing with intense power. As the two Jedi Masters sailed elegantly through the air, their mutual target charged with grace and power on an opposite trajectory. Acting as one extended warrior, at the zenith of their encounter, the younger Jedi struck high at the Korun Master's head and the older slashed his blade at the Dark Lord's knees. Impossible speed and an insurmountable control of the Force allowed Darth Salus to deflect Skywalker's blade with a powerful slash while turning himself horizontal in the air to avoid the attack of Kenobi and sail unharmed between the two. The result of this exchange was that all three men landed cat-footed on the opposite side of their make-shift arena and turned to face each other.

This is Skywalker & Kenobi in the Light:

They are the perfect complement to one another. Their blades shine brightly in the same shade of blue but their styles couldn't be more different. Anakin Skywalker is the whirlwind of power and skill. Obi-Wan Kenobi is the epitome of grace and efficiency. Together they represent the most formidable fighting team the galaxy has ever known. Should their enemy attempt to strike one down, the other is there to draw his attention away giving his partner the opportunity to recover. Every strike one of them delivers is nothing but a prelude to the slash being readied by the other. Every leap is perfectly coordinated. In a battle of two master swordsmen against one, it is easy for masters of lesser caliber to get in each others' way. This is all but impossible for this pair. If one should get in the other's way, it is the opponent that should fear because this is but a dance to them. There are no accidents of placement; no mishaps of thoughtlessness; no confusion of intent. To fight together, for The Team, is to be performers in the greatest of ballets with the final act being the destruction of anything that would dare stand against them.

But their compatibility extends beyond their skills with the lightsaber. This could be imitated if one were to study them together long enough. This could be emulated by lesser beings under the right circumstances. What separates this pair above all others is their connection in the Force. When they stand together, the Force joins the two in a powerful coupling as real as the attachment between the arm and hand. Each man can feel the other. Each knows the other's thoughts before he thinks them. It is symbiosis brought to its highest ideal. Anakin's power

dominates the connection but Kenobi's control enables it to function.

Together they can feel the Dark Lord's attack before he even begins. Together two lightsabers flash in a flurry of blocks and parries that drive the Korun back. Before the foe can even begin to mount a response, the young attacks from on high in a dangerous arc of intensity while the older comes in from below with a graceful curve of killing power. It's impossible to parry them both given the synchrony of the assault. The Sith responds by leaping backwards, placing his feet firmly on the wall and jumping over both their heads arcing behind them in a slashing attack meant to sever both their spines.

It as effective as starting a fire in a thunderstorm. Before the slash is even halfway to its target both Masters have turned and are ready. The Jedi with the scar along his eye knocks the Sith's blade away easily. Before the Dark One's feet can touch the floor, the bearded Master's weapon is already in motion with a deadly slice at his now-exposed midriff. Only a desperate blast from the Force that drives them both back from him slightly while he lands and leaps precariously backwards is able to save the Chancellor's life.

As the Two that are One in the Light stare intensely at the One in the Dark, it becomes clear that this contest will not be won easily. The light side of the Force burns brightly from them both in effervescent glory as it coalesces into one magnificent sphere of power. It is a power that cannot be matched. It is a power that cannot be stopped.

The Dark One stares at them intently in the Force and decides then that discretion is the better part of valor. He needs to destroy their advantage and the wide open space that is his office will never afford him that opportunity.

Together they feel him turn towards the hole in the wall created by Anakin's earlier attack. They see him dash into the service tunnel that is on the other side of the wall and move down the walkway. Skywalker and Kenobi stare at each other in the Force and shrug. If the Dark Lord of the Sith wants to see how The Team performs in confined quarters, they are only all too happy to oblige.

The Team is not a function of the environment. The Team does not care about its opponent. In the Light, The Team simply is relentless and unrivaled.

So The Team follows.

## Part XVIII continued

Date Posted: 6/25 6:52pm

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Twenty kilometers away in a private room at a computer access terminal, a Senator's heart skipped a beat as she watched her husband do battle with the Sith. She had finally regained the ability to breathe when her husband was joined by the implacable Obi-Wan Kenobi in the fight. She had been horrified by the sight of her husband laying helpless on the Senator's Office floor while the Dark Lord hovered above him ready to strike him down in cold blood. It was only the gallant actions of Obi-Wan Kenobi that had managed to stop his murder.

As she watched them fight in silence, she could only hope that their combined might would win out in the end. Anakin would never forgive her if she ever attempted to join the fight. She would have been a distraction, she knew. It was only through superior knowledge of the holosurveillance systems, a little luck and a great deal of intuition that she was even able to witness what was going on. Despite her best judgment however, she felt helpless. She *had* to do *something*. There *had* to be a way to advance the cause!

As she sat there pondering, she felt pride surge in her heart as she watched her husband and his companion scare the Sith Lord off. He was running now. If only the Senators could see how evil, treacherous and cowardly the man to whom they had recently handed ultimate power to really was. Perhaps they would reconsider after all.

That was it!

With the unsurpassed skill of a master of subterfuge, the Senator from the insignificant lush-green world of Naboo retrieved the automatically recorded holosurveillance recordings inside the Chancellor's office. She scanned the holograms backwards, periodically stopping to listen to the dialogue between her husband and the Dark Lord. When she found the perfect spot, she created a file that would show Darth Salus' true colors. She smiled proudly as the download completed. Then, with equal acumen, she called up the private rooms of ten thousand Senators resting in various parts of Coruscant. The vast majority of them were living in the same building she lived in. She knew that every room was equipped with its own private holotransceiver. She imagined that any Senator in the Galactic Senate would ensure that his or her room was similarly equipped.

As soon as she had confirmed the location of all these creatures which controlled the fate of the Galaxy, the Senator sent the file to each of them simultaneously,

each transmission programmed to replay the signal indefinitely until manually shut off at the local transceiver controls. After completing that task, she sent the file to every HoloNet news source she knew. Satisfied with her work, she leaned back in her chair, smiling broadly, her hand resting on her child tenderly.

“Sweetie,” she said smilingly to the unborn child, “I think we just won the war!”

Several minutes later on every HoloNet screen across the galaxy a news story broke. There was no lead in by some intrepid reporter desperate for headlines. There was no commentary provided by some nameless pundit that wanted to further advance his own meaningless career. Instead, there was simply a message that told the people of the Empire that a matter of galactic importance was being transmitted and they should continue to watch.

Billions of eyes were opened at that moment. In that instant thousands of systems came to realize just how feeble their representatives had become. The people that made up the Galactic Empire finally came to understand that this war they had fought was not between the common man and the businessman, as they had believed. They came to see that the war was not truly over at all. Because the war they had fought in was in fact between good and evil. It was between light and dark. It was between the two greatest powers in the galaxy.

It was between the Jedi and the Sith.

And the Sith were winning.

The HoloNet recording began simply showing The Hero With No Fear sitting up weakly--apparently drugged--and refusing a drink from the new Chancellor of the Galactic Empire. The words were somewhat difficult to make out, but there was no mistaking the fear in Skywalker's voice.

SKYWALKER: So...you are Palpatine...?

WINDU: Well...Palpatine is here but not in the way you're thinking...

The entire fate of the galaxy changed.



## **Chapter XVIII here's the rest**

**Date Posted: 6/26 11:04am**

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The two Jedi Masters entered the service tunnel cautiously. The lighting that normally illuminated these otherwise dark passageways was cut, cloaking the passageway in incredible darkness. Only the ambient light from the office they exited and the glow from their lightsabers cast any glow into the crawlway. It was impossible to see ahead but the two friends never hesitated. In the Force, they could see everything.

Anakin took the lead, stepping into the darkness completely unafraid. His partner hung behind less than a meter, searching the darkness with the Force. They could feel the Korun Master ahead but he was hiding himself in the Force. Any ordinary Jedi would find it impossible to locate the Dark Lord. But to these two, he was simply difficult to pinpoint, at best. As they moved deeper into the darkness, it became clear that Mace was trying to lure them somewhere. The farther they went, the deeper the former Jedi Master brought them.

Before long, the background lighting that filtered from the hole in the wall through which they had come was a distant memory. Now, all the light the two had was the faint gleam from their weapons. As the two looked at each other, their sabers cast ominous shadows on their faces and they could feel the blackness of the dark side closing in around them. The Sith Lord was using the murky lightlessness to feed his power and was counting on their fear to help make himself stronger.

“You realize, of course,” Anakin whispered back to his friend, “that he’s leading us into a trap.” Obi-Wan seemed to smile at the thought.

“Well,” Obi-Wan replied with a slight tilt of the head and a wry smile. “You know we have a policy about traps...”

Anakin laughed in spite of himself then came to a halt. In the Force he could see the red flames of the dark side far below. He opened his mind to the Force and his vision of his surroundings blossomed into salience. They stood at the edge of a deep cylindrical shaft that dropped some thirty meters down. It opened to series of catwalks and adjoining service tunnels beneath the Senate Arena. They appeared to be used for accessing the myriad hydraulic and anti-gravitational control units that were essential for the smooth operation of the Senate. Darth Salus was there.

The two Jedi stood around the precipice looking down into it with the Force.

“We can only go down one at a time,” Anakin remarked. “A well-crafted trap...”

“But a trap, just the same,” Obi-Wan smiled. He looked up at his friend and was astonished to see the blue flames of energy flashing and roiling about him. The boy that he trained was a beacon of power. But there was something more. Obi-Wan could see in Anakin something he knew now was always there but he had never noticed before. Beating in the chest of the Jedi Master that was closer to him than a brother was a bright red fire of power lashed and chained in place by his will.

“Anakin...” Obi-Wan said warily, “I see conflict within you...”

“It’s under control, Master,” Anakin replied, slipping back into the comfortable position of padawan to Obi-Wan Kenobi. It was a role he had despised but one he wore with ease. And one that he found he didn’t hate as much as he once had. He breathed deeply and the fire seemed to die down inside him but didn’t extinguish. Before long, only the hot embers remained. Anakin looked up at Obi-Wan with slightly pained eyes.

“Anakin—,” Obi-Wan began to object.

“Obi-Wan,” he spoke earnestly intercepting his friend’s words. “You have to trust me.” Obi-Wan considered this for a moment and then nodded. The two looked at each other in a light they had only hinted at before when Jedi Master Kenobi was leaving for Utapau to face Grievous.

“I don’t trust anyone more than I trust you, Anakin,” Obi-Wan replied sincerely. The two reached out to each other instinctively and clasped arms in a universal sign of brotherhood. “You are my brother. I will fight by your side until the end and die by your side, if necessary.”

“You will die,” Anakin replied glumly. Then a smile spread across his face that radiated in the Force. “But not today!” Anakin could feel Mace Windu waiting impatiently for their arrival. His frustration was building and the flames of hatred that the Korun Master was trying to control to hide himself in the Force were expanding.

“Ready to spring this trap?” Obi-Wan asked as they broke their grip reluctantly.

“Let’s!” Anakin replied. “I’ll go in first. Give me three seconds after I land and engage him, then you follow.”

“Sounds like a plan—“

Anakin was already halfway through his fall before Obi-Wan finished. He watched the youth's fall with pride as Anakin's lightsaber flashed below. Within seconds the young Jedi Master was met with a blur of amethyst energy slashing at him incessantly.

One.

Anakin moved with incredible speed. Obi-Wan couldn't see the battle with his eyes, of course, but in the Force the two combatants were a cloud of power.

Two.

Mace managed to land a kick to Anakin's midriff and followed it with a heel to the young man's chin. Anakin flipped backwards and landed on the other side of the opening flatfooted but unperturbed. He responded with a surge of Force energy that managed to surprise Salus momentarily and knocked him backwards almost two meters.

Three.

Lightning poured from Mace's hands in response to the attack but Anakin was already in the air and was dragging the lightning with the Force as he sailed over the head of the Korun Master. As he landed behind Mace with his saber drawn, the Dark Lord was engulfed in his own power.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, Master of Soresu and best friend to Anakin Skywalker beamed with pride at his padawan's skillful use of the Force as he began his rapid controlled descent into the fray.

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The city of Coruscant was alight with activity. Millions of creatures from all over the galaxy were running in terror but in no particular direction. Panic filled the streets and the skyways. But the panic on the city-planet extended far beyond—it was spreading across the entire galaxy. The local police forces and emergency crews were desperately trying to contain the conflagration but were only marginally successful. Politicians were desperately pleading over the airwaves for calm.

But a tragedy had occurred that was impossible to curtail. The collective grief of over a trillion beings across the galaxy was joined by the consolidated fear that swept the entire Empire and extended into the outer rim. The people of the Empire were suffering impossible grief.

Until now, they had believed it would all work out. Until now, they had faith that their elected leaders would be able to right the sinking ship. Until now, they *knew* that it wasn't their problem. This was what they all believed in their hearts and minds. Political problems were for the politicians. Intrigue was only for those it directly affected. Betrayal by Jedi and conflict among dissenting factions was nothing more than a dispute to be resolved by those qualified to do so. Until now, everything they had believed might have been true if only the thing they collectively believed in had held strong for them.

So the people of the galaxy didn't grieve for the Chancellor of the Republic. They didn't mourn for the loss of the Jedi Order which would never again regain its previous position of prominence. They didn't rage for the deaths of the millions of people who suffered needlessly in a pointless war. They didn't lash out with combined anger because of anything other than what they came to see while watching holosurveillance footage of the new Chancellor seemingly possessed by the evil he had destroyed.

Democracy was dead.

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Padme Amidala watched the display out of her window in horror. What had she done? She hadn't expected so visceral a response. She knew in her heart now that had she considered her actions more carefully, the riots she saw playing out far below were predictable. The masses believed in democracy and now it was gone. She had to do something to stop this madness before it was too late.

She turned and walked out the door to her room and headed for the roof of the MedLab. As she entered the turbolift, and the doors shut, she pulled out a transceiver that put her in contact with her astromech droid and his companion who were waiting impatiently for her in her quarters at Five Hundred Replica.

"Artoo," she ordered into the device. "Come in, Artoo."

A brief silence was immediately followed by a series of excited beeps and whistles. She could hear C-3PO arguing with the droid in an attempt to get a hold of the transceiver Artoo had control of. The argument was trying her patience.

"Artoo," she said testily, "Give C-3PO the transceiver. I need him to translate anyway. C-3PO, listen up and don't talk. Get the Skiff and meet me on the roof of the MedLab at these coordinates. Have Artoo ready to take control of every HoloNet transmission site on Coruscant when I get there."

“Yes, of course, my lady,” came the crisp response of the protocol droid. “But I must protest. The violence below is spreading. I’m not sure exactly what it’s all about but it seems that a great number of people are very angry about something. I fear you might be in very real danger if you were to leave the relative safety of where you are.” Padme seemed to consider this for a long moment then sighed sadly into the microphone almost to herself as the turbolift came to a halt at the top of the building.

“None of us are safe if someone doesn’t do something...”

## Part XVIII continued ... *this is the end of Chapter XVIII*

Date Posted: 6/27 5:44pm

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Anakin's eyes widened with shock as he slashed at the exposed back of the immobilized Darth Salus. Instead of slicing him open neatly, he found his lightsaber torn from his hand and flung over the railing of the catwalk, tumbling far below. He didn't have an opportunity to consider his failure to maintain his Force hold on his saber as an electrified foot from the Dark Lord planted itself firmly against his temple and drove him over the edge after his discarded weapon. As Anakin fell several stories, he saw the sky-blue blade of Obi-Wan engage Mace's amethyst lightsaber. The electrical power around Mace had now dissipated and Obi-Wan was now facing Salus alone.

If the goal was to separate The Team and fight them one at a time, Salus was succeeding beautifully. Anakin turned in the air and pointed himself headfirst downwards to search the innards of the seemingly bottomless cavern of catwalks. Within seconds he had found his lightsaber far below and called it to him with ease. As he righted himself and used the Force to guide him to a walkway and slow his fall, he saw his former Master's blade flashing and twirling in response to Darth Salus' unrelenting attack almost one hundred meters above.

Anakin landed gracefully on a bridge that appeared to connect the main engineering room on the other side of a bulkhead some forty meters away to the fusion reactor hidden behind a series of ray shields that seemed to cycle on and off periodically. Anakin called to Obi-Wan in the Force and provided the slightest of suggestions. The nod that Kenobi provided Skywalker was impossible for the human eye to see. In the Force however, Anakin could see his friend acknowledging the need to put the battle back on their terms.

Obi-Wan was a swirling mist of speed and dexterity. He wasn't attacking the Dark Lord—it wasn't his way. But the Chancellor found it impossible to find an opening or weakness in the Soresu Master to exploit. Every attack was met with resistance. Every slash was avoided with apparent ease. Mace's lightsaber moved with unimaginable speed. There was no pattern to his attack. There was no clear intent. All that existed was the unstoppable speed, precision and unrelenting power of Vaapad.

But the Soresu Master remained untouched and undeterred. No matter how hard the Dark Lord's strikes were, Obi-Wan was there. No matter how rapidly Mace's blade flew, Obi-Wan was there. No matter how insanely unpredictable the Sith's moves were, Obi-Wan was there. Not only was the Jedi Master able to deflect each

attack, but somehow, he had found the gumption to smile while doing it.

Mace Windu was infuriated. He wanted nothing more than to wipe that smug smile off the Jedi's face. He poured his dark side power forth onto the unmovable Jedi Master and found an endless spring of light pouring back out at him. Mace slashed and parried and drove and fought until sweat began to stream from his bald head but still he was unable to move the Jedi. Frustrated, Mace struck out with his foot and managed to land a kick to Obi-Wan's side. The Dark Lord rejoiced in the small victory for a moment as he brought his purple blade of death to bear. Every ounce of his power was ready to slice the smile as well as the head right off of Obi-Wan's shoulders.

Instead, he found the sky-blue plasma of Anakin Skywalker racing towards his neck. Mace jumped back in surprise and saw Anakin pulling Obi-Wan up with a wry smile. Before the Sith could completely grasp that Skywalker was back in the fight, the two Jedi Masters hurdled over the rail and fell a hundred stories below. Mace's eyes widened in disbelief and irritation. He bellowed to the ceiling as he felt his dark side rage tear at him.

As the two brothers landed on the catwalk below, Obi-Wan righted himself and stood tall, seemingly unaffected by the kick he had received. The two friends looked up above them and watched the Sith's rage pour out. Seconds later, the Chancellor lashed out with lightning from on high directed at the two Masters of the Force. Anakin stepped in front of Obi-Wan and caught the lightning in his palms and seemed to be absorbing the power that was being sent down on him. Obi-Wan stood back appraisingly, his eyes widening in awe. When it became clear that this attack would not destroy Anakin, Salus roared again.

"Picked up a few things since I left, I see" Obi-Wan said with a dry smile.

"Well..." Anakin responded. "You might find this hard to believe, but...well...Yoda kind of...umm...never mind. We'll talk about it later." This seemed to satisfy Obi-Wan as he looked up at Salus who continued to scream and rage and was now beginning to stalk the upper catwalk like a caged Nexu.

"Do you really think it was such a good idea to upset him?" Obi-Wan asked. "I mean, the Sith do feed on anger and all."

"Well, we didn't want to keep fighting him on his terms now did we?" Anakin asked.

"What makes you so sure he'll come down here?"

Anakin didn't have to reply, as the two watched Mace fall from above, power

churning about him, and land fitfully ten meters away from them. Anakin eyed Obi-Wan with a bright twinkle in his eye. Obi-Wan rolled his eyes slightly as he turned to face Salus.

“Never mind,” he pouted. “Let’s get this over with.”

Anakin sailed high in the air above Mace’s head while Obi-Wan charged forward to close the distance between himself and the Sith. Within moments, the Dark Lord found himself on a catwalk in between two of the most powerful Jedi ever known.

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“Do we have control of the HoloNet yet?” Padme asked without pre-amble as she walked up the ramp that was still in the process of going down. She was sitting in the pilot’s chair before C-3PO had completely registered that she had boarded and his aural sensors were only now reporting that she had asked him a question. C-3PO didn’t know anything about these HoloNet systems and had more or less stayed out of Artoo Deetoo’s way once he had relayed the order to the little droid. Not wanting to be asked a second time and risk the direct wrath of the apparently perturbed Senator, C-3PO did what he knew best in a situation such as this—he blamed Artoo.

“I’m not quite certain, milady,” C-3PO said hurriedly. “I’m afraid that Artoo is ever so secretive about these sorts of things and never fills me in on any details whenever he chooses to tap into some computer or the other. Why it was just the other day, I was saying—“

“Artoo!” Padme interrupted as she shut the access ramp and initiated the skiff’s repulsorlifts. She engaged the ship’s navigation systems and pointed the nose of the skiff toward her desired destination. A series of excited whistles and bleeps poured forth from the astromech droid that seemed to have no end.

“What do you mean ‘the entire HoloNet’?” C-3PO yelled with incredulity. “The Senator only asked you for control of Coruscant’s HoloNet stations! Why must you always try to show off?”

“No, C-3PO,” Padme responded, turning in her chair for the first time since she entered the ship. “That’s perfect. Thank you, very much Artoo. I need to be able to transmit from a location where there might be some interference. Do you think you can do that?” Artoo responded with his usual bleeps and beeps and whistles. C-3PO seemed offended and unwilling to translate.

“I was merely pointing, out” C-3PO announced, “that you had exceeded the



Senator's request and that we are not designed to exceed our mandate. Why if every droid decided that *he* knew what was best, what kind of galaxy would we live in, I ask you that? Honestly—" This time it was Artoo who cut him off with a loud list of whistles that didn't require translating to interpret.

"Well, I never!" C-3PO responded. He immediately received another series of beeps from the little droid who was now moving toward him and away from the access terminal he was connected to. "Very well!" C-3PO yelled heatedly. "There is no need for that kind of language!" He turned towards Amidala who was completely unamused by the exchange. "Milady, Artoo wants me to inform you that you may transmit at any time and from any location you like. He only requires approximately..." C-3PO turned back to the droid and said something to Artoo that only the little droid could understand. Artoo replied testily with more insistent beeps.

"ENOUGH!" Padme yelled. "C-3PO, what does Artoo need?"

"Pardon me, milady," C-3PO said, apparently terrified. "I certainly didn't mean to offend."

"WHAT! DOES! ARTOO! NEED???"

"Oh, dear!" C-3PO looked helplessly at Artoo but for once the droid was silent. "He requires approximately one minute to ensure that the link is in place..." C-3PO seemed to consider the wisdom of continuing to speak for a moment and then decided it worth the risk. "May I ask where we are going?"

"Five Hundred Replica," Padme replied, as she turned back in her chair to face the viewing window and keyed in an unencrypted request to every Senator still on Coruscant.

## Part XIX the beginning

Date Posted: 6/28 6:12pm

-----~~Courage~~-----

Historians of the Republic knew. Knowledgeable Senators knew. C-3PO and Artoo Deetoo were neither. As such, both droids were utterly confounded as to why they were going to Five Hundred Replica. With the Senator clearly not interested in protracted discussions about the wisdom of her decisions, C-3PO decided it best to leave well enough alone. He went over to Artoo in an attempt to start a conversation up with the astromech. Artoo simply swiveled his domed head away from the protocol droid as he approached. C-3PO seemed to get the message reluctantly.

"If you won't be needing anything else, Milady—" C-3PO began.

"Actually, C-3PO..." Padme interrupted. She had a pained expression on her face and her words almost seemed strained. "There *is* something more you can do." C-3PO knew nothing about human anatomy but it was clear that the Senator was in some kind of pain. Her face was contorted as she squeezed her eyes shut in an expression that C-3PO could only assume was some form of meditation exercise. She gritted her teeth for exactly ten-point-oh-three seconds before her entire expression relaxed. C-3PO was naturally excited at the opportunity to serve but was equally disconcerted by the Senator's sudden odd behavior.

"Is anything the matter?" C-3PO asked with as close to concern in his voice as he could muster. "I'll be happy to serve in whatever capacity you might deem necessary."

"I know, C-3PO," she responded with a voice that was now apparently free of pain. "I need you to keep the skiff ready to transport me immediately back to the MedLab as soon as Artoo and I return."

"Ma'am?" C-3PO responded. He certainly hadn't considered the possibility that he might remain with the ship. This was not an option he was entirely keen on. "I'm not certain if I should be the one to remain. I have no real experience flying, of course. Artoo has flown on several occasions, perhaps he should fly. Why only just the other day, I was telling Artoo how impressive his flying skills were. If only—"

Artoo cut him off with a series of loud chirps as the droid disconnected from the terminal he was accessing and went directly over to Padme. After another long stream of whistles and beeps, the astromech began emitting a red horizontal scanning beam that immediately traversed up and down the Senator's frame

several times. After a short pause, Artoo began beeping excitedly.

“Contractions?” C-3PO said incredulously. “Are you sure? It was my impression that human beings must be pregnant in order to have contractions! I admit that the Senator has had a few odd changes in her anatomy that might be attributed to such a condition, but I assure you that if this were the case, she would have told me!”

“C-3PO,” Padme replied more patiently than he might expect. “I *am* pregnant. And...I *am* having contractions.” C-3PO looked at her with as much utter surprise and dismay as his monochromatic features would allow.

“Milady,” he said. “We must get you immediately to a medical facility! I am certainly not trained to—”

“C-3PO,” Padme interrupted the protocol droid. “This is not up for debate. I am *going* to Five Hundred Replica. You are *going* to stay here with the ship and keep it ready to take us back to the MedLab. Are we clear?” C-3PO’s photoreceptors collected the light reflecting off the woman’s face. His digital systems processed the visual image in an attempt to interpret her expression. While his main processors could not give him a clear answer, C-3PO’s memory banks had seen that expression on several occasions—it was abject determination.

“Yes, Milady,” he replied quickly. “Quite clear.”

“Good!”

Artoo whistled off a sequence of chirps and beeps that seemed to be intended for C-3PO only. C-3PO responded in kind. By the time the two droids had completed their conversation, the skiff was approaching the roof of Five Hundred Replica and Padme had turned in her chair back to the controls of the skiff. Several moments of silence were broken by a grunt from the Senator sitting at the control panel as she seemed to be experiencing another of her contractions. Artoo whistled something to C-3PO again but the protocol droid seemed reluctant to follow the astromech’s wishes.

C-3PO stared out of the main viewing window at Five Hundred Replica. Thousands of Senatorial apartments were housed there and the windows in the buildings were all alight. The violence consuming the city seemed to have remained clear of this area so far. C-3PO observed that the Senator’s contraction seemed to be over and noted that the contractions were exactly six-point-two-two minutes apart. He had no idea whether that was significant or not. Artoo began chirping loudly and beeping incessantly at the protocol droid again. Finally, C-3PO relented.

“Milady, if I may ask,” C-3PO ventured. “What exactly do you propose to do here that is so important?”

“These buildings weren’t always just the apartments for the Senators and high officials in the Republic, C-3PO,” Padme responded as she began their decent. She never looked up from the controls as she continued her explanation. “Three hundred years ago, before construction was completed on the Republic Grand Convocation Center, there were only ten thousand systems in the entire Republic. Back then, the Republic Senate would meet in an auditorium that housed over twenty thousand. That way, there was room for Senators and room for the people to watch the proceedings. Somehow, we neglected that old tradition with the construction of the new center.”

C-3PO was utterly confused. Her answer had nothing to do with why there were going to Five Hundred Replica, as far as he could tell. Padme seemed to recognize the confusion in the protocol droid because she sighed deeply and continued.

“That auditorium is twenty meters below Five Hundred Replica,” she announced. Artoo seemed to immediately draw the connection and responded with a series of excited whistles. C-3PO was not as impressed.

“But Senator Amidala,” C-3PO said with some exasperation in his vocabulator. “What do you plan to *do* there?” At that very moment, the ship shuddered slightly as it touched down on the roof of the primary building at Five Hundred Replica. The Senator was immediately on her feet and was passing by the protocol droid as the ramp lowered far too slowly for her taste. She paused for a brief moment as she came to a stop in front of C-3PO and considered him. C-3PO’s photoreceptors once again processed the light images they were receiving and his memory banks interpreted the familiar look of determination on her face.

“I’m going to take the Republic back!” she said finally and stormed out of the craft with Artoo in tow.

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Obi-Wan slashed and banged away at Darth Salus but it seemed that the Dark Lord was treating him as an afterthought. Mace’s blocks and parries were just effective enough to deflect Obi-Wan’s attacks but there were no counterattacks. Instead, Mace seemed to be focusing his attention on driving Anakin backwards.

Anakin’s response to the attacks was impressive. His lightsaber moved so quickly that Obi-Wan was barely able to register its movements coherently, even when

viewing them in the Force. In the end, however, Anakin was being driven backwards. The movement was slow and there were several shifts in position back and forth as Mace gave and then retook ground on the narrow walkway. But the progression down the catwalk was there, Obi-Wan noted.

Obi-Wan began to realize that Darth Salus seemed to be playing for a stalemate. He had seen the Sith move much faster than he was moving now. He noticed ominously that Mace wasn't thrusting as frequently or slashing with dazzling speed as he had earlier. It almost seemed as if the Dark Lord was conserving his energy. Obi-Wan grew concerned. That concern transmitted across the invisible pathway in the Force that connected him with his former padawan. Anakin registered it but didn't know what to make of it.

For a fraction of a second, Obi-Wan glanced ahead and saw their destination. At the end of the walkway, merely five meters away now, a band of blue energy from the venting subsystem of the main power core reactor energized in perfect synchrony with almost ten others. Then Obi-Wan completely understood. He and his Master had faced eerily similar circumstances over a decade ago.

It had not gone well.

As soon as Obi-Wan made the mental connection, Anakin did as well. With stunning speed, Skywalker jumped over the Sith Lord's head, delivering a powerful slash as he did so. Salus easily deflected the attack and now stood with his back to the ray shield that bristled with its own power. The two Jedi Masters now faced him. They stood almost shoulder to shoulder.

The walkway would not support an effective attack from the two simultaneously. The Jedi recognized this immediately and began to trade assaults on the Sith one after the other. Their movements became so rapid and were in such synchrony that, to the Dark Lord, it was all one continuous flow of sky-blue energy being driven at him. Somehow, the Chancellor managed to deflect each strike and every slash. He seemed to relish the challenge and began to press the two brothers back. But this was just a feint and both Anakin and Obi-Wan recognized this. They allowed their respective positions to recede and surge with each attack but essentially maintained their station. Mace was not going to allow the battle to move from this location until he was ready. Anakin peered at him in the Force and found the red flames of the dark side beginning to build in intensity. He knew that the Dark Lord was planning something but he couldn't discern what.

The problem with lightsaber dueling is two-fold.

One problem is that, by its very nature, a fighter engaged in a clash of lightsabers must focus all of his attention on the opponent while maintaining a peripheral

understanding of the surroundings. The more intensive the engagement or skilled the opponent, the more of the protagonist's focus is directed on the adversary and less on the environment in which the battle is taking place.

The second problem lies in the assumption that the adversary will fight with some sense of honor. This is a flaw commonly found in those fighting with the light side of the Force. They engage under the misconception that the opponent not only desires victory but that he wants it to be achieved through superior skill and mastery of the blade. The Sith have no such compunctions.

The first problem is why the Jedi did not sense the clone snipers taking position on the catwalk nearly one hundred meters above. The second problem is why they didn't suspect that Mace Windu's barely perceptible nod was a directive for these clone troopers to open fire.

Everything seemed to happen at once. As the first blaster bolt rocketed towards the unsuspecting Jedi, Obi-Wan turned and brought his lightsaber up to deflect the incoming bolt that only a whisper in the Force at the last second warned him of. Simultaneously, the ray shields behind Mace Windu deactivated.

As the second blaster bolt descended towards the pair, Anakin turned towards the troopers and called them down from the walkway above with the Force. Twenty-five clone troopers found themselves hurdling a railing as if it weren't even there and beginning a fall from which none of them would ever recover.

As Anakin's eyes were momentarily averted, the Dark Lord's saber began its thrust at the distracted brothers. Obi-Wan turned his head away from the falling clones in time to see the amethyst weapon being driven at his unprotected chest. He immediately recognized that his lightsaber would never get there in time to deflect the attack. Obi-Wan ordered his body to twist in order to avoid being impaled on the Dark Lord's sword.

As Anakin turned to face the Sith again, horror filled his being as he watched Darth Salus' blade pierce his best friend's shoulder and exit out of his back. As Obi-Wan backed away from the blade and fell to the metal grating in agony, Mace Windu leaped backwards into the tunnel. As Anakin screamed with rage and began to follow the Dark One, he could barely hear the imperceptible whisper in the Force from his fallen friend.

*Anakin....No!!!*

As realization dawned on Skywalker, he found himself trapped between two ray shields energized to full power. On the other side of the ray shield that burned at his back, lay his brother, writhing in agony. On the other side of the ray shield that

crackled with power in front of him stood the Dark Lord of the Sith smiling triumphantly.

## **Chapter XIX ... next part**

**Date Posted: 6/29 6:59pm**

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Three hundred years before, the Senate had regularly gathered in the amazingly large basement to decide the fate of the galaxy. It had been, at the time, the pinnacle of modern architectural achievements. As much went into its aesthetics as went into its practicality during the design phase some five or six hundred years prior. The designers had ignored so many of the vast technological triumphs of the time to produce a room that was simplistic in its beauty and phenomenal in its function.

The room truly was a coliseum of the grandest sort. Over one hundred rows of gleaming dark wooden desks and pews extended in expanding circles from the very bottom of the central arena. This design had been adopted and modified in the current Convocation Center design to produce the somewhat helical spiraling pods that seemed to extend forever. The central difference was the lack of division among the factions in the room. Several entrances existed on multiple levels but that was the extent of the divisiveness built into the structure. Each Senator, when seated, would find himself within arms reach of the next Senator. Every representative could lean over quietly and whisper into her colleague's ear without having to pick up a communications device. Thousands of resolutions were resolved in those days, not on the main Senate floor, but in the pews that housed the leaders of the Republic.

The desks in front of each pew were seamless rows of glistening dark red wood of stunning minimalism. There were no holoprojectors housed within. There were no hidden listening devices for one Senator to eavesdrop on another. There were no underhanded computer terminals for Senators to use to tap into the computers of his opposition. In fact, each desk only had a simple light embedded into its undistinguished frame and a microphone to be used for addressing the fellow members of the Galactic Senate. These simple devices were all that demarcated one desk's location from another.

There was no hierarchy in the design either. Located inside the pews were unobtrusive speakers that brought the words of each Senator speaking in the great house to every other Senator with equal fidelity. The rows of seats and daises, while growing in diameter as the room extended from the bottom, each held the same significance in the magnificent hall.

But the truly remarkable aspect of this great hall was not in its design, as impressive as that was. The truly breathtaking sight that was housed in this room



was when it was full of the vibrant, living, breathing, and working Senators that ran the business of the Republic. Every day, thousands of spectators had visited the halls to witness the greatness of their democracy in action. They often stood awestruck at the sight of the august men and women who worked diligently for the greater good. Disputes and discourse were commonplace. Every day brought new grievances and debate. But in the end, the wheels of democracy had turned inexorably to bring resolution to the most heated of altercations. It was the zenith of democracy in action. It was the Republic at its greatest.

At the epicenter of this glorious amphitheater, stood the main floor podium. From here, resolutions had been proposed and bills had become law. From here, the Chancellor of the Republic had opened the floor for debate on countless amendments. Here, the democracy that always risked spiraling out of control under its own centrifugal power found its anchor. Here was the figurative center of the political universe.

Here, now stood Padme Amidala Naberrie Skywalker, Senator from Naboo and leader of a resistance to stop the death of the greatest democracy the galaxy had ever known.

She stared wide-eyed at the mass of Senators who had gathered here under the most extreme of circumstances to hear what she had to say. In all her years of public service, she had never felt so great a weight of responsibility. She knew that her words would not make matters worse—the situation had already deteriorated to unimaginable levels. Her fear was that she might not be able to make things better. She could feel the child moving within her, making ready to free himself from her womb and enter the world. She was determined to ensure that the world he entered would be better than it was now.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the scent of the wood from the lectern she now stood at. Secretly, she thanked the Coruscanti historical society for maintaining this unused and often unvisited monument in such pristine condition. As she breathed the air of the great hall into her lungs she could feel the prestige of the room fill her. She drew strength from the thousands of Senators who had gone before her. She felt the power of a thousand years of democracy giving her the words she needed.

A hush that fell across the room as the Senators from myriad worlds sat quietly waiting on the former Queen to speak, brought Padme back to the now. She was ready. She opened her eyes slowly and thanked the Force that the child in her womb now grew silent as if in anticipation of his mother's voice. A barely audible beep from Artoo informed her that all HoloNet programming across the galaxy had been preempted with her visage. She looked out into the crowd and into the HoloNet cameras strategically placed throughout the auditorium with a deeply

earnest sadness etched into her face.

“People of the Republic,” she began. “I am Senator Padme Amidala. I come to you under the gravest of circumstances...”

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Anakin stared at the ray shield that blocked his path from Obi-Wan with desperate frustration. He looked at his friend who lay on the metal grating, now completely still. Anakin reached out to Obi-Wan in the Force and found a beating heart and an unconscious mind. Searching Obi-Wan’s frame, he could feel the injury with absolute clarity and found himself grateful that lightsabers had the tendency to cauterize the wounds they inflicted instantaneously. This fact should keep Obi-Wan alive. Anakin mentally sighed in relief.

He could hear Salus breathing behind him. The Sith Lord was calming himself in the Force, as if trying to bring back his own mental acuity. But Anakin wasn’t all that concerned about the Sith. Right now, he simply felt empty. He remembered this feeling. It was the same feeling he had on that terrible day on Geonosis when he had regained consciousness in that hanger and found himself bereft of his arm. He remembered the despair he had felt on that day--the immense sense of loss that came with losing so vital a part of him. On many nights, even after all these years, Anakin still had that feeling when he woke and found the mechanical monstrosity attached to him obeying his commands but never replacing the flesh that had been robbed from him. It tormented him every time he pulled the leather glove from his metal arm. It tore at his soul every time he reached to touch Padme but felt no sensation from her glorious touch.

This was the feeling that swarmed over Anakin now in the Force. His connection with Obi-Wan was more palpable than his arm had been to him. His joining in combat with his friend was as much an extension of his being as any appendage could be. But it was more than an appendage. It was not something that he commanded and it followed his whim. Instead, this was a joining of two minds of common purpose. Two brothers in arms joined in conflict against a common foe. Connected more closely than any two people could ever hope to be.

That connection was now severed by a Sith Lord who stood exultant behind him.

The dragon awoke and spread its wings.

Anakin turned to face his tormentor with rage in his eyes. He could feel each beat of his heart pulse against his temple. He could hear the leather stretch about his mechanical hand as he tightened the grip on his lightsaber. He could feel the quickening of his breath as the dragon demanded to be released and the furnace of

his heart ignited with fire born of anger.

Darth Salus' smile grew wider.

"Yesss..." Salus whispered, closing his eyes as if drinking from the coolest of fountains. "I can *feel* your anger. It gives you *strength*! It gives you *focus*! *Use* it Anakin! Only *then* can you hope to defeat me! *I* am your tormentor! *I* have taken everything you hold dear. I have taken Yoda! I *will* take Padme. Let the fire in you burn! Strike me down! Don't let this barrier stop you! Nothing can stop a Sith!"

*Nothing can stop a Sith!*

Anakin closed his eyes against the words. They were wrong. This was wrong. He called on the Force and it answered. With iron will he threw chains around his dragon and dragged it down within him. With impossible resolve, he quenched the fire that burned in his heart. It was harder than it had ever been, but he could feel the calm returning. He continued to breathe the power of the Force into his being long after the dragon lay caged and helpless deep inside. Finally, he looked up at the Dark Lord and smiled.

"I am not a Sith!"

Salus stared at Anakin with absolute disgust. "You pathetic fool!" He raged. "What do you hope to accomplish? You can't defeat me, Skywalker! *Surely* you've figured that out by now! Do you think it was an *accident* that you and I are facing each other here? Now? The power of the dark side is not just about wielding lightsabers or throwing Senatorial pods! The power of the dark side lies in its patience!" Anakin found himself utterly perplexed by Darth Salus' words.

*Patience?* His experience with the Dark Lords seem to indicate that they had no patience. They wanted what they wanted when they wanted it. But no sooner had the thought entered his mind, than he began to understand. Sidious had been patient for at least thirteen years, probably longer while nurturing the seeds he planted over that time to grow and bear fruit that nearly brought him complete power over the galaxy. Dooku had demonstrated similar patience as he brought together disparate factions to form the Confederacy of Independent Systems. The Sith accumulated power over time. They wore down the opposition by simply waiting them out.

"I can see you're coming to understand, Skywalker," Salus smiled as if proud of a student. "The light can never win because it only exists because of fuel. Every source of light in this universe requires fuel, Anakin. Surely you see that. Your lightsaber is nothing but a hunk of metal without its fuel cell. The primitive candles on so many worlds can only burn as long as the wick will support. *Even stars burn*

*out.*”

Anakin stared in disbelief as the words swept over him in an oppressive wave of darkness that began to wrap itself around him like a blanket of hate. The words echoed in his mind as they had so many times before. He could beat back the darkness but it would never go away.

*Even stars burn out...* he heard the dragon whisper. *She's going to die, you know..*

“And what is left, Anakin?” Salus continued as if guiding an avid pupil down the complicated highway of learning. “What is left when the last embers of wick are extinguished? What is left when your fuel cell depletes? What is left when that hunk of rock that used to be a sun collapses under its own weight?”

“Darkness...” Anakin whispered as much to himself as in answer to the Sith.

“Darkness!” Darth Salus repeated elatedly. “Exactly! You see, Anakin, you understand the power of the dark side better than any Jedi. What’s the point of fighting the unconquerable? Why resist? It’s pointless. No matter how brightly you shine, I’ll be there one way or the other at the fringes of your power waiting patiently until your fuel is all used up. How long can you last, Anakin? *How long can Padme last?*”

Anakin felt his world caving in around him. Desperately he tried to respond. “I just have to outlast you!” he bellowed.

“Yes...” Darth Salus responded. “And there is your other problem, isn’t it? Because if, by some miracle you find a way to destroy me, then the darkness becomes a part of you forever, doesn’t it? Then you’ll find yourself in the unenviable position of leaving this place and finishing your friend out there off. Then you’ll unleash the darkness on the galaxy anyway. If you fail to destroy me, then you will die and the darkness will sweep across the Empire and consume everything in it. It’s quite a problem you have there, don’t you?”

A whisper from the Force told Anakin that the ray shield was dropping. His lightsaber was raised and slashing at the Sith Lord before the barrier was completely down. His blade sliced through the plane where the wall of energy had been the instant it dissipated and arced at the Dark Lord with phenomenal power. Salus’ blade met his instantaneously with seeming effortlessness. Anakin slashed and hacked at the Dark Lord and drove him deeper into the cavern.

“Shut up!” Anakin screamed as he charged, his dragon directing his sword and his heart pounding mercilessly in his chest. “I’ll stop you somehow! *I’ll stop you!!*” But the Sith was now in control. *He* was the picture of calm that Anakin had once

been. *He* was the one blithely knocking his opponent's blade aside and casually giving ground as they went farther and farther into the caverns—away from the only exit and away from his fallen friend. The farther they went, the more the Dark Lord taunted.

“You cannot win, Skywalker!” Mace laughed as he parried another blow. “You *must* know that by now! You lost when you came to face me! You lost when you failed to stop me from killing Sidious! You lost when you married that witch! You lost when you let your mother die! You lost the day you were born!”

Anakin screamed and raged and slashed and banged at the Sith Lord with every fiber of his being. The hate was filling him with every word from the Dark Lord's mouth. He could feel it building in him to levels he had never felt before. The anger that beat in his chest now eclipsed the insanity he experienced on Tatooine when he held his mother's lifeless form in his arms. The rage he now tapped was nothing compared to the power he used to destroy Dooku.

But it wasn't enough.

"Joining me is your *destiny!*" Darth Salus roared triumphantly as he continued to parry every slash the Jedi threw at him.

The darker Anakin's power grew, the more powerful the Sith Lord seemed to become. Every movement by Darth Salus seemed effortless while every lunge by Anakin was a strain on his soul. He could land no strike. He could grow no stronger. Anakin found himself drowning in the darkness of his rage and Mace Windu was relishing his anguish.

“Yes, Skywalker!” he screamed. “Yes! *Use* the power that you hold chained inside even now. Let loose the rage in your heart and find the unimaginable strength that is the dark side of the Force!” The words seeped into his heart and Anakin began to free the darkness within him.

Then the Force intervened with a warning.

Anakin barely had the wherewithal to pull back as the last ray shield in the series of energy barriers connecting the reactor energized into place. He found himself physically separated from the Dark Lord of the Sith who now stood frustrated in the reactor room, the deep cylindrical shaft to his rear slowly burping its gases and building pressure for the next scheduled release.

“Destroy it, Skywalker!” Mace yelled. “Come! Let's end this conflict now! We don't have to wait! We're stronger than that! We are Sith!”

*We are Sith...*

*Even stars burn out...*

*She's going to die, you know...*

*Even a candle can hold back the darkness...*

Anakin blinked.

The words were swimming about in his mind like a torrent of vulture droids engaged in battle in the darkest regions of space. But as the words swam into his consciousness, he stilled himself in the darkness. He could feel the descent abate. He no longer felt like the panic of drowning. He could feel the darkness begin to fall off him as he called on the Force. He was rising above it and the light of the Force called to him high above the surface of the dark sea he was immersed in. As he erupted from the plane of black, he felt the Force surge into him like a breath of fresh air and his eyes collected the light of the Force in his surroundings like seeing the world anew.

His eyes focused in the Force behind the Sith Lord where Qui-Gon Jinn was standing passively with Yoda by his side. Neither Master spoke, nor made any gestures. But on their faces, he could see the words they had told him that helped halt his descent into the murky depths of darkness.

“Even a candle can hold back the darkness, Salus,” Anakin announced finally.

Rage filled the Sith Lord's face at the words. “Your insight changes nothing, Skywalker!” he bellowed. “The second this barrier comes down, I will destroy you and be done with it!”

But Anakin wasn't listening anymore. He deactivated his lightsaber and placed it calmly on his belt. Then he knelt on the floor and called on the Force. He began to meditate on his most immediate problem with the passivity that was consummate in a Jedi Master.

He had failed to destroy the Sith Lord with the combined might of his and Obi-Wan's immense power in the light. He had failed to destroy Darth Salus despite calling on all the darkness within him. There *had* to be a way. Anakin knew he had only moments to learn what that way was.

If it existed, he would find it in the Force.

**Chapter XIX the rest**  
**Date Posted: 6/30 7:33pm**

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“I am one of you,” the Senator continued. “I’m an ordinary person.” She paused momentarily with a wry, humorless laugh, tilting her slightly to the side before she continued. “Ordinary. I never truly knew just how ordinary I was until I met the most extraordinary of men. Many of you have witnessed the vicious battle taking place in bowels of the Grand Convocation Center even as we speak. You’ve seen the fight between men with power far beyond any of our imaginings. Right now, my heart is filled with hope and fear. I feel hope that somehow one man can rescue our great Republic from the clutches of evil.” She breathed deeply as if gathering herself to find the strength to continue. “I feel fear because that one man may die in that quest. This man has given himself fully to the Republic to protect it from evil. I feel fear because this man is my husband and the father of my child.”

The Senate rumbled loudly as shockwaves ricocheted throughout the room. Senators whispered to one another in conspiratorial tones as if seizing this opportunity to plot Padme Amidala’s political demise. The rumblings began to grow in intensity. If the Senator from Naboo was affected, she didn’t show it. Instead she continued, undeterred.

“Even though I love him more than life itself and have faith in him greater than anything I’ve ever felt,” she carried on. “I can accept that his power will never be enough to save this Republic from certain doom. The terror that has been brought down on us, members of the Republic has been unleashed by our own actions. *We* delivered the power of the people into the hands of a madman in hopes that he could provide us with greater security! When we learned that the danger we faced was entirely of that madman’s making, what did we do? Did we look at our failings? Did we consider the ramifications of placing that much power in the hands of one man again? Did we take the time to absorb the pain of the betrayal of our trust and make a rational decision before moving forward?”

She let the stench of her questions hang in the air like the odiferous smog offered by the methane processing industrial complexes on the far reaches of the planet. The Senators in the room squirmed uncomfortably in their seats as the words struck like daggers into their collective hearts. They knew that the people of the Republic weren’t responsible for the disaster they were experiencing. They knew that the bolts of lightning being thrown by the Senator were directed at each of them as much as at her own heart.

“No!” She announced finally. “Instead we simply transferred the dictatorship we

had created from one man of unimaginable power to another. When faced with the greatest opportunity in three years to restore the democracy we had destroyed in the name of security, we grabbed the throat of democracy in our hands and stifled it to its last breath!” Her voice was filled with intensity and the fire of anger burned in her eyes. She looked across the room, seemingly into the eyes of every Senator in the room then focused her eyes into the HoloNet cameras.

“We’ve given up, us ordinary people!” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. Tears began to well up in her eyes but they didn’t fall. “We’ve given up! Now, we sit in apprehension as we watch the drama unfold before us! We act as if there is nothing we can do to stop it all! *I* tried to run away! I thought that if I went far enough away, the danger would pass! I was wrong! The danger will never pass because it’s not about the amazing abilities of the man who wields ultimate power in the galaxy. It’s not about how evil or good he is. When we put all the power in the hands of any one person, we are begging to corrupt that person. We are offering that individual the keys to the galaxy and hoping that he won’t destroy it! How can we *do* that?”

Her voice broke and she dropped her head as the tears fell. But they didn’t fall for long. When she lifted her face to the cameras and Senators again, they could see only steely resolve in her eyes. They could see only the controlled rage of a Senator who would not surrender. They could see only the very ideals they held dear personified in one ordinary person.

“We can’t!” she proclaimed. “Never again can we do this. In the span of two hours, one man tried to kill me and my child with unholy lightning and another managed to pull me from the brink of death with a power that I cannot even fathom.” Senators gasped in disbelief as the words sunk in. She paused long enough to let the words sink in and breathed deeply.

The people of Coruscant were gathering around massive HoloNet transmitters throughout the city-planet as if in a trance to hear the Senator from a foreign planet address their concerns. They could hear her words but they connected most with her emotions. She shared their fear. She shared their outrage. But she didn’t seem to share their sense of helplessness. Instead, she seemed to have a resolve that they wished they felt, and so they were drawn to her. They looked up to her and prayed she would help them find a way to save them all.

People were listening.

Outside the coliseum at Five Hundred Replica something amazing was occurring. The rioting was stopping. The anger was being redirected. The outrage was finding focus. As hooligans who saw the riots as an opportunity to be exploited tried to continue their actions, citizens stopped them with vicious finality. Emergency



crews were finding pathways to get to the injured. Local constabularies were breaking through the lines and rounding up the ones who continued to fight.

The impact was spreading.

All across the planet, the violence desisted. Across the system, the planets calmed down. Across the galaxy, entire systems paused to hear the words of this ordinary person as she reached them across the vastness of space and called them to join her in the desperate struggle for democracy.

“I have come to understand,” she continued. “the error we had committed. I don’t mean the error of putting too much power in one man. That was an error I had long understood but failed to correct. No! The error we had committed was that we placed all our hopes and dreams and faith in men and women of power. We lost faith in ourselves. We stopped fighting our own battles because we knew the Jedi would fight for us! We made them generals in the Grand Army of the Republic. We gave them full-grown warrior men to fight by their side—for *our* cause! Where were *we* when the battles raged? What did *we* do when the CIS invaded our planets? We called on the Jedi to save us! We prayed for the clones to come to our rescue. We called on the Chancellor to deliver us from our fear! And we willingly gave up everything we believed in to give *them* more power to accomplish *their* missions. What about *our* missions? Why weren’t *we* there fighting alongside them?”

As the Senator spoke she could hear the stirrings beginning in the chamber. She was surprised to see people begin to filter into the great hall from the streets of Coruscant as she continued to speak. The more that entered the room, the more seemed to come. Somehow they had found where the Senators were. Somehow they had decided it was where they should be also. Before long, the room was beginning to become crowded but no one seemed to mind. People were beginning to nod in agreement with her every word.

“Well those days are over!” she declared. “No longer will our fate be decided on the whim of the powerful. Because we have a power of our own. We...ordinary people have a power greater than any force in the universe! There is strength in our numbers! We have power in our unity! We have greatness in our will!” Her voice rang with strength and was filled with vigor. There was no sadness in her face anymore. There was no weakness in her voice.

There was only fierce determination.

The Senate cheered. The entire room erupted with applause as people of all walks of life joined in her resolve. Across the planet and into the far reaches of the galaxy, the people of the Republic rejoiced anew as they began to believe in a

power they never knew they had. The Senator from Naboo relished the moment as she watched the people of the Republic begin to reclaim their lives.

“There is only one thing we need to do to affirm our resolve!” She shouted above the cheers which went on unabated. “There is only one thing to say when faced with those who would try to grab power from the people and destroy our lives! All we need to do is stare them in the eye and declare...” she paused for a moment as a hush fell over the room and across the galaxy.

“*WE ARE NOT AFRAID!!!*”

The entire galaxy exploded.

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*No limits on the Force exist, but what we put on it...*

*Accept...*

*Simply because the darkness exists, doesn't mean it can't be controlled...*

The words were like whispers on the fringes of the Jedi Master's consciousness, drifting in and out of his mind, barely beyond his grasp. He could feel in the Force, the energy shield's generators beginning to cycle down. In mere seconds, they would shut down completely. A fraction of a second later, the field would cease to exist and he would face the Korun Master again—alone.

This time, he would be in a room with no exit. This time, he would face the awesome power of the dark side with no respite in sight. This time, he would live or he would die. Perhaps this was what he was supposed to accept. In the Force, he felt the Dark Lord's lightsaber begin to ignite.

Before the blade had even begin to extend he opened his eyes further in the Force and could see through lidded eyes, the surging red flames of the dark side engulfing the Sith. He could see the bright sky-blue flames of the light side of the Force that surrounded him and bound him to the rest of the universe. He could see the purple fire begin to emanate from the hilt of the most devastating yet elegant weapon ever designed.

With crystalline clarity, realization dawned on the Jedi Master.

*Accept*, the Force whispered to him as if confirmation to his thought.

The dragon pounded against its chains deep in the Jedi's chest. It fought for release

as it kicked and howled. Only his iron will and the light side of the Force had enabled him to contain it. Only his fear of the dark side had fueled that will. Anakin considered his fears for the briefest of moments.

His fear of loss.

His fear of death.

His fear of failure.

And Anakin Skywalker let them all go. He looked into the dragon's eyes for the first time in his life without fear or rage. He stared at the dragon as he unhinged its chains. He smiled inwardly at the dragon as he admitted to himself, finally...that the dragon did not really exist. Behind the dragon that had guarded his heart and fed off his passion, the Jedi Master saw the furnace that was the source of his power. After an eternity of denial, Anakin Skywalker opened the gates of that furnace and did what he knew he must do...

He accepted.

~~~~~

Mace Windu watched his blade reach full extension with the pride of a Master of Death. He relished the feeling of the power in his hands—the power to destroy worlds. He stared through the shields impatiently waiting for the last capacitor to complete its discharge cycle and shut the energy barrier down. He watched the Jedi Master in wonderment.

*I know he can sense that the shield is about to drop, he thought. Does he think I won't strike him down just because he's not ready to fight?*

Suddenly the bright energy barrier evaporated and Darth Salus raised his saber, ready to attack. As he peered at Anakin Skywalker in the Force, he found himself taken completely aback. Where only bright-blue flames of the light had existed only moments before, now roiling red flames of the dark side lapped at the Jedi's skin. Mace stared in disbelief as the flames seemed to meld together. There was none of the conflict he had seen in Palatine's office a day ago. There was only a harmony that the Sith Lord found mesmerizing. Within moments, Mace Windu's eyes bulged in shock as the separate red and blue fire that had pulsed around the Jedi merged together seamlessly into a color as vibrantly amethyst as his own blade. The purple flames began to pulse in time with the Jedi's breathing.

Anakin Skywalker opened his eyes and stared at the Sith Lord menacingly.

For the first time in all the time that he could remember, Mace Windu felt a surge of an unfamiliar emotion pull the blood from his dark face. In the thousand years of Sith knowledge that now resided in his head, he could never remember this feeling ever having entered a Sith Lord's heart. But there it was—

Fear.

Anakin moved with impossible speed as he launched himself from the floor and ignited his blade. The Sith Lord called on the dark side of the Force to protect him against the assault. Skywalker's lightsaber came at him with incredible speed. Despite all his powers in the dark, Darth Salus realized that his blade would never get there in time to deflect the blow. Salus' weapon seemed to be moving through a murky sea of mud while the Jedi's blade was moving at something akin to hyperspace.

Salus dodged and ducked and threw his saber up desperately to try and halt the torrent of blows that the Jedi was raining down on him. He leaped to the other side of the reactor shaft and landed in time to find Skywalker there smiling maliciously as if waiting in ambush for just such a maneuver.

Strike after strike, Anakin continuously pummeled Salus but never seemed to be pressing his advantage. Instead, it seemed as if his goal was to dislodge the Sith Lord's blade. In desperation, he called on his special gift to help him find the young man's shatterpoint—his guarantee to victory.

Mace's blood ran cold.

In the Force, the Jedi was a pure perfect crystal of power. There were no fault lines. There was no weakness to exploit. Anakin Skywalker was one with the Force—light and dark.

Balance.

Acceptance.

Darth Salus had no time to consider the ramifications of his vision as indescribable pain tore at where his hand and lightsaber had been. He watched in abject horror as the hand fell down the shaft and the lightsaber flew into the Jedi's hand. His legs lost all power and he fell to his knees and the Jedi Master stood above him with a sky-blue blade crossed with amethyst fire about his neck.

On the face of Anakin Skywalker was malicious satisfaction mixed with...compassion?

## Chapter XX

Date Posted: 7/2 12:29pm

-----Fall of the Sith-----

*He's too dangerous to be kept alive...*

*Death is not the only choice...*

*The Sith must be destroyed...*

*All life feeds the Force...*

*He's too dangerous to be kept alive...*

*What if he could be turned...*

Anakin looked down at the Sith Lord kneeling at his feet who stared wide-eyed up at him between the columns of plasma crossed about his neck. Anakin's mind was alight with questions and answers. In his heart, he could feel the rage pound. There was no dragon struggling to be let loose. The dragon was now a part of him. The pulsing rage burned brightly within him. He let it come.

It was only natural that he should be enraged, Anakin decided. The Sith Lord had attacked those he loved and tried to destroy everything they all believed in. He had tormented Anakin and would destroy him even now, given the opportunity. Darth Salus was an abyss of darkness that knew only hate. He was a putrid cancer that needed to be excised from the galaxy before his disease could spread. He was Sith. He was the dark side. He was evil incarnate. Rage was only natural.

But Anakin could also feel empathy.

Mace Windu was a good man. He had made a horrible choice while immersed in heated battle that was clouded in the dark side and shrouded in the manipulations of the Shadow. The Jedi Master, until then, had served the Republic diligently. He was among the best of the Jedi. Mace's actions, Anakin reminded himself, were born from righteous rage—not malicious intent. Even after Mace had fallen to the darkness, his motives were not to obtain power for its own sake. The former Jedi Master tried to obtain power so he could, in his mind, restore the Republic to its former greatness. Was that so wrong? Mace Windu wanted to save *everyone*. Mace had turned to the dark side because he held on too tightly to his attachment to the Republic. Mace made his choice out of a love he couldn't let go.

Anakin could relate.

But Darth Salus was a murderer. He had callously murdered a great Jedi in Plo Koon without preamble or an opportunity for the man to defend himself. He had viciously attacked Padme and Yoda and nearly killed them both. He had taken over the galaxy through lies and deceit. He had put himself in a position of power and threatened to destroy the Jedi Order. The Dark Lord had manipulated Anakin and Obi-Wan into an ambush, fully intending to slaughter yet another person Anakin loved dearly. The Shadow had tried to manipulate him. It had attacked him. It had unleashed evil upon the galaxy. Regardless of its motives, it needed to be destroyed.

Anakin's right eyebrow arched high on head as he continued to ponder.

Why does one have to destroy the man to banish the darkness? The darkness infected Mace Windu. He had traversed the edge of the dark side for years, desperately fighting in the name of the Light. He had fed the Light of the Force with everything that was in him. Did that not count for anything? Is there such a thing as an unforgivable crime? If Anakin murdered him now—and it *would* be murder, as Yoda would tell him—did he not risk making the same mistake that this good man on his knees had made?

*He is too dangerous to be kept alive...*

*All life feeds the Force...*

*The Sith must be destroyed...*

*What if he could be turned...*

*Impossible!*

*No limits on the Force, exist...*

*The Sith must be destroyed...*

*Death is not the only answer...*

Anakin considered these arguments in his mind with none of the tortured conflict he had experienced for so long. There was no angst-ridden torment in his heart. The debate rolled on in his mind with as much acrimony as two Jedi Masters sitting calmly at the pool in the room of One Thousand Fountains in the Jedi Temple discussing the nuances of the Force. Anakin allowed the rage he felt to pass through him and let the compassion emerge.

Anakin decided.

Decision became reality as each blade in his hands retracted in on themselves, leaving a completely bewildered Sith Lord staring into his face. Darth Salus stared at Anakin in disbelief for several long moments, as if the waiting for the Jedi to change his mind and strike him down. Instead, the Dark Lord watched in amazement as Anakin sighed deeply while placing the two lightsabers on his belt. Darth Salus remained kneeling in stunned silence as Anakin turned his back to the Sith Lord and walked across the room. In utter confusion, Darth Salus stood uneasily and cradled his wounded arm while watching the Jedi warily. The young Jedi Master sat calmly on the floor and placed his back against the far wall of the circular room.

“What are you playing at, Skywalker?” Darth Salus snarled in anger. Was this petulant child toying with him? Why didn’t the boy just finish him off? Darth Salus wasn’t convinced that he could easily invade the youth’s mind as his own mind had been when he had struck down Sidious, but he was ready to try. He was willing to risk oblivion to ensure the survival of the Sith.

“You said it yourself, Salus,” Anakin sighed in resignation. “If I lost to you, the galaxy would have been swept away in the darkness that now consumes you. Well...” the right corner of Anakin’s mouth curled into the arrogant smile that was so familiar, “I think we both know that I won’t be falling to you any time soon.”

Rage rushed to the surface of the Dark Lord’s heart at the arrogance of the young Jedi Master and he reached for his lightsaber in the Force to pull it from Anakin’s belt. He was prepared to recommence the attack with his left hand—his pain forgotten. But the saber didn’t budge. There was not even the customary vibration in the hilt that often occurred right before an object called by the Force came loose from its location to do its master’s bidding. If Darth Salus couldn’t feel the Force gripping the saber with all of his might, he would have believed that somehow he had lost his power. But he hadn’t.

Somehow Skywalker’s hold on the saber was more powerful. Somehow, the Jedi was gripping the weapon with such strength that pulling it from his grasp was impossible. Enraged, the Dark Lord tried to grab the boy’s saber and found an equally powerful hold there. Salus’ entire frame seemed to focus on this one task. All of his power was concentrated on the single undertaking of obtaining a weapon. Anakin looked up at him with no strain on face. There was no indication in his eyes that he was exerting himself in any way. What Salus saw in the Jedi’s face was something akin to pity. It enraged him even more as he called on the dark side to free his weapon.

“What do you plan to do with it, if I let you have it?” Anakin asked. The pity left his face and was replaced by a malevolent smile. “Lose another hand?” Anakin let the words hang in the air for a long moment. “I don’t want to fight you,” he finished.

The fear that the Dark Lord had felt when he first observed Skywalker’s transformation in the Force crept back into his mind as he now considered the consequences of going blade to blade with the Jedi who had so easily dispatched him. He released his hold on the sabers and seemed to relax.

“You were telling me what you’re playing at...” Darth Salus spat as he walked over to the wall and leaned his back against it. He could feel the hum of the power regulators throughout the chamber. He watched with interest the cycling of the energy barriers as the venting system continued its operations undisturbed. The galaxy was continuing to function. He ripped his robes and wrapped the torn cloth around the severed stump where his hand had been. Within seconds, the Dark Lord had made a makeshift sling in which to hang his arm. Anakin marveled at the expediency of the action.

“I was revisiting your thoughts,” Anakin replied finally, “You claimed that I am in somewhat of a lose-lose situation. According to what you were saying, I only have one choice left, now that I won’t let you destroy me.” Darth Salus nodded in agreement and allowed a smile to play across his lips, as he relished the idea of possibly gaining some measure of control over this awesome power that was Anakin Skywalker.

“You’re right,” Salus replied matter-of-factly. “You certainly can’t let me go. If you do, you know I will find a way to destroy you. But not before I hunt down and destroy everyone and everything you hold dear. You and I both know that there is no prison in this galaxy that can hold me for long. So...it would seem that this decision is pretty clear-cut.” Mace stood up and prepared himself. “I’m guessing you think you can keep me out of your head. Good luck with that.” He seemed to mean it.

“I’ve decided that there’s a third choice...” Anakin announced, bringing the Dark Lord of the Sith to a stand-still. Anakin, who had been staring at the floor while idly playing with the latches on his boot, suddenly looked up at Darth Salus and locked eyes with the former Jedi Master. The two stared at each other for a long moment. “What third choice?” Darth Salus asked finally, his voice filled with incredulity.

“I’m going to *save* you.”



## Part XX continued

Date Posted: 7/3 7:52pm

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Padme Amidala's heart sang with the roaring of the crowds. A joy she had only felt when alone with Anakin soared in her soul as she saw the cheering faces of the people of the Republic. They represented the best that democracy could offer. They represented the hope for the galaxy. As she looked out into the crowd, she knew they were expecting her to lead them to the next step. And a next step had to be taken. It wasn't just a declaration of solidarity that was needed. What was needed was action. So the former queen stood tall and prepared to make the first political thrust into the heart of the new Empire.

As she held the podium, she felt a wave of nausea and dizziness strike her joined with a sudden gush. She looked down at her swollen womb in terror. "Hold on, little man," she whispered to her stomach. "I have just one or two more things to say." As she watched the clear liquid gather at her feet, she realized that she's better move things along.

Bringing her eyes back up to stare out at the Senators gathered, she forced a weak smile as quiet began to fall across the room. They were waiting for her. They were hoping with her. They were desperate to be led. She took a deep breath. Then her knees almost gave out as a powerful contraction gripped her body and pulled her uterine muscles taut as if clamped in a powerful vice. She grasped the podium with overwhelming strength and could hear the ancient wood straining in her powerful grip. She swallowed hard and gritted her teeth against the pain.

Silence filled the chamber she stood in peppered with gasps of concern. The gathered Senators and spectators watched with growing worry as their leader seemed almost ready to succumb to the debilitating pain that held her in its grip. Bail Organa from Alderaan stood and ran to the podium. Mon Mothma reached the dais on the other side at the same time he did. They both reached out tenderly to Padme, an arm on each of her shoulders. The rumblings of concern began to grow inside the chamber.

The Republic was at a precarious point, Padme knew. Right now, the entire galaxy stood at the edge of an abyss. The people knew what they wanted but they needed leadership and guidance to help them find the way. The consequences of a failure here could be more disastrous than what they faced before she ever entered this room. Drawing on what reserves of inner strength she could find, she released one podium and grasped Bail's shoulder. She pulled herself tall as the contraction released its painful hold on her. She looked at Bail and then at Mon Mothma,

giving each a reassuring smile. They looked on her with concern written across their faces and she nodded gently at them both. Then she stood completely upright and released her hold on Bail. The two Senators took the cue and removed their hands from her shoulder and stood respectfully back to allow her to speak.

“Senators!” the former queen announced. Her voice was strained but strong. “Today, we will take back our galaxy from those who would seek to destroy it. Today, we will begin anew!” The crowd collectively sighed in relief and a new round of cheering began. She felt their love. She felt their concern. She felt their patriotism. Padme smiled again and raised her hand to silence them. “To save our galaxy we must return the power of the people to this august body!”

Shouts of agreement filled the room. Senators rallied and raised their arms in concert. Spectators cheered and yelled in agreement.

“I move for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Windu leadership of the Galactic Senate!” Padme announced.

And it was done. The words that seized would seize the galaxy from the Sith and put the galaxy back on the path it had tread for a thousand years were said. As the cheers erupted throughout the room and Senators screamed their affirmative votes with enthusiasm, Padme felt another contraction grip her more powerfully than any that had preceded it. She gasped for air as she felt her knees finally give up the support they had given her. Bail ran to her as she knelt on one knee at the podium but did not let go. He knelt beside her.

“You’ve done an amazing thing today,” he whispered, his face filled with respect. “You’ve saved the galaxy from itself.” His eyes took on a desperate look of concern. “Now *please* let me take you to a medical facility! You’ve done your duty.”

“Not...” she gasped as she pulled herself up with all her strength. “...not...until...the vote is done!”

Bail considered her with wide eyes and moved to argue. He looked in desperation to Mon Mothma, hoping she could find the words to talk sense into Padme. But Mon Mothma merely looked at him and shook her head. Bail rolled his eyes in frustration and looked out into the crowd. The voting was occurring in a wave across the entire chamber. A spontaneous wave of hands accompanied by voice votes began at the bottom ring of Senators and flowed up to the very highest pew. Bail nodded in satisfaction and looked back at Padme.

“It’s done!” he smiled at her. His face grew serious. “Now let’s go.”

“Announce...it...” Padme whispered at him. Her face relaxed slightly as the contraction passed. Bail’s rough estimate of the timing between contractions was something less than a minute. He didn’t know much about childbirth, but he knew she needed to get to a MedLab as soon as possible. He began to argue this point when he saw the determination in her eyes. He nodded reluctantly again and stood.

“By unanimous vote,” Bail Organa of Alderaan announced. “The motion is passed!”

Cheers erupted throughout the chamber.

Padme Amidala smiled.

## Chapter XX continued

Date Posted: 7/3 10:16pm

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“*Save me?*” Darth Salus was beside himself with incredulity. “*Save me?!*” The Dark Lord didn’t know whether he wanted to laugh or scream. He wasn’t sure if he was amused or enraged. He stared at the boy sitting calmly on the floor not five meters away. The boy looked up at him a smoldering calm despite the storm of dark side energies that churned in Darth Salus’ heart. There was no fear in the child’s face.

“Yes,” Anakin replied softly. He pulled his feet under him and stood. “I’m going to save you, Mace. I know you’re in there and I’m going to find you.” Anakin took a single step towards the Sith Lord, his arms outstretched.

Darth Salus decided then that he was enraged.

“You arrogant, petulant, *child!*” he screamed at Anakin. “Don’t *dare* take another step towards me! Mace Windu is *dead!* There is nothing to save!” Anakin took another step, undeterred by the Dark Lord’s threat. Salus roared.

“If you won’t fight!” the Sith Lord screamed. “Then you will meet your *destiny!*”

White-hot power surged from the Dark Lord’s hand with such intensity that Darth Salus had to squint away the brightness as the fire poured from his body. He roared in triumph as he could feel in the Force that he had struck the Jedi directly in his unprotected chest. Anakin Skywalker was as good as dead!

Then the man that would rule the galaxy peered through the powerful light that was coming from his hands and saw that the boy was still standing. Darth Salus’ eyes grew wide as he realized that boy was continuing to walk towards him, seemingly completely unaffected by the electrical storm that was being showered upon him. The Jedi walked at a steady, casual pace as if strolling along the shore of a calm sea watching the tide crash against the rocks. The Sith Lord felt his blood quicken with rage and freed his other arm from its sling. He pointed his stump at the Jedi approaching him.

“Stay away from me, Skywalker!” he screamed. “Mace Windu is dead!” Lightning gushed from his arm and tore apart the bandage that he had put on it only minutes before. Power churned and roiled about the Dark Lord but the boy continued his steady approach unabated. The Sith’s eyes burned with bright yellow fire. He called on ever more energy from the dark side of the Force and poured it at the boy. He roared in triumph when Anakin came to a halt only two meters away. He called on even more strength to drive the youth back. But then the child’s voice broke through the ozone-filled air that crackled with fire. The voice was steady and

calm. He was completely unperturbed by the maelstrom of lightning that engulfed him.

“I don’t suppose,” Anakin said, his voice just barely above a whisper, “that you understand how it is possible for you to strike at me with lightning, do you?” Anakin wasn’t moving. His arms were now passively at his sides as he looked at the Dark Lord with earnest compassion. Salus continued to desperately pour the energy at Anakin. The power wasn’t reflecting off him or burning him. Instead, it seemed to terminate on the surface of his body.

“I’ve only come to understand it now, myself,” Anakin continued as if speaking to a colleague about a newfound discovery. “Currents of the Force connect all things,” he smiled. “It connects the trees and the rocks; the sky and the sea; the reactor and the shaft,” Anakin paused with a smile. “And they connect you and me.” Salus felt exhaustion overtake him along with frustration at his inability to affect the Jedi Master. The lightning ceased and he stared at Anakin with cold fury. Anakin smiled in return.

“When you call upon your power,” Anakin continued, “all you’re doing is vibrating those currents with incredible intensity. You’re grabbing hold of the connection between us and tugging. It’s really quite remarkable, don’t you think?”

“So...” Salus gasped, with none of the anger in his heart weakening, “why doesn’t it hurt you?”

“Well,” Anakin replied, “it only hurts you if you resist the connection. If you try to fight the vibrations of the link, then the power has nowhere to go. So it discharges itself through the only conduit available. But if you *accept*...” Anakin smiled broadly at the word, “well...then, it becomes something like a power transfer. You pour power into me and I accept it.”

“That’s nonsense!” Salus roared. Anakin’s face grew serious. He reached out into the Force and could see the Dark Lord building a mental barrier between them. Salus would not be turned willingly. He had to be *made* to see.

“A demonstration, perhaps?” Anakin replied. With a gesture, he lifted the Sith Lord into the air and flung him against the wall. Salus was pinned, high in the air against the chamber wall and was completely immobilized. “If I vibrate the currents of the Force in say...” Anakin glanced around the room, “...that power conduit over there...” He pointed his hand at a power panel on the other side of the room. Lightning speared from his hand with incredible intensity and the panel tore itself apart. “Well...it doesn’t have any ability to understand that connection, now does it?” The lightning stopped abruptly.

Anakin's eyes took on a malevolence that tore at the Sith Lord's innards as he knew what would come next. "Now..." Anakin continued. "If I pulsate the currents of the Force between myself and...say...a person...someone who is sensitive to the Force, perhaps...someone who can *accept* the connection..."

The hand that Anakin had held aloft in a gesture to hold the Dark Lord in place erupted with white fire. Lightning engulfed Darth Salus and wrapped itself around him. The Sith screamed in agony and desperately squirmed to free himself. He called on the Force to fight the blaze. He tore with all the muscles in his formidable body. He raged with all the fire in his heart. All to no avail. The energy continued to tear at him. Through the fog of pain, the Dark Lord realized that the Jedi Master wasn't using all the power at his disposal. The Sith's skin did not burn and his clothes were not being torn asunder. The Jedi was *sparing* him.

Deep inside the Sith's heart, a soft voice cried out.

*No! the Guide roared in the Sith Lord's mind. He lies! It's a complete and utter deception! Don't give in to him! You can stop him! Quick! Grab the lightning as he did to you. Throw it back at him!*

"You know that won't work, Mace," Anakin shouted as the electrified currents continued to rain from his hand. "That's right, Mace. I'm talking to you, not the *pariah* that has infected you like a *disease*. Come back! *Accept!*"

*This is madness! the Guide screamed. Your own green troll of a Jedi has told you. You've walked the dark side. Forever will it dominate your destiny! There is no turning back! It cannot be done!*

"Search your feelings, Mace," Anakin responded. "You know that you can stop this pain. Are you prepared to die the way Plo Koon died? All you have to do is accept! Accept the connection. Accept the pain. Accept my offer to save you. *Accept!*"

*No!! the Dark Lord's mind heard. There is nothing to accept! I am your only hope! Me!! Without me, you are nothing! I gave you the galaxy! Trust me now! Fight him!!*

"Mace!" Anakin screamed. "Listen to me. Only *you* can banish him from your mind. *You* can drive him into oblivion forever. You have to *choose*. Mace! *Choose!*"

From the depths of the Dark Lord's heart a soft voice became a roar of defiance.

"GET OUT!!!" the voice screamed.

*Are you mad?* the Guide replied. *If you get rid of me, he'll kill you! I'm the only hope you have—*

“GET OUT!!!”

*No!!*

Through the fog of power that engulfed his mind, Mace Windu faced the Sith Lord that had taken hold of him. They stared at each other in anger.

*I will not go!* Darth Sidious announced. *I'm doing this for your own good.*

Before Mace Windu could reply, he could feel the Jedi Master burrow his way into his mind. He felt the electrical storm that had engulfed him come to an end. He felt his body slump, unconscious to the floor. With a suddenness that surprised him, he felt Anakin Skywalker join him in facing the Shadow that had become the Guide.

*It's time for you to go, Palpatine,* Skywalker announced.

*Getting rid of me won't change anything, Skywalker,* the Shadow replied. *Mace Windu is nothing but a candle in the darkness. As he pointed out to you, the candle will lose its wick eventually. Destroying me will only leave him without guidance. Is that what you want? A man as powerful as Darth Salus without the steady hand of the Sith to help guide him?*

“I don't want your guidance!” Mace replied.

*That doesn't mean you don't need it!* the Shadow snarled in return. *What makes you think that you can get rid of me anyway? The Sith have thrived for a thousand years because of the power I have! Do you think you're the first to try and stop us?*

*No, I don't,* Anakin replied. *But we are the last.* Mace could suddenly feel Anakin Skywalker speaking directly to him. *End this now, Mace,* he said. *We can face your darkness together. You can win against the dark. You just have to remove the interference of the Sith. All you have to do is choose to accept.*

Mace Windu searched the heart of the Jedi Master. He could feel the darkness all around him. It swirled and lapped at him like a storm of hatred, anger and fear. Mace tried to find the light but could see none. He looked around desperately for anything that could help him drive the Sith Lord away but could see only the darkness everywhere. Only he, the Jedi Master, and the Guide were visible in the blackness.

“There is no light, Skywalker,” Mace Windu replied. “What if he’s right? What if he’s all that keeps me in check? How can you hope to contain my darkness?”

*He can’t!* the Shadow replied. *I am your path. I am your hope. I will help you, Mace. Trust me.*

*Only you can pull yourself from the darkness, Mace,* Anakin whispered. *But you’ll never do it if you don’t drive him from you.*

“There’s darkness everywhere!” Mace pleaded. “There is no light to follow!”

*Yes there is,* Anakin answered. Mace felt Anakin reach into him and touch his heart. Realization dawned on the former Jedi Master as he felt Anakin leave his mind. He knew that Skywalker was preparing to restrain him again if need be. But Mace wouldn’t need restraining. He faced the Shadow.

*What do you think you’re doing?* the Shadow screamed. *I’m not going anywhere!*

Suddenly, Mace Windu began to radiate light. At first it was weak and barely visible. Then, with abrupt intensity, illumination permeated the mind of the Dark Lord of the Sith. Everywhere that the Shadow looked, there was light. It tried desperately to hold onto the mind it had occupied. With nothing to cast a shadow and with light everywhere, the Shadow found nothing to grasp on to.

*No, Darth Salus!* the Shadow screamed. *No!!! You need me....*

Oblivion is a place that none have ever visited and returned from. No one knows precisely what it is like. Was it a place of darkness or a place of light? Did darkness and light even have meaning there? Mace Windu didn’t know the answers as the light he had wrought ceased and the darkness in his mind came rushing back in. Where ever oblivion was, he knew that Sidious was now there.

Mace Windu’s eyes opened to see the Jedi Master who had entered his mind standing tall, looking down at him, smiling.

The darkness was not gone, Mace Windu realized. He could feel it everywhere around him. What was worse, he now felt more alone than he had ever felt in his life. He was cut off from the Jedi and cut off from the Sith. But the greatness of Mace Windu manifested in him as he nodded to himself in acceptance of this fate.

The darkness was not gone.

But Darth Salus was.



## Chapter XXI

Date Posted: 7/5 10:19am

-----Redemption-----

“Anakinn!!”

The MedLab delivery room was full of tension. Standing impatiently outside the sterile chamber and pacing helplessly was Bail Organa. Mon Mothma and several other Senators that knew the former Queen of Naboo quite well were also in the holding room, watching the Senator from Alderaan with mild amusement. Joining this growing throng was a glut of HoloNet reporters who continually dictated notes into little recorders they had with them. No holorecorders were allowed in the waiting area, which had frustrated many of the intrepid journalists who felt it was their duty to record everything about this event.

Bail glared at them in disgust, but Padme had insisted that they be allowed into the MedLab. Bail never truly understood the motivations of the Senator from Naboo but he'd learned to respect them. Now, as he listened to her scream her husband's name with every contraction that gripped her, he wondered if it really was wise to invite the news crews to remain.

The Senator had tried to distract himself from his concern for Padme by inquiring about Obi-Wan from the Jedi Healer who was stationed outside the Jedi Master's door. He found her to be a little obtuse. After a frustrating conversation that included several repetitions of “I'm not a liberty to discuss the Jedi Master's condition,” Bail had redirected his attention to learning about the fate of the now-deposed Chancellor. Despite getting in contact with the Jedi Temple, he found that he was repeatedly rebuffed by a rather haggard-looking Shaak Ti, who seemed to be afflicted with the same speech impediment that the Jedi Healer suffered from. Bail did everything in his power to get something out of her, but found only a stern face and a “Everything will be explained when the time is right” for a response.

So, the Senator from Alderaan did the only thing he could do given that he couldn't help Padme, he wasn't in a position to learn anything new, and the Senate had gone immediately into recess following the vote as Padme had been rushed to the MedLab. Bail Organa paced. He heard her scream again and shuddered with worry.

“Anakin!” Padme panted as another contraction finally unclenched its fist and released her innards for a brief respite. She could hear the medical droid on the other end of the table providing pre-programmed words of encouragement. It was telling her to remember to breathe. It was telling her that she was doing

wonderfully and that any moment she would be a proud mother. It was telling her that she should concentrate on her breathing and focus all her strength on this one monumental task. It was mentioning that giving birth was the most amazing thing a living creature could hope to achieve. It was mentioning that Padme Amidala was performing more beautifully at this most challenging of tasks than any in the MedDroid's recent memory. It was reminding her to breathe.

Padme glared at the machine with one ridiculously large eye and one insanely smaller one. The droid kept telling her to breathe. She stared at the machine that floated around the room but didn't actually *do* anything other than prattle out non-sequiturs and remind her to breathe. As the machine floated back, yet again from some unknown table carrying some unknown and useless tools to place on the tray next to it, Padme watched it pass within inches of her bent knee. She clearly visualized planting her foot squarely in the machine's head and knocking it clear across the room. She had no doubt she could do it. Just a little bit closer...

"Anakin!!" Padme screamed again in frustration. *I need that stupid thing. I'm going to kill Anakin, though.*

"Padme," the melodic voice of her man rang in her ears. "I'm right here! You don't need to scream my name. I'm not going anywhere. I've *been* here. Now...would you please just calm down?"

There's a problem that often occurs in delivery rooms across the galaxy. It's a problem that occurs when creatures that have no understanding of the pain of childbirth attempt to—intentionally or not—minimize the magnificent feat. This tendency naturally, is most common among the males of most species, although there are quite a few species in which the male is the birthing parent. Regardless, this problem usually occurs when the offending person is doing his, or her, level best to reassure and assuage the partner in pain. For males, it is encouraging to say things like "It's not that bad" and "You can handle it" and "Other people do it all the time, why are you crying about it?" All these comments have a tendency to spur a rather undesired response from the mate, which always produces utter surprise in the reassuring partner, who cannot imagine why his or her words are not having the intended impact. This is why for hundreds of years, throughout the galaxy, men were kept out of the delivery rooms by being told to do menial and pointless tasks like boil water and retrieve blankets. But the most egregious of all comments to deliver to someone in the midst of giving birth--while her insides feel like they are being torn apart and a child that feels roughly the size of a battle cruiser tries desperately to force its way through a passageway that is far too small—is to "calm down." The reassuring partners, of course, don't realize how intensely upsetting that comment is during such a situation. Otherwise they would find a much safer phrase of reassurance.

Anakin Skywalker didn't need to Force to tell him he was in trouble.

With a strength that Anakin had never seen in his wife in all the years he'd known her, a powerful hand grabbed his robe around the neck with stunning speed and precision and pulled the corners of the robe tight. Anakin's eyes opened wide as he realized that she was beginning to cut off his air supply. She pulled him down to her face, eyes blazing with anger.

*"I AM CALM!!"* she screamed. Anakin's face was beginning to redden.

"Yes...dear..." Anakin gasped out. He had the good sense not to try and pry her hand free from his collar, though he wasn't sure if he even had the strength to do so if he wanted to. "I can see that...you're calm! I'm sorry..." Padme glared at him a moment longer before she pushed him away with a disgusted look. She directed her wrath now at the droid standing pointlessly between her legs.

"Are you planning on *doing* anything down there anytime soon?" she yelled. The droid made the mistake of trying to respond with explanations of medical procedures for delivering babies. It was pointing out to Padme that she had only become fully dilated a few moments ago and that the babies might not come for several more minutes and up to an hour. Anakin cringed.

*"WHAT??"* Padme's bellow caused the gathered crowd outside her room to cringe. "An *HOUR*? I hope for your sake you're---aggghhhhh!!!" Another contraction clenched her in its punishing claws, rendering her inarticulate. The droid observed a monitor for a moment and then rapidly moved into position. The machine quickly put special tools on its arms that looked rather like large, flat spoons.

"It would seem," the machine announced in a melodic replica of a female voice, "that you are almost ready. On your next contraction, we will begin to push." Padme gritted her teeth and desperately tried to breathe through the pain. She secretly yelled at herself for waiting so long to get to the MedLab. Apparently, providing anesthetizing drugs too close to the birth of the child has little or no impact on the pain and may have serious consequences for the baby. Because she had to go save the Republic from its own stupidity, now she had to suffer. At that moment, she didn't like the Republic very much.

"Can't..." she gasped. "I...just...push...NOW?!"

"It would seem," the machine replied in the same musical timber, "that you are almost ready. On your next contraction, we will begin to push."

"Oh shut up!" she hollered. The contraction was beginning to pass. Padme could

almost feel the next one starting up. She dropped her head back and rested for a moment. She felt Anakin's flesh hand grasp hers. He stood on her left and looked lovingly into her eyes. His heart softened as she saw him staring at her and she almost smiled.

"What are you looking at?" she asked in a playfully harsh voice.

Her face was bright red and a vein was visibly pulsing on her forehead. Sweat had matted her hair into a disheveled tangle of uncoordinated clumps and strands. Her hands were clammy and muscles were taut. Dark black circles garnered her eyes. She looked exhausted.

She was also the most beautiful woman Anakin Skywalker had ever seen.

"You," he smiled broadly at her. "I love you."

Three simple words. Three words that made her heart soar and her soul sing. Three simple words that could never describe the depth of feeling shared between these two beings that had fought incredible battles to save their galaxy. Three simple words that meant everything. Three simple words that gave them the strength to climb any obstacle and face any threat.

"I love you, too," she whispered in response and held his hand a little tighter.

With intense suddenness, another contraction began. Padme tightened her grip on Anakin's hand with such fierceness that the young Jedi Master began to wonder what the impact would be on his life now that he would need to get a second mechanical hand. Pain filled the air as the two lovers began their journey into parenthood. Padme pushed when the machine asked her to and screamed in concentration.

As the child of their dreams began to emerge, Anakin Skywalker's heart swelled with pride.

As the boy that she named Luke was gently laid next to her in an infant monitoring bed, he smiled broadly down at her.

As their girl was born moments later and she named her Leia, Anakin beamed and told her how brave and wonderful she was.

The father looked on with joy unlike any he had ever felt in his entire life. Joy would never do justice to the elation he felt. As he stared at their children—*His* children, he marveled at the bliss that had entered his life. But another emotion began to creep into his heart. One he hadn't expected. One that, until now, had a

completely different meaning to him. One that came as realization dawned on him that he knew nothing about fatherhood--

Absolute dread.

**Chapter XXI continued**  
**Date Posted: 7/6 2:35pm**

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“It’s an ice-planet on the very outskirts of Republic space,” Ki-Adi-Mundi announced to the gathered Jedi Masters in the Council Chambers as he pointed to the small pinprick of light that hovered at the fringes of the galactic hologram on display in the darkened room. The irony of the miniscule light immersed in the darkness was not lost on Mace Windu, who stood impassively in the center of the myriad star systems distributed throughout the chamber. “The system is far from any major hyperspace lane junction points and receives virtually no commercial traffic. The planet is uninhabited by any sentient beings and life-form readings are minimal. It is a desolate place altogether, with extremely cold days and even colder nights. It is the last place in the galaxy any sane person would willingly choose to live.”

“Perfect,” Mace replied. “This...what was the name of the planet, again?”

“Hoth,” Master Ki-Adi-Mundi replied.

“Hoth...” Mace considered the word along with its namesake planet for several moments as he stared at it in the scale model of the galaxy. “Hoth seems to be a perfect home for me. The hard life will be good to keep my mind and body distracted during the day and allow me ample opportunity to test my meditation abilities at night.” He looked around the room and his eyes rested on Anakin Skywalker who was staring directly at him intently. “You can tell the Senate whatever lie suits you best, I suppose.”

“We will tell them,” Obi-Wan spoke up, “that following your defeat by Anakin and your removal of power from the Senate, you escaped to the distant regions of space and that we are tracking your movements.” Obi-Wan paused and smiled wryly as he took in the entire room.

“The truth...” he continued. “...from a certain point of view.”

Mace Windu actually smiled at that. It was not the malevolent and deeply unsettling smile Anakin had grown so weary of seeing over the past twenty-four hours. It was a smile of genuine amusement. Anakin liked that smile on the former Jedi Master. Anakin stood and walked to the center of the room, coming to a halt less than a meter away from Mace. He looked him squarely in the eyes with deepening concern.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Anakin asked. “We’ve already fallen out of favor with the public. We can weather the outcries, if necessary. You don’t have to leave--”

“Yes, I do,” Mace interrupted. “The damage I’ve done is too great. You and the rest of the Council have a lot of work to regain the public trust. Right now, they blame you for the war. Fair or not, that is the way things are. The Jedi are the powerful, as your wife put it. The people right now are not interested in trusting those with too much power. Keeping me around—no matter how noble your motives—will only fuel their distrust of the Jedi.” Anakin opened his mouth to argue but Mace lifted his hand and silenced him. The Korun Master stepped away from Anakin and turned around the room to take in the gathered Jedi Council members.

“There are no words of apology that I can offer that will make up for the damage I have done,” Mace said with his voice barely audible in the darkened room. “I don’t deserve the forgiveness you all have so freely offered. Even now, a part of me rages at the thought that I am apologizing at all. That’s the part of me that most needs to be on this ice-planet. There, I can try to contain the beast within me. There I can learn what life is like without the civilization that I loved so much that it drove me to the dark. I *must* do this. As much for myself as for the Jedi Order.”

The room was silent for a long time. Anakin’s eyes wandered around the room and observed the decimated Jedi Council. Even with all the Masters now gathered in the room, Anakin noted sadly that there were only five Jedi Masters left on a Council that normally seats twelve. Anakin grieved for the loss of the great Masters that once filled the chamber in which he now stood. Then he called on the Force and let the grief pass. It was a skill he was growing morbidly proficient at, he realized.

“As often as I can, I’ll visit,” Anakin announced. “I will bring you supplies and we will meditate together. If you will let me, I will guide you on the path to full acceptance in the Force.” Mace pondered this for several long seconds before responding.

“Perhaps...” Mace said finally. “...when I’m ready. For now, I will focus primarily on surviving there. I assume you will take me, given the risk to any other Jedi who might come on a journey with me?”

“Yes,” Anakin replied. His voice carried a bit of warning in it and Mace acknowledged this with a curt nod. Anakin reached to his belt and retrieved Mace’s lightsaber calmly. He extended it toward Mace. “You’ll need this, I imagine.”

Mace looked at the hilt of his weapon longingly. He extended his mechanical hand toward it, feeling it in his grasp in the Force long before he would ever touch it. It was his greatest ally. It was his last attachment. The Korun's eyes fell on his outstretched cybernetic hand and took in the whirring servomotors and electronic circuits that made it possible for him to hold his blade in his hand again. Faced with the personification of the hideous monstrosity that he had become, he pulled his hand back in dismay.

"No!" he responded, his voice gravelly with emotion. He turned away from Anakin's reach and shut his eyes tightly. He breathed deeply in the Force. The room remained silent as Anakin replaced the saber on his belt. Several minutes passed before Mace spoke again. "I will survive by the will of the Force," he announced at length with his back still to Anakin. "Or I won't survive at all. My weapon would only be a distraction...when I am ready...I will build a new one."

"Or you can claim your old one," Anakin replied softly as he tenderly placed his flesh hand on Mace's shoulder. "You can become the man you once were, if that is your wish, Mace. It's not about trust in the Force...it's about trust in yourself."

The Korun Master nodded but did not turn around.

Anakin called the small datasphere that powered the projection of the galaxy to him and used a gently tug of the Force to turn the lights back on in the room. The light seemed to awaken the Korun Master from his reverie and he finally lifted his downcast head and looked about the room.

"I..." Mace whispered at last, "will never be the same."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan replied as he stood and approached the men, "you can become better."



**Date Posted: 7/6 4:29pm**

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The shiny rattle hovered above, just outside the reach of Luke's outstretched fingers. The baby boy wailed and cried and begged but couldn't grab hold of it. Every movement towards the elusive toy caused it to flit away mercilessly. He was too small to crawl. He had no control of his head, and minimal ability to manage his arms and legs. The boy was a tempest of frustration and he demonstrated this by flailing his arms in concert with his howls. Unable to make any progress, the boy seemed to decide that he should just keep raising the timbre of his yowls to ear-splitting levels. For reasons that the boy would not understand for years to come, screaming louder didn't seem to be having the desired effect.

Lying next to him on the plush carpet of their mother's senatorial apartment, his sister ignored her floating rattle completely. In fact it seemed that she was rather annoyed at the object that kept flying toward her and then flitting away. Once it became clear that she couldn't get a hold of the thing, the girl seemed to want nothing more to do with it. But the persistent rattle kept floating down and flying away. Each of its entries into her space grew closer and closer, as if daring her to reach for it. Whenever she tried to bat the offending noise-maker away from her, it would leap away at the last moment. She tried timing the fall of the metal cylinder's fall but didn't have the motor control skills to mount an effective attack. Before long, she too, grew agitated and joined her brother in a loud series of screams of frustration.

Then something remarkable happened.

Both children, seemingly simultaneously, suddenly stopped crying. As if in coordination with each other, they focused their attention on the floating toys. Their eyes seemed to burn with intense concentration. Their sudden silence, however, was not the remarkable thing. What was amazing was that both rattles came to an abrupt halt in mid-air. Luke's rattle began to move slowly towards him before it was halted by a stronger grip. Leia's rattle was similarly halted from its trajectory away from her.

Anakin and Obi-Wan looked at each other completely astonished.

The exercise the two Jedi Masters were conducting with the twins was almost as old as the Jedi Order itself. It was designed to be the first lesson for a Jedi youngling about the dangers of attachment. After a long period of having the toy kept just out of reach, the youngling would eventually discover how to grasp the rattle with the Force and try to pull it towards him. When this happened, a short

game of tug-of-war between the Jedi Master and the youngling would inevitably begin. The game was invariably short because, either due to the child's inability to control the power it was tapping into or because the Jedi Master wished it, the rattle would break. This, of course, would cause the child to scream and howl for hours. It was a hard lesson, but one that the Jedi truly believed should be learned as early as possible.

Usually, that meant around the age of no less than six months, for the more gifted of Jedi students. For the younglings with lower midichlorian counts, this particular lesson wasn't taught until around the age of one. It had been learned through trial and error that until that age, most younglings had not developed the ability to connect with the Force and reflexively use it. Most children were not even brought to the temple before that age. Obi-Wan had suggested the exercise on a whim when he saw the children playing with their rattles intently for several minutes. It was intended to be a game. But as the children began to become more and more agitated, Obi-Wan insisted on continuing the game to see what would happen. Anakin found the practice to be barbaric and it went against every fatherly instinct he had. But he trusted Obi-Wan and found that he shared his old Jedi Master's curiosity. Neither he nor Obi-Wan really knew what they were expecting to happen, other than to watch the poor twins scream and wail. They certainly didn't expect the children to be able to reach out with the Force and grasp the rattles. Certainly not both of them. Certainly *not at the same time*.

Anakin beamed with pride.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow high on his forehead.

Anakin could feel his children tugging desperately at the toys with the Force. He found that he had to increase his effort in the Force just to keep the rattles in place. He looked at Obi-Wan and smiled broadly. Obi-Wan's face took on a thoughtful look as his eyes darted from Anakin to the twins, who continued to stare at the floating shiny metal cylinders with extreme concentration. Obi-Wan opened himself to the Force and looked intently at the younglings. Each had slight blue aura that was growing in intensity with each passing moment. Their auras were not clearly defined like one might see in a Jedi Knight, but the auras were definitely there. The children were beginning to grow frustrated again. Their faces began to contort with exertion.

Luke broke first.

In a fit of frustration, he began to wail again. His eyes never left the rattle as tears poured down his face and a look of anger began to form on his angelic face. He continued to pull with the Force but now he was screaming with all of his might. Leia soon joined him in equal fits of rage. Anakin felt his heart melt with their

cries. They had tried so hard and were getting no reward for their efforts. They had accomplished more than he could possibly have hoped. It wasn't fair.

Anakin smiled at his children softly and released his grip on the toys.

With stunning speed, Luke's rattle flashed into his waiting hands and the boy's cries almost instantly became soft coos of delight. With equally astonishing speed, Leia's toy hurtled across the room and smashed against the wall. Obi-Wan had to duck to avoid having the toy make a permanent hole through his head. The loud crash had startled both Jedi Masters but seemed to have no effect on the children. They now seemed content and relaxed.

"Quite a temper, your children have there, Anakin," Obi-Wan said somewhat mockingly. "I can't imagine where they get *that* from!"

"Well," Anakin replied, his face utterly sincere. "Padme has been working on that. She's doing much better lately. I think she only brought one blaster with her today..." The two friends laughed for several moments. Slowly, Obi-Wan's face took on a serious tone. Anakin picked up on it immediately. It was the same face Obi-Wan would assume whenever he was about to lecture Anakin during their time together as Master and padawan.

"What?" Anakin asked, his smile fading.

"Well..." Obi-Wan hesitated as if reluctant to go down this road. "I'm a little concerned that you might be spoiling them, Anakin." Obi-Wan's face was filled with concern. Anakin's eyes widened in disbelief.

"*Spoiling* them?" Anakin was incredulous. "Were you not just in this same room with me a moment ago as I watched my children scream and cry for over fifteen minutes?!"

"Don't exaggerate, Anakin," Obi-Wan replied sternly. "It was no more than ten. Besides...how're the children going to learn to let go of attachments if you give them what they want every time they cry a little?" Anakin's face twisted with outrage.

"*Every time they cry a little?!?*"

"You know, Anakin," Obi-Wan responded calmly. "Repeating everything I say isn't going to change the truth. Your children have got to learn the value of letting go of attachments!"

"My attachment to *you* is the only reason you're *alive!*" Anakin shouted.

“That may well be, Anakin,” Obi-Wan answered undaunted. “But that doesn’t mean it’s healthy. How many times have you risked entire *missions* just to try and save me? Think about your children. What are you teaching them?”

“Obi-Wan!” Anakin yelled in amazement. “They’re a week old! I’m teaching them that their father *loves* them! Are you *insane*?!”

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan said patiently. “Your children need your guidance, not just your love.” He paused for a long moment and turned away from his best friend. “Perhaps, it would be best if you separated yourself from them—take them to the Temple to be trained like proper Jedi...”

“*Proper* Jedi?!?” Anakin was beside himself. “Are you saying that I’m not proper eno—” Anakin stopped mid-sentence when he saw Obi-Wan’s shoulders bobbing up and down as if he were in the midst of a convulsion. “Obi-Wan...what’s wrong?” Anakin’s voice was filled with concern as he took hold of his friend’s shoulder and turned him around.

Obi-Wan could no longer hold it in. He erupted in a volcano of laughter, doubling over on the couch. Anakin looked at Obi-Wan in stunned silence as realization began to dawn on him.

“You were *teasing* me?” Anakin sounded extremely cross. “*YOU WERE TEASING ME?!?*”

Obi-Wan stifled his giggles with immense difficulty. “I’m...I’m sorry, Anakin...” he gasped desperately. “It’s just...well...you’re so *easy*!!!” Obi-Wan exploded again in a new fit of chortling. Anakin found himself repressing a rising giggle of his own.

“Shut up!” Anakin responded, now laughing out loud. “You had me worried I was going to have to toss you off the balcony for a moment there!” After a long minute, he stopped laughing and grew almost serious. “You know...I don’t think I can ever remember you laughing before now...”

Obi-Wan sat up and wiped tears from his eyes with a wide smile as he sighed away the rest of his snickering. “Well...I suppose there hasn’t been much to laugh at until now...” The comment made them both pause and brought somberness to the room.

“I suppose you’re right,” Anakin replied with a hint of sadness in his voice. After a brief respite in the Force, the Jedi was smiling again. “You know...you do bring up a good point, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well...” Anakin seemed to be trying to find the right words. “Who’s going to train them? I don’t think it should be me. I’m too close.” He looked at Obi-Wan with a wry smile. “I might become...overly critical.” If Obi-Wan recognized the pot-shot, he didn’t show it.

“That’s not really something you have to worry about right now, is it?” Obi-Wan answered. “They won’t become padawans for years. Why not just put them into a normal youngling class?”

“Because they’re not normal younglings,” Anakin answered. “They’ll know their parents—something I think every youngling should have, by the way. And their father is on the Jedi Council. Can you imagine how much that will alienate them? Besides, if they’re as strong in the Force as they appear to be, they’ll be held back in a normal training program. No...they’ll need special attention.”

“Well...” Obi-Wan seemed to be mulling it over. “Master Drallig is very good with younglings. Since he’s on the Council now, and his apprentice Keto has become a Knight, he might be a good choice.” After a moment, Anakin smiled sardonically.

“It’s ironic that you’d suggest him,” Anakin said.

“Why’s that?”

“I had a dream not too long ago that he and I fought and I killed him in the Temple.”

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin as if waiting for the punch line. When none came, he smiled broadly. “Only in your dreams, my old padawan,” Obi-Wan laughed. “Master Drallig would mop the floor with you!”

“*Hey!*” Anakin responded with mock indignation. “Last I checked, I’ve got two Sith Lords to your one!” Obi-Wan’s laugh died down immediately, but he continued to smile.

“Fair enough...” Obi-Wan said with a smile. “Fair enough.”

“Seriously, though,” Anakin said. “Master Drallig would be good for teaching them lightsaber skills and all...but...” Anakin paused as if steeling himself before continuing. “...he’s a little too...indoctrinated. We’ve discussed how the Order needs to evolve. Master Yoda recognized this. If we’re going to do that, I think

Luke and Leia are the perfect children to start with.”

“You make a good point,” Obi-Wan said after a moment’s thought. “Well, then...who would you suggest? I mean, pretty much the *entire* Order would fall into the same category as Master Drallig.” Anakin didn’t say anything. He just continued to stare at Obi-Wan intently. Obi-Wan’s eyes widened in dismay.

“No!” He shouted, getting up from the couch and backing away from his best friend and seemingly trying to put distance between himself and the twins. “No! *One* Skywalker in a lifetime is enough. Now you want me to train *two*?”

“You’d be perfect!” Anakin pleaded as he stood up and walked toward Obi-Wan. “You’re dispassionate enough to teach them what they need but you care enough to listen to them and let them grow!” Obi-Wan continued to shake his head. “Come on...you know you want to. Think about it! You’d be helping to reshape the Jedi Order for millennia!”

“You know those things don’t matter to me, Anakin,” Obi-Wan replied.

“Then do it for me,” Anakin stopped and looked at Obi-Wan sincerely. “Please...” Obi-Wan looked at Anakin resolutely, determined not to give in. As he stared into his friend’s eyes, he found himself wavering. After another long moment of staring, he threw up his hands.

“I’ll think about it!” Obi-Wan yelled. But they both knew that it was already decided. Obi-Wan looked down at the two children and fell back into the couch dramatically. “How do I get myself into these situations?”

Anakin suddenly looked up at the chronometer on the wall and his eyes went wide.

“Oh, man!” he yelled jumping up and rushing to the center table to activate the holoprojector embedded there. “Totally lost track of time! We almost missed it!” Obi-Wan knelt down and gathered Leia into his arms and Anakin gingerly picked Luke up off the carpet and turned him around to see the image coming into view.

“Hey little man,” Anakin smiled. “I bet you two would love to see Mommy talk, huh? Everyone says she’s going to be the next Chancellor.” He smiled proudly as his wife appeared, perfectly coiffed and dressed in ornate senatorial robes. He leaned into Luke’s ear and whispered softly. “Don’t worry about all the big words...I don’t know what they mean either...”

**Chapter XXI completed**  
**Date Posted: 7/8 10:12pm**

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“I don’t like this,” Anakin said as he stared out at the Coruscanti skyline, his back to the Jedi Council members. The room was full for the first time in nearly a decade. Every Council member was in attendance.

Qu Rahn, Aayla Secura, Luminara Unduli, Bant Eerin, Bultar Swan, and a Jedi Master Anakin had never met by the name Empatojayos Brand were the newest Jedi Council members to be appointed since Cin Drallig was selected soon after Mace Windu's defeat. They all seemed a little timid despite their vast experience and knowledge in the Force. Anakin found this nervousness somewhat disconcerting. He sighed deeply and turned around to face the large circle of Masters.

Seating in the Jedi Council chamber is somewhat ceremonial. Each seat was supposed to be filled and each had some significance. While the room was circular to signify that there was no hierarchy in the Council, it was always recognized that those sitting closest to the head of the Council were the most respected and revered on the Council. Ki-Adi-Mundi, Pablo Jill and Stass Allie sat in succession. The rest of the members filled the seats around the circle. That arc of Jedi Masters ended with Cin Drallig and Obi-Wan, who sat next to an empty chair.

That chair was what Anakin was concerned about.

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan replied, “sometimes doing your duty means doing something you don’t like.”

“I don’t need a lecture, Obi-Wan,” Anakin replied testily. He turned and faced his fellow Jedi Masters. “I’m just not sure that you’ve all thought this through.” Anakin took in the whole room as he stepped away from the window and walked into the center of the circle. “I’m not like any of you. I’m still learning about the Force. I’m...” he seemed to struggle for the words. “I’m not wise.”

“Master Skywalker,” Master Eerin, her large fish-like eyes, characteristic of the Mon Calamari blinking incessantly, “Did I misunderstand your meaning when you said that you had all of Master Yoda’s knowledge deposited in your mind?”

“No...” Anakin replied. “You didn’t misunderstand me. But—“

“And none were wiser than Yoda,” interjected the Twi’Lek Jedi Master, Aayla

Secura. “Are you speaking truthfully about your lack of wisdom or is this simply false modesty?”

Anakin was growing frustrated. He took a deep breath. “Masters,” he began slowly, trying to choose his words carefully. “True wisdom is a marriage of knowledge and experience.” He looked about the room and saw several heads nodding. Notably, Obi-Wan was non-responsive, but Anakin continued. “I have Yoda’s knowledge, but none of his experience. The experience I have is singular to a time of war. Now, we are entering a time of peace—something I’ve never really known. Additionally, as I’ve said before...I’m different. I experience the Force in a way that none of you can, right now. I still haven’t worked out exactly what that means, yet. How can you expect me to provide wisdom to all of you when I can’t even advise myself?”

“Perhaps, he’s right,” Empatojayos Brand spoke up. Anakin had never met this Jedi Master before but he knew a lot about him because Yoda had been Brand’s Master. He was arrogant, ego-centric and aggressive. Anakin fought an urge to find out if Master Brand’s vanity was justified or not. “If Master Skywalker is still full of all this uncertainty, perhaps he shouldn’t even be on the Jedi Council.” Now Anakin was repressing the vision of his sky-blue blade burning a neat hole in the Jedi Master’s goateed chin. Obi-Wan stood.

“This is not a subject of debate,” Obi-Wan said. He looked meaningfully at Empatojayos and then turned to give Anakin the same look. “We all consulted the Force regarding this question. We also discussed it amongst ourselves both in and out of Council Chambers.” He walked to join Anakin in the center of the ring. “The fact of the matter is that we all agree that the Order requires radical change if we can ever hope to face the dark side again. Anakin has been having visions of our not-too-distant future. There are possible horrors out there that we could hardly imagine! How can we hope to face them if we don’t change? We *know* this!”

Obi-Wan looked at Anakin as if the two friends were the only ones in the room. “Anakin,” he smiled. “True wisdom is not just a function of knowledge and experience. True wisdom only begins when one admits that he doesn’t know. You, my friend, are far wiser than you give yourself credit for.” Anakin felt the sincerity in his friend and smiled warmly. He nodded slightly in acknowledgement.

A silence filled the room for several minutes as the other Masters considered Obi-Wan’s words. He turned away from Anakin and pulled the room of Masters back into his conversation. “Master Skywalker is the only one among us who will effect the changes that need to happen,” Obi-Wan continued. He turned and looked into Anakin’s eyes with a knowing stare. “He is the Chosen One. He is the only one among us who has achieved balance in the Force.”



He put an arm on Anakin's shoulder. "He will lead the Jedi Council."

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"But I don't understand why you have to go to Yavin!" Padme yelled as Anakin continued to pack. They had had this discussion several times before and he didn't feel like going through it again. "I mean—Yavin?? I don't think I'd ever even heard of that place until you mentioned it!"

Anakin didn't respond. Instead, he continued to mill about the room, putting stray things that he needed for the trip into his travel bag. He laughed to himself as he considered how little he normally carried with him on a trip. Usually, he went on a mission with nothing but his lightsaber in tow and maybe a day or two of dehydrated rations. Now he was carrying a bag full of...junk. He smiled again. Then he realized that Padme was still talking.

"You're not even listening to me, are you?" Padme asked. Anakin considered telling the truth and facing the consequences. But when your wife is the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic and an able shot with a blaster, the consequences can sometimes be disastrous. Over the last six months, Anakin had learned that sometimes honesty is not always the best policy when dealing with an irate wife.

"Of course I am, Padme," he replied. He was quite proud of the bluff. It sounded sincere enough to him. He was sure it would work. The only problem with bluffing your opponent, is that sometimes they call.

"Ok...", Padme said with a smile. "What was the last thing I said?"

Anakin blinked.

"You will no longer ask me about this conversation," Anakin said as he waived his hand and called on the Force.

Padme blinked.

"Are you kidding me?" she asked incredulously. "You've got to be kidding." Anakin inspected his hand as if looking for some defect that prevented his efforts from working.

"I...", Anakin almost whispered, "don't understand. I'm the most powerful Jedi in the Order. Why didn't that work?" Padme broke out laughing.

"That's because I'm the most powerful woman in the galaxy!" she replied. Anakin

smiled at that and pulled her to him.

“I like powerful women,” he breathed heavily as he kissed her neck. “I like them very much...” He began to kiss her neck more insistently when she began to push him off.

“Anakin...stop....the children are awake!” Finally he broke his grasp on her and smiled.

“Sorry,” he grinned. “I get carried away around beautiful, powerful women.”

“You still need to talk to me about this, Ani,” Padme returned to the topic at hand. He sighed and nodded. Anakin sat on the edge of their bed and looked up at her. She walked towards him and stood between his knees. He held her hands in his.

“Yavin Four is a moon that is strong in the Force,” Anakin told her. “It’s a better place for Jedi to commune and learn the ways of the Force than Coruscant is. There is also some residual dark side energy there so it would help with trying to teach the other Masters about the nature of the dark side without them becoming overwhelmed by it.” Padme nodded reluctantly. He hadn't told her anything she didn't know. She just needed to hear that it was important one more time.

“When will you be back?” Padme asked.

“Six months,” Anakin replied. “I know that’s a long time without the children here but you can visit us any time you like.” Padme half-smile was resigned. “This is a good thing for you, too, you know.”

“I suppose,” Padme replied as she considered it. “The Jedi Order moving off Coruscant is going to go over well in a lot of circles. Plus, you taking off for a little while might limit the whispers behind my back about my Jedi husband.” She frowned deeply and dropped next to him on the bed. She rested her head on his shoulder and he put his arm around her. “It’s amazing how quickly we’ve degenerated back to the old political games. Less than a year ago they were all ready to crown me Queen of the Galaxy, now they’re all maneuvering to take my job.”

The both sat in silence for a long time, just being together and loving each other. Anakin was the first to move and Padme lifted her head. They both got up from the bed in silence and walked out to her veranda. They looked out at the skyline together.

The last of the light from the Coruscanti orbital mirrors was beginning to fade and the sky was colored with beautiful shades of red and yellow. The two lovers held

each other closely as each considered the future. They both feared their roles in shaping the galaxy. Padme had to continue to reform the Senate and Anakin had to remake the Jedi Order. Both were terrified of the consequences of failure.

But as they held each other on that balcony over a thousand meters above the ground with the wind blowing sweetly against their faces, they felt reassured. Because regardless of what happened in the future; no matter what horrors they faced; no matter how difficult things became;

They would face it together.

## Epilogue

Date Posted: 7/9 8:37pm

-----Epilogue-----

The bitter cold wind tore at his skin with the ferocity of a hungry nexu in full attack. If the debilitating temperature or the searing pain produced by the pebble-sized hail that poured from the darkened sky onto his motionless body had any impact on him, it was not clear. He stood in the snow, perfectly still. He was clad only in pants so white that they were indistinguishable from the smooth, pure surface of the snow. His dark, sinewy upper body was taut. His hand clenched a wooden staff tipped with a rock that had been chipped into the shape of a spear on both ends.

The storm battered at his frame with all of his power. It wrapped him in a blanket of cold so deep that it threatened to freeze the blood in his veins. It pounded him mercilessly with stones of ice at such speeds that it seemed they could pierce a meter of durasteel. The wind howled with such intensity that he could hear nothing else. But still, the creature did not budge.

This is what it feels like to be Mace Windu, Korun Master, former Dark Lord of the Sith, and exile on the planet Hoth, right now:

You can feel the power of the planet, but it cannot harm you. The Force is your ally. With it, you wrap yourself in warmth that no blanket could ever provide. The Force gives you a shield against the hail that no blaster can puncture. You are the epitome of invulnerability. But it is only a respite in the darkness that consumes you.

You are lonely, but you do not dwell on it.

You are afraid, but you refuse to bow.

You are angry, but you do not allow it to consume you.

You are darkness personified but you can now see light.

As you look out at the endless barren wasteland of ice that blankets virtually the entire planet, you can feel the creatures approach. They normally hunt alone but they have learned their lesson. You have cut so many of them down now that they

have organized themselves into a pack in a desperate hope to stop your carnage.

You find this amusing.

You loosen your grip on your double-bladed shaft and wait for the attack.

You cannot see them anywhere. They have had millennia to adapt to this harsh world and you have had only a year. They outnumber you seven to one. You almost regret that the odds are not in their favor.

With lightning quickness they attack as one. You do not move until three of them are within reach of you. Three snow-white creatures are suddenly dead at your feet, their blood that splashes against your face in a scorching deluge is a welcome shower which staves off the frigid storm.

You hear the two behind you roar with rage in a futile attempt to weaken your resolve. You reward them for their efforts with deadly efficiency and relish in the sight of their heads sailing through the storm-ridden sky. You laugh aloud at the now Sith-colored snow and turn to face the others with malicious joy.

Two more remain and you can sense their caution.

These are the true predators in the pack. The others were nothing. Your smile spreads widely across your face in a vicious grin. They begin to stalk you as if you're their prey. You can feel their confidence flowing like a bountiful river. They diverge to flank you—one on either side. In the Force you see them for what they are—brothers. They fight together. They hunt together. They are as close as two of the creatures could possibly be.

They are perfect.

With stunning speed they hurtle themselves toward you but you are no longer their. The Force has lifted you into the sky, high above their heads. You glorify in the sickening crunch of their skulls against each other as you fall back down toward them. Two merciless slashes from your stone blade cause their heads to land in the snow as your feet touch down.

As you stand in the pool of congealing blood at your feet, which rapidly begins to freeze, you survey your work. You feel no remorse. You feel no pity. You feel victory. You feel elation.

You roar into the sky with your spear raised high above your head in triumph.

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*Oblivion.*

*It is not a place. It is a state of being. Light and dark are meaningless here. It is a state of abeyance. It is a state of suspension. One that is in oblivion simply does not exist for all others and is completely forgotten.*

*This is the power of the dark.*

*For the dark is generous, but more importantly...the dark is patient.*

*Light can only survive as long as there is fuel to feed it.*

*Even stars burn out.*

*And when they do...in the midst of oblivion....*

*Darkness stirs....*

-----Fin-----

## **Deleted Scene 1**

**Date Posted: 7/10 9:53pm**

This deleted scene would have occurred right after the birth of the twins. It was intended reveal how the Jedi dealt with the death of Plo Koon (now that things had calmed down) and hint at how Anakin was going to begin to shake up the Jedi Order. I was a little put off by the scene, however. I originally liked the personification of the dark side but later found it a little too disturbing. So...I cut it. Hopefully, it can be enjoyable for you but you'll understand the choice I made.

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The Coruscanti night was dark as ever. As usual, thousands of lights filled the skyline from thousands of homes and dared to compete with the majestic wonder that was the star-filled night sky. But unlike every other night on this giant metal orb, smoke billowed from one lonely building. On this night, a fire burned on the roof of the Jedi Temple. Nearly a hundred Jedi Knights, padawans and Jedi Masters gathered around a fire that burned intensely atop their home.

They were saying goodbye to a friend.

No words were spoken. No eulogy would be given. There was nothing but absolute silence as the gathered Force-users communed with the Force as if hoping that they could find the remnants of their fallen Jedi Master in the infinite currents that his soul had joined.

Anakin found his mind wandering slightly. As he looked around at the stricken faces of his Jedi family, he discovered that he was thinking about everything but the burning corpse of a man he would have liked to call a friend. Some of his thoughts were rather mundane.

It started with the crackle of the burning wood in the pyre. He wondered where his fellow Jedi had found wood on a planet with no trees. Then, when he saw a little padawan sniffle at the sight of the fire, he wondered whether or not the boy knew Master Plo Koon at all. When he saw the boy's Master whisper in his ear and the boy nod uneasily, he wondered what non-sense the boy had been told. Most like something about not grieving for those who had joined the Force. Anakin found himself lingering on that thought for several minutes before choosing to let it go.

Now was not the time.

But soon.

The Order needed evolution, he knew. He knew what Yoda learned during the heat of battle. He also knew that while the Sith were destroyed, the darkness had not been. He knew there would be other Jedi to fall to the dark—perhaps more, now that ever given the changes he wanted to make in the Order. The Jedi Order's policies had stood for a thousand years without significant change. In all those centuries, only twenty Jedi had fallen to the darkness. In all that time, only twenty were lost. That's not a system that begs for change. But change it must. There was only one problem.

Anakin was contemplating something a little more than simple evolution.

He was considering a cultural revolution.

Anakin closed his eyes and breathed deeply in the Force. Virtually instantaneously, the ziggurats at the top of the Jedi Temple helped focus the power of the light side of the Force into him with laser-like precision. Anakin opened himself more deeply in the Force and formed a loose connection with the Jedi standing in the circle around the funeral pyre. He felt all their eyes turn to look at him. Most were confused. They knew he was doing something but few understood his intent. Others were curious and opened themselves to the link he was forming. Still others were concerned. By others, this meant the Jedi Masters gathered on the roof. Ki-Adi-Mundi and Pablo Jili exchanged wayward glances, unsure of Anakin's intent. Stass Allie stared wide-eyed at Anakin and fought the urge to tell him to stop.

Obi-Wan completed the connection in the Force immediately and spoke to Anakin with cautious resolve.

*Anakin*, Obi-Wan whispered through the Force. A few of the younger Jedi had joined in the Force-link and could hear Obi-Wan's voice. *Now is not the time or the place for this.*

*Actually, Obi-Wan*, Anakin answered immediately, *It's the perfect time and the perfect place. We can't be expected to grow as an Order if we don't unlearn what we have learned. We have to know what is possible. We have to know that there are no limits on the Force, but what we put on it.*

*What are you talking about?* Whie, a Jedi padawan of extraordinary strength in the Force interrupted. *This seems so...strange. I didn't think this was even possible.*

*Whie*, Anakin responded. Then he opened his eyes and looked around at everyone. *All of you. I'm going to show you a little of what I've learned about the Force. It will be a little scary but you need to see it.* Without waiting for assent, Anakin called on the dark side of the Force. He pulled it down into the midst of the group.



In the Force, it was a small storm cloud, the color deoxygenated blood. It descended from the highest Temple spire and floated above the group.

Many of the younger Jedi didn't recognize it for what it was—a manifestation of dark energy that Anakin had somehow given form. The older Jedi cringed at the sight and some even tried to break the connection.

*If you break our link, Anakin's ethereal voice in the Force rang, you won't see it anymore, true enough. But it will still be there.* Anakin seemed to focus a little more and the dark cloud began to morph in shape. It took on the shape of a kryat dragon. The children looked at it in awe and smiled broadly. The adults found their frown deepening. But it was the children that Anakin's demonstration was aimed at. He tilted his head slightly and the dragon became a Jedi Interceptor starfighter.

"Anakin," Ki-Adi-Mundi spoke, without using the Force, Anakin noted. "You should stop this. The dark side of the Force is not a toy to be played with. You're scaring us."

*But that's the whole point, Master,* Anakin replied. *I'm trying to show you that the dark side of the Force is not something to hide from in fear. It's something to identify, and if necessary, take control of. Only then can you hope to escape its grasp. You can't hope to understand the intricacies of the Force if you don't study all of its many facets.*

The children continued to stare in wonder at the fantastic display that continued to rearrange itself into all sorts of amazing creatures and objects, but the other Masters were growing even more uncomfortable. Finally, Anakin relented and the dark side cloud dissipated and the link was severed. A collective groan of disappointment left the lips of the children.

But Anakin had made his point.

Those padawans would never look at the dark side of the Force in the same way again. Perhaps if Mace Windu and Plo Koon had learned this same lesson when they were padawans, things might have been different. Perhaps they would have been prepared to face the darkness and not be consumed by it.

As he looked at the concerned faces of the Jedi Masters, Anakin smiled.

## **Deleted Scene 2**

**Date Posted: 7/10 9:57pm**

This scene would have taken place right after the scene with Anakin, Obi-Wan and the twins (the end of that scene was to segway into this scene). While I enjoyed the scene, I came to realize that it was throughly unnecessary. It didn't advance the plot and I tell the major point of the scene (Padme's ascention to Supreme Chancellor) later on, with far fewer words. Also, I thought that if I kept the scene, Padme would have had one too many speeches. But..here it is....

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Senator Amidala stared out somewhat nervously at the senators gathered in the newly repaired Grand Convocation Chamber. The required reconstruction had been used as an opportunity to reorganize the layout of the Senate. The majority of the changes were subtle and largely symbolic.

The most significant change was the addition of the gallery. Now, in addition to the thousands of senate pods that were now in a circular vice helical design, there was a large walkway above the very top ring of pods from which Republic citizens could gather and watch the Senate proceedings. It was designed to be able to hold close to ten thousand spectators.

It was jammed to capacity.

HoloNet news cameras were to be found everywhere. To accommodate all the various outlets, floating holorecorder droids were used and they flitted about the Arena from pod to pod, getting Senator reactions and the occasional interview for the home-planet of interest.

Over the past three weeks, the entire Republic had been focused on the election of a new Supreme Chancellor. The former queen did not campaign. The Senator from Naboo had kept herself out of the political fray. When she had learned that her name had been submitted as a candidate by petition, she resisted the strong urge to object. She always did her duty and this would be no different, if it came to it.

Now, as she gazed out at the sea of people who looked at her expectantly, she silently hoped she would not let them down.

“People of the Republic,” she announced. “It is with great humility, that I assume the position of Supreme Chancellor of the Galactic Republic.”

The Senate Arena erupted in jubilant cheers.

Padme was gratified by the applause but worried about how readily the Republic was ready to turn to her for leadership. She was concerned that the message she had been trying to deliver for the past several weeks had been lost in the euphoria of the apparent demise of the previous Chancellor. The people were in a state of elation and didn't seem to be capable of recognizing the inherent dangers she saw in placing too much power in any one person's hands. She knew that this would be the case, but it saddened her nonetheless. She looked out at the masses and smiled broadly. It didn't matter if they understood.

She would lead.

"We have stood on the precipice of the abyss that is dictatorship!" she said, filling the entire Arena with her presence. The crowd continued with muted celebrations, giving her just enough quiet to continue to speak. "We looked down into that darkness and decided to find another way!" Applause began to erupt again but she continued, raising her voice above the rising din. "We were able to stop our galaxy from being crushed beneath the feet of oppression! We were not afraid!"

The crowd screamed. Senators and civilians alike were alight with patriotic fervor. It was the effect that Padme hoped to attain but even as she watched the impact of her words stir the gathered throng into shouts of glee, she found herself saddened that it took so little. There was no skepticism. The Republic, despite all it had faced, had not grown cynical. They were ripe to be taken advantage of by another Palpatine or Windu. She sighed deeply and her slightly downcast face brought the crowd's cheers to a low rumble of pleasure. The Senators looked at her expectantly.

"But it was not without cost," she continued sadly. "Even now, on thousands of worlds, relief efforts are ongoing to rebuild our cities, locate survivors..." she paused as a deep sadness filled her. "...and bury our dead." The arena grew silent as the new Chancellor bowed her head solemnly in reverence for the lost souls of the Clone Wars.

"Now," she started anew, "we must decide how to move on. I have been duly elected by you to lead you from the precipice and into a new era." As she continued, the cheers began to build again. "An era of hope. An era of redemption. An era in which the weakest of us all has a voice. An era of security that doesn't divide us, but unites us! An era that doesn't demand unity at all cost but celebrates the vast diversity of our great Republic. An era that respects our weakness and celebrates our strength! An era that relies on the people to give it strength! An era of hope! An era of prosperity! An era of peace!"

The entire building shook with the pandemonium of celebration that ensued.

“My first act as Supreme Chancellor,” Padme shouted above the cheers, “is to return all the executive powers assigned to this office under the Emergency Powers Act to the Senate. *You* from now on will determine the fate of the galaxy. *You* will control your own *destiny*!” Once again, applause roared and the throng cheered. Padme nodded proudly. “Today we will begin rebuilding the democracy that we almost let die. Today we stand not on the precipice of doom but on the open vista of *freedom*!” Padme had believed that the room could grow no louder--that the cheers could be no stronger.

She was wrong.