

Cut Strings

by unspeakablehorror

Summary: After his success in an important battle, General Grievous is made an offer he can't refuse in the form of upgrades to his cyborg body. But the surgery is more than what it seems, and leads to some startling revelations about Count Dooku and Darth Sidious.

Story Downloads and Metadata...

[\(epub version\)](#) [\(pdf version\)](#)

Fandom: Star Wars

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Additional Tags: character-based, AU, Darth Sidious is main antagonist, I do try to capture Dooku's character as best I can when I write him though, Kaleesh, Muuns, Slow Burn, yeah I'm building up to it, also both Grievous and Sidious are major POV characters, Prepare for boatloads of Grievous backstory, delivered in small bite-sized portions, and for a front row seat to all the overly- complicated planning Sidious does, And for Obi-Wan getting himself into innumerable inadvisable situations, Enemies to Lovers

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Notes

A/N: Welcome to my General Grievous wish-fulfillment fan-fiction! This is going to be my own little AU version of the prequels time period. I will be drawing heavily on both the cell-shaded traditional animation Clone Wars series and the CG Clone Wars series, both of which I enjoy intensely for their own unique contributions. I'm going to freely mix canon and legends continuities as well. And sometimes I'll just change things as it suits me, since this is my own personal AU. While I hope to remedy some of the issues I had with the actual prequel movies in this story, fixing them all would be a monumental task that I doubt I will manage to accomplish, though I will certainly make the effort!

EDIT: Oct 4, 2018: I have edited the tags to include important platonic relationships in the story. Please note that any relationship tags using '&' reference platonic relationships, as is the intended purpose of the & symbol in relationship tags.

Chapter 1: Battle At Raxus

General Grievous flipped away from the Jedi Knight, simultaneously blocking his onslaught of lightsaber blows with his own two lightsabers. The Jedi's blue lightsaber flashed against the blue and green weapons Grievous favored.

"In the name of the Republic, you will be brought to justice," the Jedi said somberly.

Grievous laughed as he fought the Jedi and his contingent of clone troopers. His foot clutched the helmet of one of the clones and he threw him far into the distance as he flipped through the air slicing off another clone's hands in a smooth motion. Then he directed his attention back to the Jedi again, pressing forward in a swift and fluid offensive.

"Empty words, Jedi," the cyborg general rumbled. He felt the implacable anger that the appearance or even mention of the Jedi always caused in him, but he had turned that anger into a precise and lethal weapon, rather than the weakness the Jedi believed it to be. Of course, he wasn't beyond trying to see if he could get a rise out of them, either. Count Dooku had said that the Jedi never felt more off-balance than when they felt themselves pulled by their own fear and anger.

So as Grievous continued making short work of any clone troopers who got too close and deflecting the blaster shots of the more cautious ones, as well as pushing an offensive towards the lone Jedi Knight, he also attempted a psychological jab at his current prey.

"But perhaps you can use those words to comfort your padawan when you join him in death."

He saw the face of the Jedi twitch in anger, though to his disappointment his opponent did not explode with rage as they sometimes did. The Jedi did strike more forcefully now, though, changing his fighting style from defensive to offensive.

As Grievous twisted and turned in all directions, he also used the movement as an opportunity to observe his surroundings on all sides, constructing a 360 degree view in his mind of the battlefield. It was with that view in mind that he hit the Jedi hard enough on the right side to drive him physically backward as he rotated his own body fluidly around the knight, placing his opponent directly in line of the blaster fire from a clone trooper who had undoubtedly meant to hit Grievous instead.

The clone cried out in dismay as the Jedi was felled by the bolt. Grievous took the opportunity to take his ever-present anger out on the Jedi's collapsed form. If the bolt hadn't killed him, he was certainly dead now. Then the cyborg grabbed the Jedi's lightsaber from the ground with his foot and, in one fluid motion brought it around to kill the clone trooper who had accidentally killed his commander as he tried to attack Grievous. The battlefield was silent. Around Grievous there was a ring of death.

He took a moment to savor his victory, but also to feel disappointment. Kenobi would never have gone down so easily. The Jedi Master was his most hated foe, but also his most respected. They had dueled countless times, neither able to best the other.

Blaster fire sounded in the distance, catching the immediate attention of the cyborg general. His attention immediately switched back to his main objective. He turned and moved towards the estate in the distance, leaving his ship, the Soulless One, as well as the cargo shuttle attached to it, guarded by his silent and deadly magnaguard. As much as he would like to seek out other Jedi to kill, Dooku's instructions for this mission were clear--his first priority was to rescue the Parliament members who had been stranded on Raxus by the Republic's surprise attack. He was to attack only those who got in his way until that mission was completed.

Still, if he were lucky, perhaps there would be more Jedi who would 'get in his way'.

Grievous crested the hill and reached the sprawling estate. The ostentatiousness and unnecessary luxury of the place struck Grievous as distasteful, but then the Separatist Parliament did mostly consist of the rich and the privileged. In any event, he was uninterested in the politics of his benefactors.

His only duty was to carry out their orders, his only reward to be given the chance to decimate the Jedi Order.

As he approached the entrance he watched for any lurking foes. However, it appeared that the Republic hadn't reached this area yet. He pressed the alert button at the door panel and waited.

A human woman opened the door, looking up at him with wide eyes. From the records he had accessed from his ship's computer before traveling to Raxus, he identified her easily.

"Senator Bonteri," Grievous said. "I've come to evacuate the Separatist Parliament members stranded on your estate."

"Oh! You--you must be General Grievous," she said, seeming to recover her equilibrium.

Come with me! I'll let the others know you're here."

She ran back into her estate and Grievous treaded easily after her. He followed her down a spiral staircase into what appeared to be a basement. What a terrible place to hide.

If the Republic had reached the estate, the occupants would have been trapped in their current location. Not that he imagined many of them were fighters, anyway.

Finally they reached a door at the end of a long hallway. The senator keyed in a code to open it and they entered to find a large group of senators and dignitaries huddled behind crates or under a large table that took up most of the center of the room. Grievous sighed. Ten of them, counting the Bonteri woman and her spawn. This was going to slow him down considerably.

“General Grievous is here to rescue us,” Senator Bonteri said urgently.

“Let’s go,” Grievous said. “I’ve put down a shuttle not far from here.”

“That’s good news!” San Hill said, rising from behind a crate and dusting his robes off. “This planet has become a death trap!”

Grievous turned and walked back towards the stairs. He heard the footsteps of the panicked people following behind him.

They walked through the grounds of the estate. In the distance, Grievous could hear blaster fire. Nearby, he could detect the heat signatures of the group behind him, following his long stride as best they could.

As they approached his ship, he could see the battle had already reached the Soulless One again. He took out four lightsabers, spinning two of them above him and holding the other two out in front of him.

One of the Senators, a blond human man dressed in red and gold, let out a wail of despair. “We’re all going to die!”

Grievous snapped at the panicking senator. “QUIET!”

This, unfortunately, did not have the desired effect, and the man began to shriek. Grievous would have killed him then and there if Dooku hadn’t made clear that he would consider that a failure on Grievous’s part.

Bonteri spoke then, her voice dripping with disdain. “Stop snivelling, Lestur. You wouldn’t want to break the General’s concentration, would you?”

The man quieted down quickly after that, and Grievous was able to concentrate his attention on the group of clone troopers guarding his ship.

“I will handle this,” Grievous said. “Stay behind me.” He walked over to the clones. “Surrender or die,” he said simply.

The clones fired a barrage of blaster fire towards him. He blocked the shots with his lightsabers, managing to reflect some of the bolts back at the clones.

“I see you mean to die, then.”

He leapt over to them and unleashed a barrage of lightsaber attacks that made short work of the clone troopers. He guessed that there hadn't been time for the Republic to learn of the death of the Jedi Knight who had attacked him earlier, and that the clones had simply been intended to reinforce the now deceased Jedi. He defeated all ten of them easily.

Then he mentally activated the boarding ramp to the shuttle and gestured for the Separatist Parliament members to enter with him.

Remotely activating the autopilot on his ship, he initiated the takeoff sequence from the planet's surface. Within minutes they had reached orbit around the planet.

The Bonteri child gasped, pointing out the airlock window. “Is that--is that the Soulless One?”

“Yes,” General Grievous said. “This transport shuttle has been attached to my personal fighter for the purposes of completing this mission.” He motioned to the shuttle seating arrayed around them. “You may wish to prepare yourself for the hyperspace jump. I will need to pilot the ship personally until we pass the Republic blockade.”

He walked into the airlock, closing the door behind him. He prepared himself for what would happen next by sealing off his airholes and the eyeholes of his mask, flicking their transparisteel covers down like a pair of transparent eyelids. He heard a tap on the door behind him. Looking through the clear transparisteel window, he saw the face of the Bonteri child squashed against the window, watching with interest. Having ascertained that the sound was not a threat, nor of any importance, he then opened the door in front of him to the vacuum of space. Using his magnetized feet, he walked across the surface of the Soulless One and then settled into the cockpit.

His clawed fingers keyed in the commands to enter hyperspace. The hyperspace countdown sequence commenced, though several Republic ships began attacking him soon afterward. It seemed they had finally broken through the network of Vultures assigned to defend his ship and its cargo of Senators. One of his pursuers in particular stood out as being extremely difficult to shake. Grievous wondered with some interest if it was a Jedi that gave it its unerring direction. He knew the clones could never keep up with his maneuvers. Still, he had his orders. He kept up his evasive maneuvers until he saw the signature blue lines of hyperspace in front of him.

I'll be back for you later, Jedi.

The trip back to the ship from his fighter had been uneventful. Hyperspace did not feel to him significantly different than regular space, despite the numerous superstitions to the contrary. His return to the shuttle was swift, though it seemed that one of the shuttle's occupants was feeling--excessively talkative.

“--and did you know that it's a customized Belbullab-22 fighter? It has the triple laser cannons of course, but the best part is--” the Bonteri child said, stopping abruptly when he noticed Grievous's

presence. “Er, hello sir.”

“I have been instructed to brief all of you on the situation,” Grievous said, pacing around them. “I expect we will be in hyperspace for three standard days.”

“Three days?” One of the senators said. His expression was horrified. “In this awful thing?”

The Bonteri child looked delighted, however. “Really?”

Grievous sighed. “Yes.” He couldn’t help thinking what a waste of time this was. If he hadn’t had to take on all this dead-weight, he could have stayed in the battle. “The shuttle was outfitted with this eventuality in mind. You will find all supplies required for your survival over there,” Grievous said, gesturing briefly to several crates.

“But--there’s nowhere to sleep!”

Grievous looked over at the Senator who had spoken. The human looked both horrified and indignant, crossing his arms and looking up at the cyborg general.

“I didn’t say anything about your comfort,” Grievous responded. “Be grateful that you will live another day, Senator. Now, in the interests of conserving space, I’m going to return to the cockpit of my fighter.”

“Ah, General?” Grievous turned back to face Senator Bonteri, who looked up at him with a smile. “I just wanted to thank you for all you’ve done today. Lux and I are safe because of you. Please know that you are always welcome at the Bonteri manor.”

Grievous inclined his head politely, though the invitation held no appeal to him. “Thank you.” He turned again towards the cockpit.

It was at that moment that San Hill spoke up. “General Grievous,” he said. “I also wanted to express my immense gratitude for your help.”

“Very well,” Grievous said, his tone dismissive. *Gratitude is only so many empty words.*

The Muun smiled nervously. “No, truly. If there is something you would like in return, please don’t hesitate to ask. You saved my life, after all. I’d say that means you’ve been an excellent investment.”

Grievous finally turned to face the leader of the Intergalactic Banking Clan and narrowed his eyes. “Really? Five more fleets of ships and an entire armada of magnaguards, perhaps?”

San laughed. “You’re thinking too small, my friend. Of course, you can have that as well if you want. But I was thinking more along the lines of--upgrades to your current cyborg infrastructure. Let me know if you have an interest in that.”

Grievous tilted his head. “You know of a way to improve upon my current abilities?”

He needed an extra edge over the Jedi. If there was some enhancement that could give him that, perhaps he could finally fell one of the great Jedi Masters...

“Yes, considerably so,” San Hill said. “When this is over, please don’t hesitate to contact me.”

“I will take you up on that offer,” Grievous said.

“Excellent,” the Muun said. “I promise, you won’t be disappointed.”

Chapter 2: The Extra Upgrade

Chapter Notes

A/N: Writing this cranky cyborg's attempts at anger management is probably going to be one of my favorite parts of this.

The ten Separatist rescues reached Geonosis, where the general dropped them off. Shortly after that, he had a talk with San Hill as to what kind of upgrades the Muun had in mind.

“What changes will you be making?” Grievous said.

“Allow me to explain. I recall that you were quite disappointed to learn of your complete lack of force sensitivity.”

“Of course I was! What of it?” Grievous said irritably. Of all the things for the Muun to bring up, why did he have to choose that?

“Well, what if I told you that there was something I could do about that?”

“What could you possibly do? Even Count Dooku couldn't give me the power of the Force!”

“Well, it wouldn't be the Force, per se, but it would give you more of the abilities that the Jedi possess. Imagine if you could pull metallic objects to you, or shock someone with electricity with the power of your mind alone!”

“You could do that? Give me those abilities?”

“Easily, why I'm astounded we didn't think of it before! The magnetic pull ability is just a simple refinement of your current magnetic implants. And while an electric modulator with that much power is certainly expensive, there is nothing technologically complex about it. It might take you a while to accustom yourself to the new abilities, but they will surely be easier to master than using four arms simultaneously! Some simple additions to your motor cortex will be needed, and a few tweaks here and there. General, you are a marvel of engineering, but these simple improvements may just be the edge you need against the Jedi!”

“More upgrades,” Grievous said. “Yes, I think you're right. I want these changes completed immediately.” He laughed then, already thinking what a nasty surprise his new abilities would be for the Jedi,

San Hill nodded and promptly arranged for the procedure to obtain the upgrades he had promised. Grievous was ushered to the medical room and a medical droid gestured to a metallic slab. The cyborg general settled himself onto it.

San Hill walked up to him. "I hope you will find the upgrades to your liking."

"If they help me decimate the Jedi Order, then they will be very much to my liking."

San Hill smiled. "I think they will."

The medical droid said, "Please be very still, General. This will be a very delicate operation."

The General complied. The droid carefully removed his facemask. Grievous winced at the sensation. When the action was completed, however, he simply stared straight ahead, his mind moving to strategies for upcoming battles. It was as he was pondering how to successfully take Kamino, that something very unusual happened. He fell asleep.

Grievous blinked his eyes blearily. In front of him he saw the faces of San Hill and the medical droid. "What--happened?"

"The procedure was a success!" San Hill said briskly. "Perhaps you should practice your new abilities."

Grievous stepped off the metal operating slab. "Something seems wrong," he said. His mind seemed--noisy. Where before there had been little but thoughts of strategy and killing Jedi, now he found it difficult to focus. He tried to think of the Kamino battle again, but his mind wandered to Dooku and his constant admonitions of the cyborg's battle tactics and what the Count thought of as 'distasteful obsessions', such as the General's collection of lightsaber trophies. Then he thought of how strange the medical droid standing passively at his side seemed compared to his own, with a blandly pleasant personality instead of a scathingly sarcastic one. And suddenly, his mind thought of how long it had been since he had seen his homeworld of Kalee.

Kalee. He had been going to travel there before the accident. That had been years ago.

The accident. Floating in a bacta tank, completely helpless. Kalee again. Death. Pain. Fear.

He growled, clutching his head. What's wrong with me?

"General?" San Hill said nervously.

Grievous turned on him. "You botched something!"

The Muun frowned. "What do you mean?"

Grievous picked him up by his collar and pulled him off the ground. Bringing his mask mere centimeters from the Muun's face, he growled, "What did you do to my *mind*?!"

San's hands clutched at Grievous's metallic arm desperately. Dangling helplessly in front of the cyborg, he squeaked something in the Muun language and then in panicked Basic said, "Please, let me explain!"

Grievous slowly placed the Muun back on the floor. “Very well. You had best do so quickly, for your sake.”

The Muun grimaced, rubbing at his neck. “You're probably experiencing what the medical droid referred to as memory backlash. It's happening because I had the med droid remove the control chips Dooku had placed in your mind. I also instructed it to heal the damage they had caused,” San Hill said quickly. “It might seem overwhelming right now, but I was told you should adjust to the changes soon.” He held up his hands defensively. “Please don't kill me. I was only trying to uphold my end of our agreement.”

Grievous snarled. “If that were truly the case, then how did I end up with such alterations in the first place!” He had specifically said that no one was to alter his mind! It had been in the verbal agreement that San had accepted in lieu of a written contract.

“It was Dooku's idea, not mine!” San Hill said, his eyes wide. “He would have killed me if I hadn't allowed him to perform that procedure. Then I wouldn't have been able to redress his breach of contract at all! I had to let him go through with it. But that's why I concocted this pretext to operate on you. I was just trying to uphold my end of our agreement, I swear!”

“So the other changes--”

“Are quite real! But my main purpose in this procedure was to remove Dooku's blocks. I couldn't give you back the connections you had before, but eventually the new brain matter will form proper connections between your old memories instead of indiscriminately transmitting them as they did just now.”

Grievous could feel anger boiling inside of him. The thought that Dooku might have resorted to such trickery had never occurred to him. Grievous would have agreed to serve Dooku willingly without the need for such manipulation. The promise of destroying the Jedi who had helped ravage his homeworld was more than sufficient to motivate him. That Dooku had still betrayed him in a such a way was unforgivable. “Tell me more about these--control chips.”

“I don't know his exact motivations. But I do know that Dooku wasn't content to hold you to your honorable word. Perhaps it's because he has no honor himself, or perhaps he just needed to feel he had complete control over you. So he greatly reduced your ability to reflect on your past, and increased your aggression so you wouldn't have control over it.”

Grievous growled and struck out at a control panel with a flash of lightning. The panel crackled and exploded in a burst of sparks. He blinked in surprise, looking at the fingers on his hand. He had just performed an attack with Force lightning. Well, a passable imitation of it, anyway. He hadn't expected that to be so—easy.

“Ah, I see the electrical modulator works,” San said, chuckling nervously. “Why don't you try the magnetic resonance additions?”

Grievous nodded curtly and held out the same hand towards one of his lightsabers, which lay on a table near the operating bed. Concentrating on pulling it towards him, he felt a surge of satisfaction when the lightsaber flew directly into his hand. He had to root himself to the floor with the magnetic resonators in his feet to keep himself from being pulled towards the metal table, however, which was itself fortunately bolted to the floor. Concentrating again, he stopped the magnetic pull from his hand.

“Hmmm, perhaps you'll need a bit of practice with the intensity of the pull, but you're doing an excellent job!”

Grievous laughed. “The Jedi will learn the meaning of true fear now,” he said.

San said, “Yes, I'm certain they will.”

“But first, there is the matter of Dooku,” Grievous said, clasping his hands behind his back. “His greed seems to know no bounds. He must die.”

“I agree,” San Hill said. “Count Dooku seeks only his own enrichment.”

Grievous narrowed his eyes at him. “You have room to talk.”

The Muun met the General's steely gaze this time. “I may be self-interested, but I don't discard people on a whim,” the Muun said. “When I first joined the Separatists, I thought Dooku's leadership would benefit us all. But the more I saw of his decisions, the more I realized that everyone, everyone has but a limited use to him. And once that use has ended, they become—expendable. I have no interest in waiting until his use for *me* runs out.”

“So you helped me for your own purposes, then.”

“Yes,” San Hill said. “But also because I never go back on my word.”

Eyes still narrowed, Grievous said, “You do have some honor, I suppose, even if I find you highly distasteful.”

“Yes, well, I feel the same about you, General,” San said. “It seems we must trust each other's sense of honor in this, after all. You will need my help. And I need yours. I can hardly expect to destroy Count Dooku myself, after all. If I may ask, how do *you* intend to destroy him? As I understand, Sith are nearly indestructible.”

“Preferably by arranging for his ship to meet an unfortunate accident during battle,” Grievous said. “If I can make it appear like a Republic attack, all the better. Facing him directly would be—unwise.” The Sith Lord had outmatched him in all their sparring battles. But that had been under controlled circumstances, when the Count knew he was fighting the General. Grievous planned instead to use deception and surprise to kill Dooku.

“And, ah, what of Sidious?” San Hill said.

“I shall need to know if Sidious knew of this deception as well,” Grievous said. His golden eyes turned to bore into the Muun banker. “Perhaps you might know the answer to that question.”

San Hill swallowed. “Yes, I do. He knew everything. He even praised Dooku for conceiving the plan.”

Hatred boiled inside Grievous, but he shackled his emotions this time instead of lashing out. *I can control my anger now. It is my weapon, not Dooku's.*

“Then I shall ensure he meets his end as well,” Grievous said. “That will take some deception on both my part and yours. We must draw this more elusive Sith to us carefully. But first, I will need to kill Dooku.”

“If I may ask, what will happen to the Separatist government if you succeed?” San Hill said.

Grievous shrugged. “That is not my concern. I believe the Parliament has some sort of laws in place to cover such an eventuality.”

“Yes, ah, they vote for a new chancellor, while using the next person in the order of succession for the interim chancellor. But losing Dooku so suddenly would put them in upheaval. It would cause chaos--” San stopped and looked up at the General's blazing gold eyes.

“I mean it might give the Jedi an advantage,” San said.

Grievous's eyes narrowed. “I will personally shield the Parliament from any and all attacks, whether they be Jedi or Sith in origin. I will serve their wishes, as long as they do not keep me from mine. That was our agreement, after all.” For the first time in a long time, however, Grievous had more than one wish. I need to return to Kalee, explain to them what happened to me, see if I can—be of service to my people. It was for the Kaleesh that Grievous sought to wreak vengeance upon the Jedi in the first place. Dooku had made him forget that. Well, not forget it, exactly, but his thought processes had been so thoroughly sabotaged as to prevent him from from doing anything about it. The memories had all been there, just almost entirely disconnected from his planning ability. He wondered now if that had been why Dooku had seemed so displeased whenever Grievous had made any reference to his culture or homeworld, such as having his magnaguards wear the signature capes of the Izvoshra or when he had had the statues of himself done in his private fortress.

Turning his thoughts back to the present, he looked down at the Muun thoughtfully. “In any event, I'm sure you are aware of the need for secrecy in this matter,” Grievous said.

“Yes,” San Hill said. “Very much so.”

Chapter 3: This is the Droid You're Looking For

Chapter Notes

A/N: Since Obi-Wan is going to feature quite a bit in this story, I've added him to the character search. I just didn't want to add him to the search until I had added him to the story. I will probably add some other major characters to the search as they pop up as well,

though I'm not entirely sure yet who I want to be the most prominent ones. Expect a lot of characters from both the Clone Wars series to appear, however.

Also, while I anticipate some sort of romance later in the story (though at this point I don't want to say too much about that), I'm not sure how much of an element that will be in the story overall because, um, well-I'm just going to come right out and say this-I've never written cyborg smut and I don't know how. Which is why I didn't add romance as a search category for this story. Well, it's not so much the cyborg thing, actually. More specifically, the problem is that Grievous is a cyborg designed for killing people and not much else. His body is supposed to be based on the Krath war droids, designed by the ancient Sith for destruction, death, and, ah, dying painfully. Nowhere does that really overlap well with sexy fun times. But hey, if I do somehow figure that out, I'll add it as a category.

Grievous stood before his master. *Former master*, he corrected himself. *He will pay for his treachery.* Grievous ached to attack him now, but knew he did not have the advantage in this moment. And failure was not an option.

“Ah, General Grievous, I see you have returned. You're late.” Dooku's dispassionate expression still managed to convey his annoyance.

“My mission was successful,” Grievous said. “My ship required servicing, so I spent some time planet-side until the repairs could be completed,” he lied.

“You could have taken another ship,” Dooku said, raising an eyebrow.

“My ship is far superior to any stock ship the Geonosians could offer,” the General scoffed. “Anyway, I will not leave my valuable possessions for them to steal!”

Dooku only frowned. “I sent you a message. You didn't answer.”

Grievous didn't falter. “One of the Geonosians dropped my communicator when they collected it from the ship for me. It was destroyed by the fall. As the ship's computers had already been brought down for the repairs, I had no way to receive your message.”

Dooku's frown deepened. “Well, I have a new assignment for you.”

“Of course. What is your bidding, my master?”

“I have received word from Darth Sidious of General Kenobi's current location,” Count Dooku said.

Rage flared in Grievous. “Where?! Where is he?!”

Dooku smiled calmly. “Travelling,” he said. “His location is supposedly a well-guarded secret, but Sidious has discovered that he is on Alderaan with Senator Organa.”

“I will kill him,” Grievous said.

“If you can manage it,” Dooku said. “You have yet to kill a Jedi Master. Also, you will bring me the Senator alive. I require some information from him, and I plan to get it one way or another.” Dooku explained what information he needed from Senator Organa, and gave Grievous the coordinates of the

city he would be found in.

“It will be done,” Grievous said. “And Kenobi will die.” He turned and walked away, his cape trailing behind him.

Since this mission would require stealth, Grievous had had to leave his ship and use a more generic one. Dooku had seemed to derive satisfaction from this fact, almost as if he wanted to punish Grievous for not leaving his ship on Geonosis. Grievous was more focused on the opportunity ahead of him than his rather lackluster ship, however. It would serve its purpose.

“State your purpose, cruiser,” A voice said from the communications array.

Grievous pressed a button, and a woman's voice said, “I'm here to visit relatives in the capitol.”

“Very well,” the other voice said. “Proceed.”

That's it? Grievous thought. No ship scanning? No further security checks? Then again, no one was anticipating General Grievous to attack someone by himself. He was the Supreme Commander of the Droid Armies. The Republic expected him to come blazing out of hyperspace with a hundred battleships around whatever location he had targeted. And that was the point, really. They would never expect this.

Of course Dooku had merely said that Grievous had better know what he was doing. Grievous was hardly averse to proving himself capable of this. Of course, Dooku would have to die. But not before Grievous had successfully captured Senator Organa. In any event, the cyborg general could hardly turn down such a chance to take on his much-hated Jedi adversary.

He landed in a grassy glade not far outside the planet's capitol. From there, he was going to have a challenge ahead of him. Grievous was not built for stealth. Anyone who saw him would instantly recognize who he was. He had already programmed the ship to autopilot itself to his location once he gave it the appropriate signal. But he couldn't simply pilot the ship into the city, since he didn't know precisely where his quarry was. Nevertheless, he had devised a way to get himself into the capitol undetected. He just wasn't going to like it.

Grievous chafed inside the disguise. Of all the things he despised people thinking of him, he despised being mistaken for a droid the most. But it was that very misconception which would be necessary for this mission. He knew Dooku had seemed amused when he had told him of his plan.

“I applaud your resourcefulness, General,” he had said. “After all, I have no doubt that you of all people will be able to successfully disguise yourself as a droid.”

Grievous hadn't hid his displeasure at the comment. However, the cyborg knew he needed the element of surprise. He had waited until landing to implement the disguise, though, waiting until it was absolutely necessary to do it. Then, very carefully, he fitted himself inside the droid shell.

The awkward droid legs and spindly droid hands were controlled by small microchips through his mental commands, and a wireless connection also served to allow him to see through the droid's artificial eyes. The rectangular droid frame had been hollowed out to disguise his true body, which he had folded into its smallest possible volume. The droid body was awkward and ridiculous, not built for fighting at all. Its walk was more a waddle than a stride. The disguise was utterly humiliating, but if it allowed him to take Kenobi and Organa by surprise, it would all be worth it.

"No droids!" A burly human stood in front of him, blocking the entrance of the cantina he had been about to check for signs of Kenobi or Organa. Grievous wanted to kill the human in front of him for his insolence. Instead, he restrained himself.

"Sorry, sir," he said in the voice of the gutted droid, and turned away. This was going to be difficult. Difficult and infuriating. And just as he was thinking that, he heard a voice.

"Wait," the voice of Kenobi called out. "Now, just wait a minute." He walked over to the man who had just blocked the entrance. "Why are blocking this droid's way? He could be looking for someone."

"Don't care," the man said. "We don't serve their kind here. Not after what those Separatist droids done."

Kenobi crossed his arms. "Well, I care. And I can hardly believe my ears! This is clearly not a Separatist battle droid." He turned to the disguised Grievous. "Was there someone you were looking for?"

So close, Grievous thought. But he couldn't attack him here. There were too many people surrounding them. He would be outnumbered. Also, he needed to find the Senator.

"Yes! I have an important message for Senator Organa," Grievous said with the droid's vocabulator.

"I see," Kenobi said. "He's at his estate right now on the other side of the city. Would you like me to take you to him?"

Grievous forced himself to quell his excitement. "Yes, thank you, sir." You have sealed your doom, Kenobi.

Obi-Wan examined the droid as it waddled by his side. It was an older Alderaanian model, a boxy grey creation with yellow eyes.

"What is your message?" Obi-Wan asked.

"It is for the Senator's ears only," the droid responded.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "That sounds like an important message."

"Yes," the droid agreed.

"Who sent you?" he asked.

“It is for the Senator’s ears only,” the droid repeated.

“Well, all right,” Obi-Wan said. “I’ll get you to him, then.”

The trip didn’t take long. Obi-Wan flagged down a hover-bus to carry them to the Senator. He gave the droid a bemused look when it stepped on the hover-bus and caused it to tip briefly.

“You must be heavier than you look!” he commented.

The droid said nothing. Probably it was only programmed to respond to questions and a limited number of statements. That was fairly common for droids of this type.

Soon they arrived at the estate where the Senator was meeting with one of the noble houses of Alderaan. He walked up to the door and knocked, the droid waiting silently by his side. The door opened and Senator Organa looked between him and the droid.

“What a pleasure to see you, Obi-Wan,” Senator Organa said. “And I see you’ve brought company.”

“Yes, this droid says it has an important message--for your ears only.”

Senator Organa smiled. “There’s no need for such secrecy, he said. Anything that you might have to tell me can be told in General Kenobi’s presence.”

“As you command,” the droid said. “Let us go somewhere where we might talk privately, however. This message is not for the ears of bystanders.”

“Of course,” Organa said. “Come inside, both of you.”

He led them into a windowless drawing room deep within the estate. Closing the door and locking it, he said, “Now we shouldn’t be disturbed. What is your message?”

The droid said nothing, though. Instead, it began to shake. Then there was a terrible ripping noise as the entire box-shaped center tore apart and revealed a very familiar foe.

“Grievous!” Obi-Wan exclaimed, his lightsaber in his hand immediately.

“Kenobi,” the cyborg general responded, stretching himself from an almost impossibly small size to his full imposing height. “So nice to see you again. I’ll be taking that lightsaber from you this time. Oh, and the Senator as well.”

“I think not,” Obi-Wan said. He calmed his fear and focused on blocking Grievous' attacks. He could see the panic in Bail’s eyes.

“It’s all right! I’ll handle him!” Obi-Wan said, trying to reassure Bail. He wanted to take the Supreme Commander of the droid armies alive if at all possible.

“So, I’m not the only one who seeks revenge,” Grievous said, countering his attacks easily. “Do you mourn your fallen brethren, Kenobi? The ones who were slain by my hand? Do you have the need, the burning desire, to see me slain by yours?”

“You mistake me, General,” Obi-Wan said, not taking the bait. “I seek only to disarm you.” He responded to the General’s lightning-fast moves with his own. “My fallen friends would never wish for me to commit vengeance in their name.”

Grievous laughed. “How amusing. Such pretensions of honor you have, Jedi scum!” The cyborg flipped out of the way of a lightsaber attack that would have sliced off both left hands.

“Hardly pretensions,” Obi-Wan said, narrowly avoiding the slice of four lightsabers. “I must admit, I wonder what your, ah, grievance with us is.”

Grievous grabbed Obi-Wan’s face and flung him into the wall. “Your Jedi nearly caused the ruin of my homeworld. If it hadn’t been for the Separatists, my people would have starved. So it’s very simple, Kenobi. You aided my people’s enemies in their war of aggression against us! The Jedi have blood on their hands.”

Obi-Wan narrowly avoided another attack as he tried to recover his senses and consider this new revelation. He had been trying to learn the reason behind the General’s steadfast loyalty to the Separatists for a while. This was the first time he’d gotten anything resembling a real answer. He still didn’t know what exactly Grievous was. But now he knew what what drove him.

“I didn’t know,” Obi-Wan said, using the Force to call his lightsaber back to his hand. “If what you are saying is true, the Jedi committed a grave injustice against you.”

Grievous lashed out with all four of his lightsabers. “Yes, and now you will pay the price!”

“Please! If you tell me who your people are, I can tell the Council that they must stop aiding your enemies. I can ask them to pay reparations to your people.”

Chairs and tables were sliced to pieces by the deadly dance of Grievous and Obi-Wan’s blades.

“Too late, Kenobi. Your death is all the reparations my people need from you!”

Obi-Wan sighed and redoubled his defense. He was disappointed, but not surprised by the cyborg general’s response. This only redoubled his determination not to kill Grievous, however. Some of the Jedi had begun to believe that perhaps Grievous had simply been a serial killer with a fixation on Jedi. But Obi-Wan had long felt that there had to be something more behind Grievous’ malice, that it wasn’t simply borne from a violent nature. If he had been served such an injustice by the Jedi, it was no surprise that the cyborg wanted them dead. It also meant there might be a way to convince him to stop his war on the Jedi. “I think I’m going to have to pass on that one,” Obi-Wan said. “But tell me who your people are, who these foes are that we aided, and I will demand the Council redress this injustice.”

“Such noble words,” Grievous scoffed. “Such noble, empty words.” Four lightsabers flashed through the air, all in different directions. Obi-Wan allowed his movements to flow through the Force, weaving through the deadly barrage of light.

The Jedi Master was far from tiring, but he knew the cyborg general could do this all day.

Blaster shots rang out. Two clone troopers had arrived. Senator Organa stood on the other side of the

room, a look of concern on his face. Obi-Wan groaned internally. The blaster bolts had done almost no damage to the General's duranium frame, and had seemed to change his focus. Grievous turned and ran over what remained of a table on all six of his appendages until he reached the Senator. He grabbed Bail as if the robust Senator was a rag doll, flung one of the clones against the wall with his foot, and took the blaster from the other clone as he beheaded him. Then he fired it at Obi-Wan. The Jedi Master dodged out of the way just in time.

Grievous glared briefly at Obi-Wan. "I'll be back for you, Jedi scum." Then he ran to the door and blasted it open. Obi-Wan pursued him, reaching the door to the estate just in time to see the general jump several times his body height to jump into a ship that had been waiting outside the manor. The other clones, who had been about to blast the shuttle with a cannon, held back after seeing that the Senator was being held hostage by Grievous. Obi-Wan watched in dismay and horror as the shuttle zipped away.

Chapter 4: An Unusual Collusion

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, I'm back with another chapter! I have so many ideas for this story! I think one of the things that really appeals to me is giving characters who I think are really underutilized in the original media a more prominent role, but I also want to play around with some of the more prominent characters like Bail Organa. Additionally, there is obviously the question of how to handle the political themes in the story. And come up with excuses for plenty of lightsaber and space battles, of course.

Also, thanks to Denapekka (on ff.net) and Maire_Berry for being the very first reviewers of this story! Just going to say that the romance I'm planning is probably not going to be with Shaak-Ti. However, she likely will appear as a character in the story. I really enjoyed her portrayal in the cell-shaded Clone Wars.

Grievous was infuriated that Kenobi would live another day. He had ached to use his new abilities against the Jedi, but he knew he was probably being recorded. An estate like that would have cameras everywhere, and that footage would be appearing in news programs across the Holonet shortly. He couldn't allow Dooku to know about his enhanced abilities. He had to kill the Count before he could make his new powers known. If Dooku knew he had had changes made without the Sith's involvement, he might suspect that he had regained his faculties, and he would surely seek to undo that. Grievous couldn't allow him that opportunity.

And as much as he hated to admit it, his lightsaber skills weren't sufficient to allow him to take on the Jedi Master alone. To be sure, he had almost killed Jedi Masters before, even when more than one of them attacked him. But Kenobi, like a few other of his peers such as Mace Windu or Yoda, was in a class by himself.

Grievous took a few deep breaths. He felt so much anger still. He hadn't been like this before Dooku's meddling. He had been able to calm himself, to think about things besides the Jedi and their betrayal, besides the destruction of war, to think about those he cared about. San Hill said it might take some time before his mind fully repaired itself. He sighed, trying to think of something positive. He had captured the Senator, at least. If everything went as planned, he would see Kalee again soon. It was time to set his plan in motion.

He heard the Senator stir. Senator Organa woke with a start. He was restrained in an energy field. "General Grievous!" he exclaimed.

"Correct, Senator," the cyborg rumbled. "You are my prisoner."

"I don't know what you want from me, but whatever it is, I won't give it to you," Organa said. "No amount of torture--"

"I have no interest in torturing you, Senator," Grievous said. "As much as I despise your Republic, your torture will bring me little of value."

"Why am I here, then?"

"Count Dooku has ordered me to capture you. He believes that you know information that would allow him to bring certain Core worlds under Separatist control." Grievous paced around the senator, watching him pinned inside the energy field like an insect.

"And you just expect me to tell you that information?"

"No," Grievous said. "I am going to offer you an unparalleled opportunity, Senator Organa."

"I won't be bribed!"

Grievous laughed, his eyes lidding in amusement. "You misunderstand me, Senator. I don't want the information."

Organa scowled. "What do you want, then?"

"I want Count Dooku to die," Grievous said. "And I want you to help me kill him."

The Senator was staring at Grievous in shock. Grievous hoped this would work. It was a gamble. But if anyone would want to destroy the Count, surely one of his Republic enemies would. Grievous would never work with someone like Palpatine, but he would take the chance that not all in the Republic were as corrupt as their leader.

"Why would *you* want to kill Dooku?" Organa asked. "Isn't he the one who gave you your power?"

"Yes," Grievous said. "However, certain-circumstances have led me to discover that he was no great benefactor to me after all. He altered my mind, without my knowledge and in violation of our agreement. Everything he gave me was only to make me a better tool for him to use."

"But I heard what you said to Master Obi-Wan," Organa said. "You still despise the Republic for what they did to your people."

"That's true," Grievous said. "I don't relish the thought of working with you. But you are not the Jedi, so I will give you this chance. I will release you as thanks for your help if we succeed. And Count Dooku will have been brought to justice."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you die," Grievous said. "I can't afford for Dooku to find out what I've just told you."

"You really don't want the information?"

"Keep your information. I have more pressing concerns."

Organa laughed. "I guess you've made me an offer I can't refuse, then. What do you need me to do?"

"What do you mean, you have *no military*?" Grievous said. "You are the senator of a Core planet!"

Organa sighed. "Alderaan is a peaceful planet. We do not have our own standing military. I have nothing of that sort that I could-"

Grievous brought his face close to the human's. "Lies! All your propaganda may say what a peaceful Republic peon your world is, but don't think I can't see through that! Those clone troopers who interrupted my fight with Kenobi certainly brought some very *peaceful* weapons, don't you think?"

Organa sighed. "Those were Kenobi's soldiers, the Republic's soldiers, not mine."

"What about mercenaries? Have any of those?"

Organa looked horrified. "Of course not!"

Grievous paced in front of the senator in agitation, his hands behind his back. He hadn't seriously considered the possibility that Alderaan might actually have no means by which to defend itself, despite what all the datafiles had said. That any planet would be so completely devoid of any kind of military capability, especially a Core world, had been inconceivable to him. He had assumed they simply didn't advertise their martial capabilities.

"You have nothing then!" Grievous said. "Useless! This is useless!"

Organa sighed. "And here I thought I might get out of this alive."

Grievous looked over at him. The human looked so completely despondent that the usually murderous cyborg actually felt a pang of remorse. "Do not think I give up so easily. I was merely expressing my frustration. You will have something I can use, I am sure of it."

Senator Organa looked thoughtful. "There might be a way. But you're not going to like it."

Grievous brought his mask down close to the human's face. "Well, it must be better than being

reeducated by Dooku, so let's hear this unpleasant little plan of yours."

"If I asked, Master Obi-Wan would help me," Organa said. "He is a personal friend and-"

"Out of the question! I will have no dealings with the Jedi!" Grievous said.

The human frowned. "Is it possible you can defeat Dooku yourself?"

"Perhaps, if I took him by surprise," Grievous said. "But unlikely."

"But if he had to fight a Jedi *and* you unexpectedly attacked him..." Senator Organa said.

As much as Grievous hated the idea, his mind was already considering the tactical advantage. Obi-Wan had already killed a Sith once, back when he had only been a Padawan. So not only would he surely accept an opportunity to take down Count Dooku, he might even have the skill to do so-especially if he had help.

"Your plan would have a high probability of succeeding. But I have no guarantee that Kenobi wouldn't turn on me once Dooku had been dealt with!"

"He is an honorable man," the senator said.

An idea occurred to Grievous. "And a personal friend of yours, you say?"

The senator frowned. "Yes. We agree on a great many things. I used to think the Jedi teachings must make them cold and aloof, but he's proof to me that isn't true. And I've found we share many political leanings as well."

Grievous growled angrily and paced around the room. "You trust this Jedi with your life?"

"Yes," Senator Organa said, without hesitation.

"Then, for both of our sakes, let's hope your trust is not misplaced."

The senator's expression brightened. "So you'll contact Obi-Wan?"

"I am willing to do that," Grievous said. "Of course, you must understand that as my prisoner, I will use *your* life as insurance for his-good behavior. If he reneges on any part of our bargain, you will die."

"You didn't mention this before!" Senator Organa protested.

"I didn't know I would be allowing that *Jedi scum* free reign of one of my battlecruisers before. And I believe I was most clear that any treachery or refusal to cooperate by you would result in your death. Any treachery committed by your *friend* will be interpreted as treachery committed by you. But if you don't like the terms, please do suggest an alternative."

Organa sighed. "No, this is the best I've got. And I trust Obi-Wan. I just-don't trust you. But I suppose I don't have much of a choice in that."

"I'm glad we can agree on one thing, then."

Chapter 5: We Meet Again

Chapter Notes

A/N: So here's the next chapter! Also thanks to Ryuunotaki 'Zu' Yuuka, shadowwriter01, TheRebbs98, and Don'tSleep for the reviews (on ff.net)! I see a couple of you seem quite interested in the prospect of Obi-Wan and Grievous having to work together. I hope to have a good portrayal of that. Also, as to Don'tSleep's query about Grievous' emotional manipulation, the canon is not at all clear about that, but it's firmly established in the Legends continuity that Dooku had Grievous' mind altered to increase his rage, among other things. For example, it's mentioned in the novel *Labyrinth of Evil* (which I'm currently reading my way through). And while my story won't stick exclusively to the Legends continuity, I'll be drawing quite a bit of Grievous' backstory from it, as it is far more developed and, in my opinion, usually more interesting than the canon continuity.

Been thinking what I'm going to do about Anakin. I'm sure he'll pop up eventually, after all. Eh, now there's a character who seriously got shafted by the canon...

Grievous blinked blearily. His eyes opened to stare directly at the durasteel floor. “Grrrggghhh,” he said. His eyes widened and in a surge of adrenaline he jumped to his feet. In moments he was holding four lightsabers in a defensive pose against whatever foe had felled him. But there was no one else on the ship except for the restrained Senator.

Organa yelped in surprise. It took a moment for his expression to calm. “What was that about?”

“Apologies, Senator,” Grievous said, realizing that there was no one on the ship besides himself and his captive. He shut off the lightsabers and tucked them away.

“I--um--I don’t suppose you could get me some water,” Senator Organa’s voice said.

Grievous turned and walked to a control panel. He pressed a button and a metal arm held a cup close enough for Organa to drink from it.

“How long was I out?” Grievous asked as Organa finished the last of the liquid from the cup.

“I don’t exactly have any way to tell the time. But my guess would be--five to seven hours, perhaps? You just suddenly collapsed. I was worried Dooku had somehow--”

Grievous waved a hand dismissively. “No, this wasn’t caused by him. I think it must be a side effect of undoing his tampering with my mind, actually. That was the only other time this has happened, during the surgery to repair the damage Dooku did to me.” He hadn’t truly slept after the accident, not until he’d had Dooku’s implants removed. But this was hardly like normal sleeping. Normal sleeping was gradual, would’ve warned him with feelings of fatigue. Instead he had felt fine one moment, then had just sort of--switched off. *Like a droid*, he thought with distaste.

“So, you just randomly faint now?” Organa asked, his expression concerned.

“No,” Grievous growled. “I fell asleep. My species usually sleeps after every .6 standard days.” He mentally checked the time. *Hmmm, given the approximate time it must have been when I last remember talking to the Senator, that would mean--I was out for perhaps six hours.* He would have to make sure he kept track of the time from now on, to make sure this didn’t happen again. “I had been awake for two standard days since I had Dooku’s control chips removed.”

“I see,” Organa said. “So I suppose you’re not yet--used to sleeping again, then?”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle,” Grievous said dismissively. “Inconvenient, but not --debilitating.” It underscored the need to dispose of Dooku quickly, though. Grievous could hardly hide something of this magnitude from him for long.

He walked over to the communications panel. “Now, Senator Organa, I believe we were in the middle of something? Are you ready to summon your Jedi friend?”

“Sure,” the senator responded. He took a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

“We meet again, Kenobi,” Grievous said, pacing aboard the nondescript cargo ship.

“It seems we do,” the Jedi responded, his lightsaber at the ready. He glanced briefly around the ship, then focused back on Grievous. “Bail said that you wanted to propose a trade? I’ll only surrender myself if I can be certain that you will surrender Bail first.”

Grievous laughed. “It’s not that simple, Jedi,” he said. “I require your assistance with a certain task before I release your friend.”

“Where is Bail right now?”

Grievous gestured around. “Not here, obviously. Wouldn’t want you rescuing him before we even came to any agreement, now would we?”

“All right, but I’ll need proof that he’s still okay before I agree to anything.”

“And I will give you that proof,” Grievous said. “All in good time.” He gestured to a bench. “Have a seat.”

“I’d rather remain standing, if you don’t mind,” Kenobi said.

“If you prefer,” Grievous said. “I’ll be brief. Count Dooku altered my mind to make me more amenable to his commands. He must pay for that. But I cannot take down a Sith Lord alone.”

Kenobi’s eyes widened. “You want me to--help you destroy Dooku?”

Grievous paced irritably in front of the Jedi. “Yes. If you do this, I will release your friend unharmed. And your adversary Dooku will be dead. I’m offering quite the opportunity, Kenobi!”

“I--don’t know what to say,” Kenobi said, his expression concerned.

“Well, if you say no, your friend dies and the deal is off,” Grievous responded. “Your choice, Kenobi.”

He held out a clawed hand. “Now, if you would give me your lightsaber.”

Kenobi frowned. “Show me Bail again first.”

Grievous held up a small holo-projector. The image of Senator Organa appeared in the holographic display.

“Obi-Wan!”

“Bail! How’s the General been treating you?”

“About as well as could be expected. He has a droid feed me every several hours. I’m still in containment, but he hasn’t tortured me. I think I’ve been lucky, all things considered, old friend. I’m sorry to get you involved in this, but--”

“Don’t apologize,” Kenobi said. “You made the right decision. Maybe this won’t end the war,” he glanced over at Grievous briefly, “but if we topple Dooku from power, the galaxy can only be better for it. This was worth the risk.”

“All right, then. May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan.”

“Thank you, Bail.”

Grievous switched the holo-projector off. He held out a six-clawed hand again. “The lightsaber, General Kenobi.”

Kenobi switched off his lightsaber and held it out. “Very well.”

Grievous snatched it up gleefully. “Thank you for your cooperation, General. Now, I’ll need to put you in binds to make this convincing.”

Kenobi scowled. “My favorite part.”

Of course, the binds hadn’t been the worst part. Grievous had said that in order to quell Dooku’s suspicions, he needed the Jedi to appear more like he’d just been beaten in a fight. He’d watched as his magnaguard had jabbed Obi-Wan all over with their electrostaffs. Obi-Wan thought Grievous was enjoying this a little too much.

“I forget, do humans regenerate limbs?” Grievous asked offhandedly. He stood over the Jedi, flanked by his magnaguard.

“No!” Obi-Wan said emphatically.

Grievous sighed. “I need you in top fighting form, anyway, I suppose.”

“I don’t think there are very many inches of me not covered in bruises right now, and I haven’t eaten anything since yesterday,” Obi-Wan said irritably. “I’m hardly in ‘top fighting form’ at the moment.”

Grievous walked over to a crate and removed a package filled with a transparent gel.

“My nutrient rations are compatible with your physiology. This should provide all the sustenance you require.”

Obi-Wan frowned at the package. “Looks delicious.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Grievous said. “I no longer have the capability to consume food in the normal way. All thanks to your *esteemed* Jedi Order.”

Obi-Wan looked up at him solemnly. “What happened?”

Grievous laughed. “I don’t see the need to go over the details with you, Jedi scum.” He pointed a single clawed durasteel finger at Obi-Wan. “But know, it was the greed and corruption of you Jedi that created me.”

Grievous gave the gel package to one of the magnaguards. “Make sure our guest can enjoy his meal.” He turned his back to the Jedi and walked over to a control panel.

Since Obi-Wan’s hands were bound, the magnaguard had to feed him, much to his embarrassment. He was glad that the General seemed to be occupied with other matters at the moment, his spidery fingers tapping across a control panel. The gel was somehow bitter and sickly sweet at the same time. In short, it tasted terrible. Which Obi-Wan supposed was to be expected, since it hadn’t been designed to be tasted at all. He finished it up, all the same.

On the upside, it didn’t take long before his hunger subsided and he felt energy in his muscles again.

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said.

Grievous turned around to face the Jedi. “Awfully polite. Are you afraid, Jedi?”

“Respect does not have to be motivated by fear,” Obi-Wan said.

“So you do not fear me?”

“I do fear you,” Obi-Wan said. “But that is not why I respect you.”

Grievous walked over to the human and peered down at him. “And why do you respect me?”

“Because I know your sense of justice is strong,” Obi-Wan said. “That is something Count Dooku no longer possesses.”

Grievous laughed. “You respect my sense of justice? Even though it leads me to destroy your Order?”

“I hope I can offer you an alternative,” Obi-Wan said. “To bring your homeworld the justice they deserve. I can talk to the council, General. Let them know what happened. Whatever the reason for this cruelty to your people, I will not rest until I see it ended. But I must know who they are.”

Grievous moved his mask mere inches from Obi-Wan’s face. “Always the negotiator, aren’t you? Save your breath, Kenobi. I don’t need your help. Not anymore.”

Obi-Wan sighed. He had suspected the General would say that. Still, he wouldn’t let the statement go unchallenged. He raised an eyebrow. “If you don’t need my help, why am I here?”

Grievous narrowed his golden eyes. “That is an entirely different matter. Killing Count Dooku benefits you as much as it does me.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “Yes, that’s true. Count Dooku must be brought to justice. Though committing to killing an opponent is against the Jedi code.”

“Are you saying you’re having second thoughts, Jedi scum?” Grievous said.

“No,” Obi-Wan responded. “But keeping him alive does have a practical value. There is much that Dooku might tell us about Sidious, with the right incentives. And as Dooku’s master, Darth Sidious is the greater threat.”

“Sidious will be dealt with, in time,” Grievous said. “First, however, his apprentice, my former master, must die. Are we agreed?”

So he plans to take on Sidious as well? That’s ambitious. Obi-Wan took a deep breath. “Yes. I will help you to bring him to an end. However, I was obligated by the Jedi Code to ask you to consider the alternative.”

“So are Jedi not allowed to kill their enemies?”

Obi-Wan met Grievous’s steely gaze. “We are allowed to, if it becomes necessary through circumstance. My agreement with you qualifies as that circumstance. What we are not allowed to do is commit to killing another without first attempting to take them down without bloodshed. A Jedi must never kill out of fear or anger. Only by necessity, and only with regret.”

“Tell that to the Jedi who killed my Izvoshra, then,” Grievous snarled.

“Your--what?”

“Nothing,” he said, turning his back on Obi-Wan again. But Obi-Wan filed the word away for future reference, mouthing the syllables. *Izvoshra. That’s definitely not Basic.* He couldn’t help wonder what the word meant. Lover? Family? Friend? Impossible to say, just from hearing those three syllables alone. *It must be a word in his native language. With this information, Jocasta Nu may be able to find out what planet Grievous hails from.* The Jedi librarian was a true master of the art of information retrieval.

Obi-Wan was startled out of his thoughts by the sight of the electrostaff the Magnaguard to his right held flying into one of Grievous’s hands from across the width of the ship.

“How did you do that?!” Obi-Wan exclaimed.

Grievous laughed. “Maybe I can use the Force after all, Jedi scum.”

“That’s not possible,” Obi-Wan said. He had never felt the power of the Force within Grievous, and he did not feel it from him now. The cyborg general could be affected by it, as everyone and everything could be, but he had no ability to use it for himself.

“Believe what you will, Kenobi. But know I am practicing for that time, very soon, that will test all of my abilities to their limit. I am about to pit myself against a Sith Lord, with only your uncertain help. I don’t trust you, but I think it important for you to know what you can expect from me, if we are both to fight our mutual enemy.”

“And is there anything else you can do that I don’t know about yet?”

“One more thing.” Grievous said.

Kenobi managed to duck just as blue lightning crackled past where his head had been.

“You have excellent reflexes, Kenobi,” Grievous said.

Obi-Wan scowled. “You could have just told me.”

“I prefer to show, not tell,” Grievous said. “Anyway, now you know what I am capable of. Dooku is not yet aware of these abilities.”

“I see.” Obi-Wan considered the odds. Count Dooku was a powerful Sith, who had also trained under Master Yoda. Obi-Wan was considered a master of Soresu, but Dooku was a match him in lightsaber combat. If he were fighting with Anakin, he would be confident they could prevail. But he had never fought alongside Grievous. Against him, yes, but that was hardly the same thing at all.

Still, Grievous had proven his ability in lightsaber combat countless times. True, he had been taught by Dooku, which suggested he would not be able to exceed the Count in skill. But it also meant he had considerable knowledge of Dooku’s fighting style as they had surely sparred countless times. He had also apparently acquired some new abilities recently, which might take the Count by surprise.

Obi-Wan tried to imagine the battle, and found he had a hard time doing so, at least not without imagining Grievous turning on him, at which point Obi-Wan would be fighting a Sith Lord and the imposing cyborg by himself. That wouldn’t end well for him. He sighed.

“So, how do you want to do this?” Obi-Wan said.

“It’s simple,” Grievous said. “I will use the element of surprise. I will bring you to him, under the pretext that I wish to show him my first Jedi Master kill.” He paced in front of Obi-Wan. “Then, the power to the ship and droids will be cut. You will use the confusion to escape and reclaim your lightsaber from me. I will pretend to fight you so that I can get close enough to take down Dooku myself.” Grievous crossed his arms. “Any questions?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. “If we win, what happens then?” Even if things played out how Grievous had outlined, the thought had occurred to him that Grievous might turn on him the moment Dooku had been dealt with. Even now, he could feel the loathing Grievous felt for him, that he felt for all the Jedi. That miasma of anger and hate seemed barely contained in the being that stood before him. It was, in fact, the first indicator of the cyborg’s presence to any Jedi who had ever survived an encounter with him. Usually, anyway. The cyborg’s presence had been masked by the roiling emotions of the millions within the city before his earlier attack on Bail Organa at Alderaan.

"Then I release Senator Organa. That was our agreement."

"What about me?" Obi-Wan said.

Grievous said nothing for a long moment. "You will be required to leave my flagship immediately, of course. I will give you a transport shuttle for that purpose."

"Do I have your word on that? And that I will leave your ship alive?"

"Yes."

Obi-Wan sighed. He wasn't sure if Grievous' word would be worth much, but it was better than nothing, he supposed.

Chapter 6: Confrontation with the Count

Grievous could feel his emotions in turmoil. Fear, seething hatred, even excitement over the coming battle. Grievous examined the five lightsabers at his waist. He had many trophies from successful battles with the Jedi. More than he could count. One of the lightsabers was Kenobi's. The other four he had chosen to use in this battle were simply his favorites.

Of course, if I win, I shall obtain my greatest trophy yet. Dooku's lightsaber would indeed be a prize. If he could manage to kill the wily Sith Lord, that was. He looked over at the Jedi Master who stood hunched at his side. Kenobi didn't look like much now, especially as covered in cuts and bruises as he was. But Grievous knew that looks could be deceiving when it came to the Jedi.

As they traversed the final hallway to the ship's bridge, Grievous mentally prepared himself for the battle ahead.

Grievous keyed in the code on the control panel and the door opened. Dooku was standing on the bridge, staring out the transparisteel window at the planet below them. He turned as soon as the door opened.

"I've something to show you, my lord," Grievous said.

"General!" Dooku said, addressing Grievous, though his gaze was locked on Kenobi. "What is the meaning of this?!"

"I thought you would want to see the death of the great Kenobi," Grievous said.

"It was foolhardy of you to bring him here, General," Dooku said, his lightsaber now held in front of him.

Grievous pulled a lightsaber blade from his cloak and ignited it. "Hardly. I will end him here and now!" He kicked Kenobi to his knees in front of him, apparently to deal the finishing blow, but in actuality to give the Jedi a better position in which to Force-grab his lightsaber.

At that moment, the room went dark, and the droids powered themselves down, just as he had arranged. He roared angrily, feigning surprise when the Jedi pulled his lightsaber from his cape. The moment the

Jedi grasped the lightsaber in his bound hands, he deftly re-ignited it and cut through the bindings. In an instant, Grievous had four lightsabers in hand and was clashing with Kenobi.

"I will bring you down!" Grievous said.

"You fool," Dooku hissed at the General. "Look around you," he gestured to the silent droids bathed in red emergency lighting. "This was planned. He's not alone."

"Impossible!" Grievous said, not having to hold back against the Jedi as he pitted his full force against him, driving him closer to Dooku. Kenobi effortlessly blocked his strikes.

"Stand down, General," Dooku ordered. "Let me handle our *guest*."

"I'll kill him! I'll kill them all!"

"I said, *stand down*," Dooku growled, Force-grabbing Kenobi and pushing him to the ground away from Grievous and placing a Force wall in front of Grievous. Trying to walk through it was like trying to walk through solid durasteel.

"The Jedi is mine now, General. Do not interfere."

"Yes, my lord," Grievous said resentfully. Already things were not going according to plan. Of course, he had thought through a number of scenarios, but he hadn't expected Dooku to react like this. He stood and watched as the two duelists clashed, battling one another across the bridge. Grievous stood still as the Count had commanded, holding his lightsabers at the ready. He didn't want to reveal to Dooku his true intentions until it would be too late for the Sith Lord to counter them. But unless Kenobi led the fight back over to him, that was going to be very difficult.

"You would be a fool to travel here alone, Kenobi," Dooku said. "But you aren't alone, are you?"

"I'm never alone," Kenobi said glibly, easily blocking the Count's precise blows. "The Force is always with me."

"Where is Skywalker?" Dooku asked, striking at Kenobi with light, sharp moves. "I presume he will be along shortly."

"It seems not," Kenobi said, blocking the Count's strikes. "Am I not enough of a challenge for you?"

Dooku laughed. "Come now, you were never a match for me, Kenobi. But I know your apprentice can't be far right now. You would never enter into a confrontation with me alone."

Grievous watched as the Jedi and Sith battled one another.

"You've trained your pawn well, Dooku," Kenobi said. "Pity it isn't him I'm fighting. He's faster, more intimidating, and, need I say, taller? I could use the exercise."

Dooku raised an eyebrow as he executed a series of offensive moves with his saber. "Judge me by my size, do you?" He lifted Kenobi into the air in a Force choke. "That will be the last mistake you ever make, Kenobi." He flung him to the side.

Grievous magnetically pulled back at the metal in Kenobi's armor to prevent him from hitting the wall of the ship. Instead, he fell to the ground, landing on his hands and feet.

Dooku, who had been watching Kenobi's movements this entire time, now panned his gaze around the room in one swift motion. "Skywalker?! Where are you?"

"Behind you!" Grievous said, pointing. Dooku turned and while he was scanning the bridge window, the cyborg General skittered with six legs across the bridge and then rose, bringing all four of his lightsabers down on the Count.

Dooku turned and deftly blocked the attack, following his block by executing a swift offensive. Kenobi was on him within moments and Dooku backed away from the two, his eyes wide in surprise. The Count looked to Grievous. "What are you doing, General?!"

"I am destroying the Sith! Starting with you!" Grievous said, silently cursing his failure. Now that he had failed with his attempt at misdirection, it would be much more difficult to kill the Sith Lord.

Dooku narrowed his eyes, his movements becoming more fluid and controlled as he slashed at his two attackers. "What has happened with your mind, General?"

"My mind is my own now," Grievous growled.

"Quite the contrary," the Count said. "I think this Jedi has taken control of it."

Grievous spun around, attempting to slice off Dooku's legs. The Count deftly sidestepped the movements and attacked Obi-Wan simultaneously.

What if the Jedi has taken control of my mind? Grievous thought. Anger welled up in him.

"You must kill him to end his control," the Count said calmly.

Grievous turned to Obi-Wan, who's eyes widened on seeing Grievous turn away from the Count.

"I must kill you to end your control," he hissed at the Jedi.

"No!" Kenobi said, blocking the Count's attacks. "I'm not the one trying to control you!"

Grievous brought his four lightsabers down on the Jedi. Loathing filled his mind. "Liar! Jedi scum!"

"No, don't do this!" Kenobi said, jumping away from Grievous' attacks. "You're strong enough to fight him!"

The Count hung back now, watching the proceedings with a small smile. "Maybe I should let you deal with him after all, General."

"Thank you, Master," Grievous said, his attention now focused on the Jedi.

"Please, think," Kenobi said, blocking Grievous' rapid attacks. "Don't let your anger rule you."

"I'll show you anger, Kenobi," Grievous said. He grabbed the Jedi with his foot and flung him across the floor.

"Don't let this Sith rule you," Kenobi said, wincing as he rose from the ground. "You need to concentrate, break his control. Remember our agreement."

As Grievous fought the Jedi, he felt his awareness gradually increase around the edges of his rage. He found the memories of his earlier conversation with Kenobi. He was aware of it now, the hold the Sith Lord had on his mind. A hazy feeling of uncoordinated rage. It told him not to think. It told him to obey. Obey the Count. What the Count could not currently accomplish through technology, he was now attempting to accomplish through the Force. Grievous found himself wanting to continue his attack of Kenobi in spite of his realization. It would be so easy to give in to the Sith's vise-like grip of his mind. So easy to lose everything he had fought so hard to reclaim.

No! I must not let him do this!

Grievous growled and lashed out at the Count with one of his legs. Dooku sidestepped the attack.

"Tsk, tsk, General," Dooku said, frowning and blocking the cyborg's multiple lightsaber attacks with ease. "You really can be exasperating sometimes."

Kenobi pressed in on the Count from the other side, and Dooku performed a force jump away from them. Then he lifted Obi-Wan into the air again and began choking him.

Grievous ran towards the Count with all four lightsabers facing towards his opponent. Just as he was about to reach Dooku, the Count directed his gaze at him and he suddenly found himself collapsing to the ground as his head exploded with pain.

Dooku smiled calmly. "Goodnight, my wayward apprentice. But not to worry, I'll fix up this *malfunction* of yours, once I've finished with your friend Kenobi here."

Through his increasingly hazy vision, Grievous turned his attention to Kenobi. The Jedi was struggling under Dooku's Force choke, his legs flailing in the air. Grievous didn't have the coordination to pull him down again, and he couldn't stop Dooku's Force choke that way at any rate. Instead, he turned to look at Dooku. His vision was starting to fade out. The pain in his head was agonizing. He lashed out at Dooku with his electric implant. The lightning jolt caught the Sith Lord by surprise, causing him to release Kenobi and double over. Grievous felt the pain in his head lift. In one fluid motion, he grabbed the lightsabers he had dropped earlier, flipped over to the Count, and sliced through his neck.

"Thanks," Kenobi said, gasping from several feet to the cyborg's left. "He was about to finish me off."

"Quiet, Kenobi," Grievous said. "I want to savor this moment." *Dooku has paid for his treachery against me. The Count's body lay still on the floor. I thought I could ally myself with these ancient enemies of the Jedi, but it seems the Sith are no better than their foes. I will kill them all.* For the first time in years, Grievous felt elation. For a moment the cyborg simply stood over the body of the dead Count. Then he reached down and took the lightsaber that lay on the ground. *And now, I am the Master, Dooku.*

He turned to Kenobi. "I think it's time to get you off my ship."

Grievous knew it had been many, many years since he'd felt this happy, this much at peace. He had busied himself restoring power to the ship and the droids, and then telling the droids to clean up the mess from the fight. While he usually disliked the uncreative obedience of the droids, it certainly prevented the interference and awkward questions that might have come from a living crew. He'd led Kenobi to the transport ship he had promised the Jedi, and now he stood, his hands behind his back, staring out the viewport of his ship.

He saw a familiar-looking shuttle cross the front of the viewport, traveling away from them.

"Is that Kenobi?" he asked the droid manning the station.

"Yes, sir," the droid said.

Grievous lidded his eyes contentedly. "Fire at will."

A barrage of laser fire attacked the ship, which only twisted away at the last moment.

"There's a communication from the ship, sir."

"Let's hear it," Grievous said.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Kenobi's voice said. "We had an agreement!"

"That we did, Kenobi," Grievous said, walking over to the command chair and settling down into it. "I said I would release Senator Organa. I have done so. I said you would leave my ship on a transport shuttle. Alive. I was true to my word. I never said anything about what would happen to you afterwards."

"I'm not your enemy, Grievous! You don't have to-"

"Save your breath, Kenobi." Grievous said, laughing. "Cut communications," he told the droid.

Grievous had the droids manning the bridge launch several Vultures to attack the ship, and fire several more laser blasts, but the ship managed to escape into the nearby planet's gravity well.

"Should we launch a search party?" the droid asked.

"No," Grievous said. He had a lot of work to do. He couldn't waste time chasing Kenobi on some remote planet, as much as he might like to. Still, he had enjoyed giving the Jedi his parting farewell.

"Set course for Raxus Secundus. I'll need to make the Parliament aware of the Count's-sudden demise."

Chapter 7: The Sith Lord's Message

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hi there everyone! I just recently finished season 6 of the cg Clone Wars! Harrah! Now I just have to catch up on some of the episodes I skipped in my impatience (ie. I skipped more early on because I was just watching the episodes with Grievous-but I did gradually become interested by the other plotlines, so now I want to see the episodes I missed). So fun! Finishing the cell shaded Clone Wars was certainly a lot faster.

One thing I hope to do is flesh out the characters in this story as much as I can. For example, I want the Separatist Parliament members to have more personality. If anyone has insights on good EU materials to reference for that, I'd be glad to hear about that. I do want to make them somewhat more sympathetic characters, but that doesn't mean they are necessarily all goodness and light. Right now I'm just using Wookieepedia, the two Clone Wars cartoons, and the prequels themselves to help me get a sense of some stuff I can incorporate into their personalities/backstory in addition to the additions and changes I will make.

Also, thanks to my Guest reviewer, TheRebbs98, LNFRARADIANT, Gr4g4z4, and Celgress for your reviews on chapters 6 and 7 (from ff.net). As to your questions:

LNFRARADIANT: Grievous only used four lightsabers in the battle. Obi-Wan reclaimed his own lightsaber from Grievous so he could escape his binds and fight Dooku with it, as they had planned. Grievous only had it in the beginning so Dooku would think he had disarmed Obi-Wan and was preparing to kill him. This story will be very long, like all my stories are. Likely more than 100k+ words, though I couldn't say how much more.

TheRebbs98: Yes, that will cause some bad memories at some point.

Celgress: This story takes place during Season 3, and sometime before the events of Episode 10 of Season 3 (heroes on both sides). I haven't decided 100% exactly where yet, but I hope to make that clearer soon. Also, since it's an AU I may change the outcomes of certain events if they somehow interfere with my intended plot, though I do expect a lot of them to remain the same. So at this point, Maul hasn't resurfaced yet.

Grievous had received a flurry of messages recently, both for him and for the Count. he hadn't answered any of them yet. The first order of business was to send a message of his own.

"What a relief to hear that," San Hill's hologram said. The Muun was lounging on a couch in what Grievous assumed to be his private home. He was wearing nightclothes—a loose robe and some kind of furry slippers. Grievous assumed he was taking the call in the middle of Muunilinst's night. "Of course, I always knew you would succeed. Which is why I have been busy cleaning up elsewhere while you were disposing of the Count."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Poggle the Lesser," San Hill said. "One of the few who knew about Sidious' involvement with us. I've been trying to see who might stand with you against the Sith."

"Don't you mean us?" Grievous asked.

The Muun laughed. "I suppose, but I haven't exactly allowed them to know *who* was contacting them. I didn't reveal either of our identities, let me assure you, but I think they may have guessed *your* involvement nonetheless. Still, if you would like to enjoy my further assistance, I must reiterate that you not reveal the extent of *my* involvement in this. I cannot help you if I am dead."

"Yes, of course," Grievous said irritably. Obviously Sidious would target the banker if the Sith Lord knew what he had done. "So, what of the Archduke? What was his reply?"

"Sadly, he proved staunchly loyal to Lord Sidious," San said. "So I had a bounty put on his head." He winced slightly. "The bounty hunter took that very literally. It took hours for the cleaning droids to get the ichor out of the carpet."

"What of the others?" Grievous asked.

"Nute Gunray sides with us," San said. "Though he's chosen an interesting way to protect himself from any possible repercussions. He faked his own death."

Grievous made a dismissive noise. He had never liked Gunray, but he supposed this meant he wouldn't have to track the cowardly Neimoidian down himself.

"Wat Tambor has chosen to side with us as well," San said, frowning now. "Though I would have enjoyed seeing *his* head on a platter. Ah, well."

"And the rest of them?"

The Muun held up four fingers, ticking them off one by one. "Shu Mai-our side. Po Nudo-Sidious, though not to worry, I've dealt with him, too. Passel Argente-our side. Tikkes-our side."

"Is that everyone who knew of Sidious?"

"All that I know of," San said. "Very few of the Parliament was actually aware of his existence, but it's possible he has other connections I haven't yet been able to track down."

"Then it is time to start the next phase of my plan," Grievous said. He was surprised that the Muun had managed his part in Grievous' plan so quickly. When he mentioned this, San laughed.

"Quickly? Well, the bounty hunters *were* delightfully prompt. But I think you overestimate my skills at persuasion if you think winning the others over to us happened in a few short days. The truth is, I've been planning this for a while now, long before I had the opportunity to remove the control chips in your brain. I did, after all, realize that my decisions would have consequences." His expression grew somber. "But yes, I have-tied up all the loose ends that I can. So, now I ask, what exactly are *you* planning to do?"

That is interesting. I suppose he would have anticipated that I would turn on Dooku and Sidious after learning of what they did. In any event, this meant he could focus on the real threat to them all. "I will contact Darth Sidious myself and attempt to draw him out of his seclusion. Here is what we will do..."

As it turned out, Grievous didn't need to contact Sidious, because the Sith Lord contacted him first.

"You contacted me, Lord Sidious?" Grievous said. Without even thinking, he bowed before the holo-image of Sidious. The act was deeply-ingrained habit by now.

"I have felt the Count's death," Sidious said.

Grievous stood to his full height. He would never bow before this man again.

"Yes. Count Dooku is dead."

"Do not repeat to me what I already know," Sidious snapped. "How did he die?"

Grievous took a deep breath to center himself. He was feeling dark glee right now, and he needed to calm himself if he wanted to be coherent. He narrowed his eyes. "I killed him."

Sidious hissed angrily at the cyborg's admission. His mouth twisted and contorted as he spoke. "You should take more care not to anger me, beast."

"Maybe it is you and the Count who should have taken more care not to anger me, Sidious." He leaned over the hologram, taking the Count's lightsaber out of his cape and igniting it. "But Dooku's lightsaber will make a fine trophy for me, don't you think?" He waved the saber around mockingly.

"Why are you doing this?!"

"I know what Dooku did to me, Sidious. I know you are, if anything, even more twisted and manipulative than he was. And I'm not going to play your little game anymore."

"What are you talking about? You dare defy me?!"

"Let me be clear-this is a coup," Grievous said. "You no longer control the Separatist Alliance. You no longer control anythi-"

Grievous couldn't finish the sentence, though, because the Sith had lifted him in the air and had begun, across some enormous span of light-years and through the cyborg's solid duranium hull, to crush his organic lungs.

Grievous lashed out at the communications panel with lightning from his hand. The Sith Lord's hologram flickered out and the cyborg fell to the ground, coughing. He hadn't known the Sith Lord could do that. He wouldn't be talking to Sidious again via hologram. As he unsteadily got to his feet, he made a mental note to inform his allies to avoid the same.

Now it's his move. If Sidious wants the Separatist Alliance back, he'll have to come and get it himself.

Chapter 8: The Chancellor's Office

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, I'm back! Now you get to learn what Sidious thinks of what just happened. I had originally planned to leave this chapter until a bit later, but when I considered the timeline of events, it made more sense to me to put it before the other chapters.

Thanks for your comments on the last chapter, anonymous Guest commenter and Celgress (from ff.net)!

I will warn you all, I'm a notoriously unpredictable updater. I do not set deadlines for writing, because I'm not really terribly fond of them. But I am quite motivated to continue my stories since I basically put all the things I want to see in them. I have a tendency towards novel-length stories with large casts of characters. I am really looking forward to introducing more of the CG Clone Wars characters in this story, with perhaps some EU characters as well. Grievous may take center stage in this story, but he's going to be surrounded by an entire cast of friends and foes (and everything in-between)! Just a few of my planned additions: Ahsoka, Ventress, and Padme.

The man called Chancellor Palpatine sat in the chair in his office, a deep frown etched onto his face. To a spectator, it might appear that he was simply deep in thought, calmly considering some weighty affair of state. However, internally he seethed with anger and hatred over Grievous' recent communication. He fumed over the cyborg's words to him-

You no longer control the Separatist Alliance...

And then the beast had had the gall to somehow cut off his attack on it.

He had immediately tried to contact the others, then. San Hill. Nothing. Wat Tambor. Silence. Poggle the Lesser. No response. Po Nudo, Tikkes, and Passel Argente. Equally uncommunicative. Nute Gunray. A Trade Federation auto-holo notifying him of the alien's recent demise. And Shu Mai had actually had the nerve to block his call! All of his carefully chosen puppets in the Separatist alliance were either dead or refusing to talk to him. Of the ones still alive, perhaps the cyborg had threatened them into submission. Of course, any of them still alive would come to regret, for the brief time they *remained* alive, being more afraid of that monstrosity than him.

Grievous! Of all the things he should never have had to worry about! Lord Tyranus' lightsaber apprentice! His pet! How Tyranus had fawned over that beast, had favored it, even.

And Sidious had never seen the harm in that. Simple pride over his creation, a creation uniquely Sith in origin. Sometimes one needed a servant who was a monster. Not something already monstrous, but something turned from an ordinary creature into a twisted nightmare of death and destruction. Tyranus had accomplished that with Grievous, continuing the grand tradition of the Sith. And to ensure his success, he had altered the mind of his unwitting subject so that Grievous would be forever under his thrall.

Or, at least, that was how it was supposed to have gone. Someone must have interfered, and when Sidious found out who it was, he would make sure they regretted their defiance! More than anyone else involved in this wretched affair, they would learn the true meanings of fear and pain. Oh, how he would make them writhe in agony! Eventually, they would die, of course. But first, they would suffer. They would suffer, and they would wish that they were dead.

For Sidious hadn't simply lost his valuable placeholder apprentice, but the entire Separatist Alliance. The apprentice would have been bad enough. Sidious hadn't nearly completed Anakin's turn to the Dark Side. He was going to have to accelerate that process now. And in the meantime, he would have to find another temporary apprentice. Unfortunately, The assassin Asajj Ventress was the only Dark

Force user of any note that Tyranus had collected before his untimely death.

Sidious loathed her. Tyranus had been in every way an optimal apprentice, excepting of course his obvious inferiority to Skywalker. Sidious harbored no fondness for his deceased apprentice-such things were not the domain of the Sith. But he had been the right tool for the current task at hand.

Asajj had none of the abilities Tyranus had had as a statesman, and worse, she was rapidly growing in ambition and power. He sensed she would contact him soon, however. Her pretension that she was a Sith would drive her to him. Well, he might yet have some use for her. If he could determine one, he would make sure she served it.

His mind turned back to the Separatist Alliance. The monster would now have control of it. What would it do? Sidious considered. Grievous had once been a Kaleesh warrior, and additionally, a brilliant tactician. That brilliance had suffered somewhat due to the tampering to his mind, but he had still served surprisingly well as the Separatist's Supreme Commander. With his mind restored to him, he could be a true menace to all of Sidious' well-laid plans. At least, until Sidious reclaimed the Separatists. Which he would do by bringing the monster back to heel, this time directly under *his own* control. That would save him the most effort, now that the beast had successfully thwarted his previous attempt on its life. A trap would have to be set for Grievous. And Sidious knew exactly where to set it.

Kalee.

Far above, in the Coruscanti atmosphere, a cloud moved away from the sun. Bright light streamed in from the large window behind the man called Palpatine, giving his grandfatherly visage something of a halo. The Chancellor smiled a small, restrained smile.

Chapter 9: Visit to the Manor

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter took me a bit of time to edit, both because I reworked and added parts and because it's a bit longer than my other chapters. Thanks Aznereth, Celgress, and anonymous Guest for your comments on Chapter 8 (from ff.net)! They are most appreciated!

Grievous looked out at the planet Raxus through the transparisteel window on the bridge of the Invisible Hand. Technically, it was the planet Raxus Secundus, but the first planet was of no major political importance, so it had always just been referred to as Raxus.

He sighed, and then coughed. *I'll need to get another bacta treatment for this.* Grievous hated the idea. Just thinking of it reminded him of the accident. He could remember a blaze of fire all around him, then air, then water. Darkness. Waking up in the bacta tank and seeing-his own corpse. That's what it had looked like to him, anyway.

"Sir," a mechanical voice from behind him said. "We have arrived at the planet."

Grievous turned to face the droid. "Yes, I've noticed." He coughed again. *You'll pay for this, Sidious.*

"Ready my shuttle immediately."

As he was walking to his shuttle, another B1 droid approached him.

"You have received a communication from Chairman Hill," the droid said.

Grievous felt a pang of annoyance. Perhaps he had the Muun to thank for his current mental freedom, but considering that the banker had allowed the alteration of Grievous' mind to occur in the first place, the General was hardly inclined to feel an overabundance of gratitude. Still, it might be important.

It had better be important.

"I'll take it in the shuttle," Grievous said. "You are dismissed."

"Roger roger." The droid inclined its head and walked off.

When Grievous arrived at the shuttle, he switched on the holo-communicator, and keyed in the code to accept the call.

"I hope you have a very good reason for contacting me," Grievous said, and coughed.

"I wanted to see how you were doing," the Muun said, wearing his usual gray business suit this time. He frowned. "You sound terrible, you know. Sidious really did nearly do you in, didn't he?"

"I'll deal with it," Grievous rasped. "At any rate, I doubt you called merely to inquire about my health."

"You're right," San said. "I called to inquire about your plan."

"What about it?" Grievous said. "I've already explained it to you." *Everything you need to know about it, anyway.*

"Yes," San said, frowning disdainfully. "And yet, there was something strangely absent. Perhaps you simply are not interested in my input about your surely impending visit to your home planet, but--"

"You're right," Grievous cut in. "I'm not interested in your input, *Mr. Hill.*"

He took a moment to enjoy the look of offended outrage he saw on the banker's face before he switched off the holo-comm. What had made it even more satisfying had been the slight twitch of the Muun's eye betraying an undercurrent of fear.

Grievous had spent more and more of his time reflecting on his past of late, and he had determined that of all the grief he had experienced in his life, his unlikely savior had been responsible for at least a solid quarter of it. If there was one thing he wanted to make very clear to the banker, it was that he would never again be Grievous' superior.

The trip to the planet was uneventful this time. Raxus had been easily retaken after the prior Republic attack. As he exited the shuttle, an entourage of droids greeted him. He had been on his way to the lodgings where he would stay when he encountered a familiar face.

"Senator Bonteri," he said, nodding curtly and continuing forward.

"General Grievous," she said. "I heard the news. Is it-is it really true? Is Count Dooku-"

"Yes, he's dead," Grievous responded.

"This is terrible news," the Senator said, her expression concerned. She walked briskly to keep up with the cyborg, her hands clasped behind her back.

"Yes," Grievous said, coughing. Most of the populace weren't aware that Dooku was a Sith, only that he had once been a Jedi who had left the Order due to his various disagreements with them. Grievous saw no reason to try to disabuse them of this notion. He was going to pin the Count's death squarely on the Jedi. Things would just be-easier that way.

"I was wondering if you would perhaps consider my previous offer," she said.

"I was planning to stay at the lodgings nearest the council chamber," Grievous said.

The Senator looked surprised. "How did you-contact them?"

"I didn't," Grievous said. Why would he bother to contact them in advance? He was sure that if they hadn't had the foresight to reserve a room for his imminent arrival, they would soon find one for him once he showed up.

"I see," Bonteri said. "Then I guess that's why you didn't know that that location was-destroyed."

Grievous stopped and turned to look at her. "Then I will stay at the next closest lodgings."

"Well, you see, General, they were all destroyed. In fact, the closest unaffected dwelling to the council chamber is-my estate. Hence my offer."

Grievous looked thoughtful. "I could stay in my shuttle." He coughed again.

She sighed. "We could give you a bacta treatment. That sounds like a nasty cough you've picked up."

"It's nothing. I'm-," Grievous ended the sentence in a fit of coughing.

"Nothing? That doesn't sound like nothing. Look, it's bad enough our Chancellor has died. We can't have *you* dying, too!"

"I don't have time-," Grievous coughed, "-for-treatment. I have to address-" more coughing, "-the Parliament-tomorrow!" He was becoming increasingly more irritated, both by the Senator and by the betrayal of what little remained of his organic body.

"I have an aerosol-only treatment. It's fast acting and it doesn't require a tank. Maybe it will help relieve your symptoms, at least until you can get a full treatment. It's going to be difficult for the Parliament to understand you if you can't stop coughing."

Grievous looked down at the Senator, his irritation decreasing slightly. If he didn't have to stay in a tank...

"Very well," Grievous said, coughing. "I will stay at your estate."

"Good," the Senator said. "You probably could use some company, anyway. It must be lonely with only droids to talk to." She frowned.

Lonely? Grievous thought. He had never really considered it fully before. But he did lack for conversation. Most of his interactions as the Supreme Commander of the Droid Armies had been with Dooku, who would give him instruction, orders, and criticism. Sometimes he thought he had enjoyed mocking the Jedi as he killed them. He wasn't sure. He hadn't really thought about such things in a long time, his mind having been molded by Dooku to dwell little on anything besides his all-consuming anger. And his most recent conversations had been with San Hill, who he disliked, and with Sidious, who had tried to kill him.

"Droids are very bad at conversation," Grievous agreed. "At least, the ones we use for the war are. Their programming is focused on their martial ability, not their eloquence with words."

"That's what I thought. What is your homeworld? Do you still have friends there? Or perhaps a wife? Children?"

"My homeworld is called Kalee. And I have friends there, yes," Grievous said. He stopped walking abruptly. The mention of his friends on Kalee had triggered a memory of the one who he had lost a very long time ago...

Qymaen stalked through the dark jungle overgrowth, the two lig swords in his hands. His excellent night vision served him well, for he could clearly see the fresh tracks the beast he hunted had left.

As he continued forward, he heard a sound. He turned his head towards it, attempting to make out movement in the undergrowth.

He waited. The sound did not resume. He continued forward. Two more steps, and he had been met with twin lig blades at his throat. For a moment, he simply peered at the stranger's mask in confusion.

"Who are you?" Qymaen asked, frowning behind his mask.

"That question has two possible answers," the stranger said. "My name is Ronderu, but what is important for you right now is who you are."

"I do not get your meaning."

"Are you a poacher, hunting my mumuu beast? Or are you a simple lost soul, who merely needs directions to their quaint provincial village?"

Qymaen considered his response. His eyes met the golden gaze in front of him.

"Well? It is a simple question." One of the blades pressed closer to his throat.

"Please, I require additional time," Qymaen said. "It takes some effort, to invent a good name for a quaint provincial village."

"-General? General Grievous?" Senator Bonteri said, waving upwards in the approximate direction of

the cyborg's face.

Grievous looked down at her, his eyes now meeting her concerned gaze. Grievous felt concern too, then, because he had almost completely lost awareness of his surroundings while caught up in the memory. Was this more of that memory backlash that San Hill had warned him about? Why had it happened now? What if it happened while he was in battle? He quelled his alarm, though, since he didn't want the Senator to think there was something wrong with his mind as well as his body. "My apologies, I was simply-reminiscing. Now, where were we?"

The Senator's look of mild concern was replaced with a smile. "Ah, you were telling me you had friends on Kalee. Do you have a wife as well? Any children?"

"Ah, no wife, no children-I never married."

"Oh," the Senator said. "Do you get to talk to your friends much, then?"

"No," Grievous said, coughing once. His coughing seemed to have subsided a bit. "I plan to contact them soon, though."

"That's good. I'm sure they're worried about you!"

Grievous didn't reply. His friends probably weren't worried about him, he thought. The ones who were still alive likely thought he was dead. In a way, he had been. Dooku had controlled his mind too thoroughly for him to have even considered making contact with any of his old Kaleesh friends. Even if his memories hadn't been suppressed, it would have been hard to think of friends when he had been consumed entirely with rage towards his enemies.

"Your homeworld is Onderan, is it not, Senator?" Grievous asked, changing the subject. "Do you visit it often?"

"Why, yes, it is," Bonteri replied. "Lux and I visit there twice a year. Onderan is truly the most beautiful place in the galaxy-well, perhaps I exaggerate, but I can't help but be partial to it. I did grow up there, after all. The wildlife is unlike..."

Grievous listened to her response with mild interest. Yes, it had been a very long time indeed since he had had anything resembling a normal conversation.

"And here is your bedroom," she said, gesturing to a large room on the second story of her estate. "If you need anything, you can ask our protocol droid, DN-4E-we just call her Danae."

"Yes, I'll be happy to assist you-," the droid said. She looked over at the General and his entourage of silent Magnaguards. "-or your guards with anything they might require."

Grievous looked over his four Magnaguards. He gestured over to one that had sustained some damage during its last battle. "I believe this one could use some minor repairs."

The Magnaguard followed the protocol droid down the hallway and Grievous examined the room.

"This will be quite sufficient, yes," he said. "Thank you for your-hospitality." He coughed a bit then. The Senator smiled. "It's the least I can do. How about we see what we can do about that cough?"

"All right," Grievous said. "This will be quite interesting to see. I was not aware that bacta could be applied without tank treatments."

The Senator looked surprised. "Really? I thought that was general knowledge."

"Not to me," Grievous said. "Bacta treatments themselves are not well-known on Kalee. And Count Dooku never brought it up."

"That's surprising, that he never said anything," Bonteri said. "The tank treatments are usually only used for the worst injuries. Though there are quite a few who prefer tank treatments even for less serious issues."

"I am required to undergo a bacta tank treatment once a month, anyway," Grievous said, coughing. "The injuries from my shuttle accident never fully healed. So perhaps that is why the simpler treatments were never brought up."

"Perhaps," the Senator said, though she looked doubtful. She stopped. "Here we are. The medical supplies room." She opened the door and Grievous saw a collection of drawers and cabinets, even an entire bacta tank ready for use. He watched with interest as she looked through the drawers and finally picked up a spray bottle. "Here it is!"

Grievous sprayed a bit of the substance on his fingers, allowing the chemical sensors on his fingers to first test it for any poisons that might be harmful to his organic organs. The only chemicals he detected were bacta and a few innocuous ingredients he assumed were fillers.

The Senator, perhaps mistaking his caution for confusion, spoke up then. "Ah, you just need to spray it in your mouth or-" she stopped. "Well, I guess that's not really possible. But I'm sure you get the idea."

Grievous laughed, which turned into a hacking cough. "Yes, I can handle this." He took the spray bottle and sprayed it over the openings in his neck cords, which also served as windpipes to his lungs.

He almost immediately felt a difference. "That is better," he remarked with some surprise.

"I'm glad to hear it," Bonteri said. "And please feel free to keep that in case you need it later."

"Thank you," Grievous said. He regarded the Senator thoughtfully. How much of her hospitality was due to genuine gratitude, and how much due to political maneuvering? He didn't know. At least she did seem helpful and pleasant, even if her actions were likely motivated by political self-interest. *Even if this is all to curry favor, I can't say that I resent it.* He could think of worse ways someone might try to ingratiate themselves to him.

"You're welcome, General," Senator Bonteri said warmly. She looked troubled. "I would invite you to dinner with Lux and I, but I fear that would be unkind given your-condition."

"Actually, I think I would very much enjoy that," Grievous said. "I won't need any food, of course, but

I think the conversation would interest me."

The Senator seemed surprised. "Well, I'll set a place for you, then."

Sitting at Senator Bonteri's dining room table, Grievous was feeling slightly overwhelmed by the sheer amount of admiration the Bonteri child seemed to have for him.

"-and I know you have six gyroscopes to help you keep your balance, but that's still amazing, that you can fight balanced on one foot! It almost looks like you're dancing."

Grievous laughed. "I suppose it does. I must admit, I do enjoy the extra agility of this body."

"It's incredible! Although, if it's okay to ask, wasn't the surgery-frightening? I understand you volunteered for it?"

"I did volunteer for it," Grievous said. "Though I didn't truly have much to lose at that point. I was-injured in a shuttle crash. I lost all my limbs and quite a bit more. So my choices were either to accept an experimental procedure or live the remainder of my life in a broken body."

"Oh. How did that happen?" Lux asked.

Grievous took a few deep breaths to calm himself. "The Jedi sabotaged my ship."

Lux gave him a wide-eyed look. "Really? That's terrible. Even with all the bad things I've heard people say about them, it's hard to believe they would stoop so low."

"Yes, that's so appalling of them," Senator Bonteri said, her expression sympathetic.

"It is," Grievous said. "I have never forgiven them for that, or for their aid to the slavers who raided my homeworld."

While the conversation soon moved to lighter topics, he could tell that both the Senator and her child were sympathetic to the horrors he had undergone. It was nice. When dinner had ended he thanked them both and walked to the bedroom he had been given.

I suppose I must try to get some sleep so I don't collapse again like last time. He settled into the bed and, even though he didn't strictly need to, covered himself with the thick blanket. He couldn't really feel the blanket on him anymore than he felt the bed underneath him, but he did feel slightly warmer.

Grievous stared into the darkened room around him, his eyes quickly adjusting to the dim illumination. He wondered how long it would take him to fall asleep. He had slept in the command chair a couple times on his way to the planet, but he was still re-adjusting to the idea of actually needing sleep. He thought of tomorrow, and the speech he would have to make before the Separatist Parliament. And it was as he was thinking of that that his mind faded into unconsciousness.

Grievous dreamt of the past, when his body was still whole, if not his spirit.

It had been a long day. Grievous just wanted to go back to his boxy grey Coruscant apartment, eat

dinner, and sleep. But he also had a three trillion credit debt to pay off. A debt which it had turned out he could pay off by getting others to pay off their debts.

He had almost mistook the other alien for a human, but then he had noticed the antennae. Humans didn't have antennae. The face matched his memory of the alien's datafile. Undoubtedly not a lucrative target. But also not a difficult one, either, and every credit collected was a credit closer to finishing his contract. He sighed and began trailing the man. The alien turned around after he had reached an alley.

"Hey, noticed you been followin' me a while," the man said. "What's your name? Are you a potential-customer?"

"Name's Grievous," he said. "And no. Perhaps you should think of me as a-reverse customer."

The alien narrowed his eyes. "What kind of a name is Grievous? You tryin' to sound like a tough guy?"

"Why, no," Grievous said. "That is simply my name. And I do not think that you should have any room to speak on names, Mr. Sleazebaggano."

The alien scowled. "How about you don't talk about my name?"

Grievous crossed his well-muscled arms. His biceps bulged uncomfortably under the sleeves of the brown coat he wore. "Very well, I will not remark further on yours if you do not remark further on mine. But I'm not here to discuss your name, Elan. I'm here to discuss your overdue payment."

"Overdue payment? You must be mistaken," Elan said. "You have the wrong the guy, buddy. But maybe you'd like to buy-"

Grievous brought out a scanner out of one of his pockets and flashed the light in Elan's eyes, causing the alien to blink and hold a hand up to his face.

"Hey, agh!" Elan said. Grievous looked at the readout on his device.

"My retinal scan indicates otherwise, Elan."

"Maybe you just looked at the wrong record."

"I'm afraid not," Grievous fished inside his coat pocket and brought out a datapad. "A copy of your Corellian cruiser loan payments. Please note that the last ten are unpaid. Also, I noticed that the address we have on file for you is not your current address. Perhaps you would like to update it?"

Elan's eyes flitted nervously from Grievous to the dark Coruscant alley around him, probably noting the lack of other lifeforms present in this particularly desolate area.

"Hey, look, I'm kind of short on credits right now," he said, smiling. "But, I do have a deal on deathsticks-"

Grievous only shook his head, his expression dour. "Mr. Hill doesn't accept barter."

"I meant for you, buddy. Old buddy, old pal. Maybe they could even give you a sense of humor."

Grievous stared at the man silently, his face impassive.

The alien's expression became progressively more nervous. "Okay, I won't promise that. But ah, you might actually have fun. Or, whatever approximates that for you."

Grievous lidded his eyes, bored. "How many credits do you have on you, Elan? Why don't you empty all your pockets for me and we'll find out?"

Grievous opened his eyes as the internal alarm he had set earlier went off. Sunlight streamed into the windows in his room, causing a momentary feeling of disorientation as he remembered that he no longer resided in the lightless lower depths of Coruscant.

He rose from the bed, feeling increasingly irritated as he examined it. The blankets, sheets, and pillows were in various states between moderately torn to completely shredded, and the wooden headboard had several new gashes crisscrossing its ornate design.

Perhaps he should stick to sleeping in metal chairs or slabs. He sighed and turned around, walking to the door. It was time to get ready for his speech.

He wasn't looking forward to it.

Chapter 10: The Interim Chancellor

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm back with more story!

Thanks to anonymous Guest, Celgress, Aznereth, theRebbs98, and LadySindrak for your comments (on ff.net)! It's always interesting to me to see what my readers think of the story, so I very much appreciate when people are willing to share their thoughts.

Also, since this has been brought up more than once already, I think it might be a good idea to address it here in my author's note:

Grievous has no wives and no children in my AU. They aren't dead or missing, they simply never existed in this continuity. While I am certainly capable of errors and oversights, this is not one of them and is in fact a purposeful change I made from the Legends continuity. While I will be incorporating many aspects of the Legends continuity, I've made a few changes to suit the purposes of this particular story. I feel that my story continuity will in time speak for itself, but since narrative cannot address authorial intention, I felt it was necessary to discuss that a bit here.

I'm looking forward to introducing quite a few more characters, especially from the EU and The Clone Wars series. While I don't think it's necessary to recognize most of them, it might be possible to pick up on some fun extras and/or anticipate something of certain plot points if you do. Though I will sometimes just make characters up as well-chances are that if you can't find the character in a Wookieepedia search, they're just an original character of mine.

"It was the Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi who killed Count Dooku," Grievous said, addressing the Parliament from the podium in the center of the room. Most of the attendees were holo-versions of themselves today, though Senator Bonteri and a few others had dared attend in person.

There was a series of fearful murmurs. Grievous felt his agitation growing. He needed to finish this. He didn't want to be here, in front of these nearly two hundred Senators. It was one thing to talk to a handful of them, and troublesome enough. But this? This was nerve-wracking and infuriating. Anyway, as far as he was concerned, most of the Senators simply weren't worth his time.

"I do not know what story those lying Jedi scum will concoct to justify their summary execution of our Chancellor," he said, the fact that Kenobi and Senator Organa might, at this very moment, be recounting a very different series of events at the forefront of his mind. "But know that his death will not go unavenged. We will not see his like again." *And good riddance.* He wished he didn't have to paint Dooku in such a complimentary light, but he knew the Count had been extremely well-liked by the Parliament.

"There is more I must tell you," he said. At least ever since he had used the bacta spray he hadn't had any more issues with coughing, and his voice had cleared up. He waited impatiently for the Senators to quiet one another down. Then he continued. "Given Chancellor Dooku's untimely death, stability is of great importance. Therefore, I shall assume full responsibility for the Separatist military, as was planned by the Chancellor. Also, I understand that the interim chancellor shall preside over the Parliament until such time as a new chancellor may be elected by the Council. I will give the podium to whoever that may be, once their name is spoken."

It was then that San Hill spoke up. "I have been entrusted with the name of the interim chancellor," he said.

Wat Tambor then spoke as well. "I, too, was entrusted with that name. As a verification for San Hill's information."

Grievous nodded. The name of the interim chancellor, appointed by Count Dooku, had been kept secret except to a chosen few, supposedly to help prevent the Republic from targeting the person in their attacks.

"Yes," San Hill said, giving Wat Tambor an annoyed look. Then he said, "The interim chancellor is-," he paused and looked up. "-General Grievous."

"That information agrees with my records," Wat Tambor said.

Grievous stared at the two Senators with wide eyes. That couldn't be correct! He didn't want to be involved in Separatist politics! Didn't he already have his hands full enough with their military? Everyone was looking at him expectantly.

"Ah," the cyborg said. "I suppose I will-remain up here for now, then."

He looked around at the various Senators, at a loss for what to say.

The Senators, however, were quick to give their opinion on this turn of events. He heard a considerable amount of support and approval for him as chancellor, which left him feeling irritable. He had never had an interest in leading the Separatists. He thought the belief of many of the Senators that they were somehow less corrupt than the Republic to be ridiculous, really. All they actually had going for them, in his opinion, was their policy against the Jedi.

Of course, not all of the senators were happy about their new chancellor.

"This appointment is most troubling," one of them said. "I worry about how militaristic this will make us appear to the general public."

"We need a strong chancellor who can win this war for us!" another one responded.

"I doubt that General Grievous will continue to be chancellor until the war ends. This war will not end in the next few months."

"Well, perhaps the term of the interim chancellor should be extended to-"

"-I do not agree with extending the term," Grievous cut in quickly. "Clearly the interim chancellor was only meant to be a placeholder until a new chancellor is elected. I will not be running for the office of chancellor. I will still continue to serve you as the Supreme Commander of the Droid Armies as long as this Senate desires that to be so. That is all."

The senators exploded into a series arguments against each other. Grievous stood stiffly at the chancellor's podium. He thought it lucky for the senators that most of them had not actually decided to attend this meeting in person. It meant his desire to kill them was moderated by the current impossibility of that act.

It was then that he heard someone say, "We can't allow this *droid* to be chancellor! This is an outrage!"

Grievous felt his anger boil over. "Who said that?! *I am not a droid! I am not!*" He grabbed the podium then, and ripped it from the floor.

The yelling in the Senate dissolved into complete silence. The Senators, both hologram and real, stared at him as if seeing him for the first time.

"Well?" Grievous said, his golden eyes narrowing. "Would whoever insulted me like to repeat what they just said to my face? Or are they too much of a coward to do so?"

More silence. Grievous threw the podium to the ground in disgust. *Even Nute Gunray is braver than some of this Senate scum. At least he insulted me to my face.* "I will have no more of this cowardice today," Grievous growled. "This meeting is ended."

With that, he stormed out of the Senate chamber and began stalking toward his ship.

Senator Bonteri intercepted Grievous as he exited the Senate chamber. He considered skittering away

in his six-legged configuration so that she would be unable to follow, but thought that such a cowardly attempt to avoid confrontation might be a bit hypocritical of him. Instead, he slowed his walk and said, "I apologize for my outburst."

She looked unperturbed. "Well, it was surprising to say the least. Though I must admit that the desire to rip apart solid metal, if not the ability, has at times overtaken me whenever Lestur opens his mouth to speak."

"Was he the one who called me a droid?!" Grievous asked.

"Yes," she said.

"That ungrateful wretch," Grievous said, recalling the other Senator had also been one he had rescued from the Raxus battle. *I thought I'd heard that voice before!*

"While I very much agree, I hope you might practice more-restraint in the future, Chancellor."

"I will try, but I didn't ask to be Chancellor," Grievous said bitterly. *Anyway, I thought removing Dooku's chips would make it easier to control my anger.* He would have to ask someone about that. Probably San Hill, since he was the only one around who actually knew about what had happened to him. He'd almost rather ask Kenobi. Not that the Jedi would likely be any help with that even if Grievous had been willing to consult with him. But he hated talking to the banker.

Senator Bonteri gave him a long look. "I think you'll do fine, as an interim chancellor. Dooku may even have chosen you due to your lack of desire for the office. Perhaps he did not want the interim chancellor attempting to seize power."

More likely he wanted someone who he thought Sidious could control, Grievous thought. *Until another suitable puppet for the Sith could be found.* He didn't voice his suspicions, however.

"Perhaps," was all Grievous said in response. He looked down at the Senator. "Oh, and I-apologize for the damage to the bed. You may let me know if you wish any reimbursement for it."

Senator Bonteri gave him a confused look for a moment before understanding dawned in her eyes. "Oh, that? Don't worry about it. I should have given you something a little more shred-proof, what with those metal claws and talons of yours. Anyway, it's no problem."

"Very well," Grievous said.

"Would you like to go for a walk in the park," the Senator asked abruptly. "I've always found it very soothing."

Grievous looked down at her. "I don't have time for that. I have a lot on my mind right now."

"Clearly," she responded. "However, taking breaks from work is important to mental health. When was the last time you took a vacation?"

"I-" Grievous paused, at a loss for a moment. "My position is too important for such things."

"It's *because* your position is so important that I've brought this up," Bonteri said. "In this critical time,

you'll be taking on an enormous responsibility. Of course you will want to work more, not less. But overwork leads to fatigue, and dangerous mistakes. Even the military gets shore leave."

"And what of the war with the Republic?" Grievous said. "I would never trust some strategy droid to lead the war efforts, no matter how briefly."

"Of course not!" Bonteri said. "But you aren't the only one in our 'droid army' who's not a droid."

Grievous considered her words. That was true. And while he didn't think much of a lot of the other officers, droid or not, a few of them *were* capable of holding their own. One of those officers was Admiral Trench. The alien arthropod had distinguished himself in many battles, surviving against impossible odds more than once. *Yes, he could probably manage things, for a short while.* Still, Grievous didn't see the point.

"I cannot enjoy, nor do I require, the usual-entertainments."

"Perhaps not, but surely there is something you'd enjoy doing instead?"

Killing Jedi, Grievous thought, though he suspected that would not be an acceptable answer. A thought occurred to him then. "I would enjoy visiting my homeworld, Kalee," he said instead. He was planning to do that anyway. Not as a vacation, of course, but the Senator didn't need to know that.

"Then perhaps you should!" Bonteri suggested. "You are the chancellor, so you can approve it."

Grievous gave her a sidelong glance. "Did you know I would be the interim chancellor?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I was as surprised as you appeared to be."

It was impossible for him to know if she was telling the truth. San Hill had said that he might not have identified all the Senators with links to Sidious. What if she was in league with the Sith? He didn't want to believe that, since she was the least unpleasant Senator he had encountered thus far. But he couldn't discard the possibility. He decided he would have to devise some type of test to determine it.

"Well, San Hill and Wat Tambor were certainly tight-lipped about it," Grievous said. "They never even told me!"

"Really?" she said. "They were probably hoping it would never come to that. Especially Senator Hill. If his expression was anything to go by, he was quite put out by naming you Chancellor. I hope you won't mind me saying that I thought that was a good sign."

"Not at all," Grievous said. "He's no friend of mine."

"We share that in common, then. I for one would like to see less corporate influence in our Senate."

"Hmmm, that makes sense," Grievous said.

"Well, I suppose I'll let you be off to your ship," Bonteri said.

"What?" Grievous replied. "Oh. Actually, I think I would like to take you up on that walk in the park first. I can spare an extra hour or two before I leave."

Perhaps further discussion will help me determine if she is aligned with the Sith.

Chapter 11: The Council's Decision

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hello, readers! Here's my new chapter! I took some time to fix it up a bit. I introduce quite a few Jedi here, though there will be more later. Many of the Jedi in the two Clone Wars series will appear.

Thanks to Guest, Celgress, TheRebbs98, and Brievell for your comments (from ff.net), and also to iemaki and Maire_Berry for your recent comments(on AO3)!

Also, I thought I would mention some more about the future romance, now that I've had the chance to plan out my story a bit more. I think it may take some time to really get started in the story, but there will be eventual Obi-WanxGrievous romance. I know a lot of people have strong feelings about pairings and romance in general, so I prefer to mention them sooner rather than later. It just took me a while to make up my mind.

And now, without further ado, I present the answer to 'so what did happen with Obi-Wan, anyway?'

Obi-Wan could hardly believe he was back on Coruscant. Fortunately, his distress signal had been picked up, and a Republic ship had been dispatched for him. But he had spent a soggy few days in the swamp on the small backwater world he had crashed on. And the time period leading up to that had been like some kind of combination of a surreal dream and nightmare rolled into one.

Thankfully Grievous had been true to his word about releasing the Senator. He had talked with his friend just yesterday, when he had first arrived back on Coruscant. Bail was unharmed, if shaken, and was safely back on Alderaan. Bail had said that he didn't plan to disclose the details of what Grievous had done since it seemed that he 'wanted to give all the credit to Obi-Wan'. Apparently Bail had seen the same footage Obi-Wan had of the cyborg General denouncing the Jedi Master for killing Dooku. In any event, the decision whether to release any further information would now rest with the Jedi Council.

The Jedi Council that Obi-Wan stood before at this very moment in the Council Chamber, a round, airy room with large windows on all sides. He looked between Yoda, Mace Windu, Ki-Adi-Mundi, and Eeth Koth, who were attending in person, and Adi Gallia, Plo Koon, and Shaak-Ti, who were attending via hologram. Many of the seats stood empty. Obi-Wan knew that was because many of the Jedi Masters were, at this very moment, engaged in battle.

"As you know from my message, Count Dooku is dead," Obi-Wan began. "But there is much more I have to tell you."

Yoda looked somber. "Bittersweet news his death is. Fallen to the Sith, Dooku had. Unspeakable things he had done. Needed to be stopped, he did. But my padawan, he once was. Served on this very Council,

he once did. A moment of silence to reflect on this, we will have."

All of the Council were silent then, heads bowed in silent reflection.

Obi-Wan shared Yoda's mixed feelings on the Count's death. He felt immense relief, on the one hand. Dooku had been their enemy, had proven his ruthlessness and lack of compassion, countless times. And what the Sith Lord had done to Grievous required justice, even if Obi-Wan would have preferred that justice be less-fatal. Yet he couldn't fault the cyborg for choosing to kill the Sith, especially when Dooku had been prepared to kill Obi-Wan and re-enslave Grievous. Still, he couldn't take the same joy in Dooku's death that Grievous so clearly had.

That even a Jedi Master who had served the Order selflessly for decades could fall to the Sith led him to wonder if any of them could fall to such evil. In this time of war, when the pall of Darth Sidious hung over them, it seemed that even the best of them might suffer disillusionment. But Obi-Wan didn't think that disillusionment by itself was what turned a Jedi to the Sith. His own Master Qui-Gon had been disillusioned with the Council as well. No, it was that disillusionment coupled with the willingness to draw on the easy power that the Dark Side offered.

Obi-Wan could only speculate on what Sidious might have said to the Jedi Master Dooku to entice him to embrace that power. The Sith Lord he had faced with Grievous had done things he could never reconcile with the actions of the very Master who had trained his own.

"Continue on, we shall," Yoda said suddenly, and Obi-wan looked up at the aged Jedi.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, his thoughts turning back to the present. "I have-unexpected news regarding the Count's death."

"We feared the worst when it was reported that General Grievous had captured not only Senator Bail, but also you, Obi-Wan," Mace said. "But it seems that both of you have lived. And it is surprising news that you bring us, of Count Dooku's death. You said that you didn't want to discuss the details of what happened publicly, though, so I can only guess that you must have good reason for your secrecy."

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. And then, taking care to collect his thoughts, he spoke. "You see, I was not the one who killed Count Dooku. General Grievous did."

Though the room was silent, Obi-Wan could see the surprise in the other Jedi's expressions as they looked between one another.

He continued. "What's more, he told me that his motive for doing so was learning that Dooku had been using some sort of mind control on him."

Mace's expression was unreadable, but he leaned forward in his chair. "This is very unexpected. Do you know anything else about this mind control the Sith used on him?"

"Not much more than that, really. He only told me that the Count had done something to his mind. Bail said that he had mentioned some sort of surgery that had removed whatever it was the Count had used to control him, though. We don't know the circumstances surrounding the surgery that removed these

control implants, but I think it's highly likely that someone on the Separatist side was involved."

"That makes sense," Shaak-Ti said. "They would have the most opportunity." She smiled wryly. "And no one on our side has reported any impromptu cyborg kidnappings to remove implants we were not even aware of."

"But perhaps they are an ally to us, nonetheless?" Master Koth asked. "If they were willing to expose Dooku like this to Grievous at the potential cost of weakening the Separatists, then perhaps they are also willing to talk to us."

"It's impossible to say," Obi-Wan replied. "Grievous said nothing about who might have been involved in that."

"What about Grievous himself?" Master Koth asked. "What differences did you notice in his personality from our previous encounters with him?"

"They were subtle," Obi-Wan said. "I would suggest extreme caution around him, still. But there is good in him. If there is one difference I've seen, it is that I would trust his word now. I sensed that honor is very important to him, though he may have a somewhat different conception of that than we do."

Eeth Koth frowned. "You say that there is good in him, Obi-Wan," he said. "And I do not doubt your statement. But I think that it is important for us to remember that there is also great evil in him. Perhaps much more than there is good."

"I think all of us have seen that evil," Plo Koon said. "Though you have perhaps experienced that more viscerally than any of us, Koth."

Obi-Wan looked between the three Jedi Masters. Koth had been tortured by Grievous, and Koon had been nearly killed by the cyborg's attempt to eliminate any survivors who might report on the existence of the Malevolence.

"At least I had warning of what I would face with him," Koth said, looking meaningfully at Shaak-Ti and Ki-Adi-Mundi, who had been among the first Jedi to face Grievous and live to tell the tale.

"I understand your reservations," Obi-Wan said simply. He had seen that side of Grievous himself. Recently, even. "But given that his mind was altered against his will, I do not think his past actions were entirely within his control."

"That is a fair point," Koth said mildly.

Obi-Wan hesitated before continuing. "Also-I've discovered the reason for his intense hatred of us."

"Do you mean to say that that was not caused by these implants that were removed?" Mace asked.

"No, though they surely exacerbated his hostility," Obi-Wan said. "But he told me that we aided his people's enemies. While he was not clear on the specifics, he indicated that these enemies were the aggressors, and his people suffered as a result of our aid to them."

"And do you know what planet the General is from?" Mace asked.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "That's the problem. He didn't give me any details I could use to confirm what he told me. I planned to try to find out what I could, though, using what little he did say."

"That would certainly be valuable information," Mace said. "We need to know if these allegations are true."

Yoda nodded. "Yes. But speak of these details yet, do not. Sense that Sidious will try to exploit this information, I do. Say only that Count Dooku is dead, we will. Let others think Obi-Wan destroyed him, we will."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I understand." While the Council had yet to locate any good leads on the identity of Sidious, they had become certain that he resided on Coruscant. Unfortunately, anything more specific on his location had yet to be determined. The Council knew only that they were dealing with a Sith of immense power who had thus far eluded any of the usual methods by which the Jedi tracked such ability.

Obi-Wan's thoughts turned back to the cyborg general. "I'll find out what I can about Grievous."

"Good," Mace said. "Report back to us as soon as you determine the information."

Obi-Wan nodded. One way or another, he *would* find the truth.

Chapter 12: A New Hope

Chapter Notes

A/N: Look! A wild chapter appears!

Thanks Celgress (ffnet) and theascetic (ao3) for your comments on chapter 11!

I am really looking forward to introducing more characters. In addition to the many canon characters I intend to involve in this story, I will also have a few OC's to facilitate certain aspects of my story. This chapter introduces a Kaleesh OC. Also plenty more Grievous here. I've written a good portion of the chapters up to chapter 15 by now and some assorted snippets from later in the story.

Grievous had contacted one of the few Kaleesh he remembered having Holonet access, Halari, one of Sk'ar's children. He was relieved when his call was answered almost immediately. The younger Kaleesh had grown considerably since Grievous had last seen him.

Halari eyed him warily. "Why do you contact me using the name of one of our greatest fallen warriors, offworlder?"

"I did not die, young Sk'ar," he said. "But I was forced into service by offworlders and prevented from returning to Kalee. They rebuilt me from near-death, so I may look quite different, but under all of this, I am still the Grievous you knew."

"I-see," Halari said, the expression in his eyes still skeptical. "Then you should really be talking to my father instead of me."

"Bentilais is *alive*?"

"Yes," the other Kaleesh confirmed.

"I must speak with him!"

"He is not here right now. But I will let him know you contacted me," Halari said. He looked thoughtful. "You do not look or sound like the Grievous I knew. I think somehow you *are* Kaleesh. Your eyes are Kaleesh, your mask of Kaleesh design, but there are many among us who seek to don the name of our fabled hero. I have met a few of these pretenders myself. If it is really you, Grievous, then you will know what my favorite pastime was as a child."

Grievous laughed. "An interesting test. You liked to look in your telescope, and record the movements of the stars."

"You truly are Grievous, then," Halari said, his voice incredulous. "I never imagined you'd survived."

"Those stars are all full of trouble, by the way," Grievous said.

Halari laughed. "I don't doubt it."

"I see you've grown even taller than me." Grievous said to the life-size holo of the young Kaleesh adult.

"I took sustenance from all those teasings about my height," Halari said. "And now I have my revenge."

Grievous laughed. "That you have, that you have." His mood became somber. "How goes the war?"

"My father still fights, but must do so quietly. He must skulk in the shadows while the Huk boldly take Kaleesh slaves and hide behind the might of the Galactic Republic."

Grievous growled. "They must not be allowed to continue that. I will soon arrive at Kalee. I have the resources to bring the Huk to their knees."

"But what of the Republic?" His voice dropped to a whisper. "The Jedi?"

Grievous unclipped a lightsaber from his belt and ignited its blue blade. "They have already learned to fear me. I have collected the blades of many who dared challenge me to battle. I will relish having new trophies."

Halari's eyes widened. "Then-you can defeat anyone!"

Grievous laughed. "Not quite. But I will be more than a match for the Huk and I will make the Republic flee once it sees the advantage the Huk can give them is not greater than *the pain I will offer them*." He knew exactly what the Republic stood to gain by aiding the Huk. And while those hyperspace routes were of great tactical use, once they were firmly in the hands of the Separatists, that fact would be of no import. The Huk would have nothing more of worth to beg their aid with, and the

Republic would withdraw.

When Grievous finished his conversation with Halari, he had already begun to plan out the battle.

Grievous hesitated, his hand over the communications panel. He had to make this call, as much as he wished he could avoid it. Finally, he pressed a series of buttons, and San Hill was contacted. The Muun answered the call immediately.

"Grievous," he said calmly, his expression neutral. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes," Grievous said, his eyes narrowing. "I need to know why I still cannot control my anger."

"You can," Hill said. "And I do think there has been some noticeable improvement in that area since your surgery. But your mind undoubtedly formed certain habits while under Dooku's control." He shrugged dismissively. "You will have to train it out of those. Anyway, podiums are at least not as expensive as droids."

So, I am still not entirely free of the results of Dooku's meddling, then.

"Speaking of droids, I wanted to ask about my medical droid," Grievous said.

San laughed. "Ah, yes, that. Dooku had a rather perverse sense of humor. Given your droid was programmed to keep you under the Sith's control, I've deactivated it and supplied you with a new medical droid of a more standard-

"Can you instead reprogram EV-A4-D not to answer to the Sith?"

Hill gave him a skeptical look. "Yes, but-are you saying you *prefer* that one? The personality routine was intentionally designed to be abrasive and-

"Yes," Grievous said. "I would prefer my usual medical droid."

"Then I'll have his primary co-routines reprogrammed immediately," San said.

"Good. Don't alter his memories or personality, though."

"If you insist, General."

"I do," Grievous said. "Also, I-

Grievous felt awareness returning now. He was suspended, floating. A feeling of peace. The shapes and outlines he saw were not the trees or sky of his home, however. And directly in front of him stood a blurry but clearly identifiable outline of a thin and pale alien.

"Ah, you're awake!" the figure clasped his hands in front of himself. The voice, too, even with its strange echo and muffling, confirmed Grievous' suspicions.

"Am I dead?" Grievous asked, not sure what to make of the presence of this unpleasant and all-too-familiar apparition. Was this a punishment? What had he done to deserve this?

Mr. Hill laughed. "No, of course not! Though that was a very near thing."

"My-Izvoshra. Are they-?"

"Dead, I'm afraid. All of them," Mr. Hill said.

Grievous felt despair. "I need to return-to-Kalee."

"You are in no condition to be going anywhere at the moment," Mr. Hill said. "However, I do have a proposition for you."

"Please, no more," Grievous said. "There is only one thing I wish to ask of you."

"And what is that?" The banker asked.

"Get out of my afterlife, Mr. Hill."

Grievous blinked. The hologram of San Hill was reading a datapad now.

"Mr. Hill," Grievous said, his eyes narrowing.

"Hmmm, what?" The Muun turned to face him. "You were just standing there, staring off into space, so I thought I'd amuse myself."

"Let us finish this conversation. There is one other matter--"

"It was the memory backlash again, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Grievous said, annoyed at being interrupted. "A particularly unpleasant memory at that."

"Oh, that's good."

Grievous growled. "And why is that?"

"Well, it means your bad memories haven't been repressed. With the memory backlash, they would have to surface at some point anyway, but if allowed to be repressed for too long, they might eventually resurface all at once."

"I'm glad we discussed this wonderful possible side effect."

"I didn't see the point. Why should you worry about it? The possibility was unavoidable. Oh, unless you'd rather I not removed Dooku's little mind control chips?"

"Never mind," Grievous said. "There is one other thing. My other request--"

"The ships and battle droids you requested? Already done. They await you above your fortress on Vassek."

"Good," Grievous said. "I will soon have use for them."

Chapter 13: The Librarian's Lead

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hello, everyone! Here's another Obi-Wan chapter. Also, I introduce Anakin in this chapter. His backstory is going to have some-changes done to it. None of them will be apparent yet, but I realized that there are some things that bother me enough in the movies that I had to change them. I think his portrayal from The Clone Wars cg cartoon is probably the best one. But it's not just Anakin's personality in the movies that bothers me, but certain plot elements relating to him. Anyway, those changes will become clearer later on. I might also mention when they're about to be introduced if I remember to do that. My planned changes should fix most the issues I have while minimally affecting other plot elements that I do not want to mess around with. While I don't yet know how often Anakin will appear in this story, since he has links with so many other major characters here I felt I should give particular thought to how I was going to present him.

And thanks to everyone who took the time to review! I always read reviews, and I appreciate all the feedback I get from them. I hope I can make this a fun story not just for me, but for others as well. So I try to incorporate any feedback that doesn't interfere with my main story goals as much as I can.

This isn't the most action-y chapter, but I think it has some interesting bits, plus some important setup for later. There will be a bit more action in the next chapter.

Obi-Wan needed to find out the truth before he could do anything to help Grievous. And in order to do that, he had to find out just what planet the cyborg General had originally hailed from. However, his trip to the library was interrupted by a familiar presence.

"Am I ever glad to see you in one piece!"

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan said. "What trouble have you been up to recently?"

Anakin laughed. "Trouble, me? You're the one who's been in all the trouble lately. Congratulations on killing Dooku, old man! Just, save me at least *one* Sith, okay?"

Obi-Wan laughed nervously. "I only did what I had to."

"Fine, but what's going to be left for the great and mighty Chosen One if *you're* the legendary Sith-killer? That's two of them now!"

Obi-Wan gave Anakin a stern look. "Jedi do not seek status or fame, Anakin. To strive for such is a form of greed."

"Okay," Anakin said, still smiling. "If you say so, legendary Sith-killer."

Obi-Wan sighed. *This must be some sort of repayment from the Force for all the times I tested Qui-Gon's patience, he thought.* Still, he smiled back. "I have every confidence that you will far exceed me as a Jedi, Anakin."

Obi-Wan sensed that Anakin drank in the compliment like a man dying of thirst. He hesitated, unsure if he should say something. But he didn't want to be too harsh on his friend and former padawan.

"At least I still have a chance at General Grievous," Anakin said. "Not as good as a Sith, but four

lightsabers sounds like a decent challenge."

"You stay away from Grievous," Obi-Wan said. "Don't give me nightmares!"

Anakin sighed. "Okay, I don't want to give you a heart attack, Master."

"You are powerful in the Force, Anakin. But, please, allow yourself to gain the *wisdom* needed to use that power. Don't lose any more of yourself from rashness." He looked meaningfully at Anakin's gloved hand.

Anakin laughed. "Hey, only three more limbs to go, and then it can't get any worse, right?"

"Don't say that!"

"Glad to see you are well, Obi-Wan," Jocasta said. She smiled, but then her expression grew somber. "I heard the news. About Dooku. I don't suppose he-

Obi-Wan shook his head, his expression sad. "I'm afraid not. He was a Sith to the very end."

Jocasta closed her eyes for a moment, before looking back up at Obi-Wan. "Then he had to be stopped." She took a deep breath. "So, what do you need help with?"

Obi-Wan told her about the word he was looking for. She proceeded to conduct a lengthy search, after which she finally looked up and spoke.

"No results," Jocasta said.

"What?" Obi-Wan asked. "How is it that every time I come here, I can never seem to find what I'm looking for?"

"Apologies, Master Kenobi," the Jedi librarian said. "But it seems the word 'izvoshra', at least as possibly relating to some sort of lifeform, does not exist in our database. Though as I've stated, there are several languages that use that word to reference an object, or as a verb. In one language it means 'swimming with desperation'."

"Thanks, but I'm certain that was not the intended meaning within the context," Obi-Wan said.

Jocasta sighed and crossed her arms. "I might be able to find whatever it is you're looking for, if you gave me some idea of what that was."

"I'm not sure how much I should-

"I know, I know, it's all classified," the librarian said disapprovingly.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Sorry. I suppose there is a bit more that I can tell you, without revealing more than I should."

"Let's hear it, then. I'm ready to do some cross-referencing!"

"Well, I first heard the word during an encounter with General Grievous. He said something about his

izvoshra being killed. I thought it might be a clue. You see, what I'm really trying to figure out is just what species the General is and what his homeworld is."

"That's an interesting question! It can be quite difficult to figure out someone's species with only their eyes for reference. Unfortunately all I've seen are speculations, but I'll be happy to pull up all the data that might be relevant."

Jocasta seemed to enjoy the research, and Obi-Wan thought that perhaps it helped her take her mind off the grim news about Dooku. Obi-Wan agreed with her that some of the speculations listed were utterly ridiculous, such as the one about Grievous being some sort of trandoshan. Obi-Wan had seen plenty of trandoshans in his time, but none with eyes like the cyborg's.

After several hours of research, Jocasta had cheerfully filled an entire data chip with speculation, rumor, and guesses as to the cyborg's species, discussing some of her personal favorites, though always pointing out a number of flaws in the assumptions behind them.

"So, I hope you can find some interesting leads there. Oh, and you might want to talk to Master Fisto, about it, too."

"Kit?" Obi-Wan asked, raising an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Why? Because of what he saw in Grievous' personal fortress, of course! I've been begging to get him to give me the details for ages but he's always been too busy, flitting from one side of the galaxy to the next, you know."

"What-did he see in Grievous' fortress?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Statues! Of an individual hailing from some sort of unknown species. Some of them were partially outfitted with cybernetics resembling the ones Grievous is composed of today."

"I see," Obi-Wan said. Kit Fisto! He had been away in battle, and presumably would not be available for lengthy conversation. Though perhaps he would respond to a short query for the information. If not, well, then there was another option. "And where is this fortress of his?"

"The third moon of Vassek," Jocasta said.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan replied.

Chapter 14: Sith Assassin

Chapter Notes

A/N: A new chapter appears! And I'm happy to present one of my absolute favorite characters from The Clone Wars here, Asajj Ventress. I confess that I was initially disappointed that I wouldn't have the opportunity to have her fight Dooku as she did in The Clone Wars series. Since he's dead now, and all. But I have a lot of plans for her, and some ideas for an alternate arc which has the advantage of avoiding being too much of a retread of events in the cartoon. I rather liked many of the aspects of the way her arc was handled

in the series, and I may reuse some ideas from it. But I'm not a fan of doing nearly word-for-word rewrites of entire scenes, and certainly not entire arcs. So be prepared for something very different!

As always, I greatly appreciate the reviews! So thanks to everyone who's taken the time to do that. I often reply to reviews via PM (on ffnet). Sometimes I reply to reviews on AO3, but because sometimes I'm weird about replying to things publicly (and they don't yet have a PM system), I might not always be as talkative, so I apologize for that. That doesn't mean I don't appreciate the review, though! And please feel free to contact me via my unspeakablehorror Tumblr or the ffnet PM system if you'd like to talk about the story, or anything else!

Grievous paced on board the bridge of the Invisible Hand. He had to do something about Ventress. It was almost time for the Battle of Kamino to begin. Or, well, it would have been, had he not killed Dooku and decided to delay that in favor of ousting the Huk from his home planet.

So Ventress would likely show up soon, expecting to prepare for the battle. What should he do?

One thing was certain—he wasn't going to allow her to live. After all, she was a Sith, as she had always liked to remind him. The only question that remained for him was whether he should battle her directly or destroy her ship before she boarded.

I know I can defeat her in direct combat, he thought. Still, he did not like the idea of willingly allowing another Sith to step foot on his battleship, no matter how temporary that arrangement might be. But despite the far superior firepower of the Invisible Hand, he was doubtful of its ability to definitively overpower any Force-user. They were too agile, too maneuverable. Still, that very fact might breed complacency in his opponent. Yes, it was possible he could take her out that way, especially if he tried a few-unusual tactics.

Movement outside the transparisteel viewport caught the cyborg's attention, and he saw a familiar ship. The time for planning had ended. It was time to act.

Ventress dropped out of hyperspace and guided her fighter towards the Invisible Hand. She hailed the enormous Providence-class Dreadnaught before her.

The Invisible Hand responded to her communication almost immediately. But the voice she heard wasn't the one she had expected.

"Ventress," Grievous said. "I was just thinking about you."

"Really," the Sith assassin replied, frowning.

A barrage of laser fire assaulted her ship. Only her unnaturally fast reflexes kept her from being incinerated as she tilted her ship to the right, allowing the solar sail to take the brunt of the blow.

"Yes," Grievous said. "Thinking about *how to kill you*."

"What are you doing?!"

"I should think that would be obvious. Pity I won't be able to collect your lightsabers. But being a head of state is a lot of work."

"What are you going on about?" Ventress snapped.

"Oh, you didn't hear? Dooku died. And it occurred to me, that I don't really need a Sith assassin. So, think of this as-your retirement package."

"You're going to regret this!"

"Really?" Grievous asked, his tone amused.

"Arrgghh," Ventress growled. "I'm going to mount your ugly face on my wall!"

"Good luck with that," Grievous responded, laughing. Ventress cut the communication as she steered her ship into an evasive roll. She'd heard all she cared to from the treacherous cyborg. Whatever was going on, she didn't plan to let that bottom-feeder take her out. As she maneuvered her ship away from laser fire and a stream of Vultures, she began weaving towards her target-the bridge of the Invisible Hand.

Two blasts from either side of her grazed the edges of her ship, but a quick turn had minimized the damage. Ventress glanced in the directions of the attacks. Hyena bombers.

Then several round-shaped droid fighters attacked her ship. Ventress dipped her ship below the blasts. Then she snarled and fired at her attackers. She hadn't seen these before, but she'd heard something about a newer class of droid called tri-fighters.

She dodged an incoming volley of tiny ball-shaped droids that had been released by the tri-fighters.

Grievous really went all-out with this. Still, he severely underestimates my abilities, as he always has.

As she got closer to the massive ship, a figure resolved itself from behind the viewports. Grievous, standing with his hands behind his back, watching her ship from inside the enormous dreadnaught.

Ventress grinned. *Why don't you just paint a target on yourself, fool?* She concentrated her laser fire on the cyborg general's position, and was satisfied to see his eyes widen as he lunged away from the lasers piercing the transparisteel viewport.

Well, that was fun. Time to go, though. Ventress knew she didn't have the strategic advantage, and she doubted her attack had actually killed the cyborg. *Might need a bomb for that. A nuclear bomb. Which I do not currently have.*

She entered in the hyperspace coordinates and the ship prepared for the jump. Dodging a few more lasers and battle droids, she weaved along the length of the Invisible Hand until the threats faded away with the blue lines of hyperspace.

When she exited the jump, she was in a tranquil, abandoned part of space. She tapped the console of her communications panel. There wasn't an immediate response. But Ventress waited patiently.

Eventually, her patience was rewarded. The image of Sidious appeared.

He frowned disapprovingly. "I don't recall giving you my number."

"You didn't. But I have my sources," Ventress said. *Like hacking into Dooku's communication lines.* She liked the vague wording of 'sources', however. Made it sound more mysterious, like she might have spies or something.

"I see. So, why have you contacted me?"

"Grievous attacked me! For no reason at all!"

"Yes," Sidious said. "It seems he's-gone rogue."

"Also he claimed that Count Dooku is dead. Is it true?"

"That is true," Sidious said. "Apparently by the General's own hand. Or so he claimed to me."

"The traitor!" Ventress hissed. She took a deep breath. "I am prepared to take up the Count's mantle and-"

Sidious held up a hand. "Do not presume. The master chooses the apprentice, Ventress. Not the other way around."

"Oh. So you have found someone to replace him already?"

Sidious scowled. "A master may take his time in choosing a new apprentice, should his old one fail him."

"If you wish to find a new apprentice, you should have someone to challenge them with. Like me. I understand that you are a very busy Sith Master-surely you don't have the time to test all those who aspire to be Sith yourself right now. And, if it just so happens that I kill a few, or *all* of them, in the process-"

"Very well," Sidious said, holding up a hand. "I will give you a chance, Ventress. Meet me on Coruscant. I will send you the time and location now. Don't be late."

"I won't be," Ventress said, smiling. "And I promise, I won't disappoint."

Chapter 15: The Uninvited Houseguest

Chapter Notes

A/N: My taxes are finally filed and I am free! Free! Ahem. So, yeah, I finished this chapter up.

Thanks to Celgress (ffnet) and Myabers013 and monetpreneur (ao3) for their reviews of the previous chapter!

This chapter has a decent bit of action I feel, and I quite enjoyed writing it. I'm really

looking forward to the next few chapters as well, where I hope to really raise the stakes and introduce some new characters, environments, and starting in the very next chapter, show a secondary character perspective that hasn't previously appeared. Eventually, I'll have chapters or sections from all the secondary characters' viewpoints. Which certainly doesn't mean I'm going to ignore Grievous, or stop having chapters and scenes from his perspective. But the story I have in mind is going to be best told from a wide variety of viewpoints. That also means you get a more up close and personal view of what other characters think of the cranky cyborg general. Anyway, I'd be interested to know what people think of this approach regardless.

Grievous paced down the length of his fortress. While he was here, he had decided to check on EV-A4-D and ask the droid a few questions. What San Hill had said about side effects earlier had made him wonder if there weren't other side effects of the surgery that the banker didn't see fit to tell him about. In any event, he'd much rather ask his medical droid these questions than his former boss.

As he was walking, his mind wandered to his earlier encounter with Ventress. That had been an unfortunate failure on his part. Clearly he was going to need a better approach if he was to be rid of her. Unfortunately, he no longer had the element of surprise. On the other hand, he knew he'd get another chance. Ventress would be intent on having her revenge on him now. So he wouldn't need to find her. She would find him.

Grievous turned a corner.

Ronderu hit Qymaen's left sword out of his hand, knocking it to the ground and then twisted fluidly to his side, kicking him in the shin. Qymaen growled and fell into the leafy jungle undergrowth. His new ally emitted a sigh of frustration. Qymaen looked up at her.

"Do you even know how to use those things?" Ronderu asked, her eyes narrowing. "How have you survived this long, much less gained your reputation, without the ability to execute a simple double slice?"

"I have other skills," Qymaen protested, looking up at her from the ground.

"Like what? Flailing?"

"Flamethrowers," Qymaen replied, indignant. "And slugthrowers. Anyway, no one uses swords anymore except for the hunting ceremonies. You're a relic, Ronderu." Certainly he had been impressed with her ability to kill the Huk who had attacked them with such primitive weapons, enough to ask her to show him how it was done, but he hardly thought it was necessary.

The other Kaleesh rolled her eyes. "A relic who's three years younger than you, and at least three hundred times more skilled. In a close range fight a good sword is always better than a projectile weapon. Faster. More reliable. Less expensive, too."

"I've always found that putting a few holes in my enemies and setting them on fire has been more than sufficient. Anyway, salvaging from the remains of my deceased foes supplies me with a steady stream of credits."

"And I've always preferred to spend my credits on myself and not my weapons. But if that's how you gained your legendary reputation, then you can show me how to 'put holes in my enemies and set them on fire', and I'll show you how to dismember, disembowel, and decapitate them. Deal?"

"Sure. But you're getting the better end of that deal."

"So modest!" Ronderu remarked, and laughed.

Grievous looked around, taking a moment to adjust to the sudden transition from the thin streams of sunlight and omnipresent plant matter from the memory to the harsh artificial light and precise architectural lines of the corridor. The memory filled him with sadness, but also a deep pervading fondness. He laughed. *I do not think either of us were particularly modest about anything, ever.* He looked back up then and continued on his way.

Eventually, he reached the medical room. EV-A4-D looked up at him as he walked in.

"You look perfectly fine," he said, his photoreceptors dimming. "What do you want from me?"

"I had some questions for you, Doctor," Grievous said. He sat down on the metal chair in the room.

"I'm not a psychologist," the droid responded.

"Yes, you are," Grievous said. "Anyway, that's not the type of question I wanted to ask."

"You don't want to talk about your feelings? Good. I don't want to talk about your feelings, either."

"I recently had the control chips Dooku put in my mind removed," Grievous said.

"Yes, I've been informed," the droid replied. "Congratulations, Master. I tried to tell you about them many times, but my programming never allowed me to be direct or remove them myself."

"Yes, I realized what you had been trying to tell me after the implants were removed," Grievous said. "I do appreciate that."

"Oh, no," the droid said. "You do want to talk about your feelings. Look, I'm not going to give you an inspirational talk. I don't want to know about your childhood. Don't make me do this."

"Are you even capable of giving an inspirational talk?" Grievous asked.

"Yes! Of course I am!" The droid said. "I could bring you to tears if I wanted!"

"I'll take your word for it," Grievous responded, amused. "But I just wanted to know what all the possible side effects of the implant removal are."

"Oh," the droid said. "Well, memory backlash is the most likely. There is also a possibility of particularly traumatic memories surfacing all at once, which could cause long-term psychological paralysis. Basically, you'd be reduced to a weeping hunk of metal and organic bits, Master. Assuming, of course, that you still had the energy left to weep."

"Sounds fun," Grievous said, his eyes lidded. "Can these-flashbacks happen when I'm fighting?"

"Yes, but it's very unlikely," the droid said.

Still, I need to keep that possibility in mind, Grievous thought. "Anything else I should be aware of?"

"Occasional bouts of uncontrollable rage," the droid responded.

"Wasn't that one of the things that removing the implants was supposed to get rid of?" Grievous asked.

"Yes," the droid said. "But certain side effects of a procedure often mirror the effects of the original problem. Anyway, that should be an improvement over *constant* uncontrollable rage."

"True," Grievous said. Of course, all of this had already been explained to him by San Hill. But he had wanted to hear the droid's explanation of the effects which, as he had suspected, had revealed details to him that Hill's explanation had not.

"Certain forms of psychotherapy might alleviate the symptoms, though inspirational talks are not included among those forms. Thankfully."

The droid shined a light in Grievous' eyes. The cyborg blinked.

"Your organic reflex responses appear normal." The droid stepped backward. "I want to see your other responses." The droid pointed with three needle-shaped fingers towards a collection of scrap metal that had dropped down from the ceiling and hung suspended in midair by a thread. "Pretend that is a Jedi Master."

Grievous rose from the metal slab in one fluid motion. His two arms ripped into four and he grabbed the lightsabers at his waist, slicing all four of them through the metal.

The droid's gaze lingered on the red lightsaber. "Very good. How did you get that one?"

"A gift from Count Dooku, after I separated his head from his body."

"Ah. Then I do not think the rest of the reflex tests will be necessary."

"Are there any other side effects I should watch for," Grievous asked.

"One more," the droid said. "Difficulties with concentration, which may surface with or without your other symptoms."

"Very well." He considered the droid for a long moment and finally came to a decision. "I am about to undertake a very important mission. I may have need of your services, Doctor. Please make preparations to join me on the Invisible Hand."

The doctor's photoreceptors brightened. "Really? Oh, excitement! Adventure! I'll make the preparations immediately!" And with that he hurried out of the room.

As Grievous was walking down the corridor, he heard a sound. He drew two of the lightsabers at his waist and ignited them. Opening the door to his right, he saw the intruder looking up at his statue.

"Kenobi!" he growled.

The Jedi looked over at him and ignited his lightsaber. "Don't take this the wrong way, Grievous, but I was hoping you wouldn't be here."

Grievous brought his lightsabers down on the Jedi, who blocked the blow. The cyborg became a whirlwind of attacks then, driving the Jedi backwards.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Kenobi, but it's time for you to die!"

"There *may* be some damage to the magnaguards at the entrance," Kenobi said. "Sorry about that."

"What are you doing here?!"

"I'm trying to help you!"

"By breaking into my home?!" Grievous yanked at the Jedi with his one of his new magnetic implants, but Kenobi had firmly anchored himself to the ground somehow, probably by using the Force.

"It was the only way! You never told me who your people were!"

Grievous growled. "This again? I told you, I don't need or want your help. You Jedi are nothing but trouble!" Grievous felt his anger flare as Kenobi blocked blow after blow.

And then Obi-Wan's evaded the cyborg's defenses and sliced through one of his wrists. A metallic hand fell to the ground.

"Sorry about that!" Obi-Wan gave the cyborg a look of dismay.

"You're going to be sorry all right!" Grievous attacked the Jedi with all his considerable speed, rotating blades, slicing in vicious diagonals, and lashing out with his feet. The Jedi blocked his attacks and flipped away from him. Grievous attacked him with a blast of electricity then, and saw with satisfaction that he staggered to the ground. He ran toward the Jedi, laughing darkly.

Obi-Wan called the saber Grievous had dropped earlier to his own hand, and blocked Grievous' strike with the two lightsabers crossed in front of him.

Grievous attacked with another electrical blast, but this time Obi-Wan deflected the electricity back at the cyborg with his lightsaber. This temporarily shorted some of Grievous' own components and the cyborg staggered backwards.

Obi-Wan used the opening to cut off another one of Grievous' hands.

"Another accident, Jedi scum?"

Breathing heavily, the Jedi answered, "That one was on purpose."

Kenobi looked tired, but far from exhausted. Grievous wanted to kill his opponent but-he had a battle to get to. Helping Kalee was more important to him than destroying Kenobi. If the Jedi injured him further now, that could delay him from bringing vengeance to the Huk. He backed up, still holding two lightsabers, but only in a defensive pose. "If you leave now, I will allow you to live."

Kenobi smiled. "I'll leave if you tell me-"

Grievous rolled his eyes. "Kaleesh. I am Kaleesh."

Kenobi tilted his head. "I don't believe I've heard of the Kaleesh." He gestured to the statue. "Is that you?"

"Yes," Grievous said.

"Very handsome," Kenobi said.

Grievous growled in annoyance. "Are you going to leave now?"

"Well, I-"

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "If not I just might change my mind about allowing you to live."

"All right. I'm leaving, see?" Kenobi backed up slowly toward the door. "I won't trouble you any more. Nice place you have here, by the way-"

Grievous growled. "Enough! Just go, and take your foolish banter away from me!"

"All right," Kenobi said, still smiling. He reached the door and pressed the control panel to open it. Inclining his head slightly, he said, "I'll take my leave of you, General. But I promise, I will make good use of what you've told me."

"Doubtful. You and I have a very different definition of 'good'," Grievous said.

When Kenobi had left, Grievous sighed. Something would have to be done about his two missing hands. EV-A4-D was not going to be happy about this.

Chapter 16: A Collection of Vendettas

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, I've completed another chapter! And, as I said, this one will introduce a new POV, though not from a new character.

Thanks to Celgress and LadySindrak (ffnet) and to brucebannerfangirl (ao3) for your recent comments!

This chapter is the longest chapter I've yet written for this story (though by no means is it the longest chapter I've written for any story, haha). There's quite a bit going on here, and I introduce a lot of plotlines here that I'll be coming back to later on. So there's some things here that can be interpreted in a few different ways. I plan to clarify those things further later on, but if you want to tell me what you think is going on, I'd certainly be interested in hearing that!

San Hill leaned back on his enormous sofa, watching one of his favorite HoloNet dramas. Dressed in a formal-looking but comfortable suit, he was prepared for any impromptu holo-calls while also being

able to enjoy what would likely be an entirely free evening for him. The serving droid brought the first course of his dinner in. The Muun turned his attention to the various delicacies arrayed in front of him. There was a platter of various vegetable dips with crackers, a pureed orangeroot mushroom soup, an elaborately constructed model of the city of Harnaidan made entirely of tangy-sweet dressing-drenched salad, a variety of savory and sweet breads, Dorian passion fruit, fringe cake coated with a platinum-gold frosting, and a tall glass of Muunilinst spring water topped with gold flakes frozen in ice. He sighed contentedly and began nibbling the fringe cake as he watched the holodrama.

"When you said we'd spend romantic evenings on your beautiful home planet," the Muun woman said, shivering in an envirosuit, "You didn't say that planet was Scipio."

"Scipio sparkles with the beauty of a million diamonds!"

"More like this place is a frozen rock! Anyway, is that giant furry thing over there some sort of Wookiee? Exactly what kind of company do you keep?"

"No," the Muun man said unhappily. "That's a Griber beast. They're-carnivorous."

The creature roared, and the two characters began running and screaming in opposite directions.

Hill laughed uncharitably. Of course, neither of the characters was going to die-it wasn't that kind of show. But their romance was of course completely doomed to failure. Really, one of the things he liked best about this show was not having to endure the overbearingly sappy romantic tropes so common in human holodramas. Sadly, this genre was not popular with most Muuns.

If any of his high society associates were to discover that he watched tacky holonet dramas like this, he'd never hear the end of it. But he couldn't help what he liked. And he simply didn't understand the appeal of things like the bubble opera. So dull.

The banker had started on his salad-city when he received a communication. Annoyed, he paused his show and put down his golden utensil, pressing a long finger to the communications panel built into the small table in front of him.

"Security and Collections, sir," the voice from the panel said. "There's a bounty hunter here demanding we let them in to see you."

The banker scowled. "Which one? I already paid all of them in full."

"They're not one of the ones you contracted, sir."

"Well, in that case, tell them to leave. If they don't, then kill them."

"Yes, sir," the voice said. Hill switched off the communication, giving an exasperated sigh. *Shouldn't that be obvious? Good help is so hard to find. The consequence of promoting the only remaining competent officer I had, I suppose.* But Riklon Tost had done as well in his much deserved new position as his old one. *I really do need to do something about this deplorable situation, though. It's too bad that I don't have Grievous to deal with these things anymore.* He frowned. *Dooku just had to go and ruin everything.* As much as he despised Grievous' natural unruly attitude, Dooku's changes to

the General's mind had been worse. He had barely recognized Grievous in the rage-consumed creature who answered only to the Count. And that last part had been a particularly raw point for the banker. For if Grievous answered only to Dooku, what would stop Dooku from one day using him against San Hill? *Certainly not principles*, the Muun thought derisively.

And of course there had been the other matter of what Dooku had done to San Hill himself. That had been-unacceptable. At least the Count had been dealt with.

Sidious was still at large, but he was far away, doing whatever it was deposed Sith Lords did. Hill knew that everything Dooku had done had been at the behest of his distant master, and so was eager to see that master eliminated by whatever means possible. But without his apprentice, and without the support of the Separatist leadership, what was the worst that Sidious could do? For all of his fearsome powers, his influence was what had made him truly dangerous. Once Grievous tracked him down, Hill was confident that a simple orbital bombardment would settle that loose end.

He switched the holodrama back on, trying to focus on the simple plot, but found his mind kept wandering back to the bounty hunter. It was hardly the first time someone had tried to kill, kidnap, or maim him. And it was unlikely to be the last. He didn't like to admit, even to himself, that such a thing had any power to distress him anymore. But even with his small army of security officers and droids, it did.

He sighed and switched the channel to one of the Republic's news stations. He needed something a little more substantial to occupy his attention right now. Of course, he had access to the CIS shadowfeeds as well, but he already knew what was on those. He'd paid for half of *that* propaganda himself.

A twi'lek reporter was covering a story about a clone trooper rescuing some small twi'lek child. *How sickeningly maudlin*, Hill thought to himself. But also-*How delightfully devious. A clever distraction from the larger question of the ethicality of using soldiers born and bred for battle in the first place.*

Of course, Hill had taken pains to ensure the shadowfeeds pointed out the obvious hypocrisy in the Republic's use of soldiers trained from birth to fulfill a single role, given their supposed ban on slavery. But he certainly wasn't above taking the low route-it was just harder to make people feel attached to the expendable droid soldiers or to someone like Grievous, who exuded an air of constant deadly menace. *On the other hand, we do have children. What was that Bonteri kid's name again? Lup? Lum? I should make sure he's been interviewed on how he's been saved by our fearless General Grievous. And if I can just get Grievous to stand around at the same time, maybe holding a loth-cat or something, we can make him seem-almost sympathetic.*

The Ryloth story had ended, and he watched the next transmission with rapt attention, and no small amount of loathing for the figure who stood front and center in it-the Republic's Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Of course, Palpatine was nominally his political enemy, but that was not the reason for the Muun's virulent hatred of the unassuming human. Unlike many of the others who had joined the Separatist

movement, San Hill had no true grudge against the Republic. The fact was, he still did a great deal of business with them, and he had no intention of ever making the IBC banks exclusive to the CIS. No matter which side won this war, he intended to turn a profit.

No, the real reason he hated Palpatine was that he knew, in all three of his hearts, that the man had *somehow* been responsible for the death of his Uncle Hego. What infuriated him was that he didn't know how, or why, and *no one believed him*. He didn't have any proof. And that was simply-incomprehensible. He had conducted his own very expensive investigation after seeing how badly the authorities had botched theirs, but to no avail.

Hego Damask had *not* died from some fluke failure of his transpirator! Especially not on the night before Palpatine's election as Chancellor. What a coincidence! When it had been clear that Hill had been unsatisfied with that explanation, one of the Coruscanti officers had gone so far as to hypothesize that Damask may have initiated the failure as a means to suicide, a suggestion which Hill hadn't even bothered to dignify with a response. No, Hego Damask hadn't killed himself. However, there were quite a few *others* who might have liked to cut his life short.

Unfortunately, the killer had very meticulously covered their tracks. Hill's own investigators had found nothing to confirm his suspicions. Hego had been killed without the use of any conventional weapons, and without anyone laying so much as a finger on him. And yet he had not been poisoned. He *had* been drinking a bit more than would be considered moderate, but that was nothing out of the ordinary for him.

Hego had had a great many enemies. But it had been his close associates who San had felt would be the most likely culprits as they would have considerably more ability to access the private apartment where he had died. And none of them more likely than Palpatine the Innocent-Hego's nickname for his most unusual friend.

The problem was, that was very much how Palpatine always appeared-innocent of any crime, the victim and never the aggressor. But since San's uncle had held the human in such high regard, he knew that image to be nothing more than a front. San Hill had known his Uncle Hego very well. The man had been San's family in all but blood, after all, and had raised the younger Muun himself after the abrupt death of his parents. And so San knew that Hego would never have bothered to take in his confidence the man Palpatine *appeared* to be. Which meant that the man who he *actually was* must be a very different man indeed.

But that man hid behind a benevolent and charming mask so convincing, that San had been able to find nothing on him. Not only nothing linking him to Hego's murder, but no incriminating or embarrassing information of any kind at all. It was infuriating.

No one, and certainly no politician, was ever *that* clean.

"So I emphasize that we must place our trust in the Jedi," Palpatine was saying with that ever-earnest expression of his. "And they will end this war."

The Muun bared his teeth in a grimace.

The news segment ended then, and Palpatine's face was replaced by that of a kaminoan senator. Hill's expression relaxed, and he yawned and switched off the news, deciding to check his messages. He brought up the message menu on the HoloNet interface. There were a couple hundred that hadn't been filtered out by his exacting algorithms, but only two had been flagged as urgent. He selected the first message, frowning as he saw the face of a Republic senator. And not just any Republic senator, but really the last one he would have expected to contact him, after that business with him sending her straight into Grievous' clutches. True, it had been a while ago, but surely she hadn't forgotten *that*?

"Chairman Hill," Senator Amidala's hologram began. "I contact you not as a Senator, but as a client of the IBC."

Hill steepled his fingers. *Interesting.* By their own laws, the Senators in the Republic were barred from contacting him. However, it was of course still legal for them to conduct business with him. It was a legal grey area for them to send him messages like this *directly*, however, so it was highly unusual that one of them might choose to do so.

"I have been informed by your associate, Nix Card, that you are the only one with the authority to approve my loan request," she said, frowning.

Which would be Card's not-so-subtle method to reject the request. But it seems she didn't take the hint?

"So I've submitted the paperwork to you," the Senator continued. "I know you will see the value in this investment in the next generation of--"

Hill muted the transmission and brought the documents up, glancing over them. *Hmmmm, it's for the Naboo educational system. How quaint. I don't see why Card didn't just--*

He paused on a line near the bottom of the document. *Oh.* There, a single signature had caught his attention. Clovis.

Now he understood the problem. Card couldn't officially deny the request because he didn't possess the authority to override Clovis.

That human is becoming more powerful than I would like, San thought. He didn't trust Clovis. Not after how terribly he had botched that one major mission, proving not only how unobservant he was, but also how dangerously sentimental. The human had promised to bring Senator Amidala to the side of the Separatists. But after seeing how the events of that sordid affair had played out via holorecording, Hill had judged that Clovis was much more attached to her than she to him. *He should never have been allowed such influence. Unfortunately, it seems our remaining Tonith wishes to use him to rise through the ranks.*

And rise through the ranks Clovis had, notwithstanding his recent blunder. And San had watched, growing progressively more concerned, and now certain that this was a power bid by the Toniths. He imagined that family would be all too happy to see himself ousted from power, even, apparently, if the one who did so was not of their blood, or even a Muun. After all, San Hill represented their largest failure, to hold onto the position that had once been theirs.

It appears I must arrange for Clovis' early retirement, he decided. Sighing heavily, he signed the holo-document. But it seems I must also approve this loan, so that he might be less likely to anticipate that. See, we're all friends now, no hard feelings about about your incredible incompetence or your schemes to unseat me at all.

Scowling, the banker hit the send button. *I wonder what unpleasant, illegal little secrets Clovis has been keeping?* The Muun was certain he could find out, with some digging. Clovis, after all, was no Palpatine. But he would have to unearth a failure that the rest of the IBC leadership would agree was unacceptable. His attempts to get Clovis imprisoned, fired, or even just demoted over the failures and improprieties he had pointed out in the holo-vid evidence he possessed had failed. The entire episode had been waved off by the others as impulsive mistakes the human would either grow out of or learn to better conceal in the future.

Hill's thoughts were interrupted by an alarming hissing sound. He turned to look at the door. A pair of dark energy blades were cutting through it. His eyes widened, and he hit the panic button under the table several times.

The oval shaped cut-out the blades had created in the door's metal was kicked in and a towering masked bounty hunter stalked into his suite, immediately heading towards him. The chairman scrambled over the back of his couch and ran towards his bedroom. If he could reach it, then perhaps the blast doors could delay his assailant for long enough for the backup security team to arrive.

A blaster bolt grazed his shoulder. Hill yelped and fell onto the carpet. All three of his hearts were pounding as he tried to rise from the floor.

A foot on his spine pushed him back to the ground. "Don't move," a synthesized voice said. "Or I'll shoot you again."

The banker lay prone on the floor, his hearts' rate slowing and his mind racing. *A threat. Which means they need something from me. Which means they can't kill me immediately.*

"I would like you not to do that," Hill said slowly, one side of his face embedded in his plush red carpet. *Stall. Stall for time.* "Are you a Mandalorian? Those darksabers are very impressive. Only, your armor doesn't look Mandalorian."

"I've killed a few," the bounty hunter said. "But stop stalling. I need you to contact General Grievous immediately."

"I am, of course, happy to assist you in any way possible," the Muun said mildly. "Unfortunately, that is not currently possible for me in my-present position."

Hill felt a blaster press into the back of his neck. The foot lifted from his back. "If you try to run again, you will dearly regret it. Get up. Slowly."

"Very well," the Muun said. *Where are they?!* As he was walking towards the communication console near his couch, he said, "I applaud your skill. You've apparently managed to demolish my security. But-if contacting Grievous was all you wanted, wouldn't it have been easier to simply-do that

yourself?"

"Would I be asking you to do that if it was?" the bounty hunter said, prodding him in the back with the blaster.

"I suppose not." They reached the table and the Muun slowly settled back onto the couch and entered the communication code to contact Grievous. The bounty hunter must have realized that he would have keyed his communication console to respond only to his own commands. *It will also be checking for my vitals.* Hill hoped the bounty hunter didn't plan to kill him. In the event his sudden death was detected, he had set up his security system to detonate an explosive that would take out the entire suite and anyone in it. It had been done when he'd felt in a particularly vindictive mood about his family's tendency towards death by assassination. *Though at the moment it seems a pitifully small consolation.*

"I hope you're not planning on killing me when you're done with me," he said.

"That depends on you," the bounty hunter said. "How long do you think before Grievous answers?"

"I don't know," Hill said. "He often delays responding to me."

"But he does respond?"

"Eventually."

"That is what is important, then." The bounty hunter sat down on the couch next to the Muun and picked up one of the plates of food on the table.

"Please, feel free to help yourself," Hill said, trying not to allow too much sarcasm to seep into his voice. *Seriously? Are they all dead?* The banker was beginning to lose hope that his security was ever going to show up. It was time to try a different tactic.

"Being a bounty hunter is a dangerous business," Hill said. "With uncertain pay. Have you ever considered a more stable career option?"

The bounty hunter set their armored feet on the table. "I prefer the flexibility of my current arrangement. Stability is overrated." They set the food plate back down.

"If you say so," Hill said. "In that case, whatever your current employer is paying for you to do this, I could pay you a lot more just to leave. Enough for you to retire. Assuming, of course, that you don't kill me."

"Oh, I'm not being paid," the bounty hunter said. "This is personal business."

The Muun frowned. "A grudge?"

"You could say that."

"Against Grievous?"

"Guess again."

"Me? Have I done something to upset you?"

The bounty hunter gave a metallic laugh at that. "To put it mildly!"

"Can this something be solved by very large amounts of credits?" The banker's tone was hopeful.

"You wish! I will not rest until-"

A holo-image of Grievous appeared then. "Yes, Mr. Hill-" he paused and his eyes narrowed. "Who is that with you? What's going on?"

The bounty hunter pressed a button on the side of the helmet to retract the segmented metal mask. Underneath was the face of a Kaleesh.

"Apologies. Do you recognize me now, Qymaen? It has been many years-"

"Ronderu?!" The cyborg's eyes widened momentarily. Then they narrowed. "This is some sort of trick. Ronderu is dead."

San Hill was also trying to understand what was going on. He did know who Ronderu was. Grievous used to talk about her all the time before he'd been turned into a memory-suppressed cyborg. She had died before Hill had ever met Grievous, though. At least, that's what Grievous had believed. The Muun looked over at the hulking bounty hunter who had a blaster aimed towards him. Grievous *had* said that Ronderu had been an incomparable warrior.

"This is no trick, I assure you," Ronderu said. "The Huk tried to take me as a slave. They waited until you would think I was dead. They told me that you would think I had drowned, died from my injuries. But they placed me in a bacta tank, and then brought me back to their homeworld to parade in the streets like a trophy."

Grievous clenched a clawed fist. "They must suffer."

And if I don't think quickly, I'm going to suffer, San thought. Well, I'm going to be dead, so probably not suffering, but even so...

"Oh, they did," Ronderu said. "The price for their arrogance was paid in blood. I killed all of the Huk who were involved in my capture, and freed their slaves. It was a good revolt. But I knew that I could not drive them from our homeworld, not after the arrival of the Republic, of the Jedi. Not unless I searched the stars for answers. And it seems I have found them."

The two Kaleesh began talking in their native language. Meanwhile, Hill had been trying to gauge whether he should attempt to run again or appeal to Grievous. He didn't think he'd get far if he tried to run. And that might only incite Ronderu's ire toward him. Maybe he should wait to bring the issue up. They would probably be irritated if he interrupted now.

"How did you know who I was?" Grievous asked. Speaking in Kaleesh, the cyborg General at least wasn't concerned their Muun onlooker would understand them. "Why didn't you contact me earlier?"

"So many questions, Qymaen. But I'm more than happy to answer," Ronderu said. "I knew who you

were because I saw you on the HoloNet."

"I don't exactly look like I used to."

"True, but I've seen you use a number of the attacks I taught you with those lightsabers of yours."

Of course. Dooku had tried to train his old style out of him, but it had never entirely been supplanted by the new knowledge. In fact, he had often mixed those attacks in with the Jedi styles he'd been taught in order to surprise and disorient his opponents.

"And I *did* contact you earlier. Many times. But I never received a response."

But I know if I had seen a message from Ronderu that I would have-a thought occurred to Grievous then. My messages were being filtered by Dooku.

"Ronderu," Grievous said. "I am sorry to have such doubts but-I must be certain you are who you claim to be."

"Of course," Ronderu said. "I would expect no less from you, Qymaen."

"So I must ask you some things that only the two of us would know."

"Obviously."

"How did you get the nick on your left ear?"

Ronderu growled. "A Huk blaster shot when I was a child in Grendaju. I sliced him to pieces, but not for that, but because he'd killed my entire family."

"Where did I master the double diagonal slice?"

"We were in that abandoned Huk warehouse perhaps five miles from Thensdown."

"When was the last time we made love?"

Ronderu laughed. "Only in your dreams, Qymaen."

Grievous chuckled. "There are no more doubts in my mind, then. It is you, Ronderu."

The two Kaleesh had begun to laugh. *That must mean they're in a good mood. Maybe even a-merciful mood?*

"I'm so glad that I could help bring you two together," San said quickly. He gave the two Kaleesh a nervous smile. "But, ah, I was just wondering if our friend Ronderu here could consider perhaps *not killing me?*"

Ronderu turned to face him and growled. "You were responsible for forcing Qymaen to leave Kalee. You were responsible for him nearly dying!"

Hill shrunk back from from the blaster she aimed at him. He gazed imploringly at the cyborg's holo-image. "General Grievous, I would really appreciate it if you would-help me out here." Hill's voice had

begun to shake. He hated looking this pitiful. But if it kept him from getting a blaster bolt through the head...

The holo-image of Grievous sighed. "He was the reason I left Kalee, but he was not the reason I nearly died. I have the Jedi to thank for that."

Not entirely true, but this would be a very bad time for me to address that little detail, now wouldn't it?

"Nevertheless, should he not pay for what he has done?" Ronderu asked, her gold eyes glaring at the Muun. Hill cringed.

Grievous shook his head. "For all the difficulty and pain he has caused me, he has also assisted me in a vital way. I ask that you not kill him."

The Kaleesh bounty hunter glared at the Muun for a long moment. "You are very lucky, San Hill," Ronderu said at last. "You have caused both of us much trouble. But Grievous seems to think that you are not deserving of death. So I will let you live."

Hill breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm most relieved to hear that."

Ronderu looked back to Grievous. "We will return to Kalee at last, then?"

"Yes," Grievous said. "It should be a simple matter to stop at Muunilinst on my way to Kalee. I will meet you there, and then we shall-retake our homeworld." Their were tears in his eyes. The two Kaleesh began talking in soft voices in their native language again.

How disgustingly sentimental, San thought. He was glad that whatever sweet nothings they had chosen to exchange were not being expressed in a language he could understand. *Still, I'm enjoying my continued existence, so I suppose I shouldn't complain.*

He frowned as a thought occurred to him. It would take several days for the General to arrive at Muunilinst. Where was Ronderu planning to stay in the interim?

The banker got his answer when Ronderu finally ended the communication, dissipating the hologram. She looked around the suite appraisingly.

"This entire room is yours?"

"This entire building is mine," San said.

"Does anyone else live with you or visit you? Family? Friends? A spouse?"

"Nooo," San said slowly. "No one else ever comes here besides my-personal security." Who was apparently all dead.

"Ah, good. I wouldn't want to inconvenience any innocents." She settled back onto the couch. "This is going to be great! Usually I just get some dingy low-level alley or cantina backroom. This is certainly the *nicest* place I've had to hide out in."

Hide out-here. San kept his existential horror to himself as he watched the Kaleesh start in on his food,

propping her armored feet on his table. Or he tried to, anyway. He wasn't looking forward to the next few days.

Chapter 17: A Podrace on Coruscant

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here's my new chapter! This one features Sidious and Ventress POVs. I really enjoyed writing Ventress again, and I'm looking forward to developing her backstory and personality. Sidious is an interesting character to write. Also sometimes writing him makes my skin crawl slightly.

Thanks to Celgress, Guest, LadySindrak, and ShadowBlah2 (ffnet) and Marie-Berry, monetrepneur, Myabers013 (ao3) for your recent comments! Also, thanks to everyone who read my story on AO3 and contacted me in other venues. I really enjoy talking with reviewers, but due to the 100% public nature of responses on AO3, I am not always willing to do so on that site as I often don't feel comfortable with my conversations doubling as public performance art. Please feel free to message me either on fanfiction dot net or Tumblr at the same username if you'd like to talk, though!

A lot of the background and not-so-background details of the previous chapter owe their existence to my reading of the novel *Darth Plagueis*, from which I pulled quite a bit of backstory and details on Muun physiology from. Did you know that Muuns are herbivores? Well, except for *Plagueis*, who eats dead bats and fish and the occasional freshly slaughtered warrior's heart, but he's clearly an outlier and should not have been counted.

Also I pulled in some of the Muun-related stuff from *The Clone Wars* cgi series as well with the whole plotline around Amidala and Clovis. I really like Muuns, so they're going to feature prominently in my story, and San Hill is not going to be the only important Muun character.

As for Ronderu, well, she's going to be an interesting character to flesh out. I have a very particular direction I want to go with her, and due to the ambiguous nature of her backstory, it doesn't even necessarily contradict the canon (though I certainly doubt such an interpretation was ever the intention of the canon). Additionally, I'm really going to enjoy fleshing out Kaleesh society as well. It's going to be fun when all four of my Kaleesh characters can meet up!

Anyway, I hope that the current chapter will give some clues on upcoming threats to Grievous and friends^[1]!

[1] by which I mean both the actual friend friends and the definitely not really friends at all but are stuck with him anyway friends, haha

The hooded Anakin walked side by side with the Chancellor, who had cloaked himself similarly in borrowed Jedi robes. Sidious found a dark amusement in using the trappings of the Jedi to skulk around

just like the Sith he truly was.

"It won't be much farther now," Sidious said.

"You said that an hour ago, sir," Anakin replied.

Sidious laughed lightly. "And I meant it! I thought the Jedi taught you patience!"

"It's not that. You're not boring me. But I wouldn't want to be called to some battle before I even got a chance to see this retrofitted speeder of yours. Anyway, won't someone notice you're missing if we're gone for too long?"

"No, I've taken the day off," Sidious said. "Anyway, I have the solution to your problem." He held out his hand. "Give me your comm."

Anakin handed the device to the Chancellor. One corner of Sidious' mouth quirked upward as he threw the device off the walkway and into the darkened void below.

"Hey!" Anakin ran in front of Sidious, staring fruitlessly over the railing into the blackened abyss below them.

"It was for your own good. The Republic shall have to manage for some short time without you, Anakin," Sidious said, placing a hand on his shoulder. "You can't always be at its beck and call."

Anakin sighed. "I guess you're right, Chancellor."

"Of course I am," Sidious said smoothly. "Now, right this way. It's just past this next turn here."

Sidious observed Anakin thoughtfully as they walked the short distance to the speeder. If he could make haste in turning this 'Chosen One', he wouldn't need another makeshift apprentice. *The Jedi have no conception of what you truly are, Anakin. Only I know that you are not a creature of prophecy, meant to aid the Jedi in 'balancing' the Force, whatever they may mean by that. Only I know that you, Anakin, are a creature of the Sith, created by our tinkering into the fundamental nature of the Force. And you, like all of our creations, will ultimately serve our will.*

"Wow!" Anakin said. "It really does look like a podracer!"

"You like it?" Sidious asked, giving the Jedi an indulgent smile. "It's yours."

Anakin gave him a wide-eyed look. "I couldn't. Jedi aren't allowed-"

Sidious frowned. "You deserve more than the Jedi allow you, Anakin. Besides, I am not bound by the rules of your Order."

"Still, they'd never let me-"

Sidious sighed. "I understand. Which is why I've rented you a space for it in a storage facility." He pressed a key card into Anakin's hand. "It's yours."

Anakin looked down at the key card, then at the speeder-turned-podracer. "Are you sure?"

Sidious crossed his arms. "Do I appear uncertain to you?"

Anakin laughed. "I don't think I've ever seen you uncertain about anything."

"Then you've answered your own question."

Anakin's expression was still doubtful, though. "It would be another secret to keep from the Council."

Sidious gave him a sympathetic look. "I apologize. If you think it would be too much trouble—"

"No," Anakin said. "It's not your fault." He pocketed the key card and smiled brightly. "Thank you, Chancellor."

"No, thank you, Anakin," Sidious said. "For everything you have done for this Republic. For standing against the evil without, and the corruption that lies within." He gestured to the racer. "You first."

They both settled into the two seats, and removed the hooded Jedi robes to reveal their usual clothing. Anakin started up the vehicle and it bolted into motion. The momentum pushed Sidious back into the seat.

"You all right there?" Anakin asked, giving the older man a concerned sidelong glance.

Sidious smiled, laughing. "Is there a reason I wouldn't be? You know, you *can* go faster. There's no traffic at all here." The entire place was abandoned, in fact. It was one of the Sith Lord's favorite haunts for that very reason.

"Yeah, I was just worried it might be too fast for-you."

Sidious snorted at that. "You underestimate me, Anakin."

Anakin raised an eyebrow and smiled deviously. "All right. You asked for it, old timer."

The vehicle picked up speed and then Anakin began to spin it upside down in tight loops.

This will be a worthwhile trip even if I make no progress on my objective, Sidious thought, closing his eyes momentarily and focusing on the sensation of the acrid-smelling Coruscant wind on his face. If there was any mundane act he enjoyed more than racing, than the feel of immense speed and momentum, Sidious could not bring it to mind. Certainly it was a welcome change from attempting to appear awake while bores like Orn Free Taa droned on, or having to endure yet another harrowing heart-to-heart with Senators Bail or Mothma, or, worst of all, Amidala. He sighed, thinking of how incredibly tedious his life had become. *The last time I did anything truly exciting was when I killed Plagueis. Maybe this little setback with the Separatists will not be as much of a disaster as I thought, if it requires me to do something more interesting than sit through endless Senate meetings.*

"Not bad, but you could try to be a bit more adventurous," Sidious suggested.

"Really? I thought you'd be begging me to stop by now," Anakin said. "Everyone else hates my driving."

"You must be joking," Sidious replied, smiling serenely as the vehicle lurched out of the way of a row

of exposed girders at the last possible second. "I trust you completely, Anakin. Who wouldn't?"

Anakin laughed. "You might be surprised. You are holding up really well, sir. And I mean, especially for someone your age."

"Can you keep a secret, Anakin?"

"Of course," the Jedi said instantly. "You've always kept mine."

Sidious smiled. "I used to be a bit of a racer, myself. Not podracing, of course, but I was quite good in a speeder in my day."

Anakin laughed. "Really?"

"You don't believe me?"

"No, it's not that. It's just-this is a deep, dark secret for you?"

"I think you underestimate what the tabloids can do with the slightest bit of-unusual information."

Anakin scowled. "No, you're right. Reporters will do anything for a story."

"I suspect you understand that from a very personal perspective."

"To say the least," Anakin responded.

Sidious gave him a sympathetic look, but didn't say more on the subject. Instead he asked, "How is your mother?"

Anakin smiled and his expression brightened. "Doing well. She's started a class recently to learn Aurebesh."

The Sith Lord gave Anakin a benevolent smile. "I'm glad to hear it." He had once privately fumed over the act that had brought Anakin's only parent to Coruscant less than a month after the Battle of Naboo, but had come to accept that, in this, Padme's meddling had actually done him a favor. Shmi was Anakin's mother, yes, but she would never inhabit his world mentally even if she did so physically. So close to him, and yet, so truly far away.

Palpatine, on the other hand, *understood* Anakin, understood his world, his interests, his joys, and his greatest fears. Shmi's presence, Sidious had realized, had only served to highlight to Anakin just what she was unable to provide in the way of parental guidance as he grew into an adult in an increasingly complex world she could neither hope to understand nor help him to navigate.

It had also made the Sith Lord's assassination attempt of her shortly after Anakin's adventures on Geonosis an incredibly simple affair. And when Anakin had foiled that attack, Sidious had felt the darkness unfold in the young Jedi as he had not simply killed her would-be murderers, but tortured them mercilessly before finally ending their lives. Another secret shared only between Anakin and Palpatine, as Anakin had ensured that neither Shmi nor anyone else was present when he 'dealt with' the attackers.

Thus, what had seemed an irritating setback to Sidious at first had instead been turned into a fortuitous circumstance.

A true Sith Lord can always work with whatever the universe may offer.

Sidious looked idly up at the sky. Far in the distance, he saw a tiny gleam of chrome and yellow. Insignificant except for the occupant he sensed inside it.

Ventress. Right on schedule.

He smiled. *And now the real fun begins.*

Ventress brought her rented vessel down on the landing platform in the deserted area called The Works. Her usual ship was undergoing repairs in a distant space station-even if it had been in peak condition, it was a bit too identifiable for her tastes to be landing on Coruscant. The vessel she was in now was also a fighter, but one of Nubian origin. She was just about to open the hatch when she saw an unusual vehicle speed right past her.

Ventress narrowed her eyes. *Skywalker. A realization came to her. Not a coincidence. A test.*

She raised the ship back up from the launch pad and took off in pursuit of her foe.

The vehicle Skywalker rode looked to be a standard speeder at its core, but had been retrofitted with gear more often seen in the podraces of Malastare or Tatooine. *Is he trying to podrace-by himself? Guess that's the easiest way to win.*

She had the ship bring up a zoomed-in image of the vessel and her eyes widened in surprise. *Looks like he brought the Chancellor along for the ride. She grinned. Two for the price of one.*

She fired a volley of bolts towards the pod, severing one of the enormous engines powering it. Skywalker sped up in response and somehow reattached the broken engine through the Force. Ventress sped her ship up to match the speed of the racer. Pressing the sequence to place the ship on autopilot to follow the other vehicle, she opened the hatch window and jumped onto the left fin of her ship, directly across from Anakin's vehicle. She ignited her twin lightsabers.

"Skywalker! Looks like you could use some competition!"

The Jedi scowled, gritting his teeth. "Ventress."

"Now that introductions are out of the way, we get to the fun part. Do you want to die by lightsaber or by crashing?" She laughed as the Jedi seemed to realize his predicament. She spun her lightsabers lazily and walked towards the racer.

"Anakin!" The Chancellor said suddenly. "I'll drive. You fight."

"Are you sure-?" Anakin started.

"Yes!" Palpatine said, his eyes wide.

The Jedi didn't argue any further and jumped out of the seat to the side of the speeder as the Chancellor took the controls. Anakin ignited his blue lightsaber and clashed it against the blades Ventress held.

"I thought I sensed a dark presence," Skywalker growled.

"So glad to make an impression," Ventress hissed trying to push him back into the speeder.

The speeder-turned-podracer shook erratically, forcing Ventress to use her Force powers to stay anchored to the wing of her ship. She ducked as they passed a bent pole, her ship's right wing scraping the side of a building. The racer went into a steep dive then, and her ship followed suit, essentially copying the Chancellor's motions with the racer.

"Maybe the Chancellor should get his license revoked," she remarked. "His driving is terrible."

"Pretty sure-he did that-on purpose!" Anakin parried her slashes and then slashed back at Ventress, who leapt backward toward the cockpit of her fighter.

"In that case, perhaps we're better off *without* his direction." She used the Force to yank the Chancellor from the driver's seat and pulled him towards her. Dooku had impressed upon her the importance of taking the Chancellor as a hostage, rather than killing him outright. And so she realized this would be the perfect opportunity to use that one bit of neglected tech she had acquired. She grabbed the wide-eyed Chancellor by the front of his elaborate robes and activated the nanotech device stored in her lightsaber. A small light on her saber handle indicated that the nanoprobe release had been a success.

"Don't move, Jedi, or your Chancellor-."

Anakin didn't waste a moment to use the Force to grab the Chancellor back. He supported Palpatine in his left arm while holding his lightsaber out towards her from his right hand. "You'll pay for that, Ventress," the Jedi growled, his expression dark.

Ventress laughed. "Well, aren't you a vindictive one. I think it's time for me to go, though." She jumped back into the cockpit of her ship and turned off the autopilot, turning the nose of her ship up right before it would have joined Skywalker's doomed vehicle in an explosive crash against the side of a building. When she reached the top of the building, she saw Skywalker had jumped off the side of her ship and onto the building. He still held the Chancellor in his left arm. She didn't pursue them further.

You think you've won, Skywalker, she thought. But the Chancellor is still my hostage. He just doesn't know it yet.

Ventress hated waiting.

It had been almost a full standard day. After the battle with Skywalker she'd returned to the space station where she had dropped her ship off earlier to pick it up. Then she had fallen asleep in front of the communication panel on her now-repaired ship, only to now be jolted awake by a harmless passing freighter. She had spent any time she hadn't been sleeping second-guessing whether her instincts about the encounter with Skywalker had been correct. Had Sidious meant to appear? Had the whole thing

been a freak coincidence despite the certainty she had felt otherwise? The anticipation and worry was nearly unbearable. But she *would* bear it if it meant she would finally be named a Sith. Surely Sidious would make her his apprentice when he learned of what she had done with the Chancellor. She called up her nanoprobe program and watched idly as coordinates flashed across the flat holoscreen.

At any moment, she could make those numbers still...

But she needed to prove to Sidious that the deed had been hers, and hers alone.

She thought back to the man who had supplied her with the nanoprobes. Technological terrors that could rival the powers of a Sith in some respects, the knowledge of their existence had caused Ventress considerable consternation. Their inventor, an otherwise unimpressive human, had been willing to sell these most dangerous inventions to the highest black market bidder. As such the probes she had just used had been her only supply. Not because of any issue with the money, but because she had run their creator through with her lightsabers, slagged all his datapads, and bombed his lab to oblivion. As Dooku would've said, such power was not meant for mere mortals.

She frowned. She had to admit, she kind of missed the deceased Sith Lord. He'd been a difficult taskmaster, but had never seemed to doubt her abilities the way Sidious did.

Suddenly a holo-image of Sidious appeared, and Ventress sat up straight in her pilot's seat. "Lord Sidious!"

"Ventress," Sidious said. He smiled. "So, how did you find the meeting?"

Ventress frowned. "I wouldn't call it a much of a meeting with only one of us in attendance."

"Oh, I was there," Sidious said. "Observing. You simply didn't see me."

Ventress tried to imagine the Sith Lord standing on some rusted skyscraper holding macrobinoculars to his face. The image seemed-unlikely. *He probably doesn't need anything like that, though. Probably just uses his Force powers to enhance his vision. Still, he must have been awfully sure Skywalker wouldn't spot him.*

"In that case, what is your assessment of my accomplishment?"

Sidious frowned. "Don't you mean your lack thereof? I didn't see anything accomplished besides a bit of property damage, Ventress."

"All right. Then perhaps you missed it."

"Missed what?" Sidious asked.

"When I dispatched a series of nanoprobes into the Chancellor."

The Sith Lord crossed his arms in his robes. One corner of his mouth quirked upward. "Did you now?"

"Yes, he won't even notice they're there. They'll serve as a tracker, and can also kill him via brain stem cauterization-I have the remote activator right here."

"Really? Impressive."

"Should I-?"

Sidious held up a hand. "Not at this time. Do not do anything with the probes until I command it, or I guarantee you will lose any chance at becoming my apprentice."

"As you wish, Lord Sidious. So, what now? Did I pass your test?" *Surely I will be named a Sith now that-*

"You still did not kill Skywalker."

Ventress felt disappointment. Disappointment and anger. "He's really hard to kill!"

"Hmmm, perhaps. But if you can't even take down a Jedi, my other prospective apprentice will grind you into the ground."

"You found another candidate? Who?!"

Sidious laughed. "I may tell you, in time. If you can complete my next task for you."

Ventress tilted her head. "What is this task?"

"I want you to travel to this Outer Rim location," a star map appeared next to the holo of Sidious, with a flashing red dot placed in the Unknown Regions.

Ventress frowned. "Is there even anything at that location?"

"Oh, yes, I assure you there is," Sidious said. "But more importantly, someone who will be very useful to my plans resides there."

"You want me to kill them? Torture them?"

"No," Sidious said. "I want you to bring them to me, alive and well. Do not under *any* circumstances bring them to harm."

Ventress frowned. "With all due respect, Lord Sidious, this sounds more like a mission for a courier than someone to be trained as a Sith."

Sidious smiled. "Being a Sith isn't all fun and bloodshed, Ventress." His expression grew serious. "If you are to be my apprentice, I need to know that you will follow my commands. *All* of my commands."

"Of course, Lord Sidious. Who is this person I must bring you?"

"His name is Mitth'raw'nuruodo," Sidious said.

"Mith-Raw-Nu-What?" Ventress asked. The name had entirely too many syllables for her liking.

Sidious sighed. "I'll send you the phonetic spelling so you can practice it until you get it right. He is to be treated with the utmost respect."

"Understood."

"Oh, and Ventress?"

"Yes?"

"While I will again impress upon you the importance of not bringing him to harm, there are no guarantees that he will act in kind. I will send you a message from myself which may gain you his cooperation. But if he does not agree to the offer in my message, he is to be brought to me, unharmed, regardless. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Lord Sidious."

"Good."

Sidious ended the communication. Ventress stared out her viewport at the asteroid and its space station companion in the distance, grimacing. She *still* hadn't been named a Sith, and worse, she'd been sent on some menial errand instead of a real mission.

She sighed, typing coordinates into her ship's hyperdrive. *Let's just get this over with.*

Chapter 18: Reunion at Muunilinst

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, here's the new chapter! Now with 100% more Grievous! I very much enjoyed writing the last chapter, and it sounds like those who reviewed enjoyed reading it, but I'm sure most of you would like to see some more Grievous as well, so here he is again, in all his cyborg glory. This is a Grievous POV chapter, but with significant appearances from Ronderu, San Hill, and a new Muun OC.

Thanks to The Necropolis, Celgress, ShadowBlah2, and DragonBowl (ffnet) and kybercron (ao3) for your recent comments!

Ah, I had so much fun writing the battle scene last chapter! And, as you may have guessed from the end of the last chapter, Mitth'raw'nuruodo is going to show up in later chapters. If you've read certain EU novels then you know who I'm talking about. I might introduce other EU characters in the future, depending on if I can think of something interesting they can add to the plot, but I expect most characters will be from the prequel movies or one of the two Clone Wars series. I'm likely going to introduce more OC's as well-usually I add an OC because there's a certain kind of character that would fit well into the story I'm trying to tell, but I don't know of a similar-enough character in the canon that would fit all the specifics I want them to have. Also, if there's a character you think would be a really cool addition to the story, feel free to suggest them! I've already received some interesting suggestions for characters from The Clone Wars series that I plan to incorporate. I can't guarantee that every suggestion will appear, but quite a few of them probably will. In addition, I enjoy discussing all the cool Star Wars characters out there!

Also, while I do expect it to take a while for the Obi-Wan/Grievous romance to really get going, I'm very much looking forward to writing it once it does. I don't plan for the rating

of this story to ever exceed the current Teen rating, but I also like to make the main romance fully live up to that rating. Now, of course, considering that Grievous doesn't have a body incredibly conducive to the sexy make-out times, I'm going to have to be creative, but I do have some ideas. Obviously there are other components to a romance besides that, and those will also be included, but I will not be excluding the more physical aspects.

Grievous stared pensively out the window of the shuttle as it descended from the skyhook's suborbital launch apparatus to Harnaidan. He was impatient to see Ronderu in person at last. He just wished, that of all the places they could have met again, that it hadn't had to be here.

Muunilinst was not intrinsically an unpleasant planet. Quite the contrary, actually. The green and blue world was covered with forests, plains, scenic mountains, and calm oceans, all of which were enhanced by a larger-than-average temperate region. The skies were clearer than those of most any other inhabited planet due to the tight pollution regulations, the cities filled with tree-lined walkways, tube transports, and restrained skyscrapers. And what little interaction Grievous had had with the denizens of this world besides San Hill and his ilk had seemed to hint that a fair number of friendly, pleasant people dwelled here.

But that was the problem. Most of his time on Muunilinst had been spent directly in the service of one Mr. Hill and his equally unpleasant corporate associates. And so Grievous regarded the planet he was rapidly approaching through the lens of those less than pleasant memories.

"Ah, home sweet home," Mr. Hill said, exiting the skyhook shuttle in front of Grievous. He smiled fondly at the scene before them. "This," he said, gesturing to the cityscape surrounding them, "is where you'll be staying for the next-little while. Eventually, I'll need you on Coruscant, but for now, you'll stay here with me as part of my personal guard."

Grievous frowned. "What about paying off Kalee's debt?"

"That will occur as we have agreed," the Muun said, glancing up at him. "It's all in your contract."

"I can't read my contract," Grievous said, frowning behind his mask. He had made that clear to the banker already. It wasn't that he didn't know any Aurabesh-it just wasn't yet up to par with his spoken Basic, and the contract was full of specialized jargon and words with more letters than his eyes knew what to do with.

"You can have a protocol droid read it for you," the banker said, waving a hand dismissively. "There's nothing in there we haven't discussed. But I assure you that your planet's debt payments have already begun, and if you perform all the tasks I assign you, those debts may be paid off in as little as thirty or forty years."

"That's-a really long time," Grievous said.

Hill looked over at him, regarding him with mild curiosity. "You think so? How long is your species' natural lifespan?"

"Perhaps 90 years or so," Grievous said.

"Ah, that's unfortunate," Hill said, frowning. "I suppose you might be-rather old-when your contract is completed."

"Is there any way I can finish my contract more quickly?"

"Hmmm, I suppose," Hill said. "Yes, I will look into it. I'll not keep you past retirement age, I assure you."

"Thank you," Grievous said cautiously.

"Think nothing of it," Hill said. "You are a rare find, Grievous, and I have little doubt that your services, however brief they may be, will be of great value to the IBC."

Hill's eyes flitted to the people around them, and he frowned. "There is one other thing."

"Yes?" Grievous said.

The banker held out a hand. "Give me your mask."

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Because," Hill said, "it does not conform to my company's dress code. Also it is attracting attention."

"It's mine," Grievous growled, looming over the banker menacingly.

Hill pulled his hand back, his frown deepening. Grievous heard the Iotran guards and MagnaGuards behind him shift their weapons. A word from the Muun would be all it would take for them to attack Grievous. He could probably still win, but that would defeat the purpose for which he had come here. The Kaleesh backed down and reluctantly removed the mask.

"But if you insist I not wear it, then I will put it away."

"Good. I've been criticized already for my decision to hire you, given your-background. I will stand by that decision, but it would be in your own best interests to avoid appearing overly-primitive."

"-again, please state your name and purpose," A Muun man wearing a blue jumpsuit said, looking over at him with a slight frown. Grievous shook his head as if to shake away the memory.

"Apologies," Grievous said. He answered the questions without much thought and was soon allowed to exit the shuttle. He had an airtight excuse to be visiting the planet, after all. San Hill had personally requested his presence. That Hill's request had been made under considerable duress was not something that need be known.

He walked onto a wide pathway that wound through the city. A crowd of pedestrians flowed along the path. Most of them were Muuns, though Grievous saw the occasional group of Iotrans and a few aliens of various species who appeared to be tourists.

He thought back to the flashback he had had to the first time he had been here. He had tried to stay optimistic about the situation, but he had known even before that time that Hill's interest was not in helping him, but in having him serve the banker and his company. Grievous had not had much of a

choice in agreeing to Hill's offer, though he wouldn't have continued enduring such dishonorable work at all if the Muun hadn't kept to his end of the agreement. But he hadn't broken his word on that, at least. The famine caused by the Republic sanctions had been alleviated.

As he looked up, he noticed a Muun woman was standing in the middle of the path. Other Muuns walking past her gave her a wide berth, not looking at her as they passed. She was wearing a tattered grey robe with a hood and she held a cane, though from what he could see of her face and hands, she did not look particularly elderly. She smiled up at Grievous, and that was when he saw that her eyes were a filmy white. "Have you any credits for a poor blind woman?" she asked.

Grievous stopped in front of her. He was unused to random strangers approaching or speaking to him. They usually avoided him due to his intimidating appearance. But he supposed this one wouldn't be aware of that.

"I apologize," he said. "But I do not have any credits on me." He wasn't on Muunilinst to buy anything, after all.

She tilted her head, her blank eyes widening, though she showed no other sign of surprise or fear. "Chancellor Grievous?"

"Yes," he said, somewhat unhappy at the reference to his new, unwanted title. "I am Grievous."

"Good. I've been waiting for you."

Grievous narrowed his eyes. He didn't know anyone from Muunilinst, excepting San Hill and his associates and a few of the Muuns who served in the Separatist military. He certainly didn't know this woman. "Who are you?"

"My name is Lora Far," she said. "And I believe that I have something that you are looking for."

"And what is that?"

"Force abilities."

Grievous narrowed his eyes further, his stance shifting slightly. "Are you a Jedi?"

The Muun woman laughed. "Goodness, no. I've never been off Muunilinst, and the Jedi are not allowed here. In any event, I don't hold to their ideology."

"Then are you a Sith?" A clawed hand trailed towards one of the lightsabers at his waist.

"Again, no. Their philosophy holds no appeal to me."

The hand stopped its path towards the lightsaber.

"In that case, how did you come to learn about your powers?"

"They made themselves apparent to me at an early age," she said. "I am mostly self-taught, but I've occasionally encountered others like myself who have sometimes shared their own insights with me."

"And how do you plan to help me?"

"I have visions of possible futures. It's how I knew you would be here." She tapped her cane around her until it hit the top of a rock. Gesturing with a hand, she lifted up the rock from the side of the path. Another gesture, and it began to slowly spin in midair. "I also have many of the standard talents one might expect of a Force-sensitive, and I've learned a few of the more unusual abilities as well."

Grievous considered the Muun's words. "And what do you wish in return?"

"Well, I will expect to be paid," she said. "I'm not a Jedi, after all. I don't have a Temple to feed and clothe and house me. Also, I'm not a warrior of any sort, so I wouldn't suggest bringing me to any battles. I can defend myself adequately against the more ordinary sort of troublemakers, but that is the extent of my fighting abilities. As I said, though, my talents can be helpful in anticipating future threats, among other things." She held out her hands, still holding her cane in the left. "Now, as you may have guessed, I am currently-unemployed. So, what do you think? Do you want my help?"

Grievous considered his situation. The Separatists currently had no Force-sensitives of any kind on their side. And while he had once fought a war against the Jedi with the aid of the Sith, he was now fighting against both of those ancient and powerful Orders. It hadn't occurred to him that there might be Force-sensitives who didn't align with either group, but now that he thought about it, it was obvious that such individuals would exist somewhere within the immensity of Galactic space. The single Force-sensitive Muun in front of him would not be sufficient to defeat both the Jedi and the Sith, even if she had been a battle-hardened warrior. But recruiting her help would be a start. Perhaps she would be able to find others like her as well.

"Yes, I like this idea," Grievous said. "What do you want to be paid?"

The amount she requested was ridiculously low, so Grievous offered to triple it, and she agreed to the offer.

"Excellent!" Lora said, smiling, her hands clasped together. "So, where to now? Do we return to your ship?"

"Not yet," Grievous said. "A friend of mine is currently in the company of a certain troublesome IBC executive-I'm here to meet up with her so we can travel to Kalee."

Lora frowned. "Really? That sounds unfortunate. Is she being detained by them?"

Grievous lidded his eyes and said in a quietly amused voice, "No. In fact, I'd say it is rather the other way around."

Lora had followed Grievous to San Hill's residence, which was the same tall, light green tower he had spent countless hours inside of as part of Hill's security team. The gate it was protected by had been unlocked by Ronderu for their arrival. Inside, they passed through the banker's large, intricately sculpted garden.

The Muun woman didn't ask further details about where they were going, but instead talked with the

cyborg about the Separatist government and her visions.

"I've heard that a lot has happened lately, with Dooku's death and all," she said. "I'll admit, I was reluctant to be involved with any of this, despite my situation, but I had the most terrible vision of what would happen if the Republic wins this war."

"Really?" Grievous asked, concern in his tone.

"Yes," Lora said. "I know it is only-a possible future-but right now it is also an all-too likely one."

"What did you see?" Grievous asked.

"The total subjugation of the Separatists, and, inexplicably, the complete destruction of the Republic as well. Uncountable casualties on all sides."

"How does this come to pass?"

"It's not clear," Lora said. "Many things in Force visions are not. But I think I may be able to see more from this future in time." She frowned. "To achieve sufficient clarity may require delving more into the Dark Side than I would like, though."

"You would become a Sith?"

"No," Lora said. "That is a particular philosophy on the usage of the Dark Side, just as the Jedi employ their specific beliefs in their usage of the Light Side. I find them all a bit strange and superstitious, to be honest. No aspect of the Force is intrinsically good or evil. Dark Side abilities do not have to be offensive or harmful, and Light Side abilities can be turned to unsavory uses. Though I admit to favoring the use of the latter, as I find that the former requires an exhausting expenditure of emotion. Such intense feelings do not come naturally to me, especially anger."

Well, that's very much the opposite of my current difficulties, Grievous thought ruefully. An idea occurred to him then. "Could you use someone else's emotions in place of your own?"

"I-I don't know," Lora said, sounding surprised. "I hadn't considered that. I'll have to investigate the possibility."

As they entered the tower and took the series of elevators up its length, they passed through the security checkpoints Grievous remembered-large open lobbies with no apartments or offices of any sort attached to them, just a single door to the next elevator. Each lobby was strewn with demolished droidekas, chunks of MagnaGuards, and streaks of dried blood. *Ronderu must have dealt with the bodies earlier.* She had always been tidy like that.

When they reached the top floor, Grievous finally saw a place he'd never been-A smaller lobby attached to a suite with a metal door that had been cut clean through. He looked through it and saw Ronderu in the room on the other side. She saw him as well, and ran to him.

Grievous and Ronderu embraced, then pulled apart and clapped each other on the shoulders.

"It's about time you got here!" Ronderu said. "There is no more battle to be had in this place, and the

futile pleadings of its sole inhabitant cease to amuse me."

"Where is he, anyway?" Grievous asked.

She gestured to another set of doors. "He stays in that bedroom of his most of the time. Apparently he has everything he requires to survive in there, which leads me to wonder what he needs this room for. And that one! And that one!" She pointed to two other doors in the suite.

Grievous laughed. "So then you've had all the rest of this to yourself?"

"Mostly. Every so often he would come out here to try to get me to leave."

Grievous felt amused. "I can only imagine how he expected to accomplish that."

Ronderu laughed, but then her face grew serious. "I'm sorry I let those Huk get the better of me and let you think I was dead. None of this would have happened if-"

"There was nothing you could have done," Grievous said. "There were too many of them." He was silent for a moment. "After I saw-what happened, I tried to call you up from the Jenuwaa Sea."

"Fool," Ronderu admonished him. She looked at the floor. "I tried to do the same with you."

Grievous laughed. "All those years I cursed the gods for doing nothing, and here it was because there was nothing for them to do."

Ronderu smiled.

"I wish we had never been separated," he said.

"I feel the same," Ronderu said. "Though I wonder if we were not meant to be apart for a time, to seek power outside ourselves sufficient to defeat the Republic forces who aid our enemies."

Grievous sighed. "Perhaps."

It was then that Grievous saw the bedroom door open and Hill look over towards them from the other side of the room, his expression brightening as he approached. "Grievous! Why, how truly heartswarming to see you two reunited-and ready to leave these premises, I presume." His gaze then moved to Lora, and he grimaced. "Who is this? Is there a reason you've allowed this *riffraff* to trail along with you?"

Lora's mouth compressed into a thin line. "Is that-*San Hill*? The IBC Chairman?"

"The one and only," the banker replied with a frown, his yellow eyes narrowing.

"Do you know him?" Grievous asked.

"Only from what I've heard on the HoloNet," Lora said. "But I can sense the presence of others in proximity to me, and what I sense right now is an endless well of malice and arrogance. Which is-about what I would have expected."

Hill looked up at Grievous. Pointing at Lora, he asked, "Again, who is this? Why is she here?"

"She's my new employee," Grievous said. Then, because he was feeling contrary, he added, "She says she can see the future. Clearly she has an uncanny ability to read people as well."

Hill scowled at him. "You hired a mystic? Their powers aren't real, you know."

Grievous tilted his head. He had been about to explain about her Force abilities, but noticed that Lora was making no attempt to clarify the situation and in fact seemed faintly amused by the misconception. So instead he merely said, "Seems real enough to me."

Hill rolled his eyes. "Looks like a beggar, too. I don't think she's even showered in months." He crinkled his flattened nose in distaste.

"That's because I haven't," Lora said. "I'm looking forward to reacquainting myself with the experience."

The banker shuddered, backing up a step away from the other Muun. "Fine. Fine. Now that you and your other half have been reunited, Grievous, you can take your *new friend* with you on the way out." He made a shooing gesture towards the three of them.

Ronderu casually pointed her blaster at the banker. "Actually, you'll be coming with us as well."

"What?" Hill said. "What conceivable reason would I have to accompany you to Kalee?"

"Because you don't have any other choice," Ronderu said. "I insist."

Grievous looked over to Ronderu, puzzled. "If you want him along, I won't object, but what advantage would that give us?" It wasn't as if the banker could fight.

Ronderu sighed. "Leverage, Qymaen. This one hoards considerable wealth and power. If we ensure his fate is tied to ours, he will use that wealth and power to help us succeed. Otherwise, he may be less-motivated to agree to our requests."

"Ah," Grievous said. "Yes, that is true." It was not something he would have done on his own. His personal obligations towards Hill, while certainly not on the order of a life debt, prevented him from directly defying the banker quite so brazenly. But Ronderu had no such obligations, and by both their thinking, was in fact owed recompense from Hill. And if she wasn't going to kill or severely wound him, there was no need for Grievous to attempt to stop her. In fact, there was no reason he couldn't assist her in having the debt she was owed repayed.

"Are you taking me *hostage*?" Hill asked, outrage now apparent in his tone. "This is extortion! This is very illegal."

Ronderu laughed. "Yes, yes it is. Illegal is in my job description, after all."

The banker looked imploringly at Grievous. "Please, think of all I've done to help you!"

Grievous stared at him. "Define *help*. Perhaps it includes getting me out of situations you originally allowed me to be put in? Forcing me to do grueling, soulless work for you to pay off my planet's crushing debt?"

Grievous, who was enjoying this turn of events, continued on. "Of course I will eventually release you. But not right away. After all, if you can take a few years to get around to resolving your contractual obligations, then certainly it would only be fair of me to *take my time* as well."

Hill laughed nervously. "Alright, perhaps 'help' is too strong a term. Still, would taking me as a hostage not be bad for your reputation, *Chancellor?* Surely you don't want to be involved in this."

Grievous looked down at Hill. "You're right. I don't want to be involved in this. Which is why we won't be leaving with you."

San smiled. "Well, I'm glad we could come to an agree-"

"We'll be leaving with Fal Nim, who we hired as an additional-" he thought back to the word San had used for Lora, "-mystic."

San gave him a wide-eyed look of horrified comprehension. "No. *No.*"

Grievous, who was enjoying the banker's obvious dismay, then said, "No reason to be worried. *We will* release you, in time. After all, you did finally correct that little issue with my contract. But-you did also take a few *years* to do that. Perhaps we will take our time as well!"

Ronderu laughed. "Okay, troublemaker. Time to go."

San frowned. "No, I refuse to-"

Ronderu nudged the blaster into his chest. "You refuse to what?"

San looked at the ground, his expression sullen. "Nothing."

"Good. Qymaen, we will need him to wear some more colorful costume," she said. "What do you think-?"

"My wardrobe," Hill said tonelessly. "I have some terribly garish items in there that I never wear. If you will allow me, I will find something suitably-hideous."

Lora frowned. "General Grievous, how large is the ship you came here on?"

"The Invisible Hand is 1 km in length," Grievous recited from memory. "Why do you ask?"

"So I'll know how much space I can put between me and this loathsome man."

Chapter 19: Aboard the Invisible Hand

Chapter Notes

A/N: So I finished up the newest chapter!

Thanks to Celgress and DragonBowl (ffnet) and IvoryInkwell, Anonymous or Something, May-chan and Myabers013 (ao3) for your recent comments!

I had fun researching skyhooks for the last chapter. In the Darth Plagueis novel, the skyhook described sounds more like a space elevator as a turbolift going down to the surface is mentioned. Skyhooks actually work a bit differently in that they reduce the energy required to break out of orbit to only requiring a suborbital spacecraft while also not requiring the skyhook structure to touch the surface of the planet as a space elevator does. So I changed the description of the skyhook descent in my story to reflect that.

Also, I'm really looking forward to having Ronderu as an important character in my story. I felt that one of the best ways to focus more on the Kaleesh was to feature as many canon Kaleesh characters as possible. But besides Grievous, Ronderu, and Bentalais, I don't know of any other canon Kaleesh characters from around the Clone Wars time period (there's the one in the Plagueis novel from like 40 years before the Clone Wars time period, but, uh, yeah...). And certainly there aren't any others as central to Grievous' life. Anyway, I have a lot of plans for Ronderu.

Bentalais is also going to be fun-I've been thinking about what I want to do with him. And of course my OC is one of his children, so it will be interesting to explore that dynamic as well.

I'm just really going to have fun with these characters and with some of these really intriguing alien species we have in the Star Wars universe.

Ronderu had observed as Qymaen assigned a number of droids to both San and Lora-they would not be able to order the droids to do just anything, but they could ask them to help them with simple tasks or to fight off any preprogrammed targets, such as the clones or the Jedi. Grievous had made sure that Ronderu would not be included in the droids' database of foes and Lora had been given new clothing and assigned a room. The Muun woman had disappeared for a bit while Qymaen showed Ronderu a map of the ship, and had returned freshly showered and wearing the new grey robes she had been given.

Now the Kaleesh watched as Lora walked carefully around the new area, her cane stretching out in front of her.

Ronderu had offered to help Lora get settled on the ship, mostly to avoid any involvement in the task in which Qymaen was now engaged. Later, she'd get her own briefing on how to use the ship, or, more specifically, its weapons and hyperdrive, but Qymaen was currently trying to find out where Hill had gone off to. Ronderu thought it a good idea that he attend to that rather than her, as she had become increasingly fed up with the troublesome creature.

The Muun banker had to be the most uncooperative hostage she had ever dealt with. She had thought it bad enough when some of her quarry became too terrified to comply with commands. Hill hadn't had that problem. But what he did was much worse in her estimation. Every time he opened his mouth to speak, it seemed it was either to complain or cajole. She had considered murdering him several times. She really had to ask Qymaen how he had managed to put up with Hill for so long. And why.

Ronderu turned her attention back to the Muun woman in front of her. "So, you have powers like the

Jedi, but you are not a Jedi yourself," Ronderu said.

"Yes," Lora responded as she examined her new lodgings. She triggered the sink faucet in the small kitchen, and water rushed onto her hand. Apparently satisfied, she deactivated it. Then she walked over to the food reheater and began prodding at that device. "I am Force-sensitive, but I do not have Jedi training."

"That's good," Ronderu said. "Qymaen and I have not had good experiences with the Jedi."

"Well, I don't envy their ascetic attitude, but their training far surpasses mine," Lora said. "I wish I had access to the information they do on Force-training."

She began walking back towards the living room.

Ronderu considered this statement as she followed the Muun to the other room. "I heard Cad Bane once stole a holocron from the Secure Archives. Most of the Jedi training holocrons are not nearly as secured as that. It would probably be trivial to-

Lora frowned. "It seems wrong to steal from a library."

Ronderu crossed her arms. "You want to fight against the Jedi, but you balk at the idea of petty theft?"

Lora sighed, her cane reaching the sofa. After a few prods, she settled down onto it and felt around until she reached the HoloNet display. "I don't want to fight anyone at all. More to the point, I can't."

"Then what do you plan to do here?"

"Hopefully help to end this galactic war as soon as possible, with as few casualties as possible."

"As long as Kalee wins the war against the Huk, I could care less what happens to the rest of the galaxy."

"That's understandable, I suppose. But if the rest of the galaxy is still at war, I can't imagine that Kalee would remain untouched by that. The fate of your planet is not separate from the machinations of the larger galactic governments."

Ronderu sighed. "True enough. Republic interference is what doomed our planet to its current plight in the first place. If they had not come, Qymaen would have won the war. Still, as long as Kalee is left alone, whatever else happens in the galaxy is not my concern."

"I suppose I might not be so concerned about the bigger picture, either, if I didn't have to see these dramatic visions of galactic destruction."

Ronderu frowned. "What happens in these visions?"

Lora's expression become somber. "Nothing specific-I'm working on that. But there are frightened voices speaking a thousand different languages, ear-piercing explosions and screams-so many screams. Then silence. Then death so all-encompassing it extends from the Core to the Outer Rim. So much death. Not just from the war itself, although that is surely staggering, but from what comes after."

"You can feel death?"

"Yes," Lora said.

"What is that like?"

"I don't think I could describe it to anyone who hasn't felt it themselves. But all Force-sensitives can sense death, just as we can sense life."

Ronderu considered that. Another question occurred to her. "How did you lose your sight?"

"Lose it?" Lora asked, smiling now. "I never had it to begin with. I was born like this. A recessive gene, I was told."

"Recessive gene? What's that?"

"You don't know?" Lora asked.

"No."

"Well, a gene is a trait you inherit from your parents. If it's recessive, then your parents have one gene for it that is not expressed--"

"Ah, never mind. This sounds like one of those 'science' things."

"Am I boring you?"

"No. It's just not a good use of my time. I don't need to know all this stuff about *why* things happen. What's important is that they do."

Lora gave her a small smile. "All right. I suppose you prefer to focus on answering the more immediate questions."

"Exactly. Anyway, if I did need any science, I can always find one of those science people to do it for me."

Lora chuckled. "True. I actually have a bit of an interest in the subject myself. Unfortunately it's been difficult for me to do any experiments without a lab or proper equipment."

"What sort of science do you have an interest in?" Ronderu asked.

"Well, since I have the ability to use the Force, I've had an interest in studying that. Especially the topic of Force visions, so that I might understand how to better make use of that ability, but perhaps other things as well."

Ronderu considered this. "I suppose that could be useful-especially if we could learn more about how to fight against the Jedi and the Sith. I'll make sure you get your lab." She was sure Qymaen could find some unused room in the ship to set one up in. After that, it would be a simple matter to order the necessary supplies.

"Really? That's most kind of you."

"Think nothing of it," Ronderu said. "Qymaen and I have a lot of enemies. We could use all the help we can get."

Grievous found Hill at the entrance to Dooku's suite, ordering his droids about. He was still dressed in the clothing he had donned before they left Muunilinst—a strange-looking white outfit covered with multi-colored triangles, though the matching floppy, broad-rimmed hat they had had him wear to hide his face was nowhere to be seen.

"Yes, I want all of his clothing burned," Hill said to one of the B1 droids clustered around him. "Check the pockets for valuables first. And you, I need every strand of his hair vacuumed out of the carpets and sofas—I'm allergic to human hair. And I need a deodorizer for—"

"What are you doing?" Grievous asked.

"Cleaning out Dooku's suite," Hill said, as if stating the obvious. "It's going to be such a hassle to be rid of the smell of that *terrible* cologne of his. Seriously, I can't imagine why humans try to smell so awful."

"And why are you doing this?"

Hill gave Grievous a puzzled look. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Please-explain."

"Well," Hill said slowly, "When you're going to live in a place, it's standard practice to get rid of all the previous occupant's—"

"Wait, you're going to be staying in *Dooku's suite*?" Grievous asked incredulously. The General had avoided the place ever since Dooku had died. He had been taught from his earliest years that some part of the spirits of the dead lingered in their private dwellings. Still, he thought he could guess why the Muun man was willing to live in Dooku's previous dwelling. As he understood, Hill did not believe in souls, which Grievous supposed made sense as he did not think the banker had one.

"Where else on this vessel would I stay? None of the other rooms are even remotely acceptable accommodations for any self-respecting Muun—"

"Lora said that the standard room I gave her was perfectly fine," Grievous said.

Hill rolled his eyes. "I said self-respecting. Anyway, why shouldn't I have this room? Are you using it?"

"Of course not!" Grievous said. Even if he had wanted to see Dooku's spirit, perhaps to taunt him, he disliked being near the place.

"Then a perfectly good room is going to waste," Hill said. "Anyway, if I have to stay on this glorified death trap of yours, I should at least get the chance to erase Dooku's presence here and take what remains of his possessions for myself."

Grievous considered the Muun's words. "You disliked him."

Hill looked up at Grievous. "General, I plotted his death for years. I despised him."

"Because he forced you to break a contract."

Hill narrowed his eyes. "We've discussed this already."

"It just seems like you had something more *personal* against him." Grievous had mostly taken Hill at his word when he had first explained his reasons for having the chips in Grievous' mind removed. But while he couldn't quite put his finger on it, something had seemed off, seemed *missing*, about the explanation to him from the moment he'd heard it. It was just a feeling, but he had found that usually his feelings about such things were right. It was second nature for Grievous to attempt to understand the motivations of both his enemies and allies-it was the tactician in him. And he thought it especially important to understand those things that motivated one such as Hill to be an enemy in one context, and an ally in another.

The Muun frowned. "He was bad for business. That's all." He glanced over at a droid. "I want this place spotless by 9."

"Roger, roger. Task completion scheduled for 0900 hours."

"Argh, no, not in military time!" Hill groaned. He had the droid change the task schedule, then looked up at Grievous. "Anyway, I suppose it's good that you dropped by. There's something we need to discuss."

"I didn't 'drop by' for your convenience. I was making sure that you weren't trying to cause trouble."

"Yes, I know," Hill said. "But I believe this whole half-baked plan to kidnap me was about my money? And you see, I will not be able to give you that unless we work out one *small* little detail first."

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "What small detail?"

"I need unrestricted HoloNet access."

"Denied," Grievous said. He jabbed a sharp claw at the Muun. "You need access to your bank accounts. Hostages do not get unrestricted access of any sort."

San smiled. "Well, no, they usually don't. But if you want unrestricted access to my assets, then you will need to give me unrestricted access to the HoloNet."

"Explain," Grievous said.

"Gladly, General," San said. "You see, most of the money I've used for the Separatist cause is actually the IBC's money, which I am authorized to dispense in various ways as the Chairman. What remains besides that is tied up in various stocks, mostly IBC stock, and thus its value depends greatly on the continued smooth functioning of the bank, which might be upset by, oh, say, having its Chairman as your hostage."

"What about-"

"I'm not finished. Additionally, all of my power stems from the fact that I am the current Chairman of the IBC. Even my position in the Separatist Senate is based on my IBC position. I am not a government official-the Muunilinst government will pay you nothing for my continued safety. Anyway, I'm sure you are aware that it would hardly look good if the Separatist Chancellor was found to be holding one of his own Senators hostage!"

"Fine, but-"

"-and the IBC will simply choose a new Chairman if they discover these plans to hold onto me indefinitely. Even if you tried to ransom me off to them, you would either have to settle for a rather small sum, or none at all. After all, there are plenty of ambitious types in my company who would be more than happy to fill that position, negating the need for my return."

Grievous growled. He hated all this corporate nonsense. He did, however, follow what the banker was saying. "Then you need HoloNet access so you can continue to do your job and so no one suspects there is anything wrong."

San nodded, smiling brightly. "Yes, General. I can attend all meetings remotely for the duration of my stay here. So that is not an issue. But if you want money from me, you need to give me unrestricted HoloNet access."

"And what's to stop you from tipping someone off about your situation then?"

"What an interesting question," San said, his expression growing increasingly smug. "I really couldn't say. But then, this wasn't *my* idea in the first place."

Grievous growled, lowering his visor close to the Muun's face. "If you're going to be that way, then maybe we just won't bother with the money at all. Maybe we'll just keep you here indefinitely, no HoloNet access or anything else. Perhaps you'd prefer to stay in the cell block?"

The banker sighed. "Or you could take me back to Muunilinst now. Regardless of our mutual loathing, General, I really do require your assistance with killing Sidious. And we *are* on the same side in this war. So I'd rather not get you into any trouble. I can forget this little temper tantrum of yours if you release me immediately. Perhaps punishing me will gain you some amusement, but that will be short-lived when you no longer have any credits at your disposal. So let me go. All of these strong-arm tactics are so unnecessary."

Grievous glared at Hill, his rage slowly boiling. *I could kill him right where he stands.* He hated when the banker did this. When he tried to turn everything around so that it worked in *his* favor. So that he got what *he* wanted, at everyone else's expense. It wasn't going to happen this time.

"No," Grievous said. "You aren't leaving this ship." It was true that Hill needed him to get rid of Sidious, and he did think the banker would continue to help with that regardless. But it was also true that Hill did not consider Kalee a priority. And the banker certainly didn't think he owed Ronderu what she was due from him. So he couldn't be allowed to leave. But he needed to be given HoloNet access, and yet also deterred from using that HoloNet access in a way that might cause Grievous or Ronderu

any problems. Grievous realized what he needed to do.

He retrieved a datapad from one of the nearby droids and typed a few short paragraphs onto it. Then he handed the device to Hill.

The banker sighed again. "All right. You win. I sign this, you give me my unrestricted HoloNet access, and I won't say anything about my current-situation. But first-" He typed something on the datapad and turned it to face Grievous.

The cyborg read what the banker had wrote and gave him a disbelieving look. "You added in a clause just for Dooku's suite?"

"I want this room," Hill said.

"Fine." Grievous rolled his eyes. It didn't really matter to him.

Hill signed the document, and Grievous placed his signature below the Muun's.

"Well, now that that's settled," Hill said, "I'm going to get some food. By which I mean the supplies I took with me, and not the usual appalling cardboard that you military types label as such."

Grievous watched as the Muun left, taking three of the droids with him. The General didn't linger in the area long. Now he had another reason to avoid Dooku's suite.

Chapter 20: Battle of Kalee

Chapter Notes

A/N: Time for another chapter!

Thanks to theascetic and May-chan (ao3) and Celgress and ShadowBlah2 (ffnet) for your reviews of the previous chapter. I always like to know what my readers think of my stories. As the writer, I'm always going to view it from a rather different perspective, so it really helps to know what other people think of the story. I'm glad people seem to be enjoying the interactions between the characters.

I really enjoyed showing the new crew of the Invisible Hand getting settled in last chapter. Fun times!

This chapter ramps up the action a bit from the last chapter, but I'm just getting started. The bigger action scenes are yet to come. Also, this chapter has both a Sidious POV scene and a Grievous POV scene. I'm probably going to be alternating between the protagonists and antagonists quite a bit in this story. I like to show what everyone's up to.

Anyway, I'll be interested to know what you think!

Sidious was walking down the hallway when he encountered Master Yoda. Smiling politely, he began walking back toward his private apartment. He had important matters to attend to. Important nano-sized matters.

"Chancellor, news we must discuss, there is."

Sidious stopped and sighed. *Must we?* At any other time, he might have been quite interested in what Yoda had to say. The ancient Jedi never spoke to him merely to make idle conversation, and his tone indicated that the news was of great importance. But the Sith Lord's mind was on what he considered a significantly more urgent matter that had already been put off far too long. After all, while he was quite confident that Ventress would obey his command not to activate the nanites, he felt that, in this case, a higher level of assurance was necessary.

"Apologies, Master Yoda, but I'm afraid the latest Senate meeting has left me quite exhausted. Perhaps we could reconvene in another-three hours? I might be more attentive after a meal and a short afternoon's nap."

"Urgent, this news is," Yoda said. "Apologize for the inconvenience, I do. Follow me now to the Jedi Council chamber, you must."

Sidious frowned. "If you insist. But you might need to rouse me if I nod off." He followed Yoda to the meeting place of the Jedi. It was not a place that non-Jedi were typically allowed.

"This is most irregular, Master Yoda," Sidious murmured. "We could speak of these matters in my office. It is closer."

"Hmmm," Yoda said. He didn't elaborate.

When they arrived at the Council chamber, Yoda used the Force to close the door behind Sidious. They were the only ones in the room. Sidious briefly considered attacking the Jedi Master now, but almost immediately dismissed the idea. Any fight between him and Yoda would be a close one, and the deceptively diminutive Jedi would likely have ample time to inform the others of the Sith Lord's identity. Anyway, he couldn't help but be curious about what the ancient Jedi thought was so important.

"Information about General Grievous we have, but highly confidential it is."

Sidious raised an eyebrow. He looked around the empty Council chamber. "What is it?"

"The report to the Senate on Dooku's death-missing an important detail, it was."

"Really?" Now Sidious was interested. He had had a lot of questions about Dooku's death, and had wanted to interview Obi-Wan about the matter personally, except the Jedi had left again before Sidious had had any chance to speak with him. So instead he had continued to wonder how it was that both Grievous and Obi-Wan had claimed to have killed Dooku. And how they had seemingly both independently come to publicly claim that Obi-Wan had done the deed. That had been quite the mystery to him.

"Killed Dooku, Grievous did," Yoda said.

"I thought the credit for that accomplishment went to Master Obi-Wan," Sidious said.

"A necessary misdirection, that was, as is our meeting here," Yoda said. "Known to the Sith, the truth cannot be."

Funny you should say that. He feigned a concerned expression. "You think the Sith have compromised my office?"

"Know, I do not. But take any chances with this information, I will not."

How inconveniently paranoid you've become, Master Yoda. If Coruscant glowed with the presence of the Jedi, their council chamber practically oozed with presence of the Light Side. It was like standing suspended in syrup. Sidious did his best to ignore the uncomfortable sensation.

"All right. Why would Grievous kill Dooku?"

"Controlling Grievous, he was," Yoda said. "Through cybernetic implants. Found this out, Grievous did. Allied with Obi-Wan temporarily to kill Dooku, Grievous did."

"So, the cyborg General was being controlled all this time?" Sidious asked. "And now you hope we might negotiate with him to end the war?"

Yoda nodded.

"Who removed these implants?" Sidious asked, eager to know who he should make pay for this turn of events. "I surmise it would not have been possible for Grievous to have removed them himself." *Rather, I know it would not have been possible.*

"Correct, you are. Help, he must have had. But know who they are, we do not," Yoda said. "Sent Obi-Wan to find more information on Grievous, we have. Perhaps also determine the identity of this person, he will."

"It's unfortunate that we still don't know who they are," Sidious said, disappointed.

Yoda nodded solemnly. "Indeed. A great reward, such a heroic deed merits."

Or rather, a horrific punishment, Sidious thought. *I'm really going to have to think up something more creative than the usual forms of torture for this one.*

"I agree. And I thank you for keeping me updated on these important events. I will prepare a transmission to let Grievous know that the Republic may be willing to grant him a full pardon. To be sent confidentially, of course."

"Thank you, I do, Chancellor."

"There is no need to thank me, Master Yoda," Sidious said, smiling benevolently. "I am merely doing my duty to end this war as swiftly as possible." *And to end all the Jedi along with it.*

Grievous dropped his ships out of hyperspace to the sight of a satisfyingly underpowered Republic fleet. Unlike most of the engagements he'd had with the Republic of late, this one was against a considerably smaller force. And given where Kalee was located, the Republic wouldn't be able to send reinforcements immediately. A few Huk battlecruisers also surrounded Kalee, but given their relatively insignificant size and number, it seemed that they expected the Republic to fight their battles for them. It was clear that neither group was prepared for a concentrated Separatist attack. The Republic admiral still had the gall to send him a communication warning him to retreat. Grievous laughed at the weak attempt at bravado. It was time to run the Huk and the Republic off from Kalee once and for all.

"Execute Karabbac Nest maneuver. Open fire on the Republic and Huk fleets," Grievous said, sitting back in his command chair. "And release ten squadrons of Vultures and tri-fighters each." The droids responded immediately. They moved the Munificent-class frigates and Providence-class dreadnaughts into position. Then a hail of lasers shot toward the Republic Venator and Victory-class Star Destroyers, and he saw a number of droid fighters appear in the viewport.

The sides of several of the enemy ships exploded. Grievous lidded his eyes and watched contentedly as his enemies were decimated by the combination of unrelenting lasers and droid fighters.

"Is this all you have to do?" Ronderu asked. "Just tell these machines to attack?"

"Usually it is not quite that simple," Grievous said. "But they are woefully unprepared for us. This will be a short battle."

"An entire fleet of ships and droids, at your command. How did you manage to get the position you have in the Separatist force, Qymaen?" Ronderu asked. "And-what kept you from returning to Kalee with this fleet before now?"

Grievous sighed. "It's a long story, and I confess I don't really know why they wanted *me* to command the Separatist fleet so badly. I never expressed an interest in the position. As for why I was away for so long, well, that was because there were chips implanted in my mind when they made me a cyborg. Chips meant to control my mind."

Ronderu growled. "Who did this?"

"Count Dooku."

Ronderu tilted her head. "I heard he died recently."

Grievous lidded his eyes. "Yes, although few are aware that I was the one who killed him."

"You mean it wasn't Obi-Wan? The Jedi?"

"He did provide some-minor assistance. But no, he did not strike the killing blow."

"Then, you took revenge on Dooku for what he did to you. But-how did you get out from his control?"

Grievous sighed again. "Mr. Hill. He had the control chips removed. Apparently he had been aware of Dooku's tampering from the start, and had finally mustered up the courage to actually do something

about it. Hence why I have asked you not to kill him-and why I have not killed him myself."

"Oh," Ronderu said. "I had wondered about that. He is extremely irritating and troublesome."

"Yes," Grievous said. "He is."

"But I understand now why you let him live."

"I do sometimes wonder how far he can be trusted, but I am indebted to him for his assistance." He sighed.

"But he was also the one who originally took you from Kalee."

"Yes." Grievous said. "He was."

The droids brought him to a thin, pale creature who was complaining about the heat and humidity to one of their guards. Upon noticing him, the alien stopped speaking mid-sentence and tilted their elongated head in apparent curiosity. "Is this the-General Grievous?"

"Yes," a droid intoned.

A wide smile appeared on the alien's face. "Excellent! You've caused me quite a bit of property damage, General! Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Yes," Grievous snarled. "I wish I could have caused more. Republic scum."

"Oooh, you speak Basic! Convenient." The creature clasped their hands together at their waist. "You misunderstand my presence here, however. I do not work for the government."

"What do you want?"

"To offer you a trade. My name is San Hill," the alien said, gesturing to themself. "And I am the Chairman of the InterGalactic Banking Clan. I understand you have a bit of a money problem."

"I understand that you are the source of that problem," Grievous growled.

Hill frowned. "Oh, no, you are mistaken. As I said, I am not an agent of the Republic. I am simply here to collect on the debts your planet has incurred due to the Republic's unfortunate embargo here."

"That still makes you part of the problem," Grievous growled.

"Yes, but I recognize that trying to extract credits from your planet is like trying to squeeze water from a stone. I cannot take what you do not have. It's a waste of my resources and efforts. But the Republic doesn't care about that-they just want to punish Kalee."

"What's your point?"

"There's another option," Hill said. "You work for me for-a time, and I will pay off all your planet's debt from this embargo."

Grievous looked at the droids who held him firmly and at the other droids who stood around them. There were perhaps thirty of them, plus a few bulky green-scaled guards who surrounded the fragile-

looking alien. Grievous was alone, and without any weapons. The droids had caught him while he was sleeping. This alien was a coward who hid behind those who were stronger than them.

"And if I refuse?"

Hill shrugged. "I hand you over to the Republic. I hear you've got quite the reward attached to your capture. Though I'd rather not do that. Still, it's up to you."

"Qymaen!" Ronderu said, standing over him. "Qymaen, what's wrong?"

"Sorry, I had a memory flashback," Grievous said, shaking his head as if to clear it.

"A memory flashback?"

"Yes. When it happens it's as if I'm stuck in my own head. I don't notice what's going on around me."

"How long has this been happening?" Ronderu asked.

"Ever since the control chips were removed," Grievous said. "My mind may never work normally again because of the damage they did."

Ronderu growled. "If Dooku were still alive, I'd kill him myself."

"Has the Republic surrendered yet?" Grievous asked.

Ronderu shook her masked head.

Grievous surveyed the results of the battle. The Huk battleships were now nowhere to be seen and most of the Republic ships had been destroyed, their wreckage floating harmlessly in orbit. Some were spiraling towards Kalee's moon. The remainder had been forced away from Kalee, though they continued to fight.

"Perhaps I should suggest the possibility," Grievous said. He turned to the droids manning the battlestations. "Hail the Republic vessels."

The droids followed his instructions and opened a communication channel.

"You have ten minutes to surrender what remains of your fleet, Republic forces," Grievous said. "What do you say, Admiral?"

The line was silent for a full three minutes. Then, a holo of a Republic officer appeared, but not the one the cyborg was expecting- Grievous could see he was a captain from his rank insignia.

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "You're not the fleet admiral."

The human gave him a dour look. "No, I'm not. Admiral Dreevan is currently indisposed, and, I am inclined to believe, dead. That makes me the commanding officer of this fleet."

"And who are you?"

"I am Captain Tarkin," the Republic officer said. "And I will give this answer to your ultimatum-we will not surrender."

"Then I will destroy every last one of you," Grievous said, his eyes narrowing.

Tarkin gave him a small smile. "You will try."

Chapter 21: The Laws of Motion

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here I am again!

Thanks to ShadowBlah2 and Celgress (ffnet) and May-chan and Red_Griffin (AO3) for your recent comments!

I recently finished reading Tarkin by James Luceno, which I hoped might give me some ideas for this chapter. It didn't give me as much as I was hoping for, but I will be using some material from it. I thought it had some interesting ideas, but I liked his Darth Plagueis novel a lot better. I think the problem I had was that I found the main plot for Tarkin much less interesting than its various peripheral subplots and Clone Wars references. Ah, well. There's still quite a bit I was able to glean from it, research-wise.

Anyway, this chapter has been an interesting experience. It's been almost entirely rewritten from my initial draft, mostly to make changes in the pacing. I could probably make more changes, but I suppose it's good enough to post. Feel free to let me know if you have any thoughts on it, at any rate. I certainly do appreciate feedback.

When the captain had cut communications, Grievous had expected him to initiate an attack. Instead, the cyborg General now watched the retreating ships in amusement. "So our opponent wishes to run away, then?" Was this to be their impressive plan?

"Are we just going to let them flee?" Ronderu asked, standing casually near the viewport.

"Of course not," Grievous said, chuckling.

"Good," she said, though she sounded disappointed. "If they're going to be cowards about this, we should at least shoot them down for it."

"I agree." Grievous directed several of his ships towards the fleeing Star Destroyers.

The Republic ships picked up speed. Grievous was expecting them to enter hyperspace at any moment. It was the only way he thought they might salvage their lives.

Instead they curved into the moon's orbit and traveled behind it. The cyborg General's dreadnaughts followed closely behind them.

"Perhaps they wish to play hide-and-seek?" Grievous said.

Grievous and Ronderu waited.

After a few minutes, a pointed tip emerged from behind the moon. All seven of the Star Destroyers

eventually emerged. None of the Separatist ships did. Grievous growled, his anger beginning to boil.

"What trickery is this?!" He paced around the bridge of the ship, feeling increasingly agitated.

"It seems they mean to fight us after all," Ronderu said. "I take it none of the ten ships you sent after them survived?"

"Not a one," Grievous said sourly. "I don't know how they did it."

"Perhaps we will get a personal demonstration," Ronderu said. "They appear to be coming right towards us."

Grievous launched Vulture and tri-fighter swarms, and fired lasers at the ships.

The Star Destroyers continued to head straight towards them.

"An all-out attack," Grievous observed. "This Captain Tarkin wishes a warrior's death after all, then." *A bold, if ultimately futile, move.*

Grievous ordered the droids to close several ships in from all directions and engage the Destroyers in combat. He watched as the ships approached the Star Destroyers from all directions.

Then it happened. The ships nearest the Star Destroyers began to spiral out of control.

"What is this?!" Grievous walked closer to the transparisteel, observing as the Star Destroyers ignored the now harmless ships and continued to head straight towards the Invisible Hand. He tried to contact the ships now spiraling out of control, but there was no response.

Ronderu was at his side now. "How did he do that?!" her voice was tinged with concern now.

"I don't know."

"If one of us doesn't figure it out soon, we may never do so," she said. "He means to ram us with those Star Destroyers."

"You're right." Grievous narrowed his eyes at the ships. Somehow Tarkin was disabling his opponents without even firing on them.

"Launch vulture squad," he said to the droids manning the battle stations. "Observational only. Avoid attackers and get me a visual on the inside of those incommunicado ships."

The two Kaleesh watched in tense silence as the Vultures flew towards the now defunct ships. The Star Destroyers seemed to pay them no heed, continuing on their one way path towards mutual destruction with the Invisible Hand.

"They're transmitting now!" Ronderu said, her gaze fixed on the holo that had appeared.

The holo showed pieces of droids everywhere inside one of the spiraling ships.

"They're all destroyed!" Ronderu exclaimed. "But how? He didn't even fire at them!"

Grievous frowned, his mind racing for answers. The interior of a ship was in complete disarray without

a single weapon fired. And the Star Destroyers were getting closer. What did they have? An invisible pulse weapon? No. It would have damaged the exterior as well. Tractor beam of some sort? Didn't fit. He was about to order the Invisible Hand to take evasive action when the answer finally came to him.

"Sir," one of the droids near him said. "Should we move out of their way-?"

"No!" Grievous said urgently. "No evasive action! Execute Shoni maneuver with-those five ships over there, and-those four over there!" he pointed a clawed finger towards a cluster of his dreadnaughts to the left and the right that were between the destroyers and the Invisible Hand.

"Er, that will destroy-

"I know," Grievous said. He was about to sacrifice a lot of droids-and a lot of ships. "It's the only way to stop them."

"Alright. Roger, roger."

The nine ships were sent on a straight line path directly towards the Star Destroyers. *I'm going to turn your own weapon against you, Tarkin.* This time there would be no escape for the Republic captain or his crew. No escape from the forces of acceleration.

Sure enough, the dreadnaughts collided with the formation, and the remaining Star Destroyers finally broke apart in a series of explosions, though they took the ships he had sacrificed with them.

Grievous breathed a sigh of relief.

"You figured it out," Ronderu said. "What were they doing?"

"They were remotely disabling the inertial dampeners," Grievous said simply. "As soon as our ships made any acceleration changes, the change was transferred to the onboard occupants instead of being dispersed. The droids can withstand forces in excess of several g's, but even they have their limits. If the Invisible Hand had taken evasive maneuvers-

"We'd all be crushed to a pulp by now," Ronderu finished, her voice grim.

"Yes," Grievous said. He watched the wreckage of now-destroyed Republic and Separatist ships. He sat back down in the command chair. He had won. He hadn't come this far to be taken out by a hastily planned sneak attack.

Still, had it really been hastily planned? It was almost as if the Republic had already known he would come here. But if that was the case, why hadn't they sent more ships? It didn't make sense.

"I can't imagine how they knew how to take out our ships like that," Grievous said. "The ship plans are a very closely guarded secret."

"You mentioned another Sith earlier. Darth-Sidious?"

"Yes," Grievous said. "He is the head of the Sith."

"Do you think that Sidious might have given them the plans?" Ronderu asked.

"He could have, yes. He had access to everything. But how would that help him? If the Republic defeats us, then they'd just reabsorb the Separatist worlds back into the Republic. And since Sidious is an enemy of their government and their Jedi, he would gain nothing more from that than if he were still giving *me* information about the Republic. They want him dead, too."

"Maybe he's given up on winning, and just wants to destroy you before he's destroyed?"

"Possibly. But I don't think he's given up." He looked out through the transparisteel window towards Kalee. "We need to clean out any ground forces the Republic may have here. Time to pay Bentalais a visit."

Tarkin opened the hatch of his escape pod. There were trees all around him, and-under him. The pod had landed in the thick branches of the rainforest canopy. Calls of all sorts of animals filled the air around him. A variety of flying insects attempted to ascertain his suitability as a source of sustenance. He waved them away absently.

He looked down, estimating his height from the ground to be about 20 meters. He gave the ground a fleeting smile.

Kalee reminded him a lot of Eriadu. He felt his training would be particularly relevant here, especially in light of his recent realization. It was time to get to work. He had a veermok to kill.

Chapter 22: The Geonosian and the Giant

Chapter Notes

A/N: As I've said before, I am an unpredictable updater, so here's another irregularly scheduled update.

Thanks to Celgress (ffnet) and May-chan and FadingToBlack (AO3) for your recent comments!

Here I present the first chapter with actual scenes devoted to the two characters referenced in the title of this chapter. I have some plans for these two, I'll just say. The Geonosian character is another of my OC's, who I always have fun with creating, and if you haven't already guessed who the giant is, I think their identity will become clear by the end of this chapter.

As always, I'm interested to know what people's impressions are.

San Hill was currently preoccupied staring at the flaming ships outside his window. Watching them abruptly sputter out as the oxygen drained into the vacuum of space, watching the twisted metal float haphazardly about, and trying not to imagine that some of the tiniest pinpricks might be vacuum-frozen bodies from the Republic ships. He was no stranger to death or murder, and he harbored no regrets for any of those possibly once-living bits of light. But he rather preferred not to see the results. He just

wasn't good at looking away.

He did, however, take the time to tap the holocomm.

"Congratulations, General," he said. "On your victory over the Republic fleet. I was beginning to get worried. I could see they planned to go out in a blaze of glory, and it was clear they wanted to invite us to the party. Not my idea of a good time."

"I hope this is important, Mr. Hill," Grievous growled. "I have a lot on my mind right now."

"So do I, General," Hill said. "Thanks for saving my life again, by the way. Not that it would have been in danger in the first place, if not for you."

"What an interesting observation, Mr Hill," Grievous replied. "And yet I seem to recall that you were the one who arranged our first meeting. If not for you, Mr. Hill, neither of us would be having this conversation right now. Why don't you think on that?"

"Is that miserable man still giving you trouble, Qymaen," Ronderu said over the line. "Do I need to go talk to him?"

"That won't be necessary," Hill said quickly. "I assure you that trouble is the last thing on my mind at the moment. But I thought you might want me to order you some replacement ships."

"Yes. And I'm going to need Hailfire droids. A lot of them."

"Could you be more specific, General?"

"I'll send you a number."

"All right. What exactly happened with our ships out there, Grievous?" The Republic had somehow rendered all their attackers harmless until the General had sent that squadron of ships to collide with them.

"A vulnerability they exploited. I'll send you the details. You need to get me better ships this time, Mr. Hill."

"Don't blame me," Hill said. "I didn't design them."

"Find out who did," Grievous said. "And get them to fix it."

"Of course."

"Anything else?" Grievous asked.

"No," Hill said. He heard the click as Grievous cut the communication, and breathed a sigh of relief. Grievous had somehow snatched victory from what had looked to be certain defeat. It was something he was good at. That was, after all, why Dooku had chosen him.

Hill frowned as the unwanted memory surfaced. He still regretted ever mentioning the Kaleesh to Dooku. That was when everything had started to go wrong for the Muun banker. Then again, if he hadn't, Dooku might be alive even now, which Hill did not think to be a good outcome, either. Still, he

decided it better not to linger over what might have been, but instead try to determine if there was something to be learned from it.

An idealist. A charismatic, powerful, and profitable true believer in his cause, Hill thought. *That's who he appeared to be, who I thought he was.* Hill thought of himself as a good judge of character. It was an important quality, in his line of work. And he was very rarely wrong. But with Dooku, he couldn't have been more mistaken.

Hego took an interest in him early on. Not as a confidante, but as a subject-of-research. Hego had always sought out anyone with Force powers. He had also made a point of mentioning to San that Dooku might become an important investment in the future.

Did he misjudge Dooku as I did? Or did he have plans for him that he simply never shared with me? Hego had long been a risk-taker with his business transactions. But he had always been quick to respond to any concerns for such by saying that he was quite capable of taking care of himself. Which he had demonstrated by his survival of even the most perilous situations time and time again. And those risks, such as they were, had always seemed to lead to a great deal of profit for him.

How would that relate to his interest in Jedi, though? Did it? Hill steepled his fingers in thought. It was rumored that Hego's father, Caar Damask, had had some unusual...abilities with persuasion. San had long thought that Hego must have Force powers himself, though he had never admitted as such to anyone who might cause Hego trouble for it. He remembered the first time he had asked about it, long before the incident that had orphaned him as a teen and had left Hego sans half his jaw.

The old Muun had simply smiled wryly and said, "Of course not, San. Do you really think I'd be shifting money around in this boring old job of mine if I could be shifting anything around with my mind?"

"Yes," San had said with a serious intensity. "You always say that real power isn't about looking powerful."

Hego had chuckled. He'd bent down so that his face was level with San's. "You're a very good listener, San. Do you remember what I've said about that?"

"It's good for blackmailing people," San said matter-of-factly.

Hego tilted his head, his expression thoughtful. "True. Are you planning to blackmail me, young San?"

San shook his head. "I was just curious."

"Would you be disappointed if I was nothing but a boring old banker, with no special abilities of any kind?"

"Maybe," San had said.

"I told you I have no Force abilities. Do you think I'd lie?"

"Yes."

Hego pressed a 500 credit piece into his hand. "Sometimes the question is more fun than the answer, San."

"Is this a bribe?" San had asked with interest, turning the credit piece around in his hand.

"Don't spend it all in one place," Hego had said.

San had saved half of the money, and used the rest to buy himself a small mountain of sweets.

He smiled at the memory. What he would give to know what plans Hego might have had for Dooku. But the old Muun had always been reluctant to confide too much to anyone, even those he was closest to. And San had always thought that his uncle was untouchable, Force powers or no. That he'd always be around, to put his plans into action and make them turn out just as he had wanted them to.

Until one day he was not.

The holocomm chirped. Hill looked down at the name on the ID screen. Rittle the Lesser, from Geonosis. Poggle's secretary. *Time to give her my condolences, I suppose.*

A holo-image of Rittle came up. She was sitting in a disproportionately large chair.

"Yes?" San said. "This is unexpected. How are things on lovely Geonosis?"

"I regret to inform you that Archduke Poggle is dead," she said in the Geonosian language of clicks. A translation in Basic scrolled under her hologram.

San feigned surprise. "What terrible news!" In truth, he did feel a bit sad about the whole affair. Poggle had been a lucrative business partner, and possibly as legitimately idealistic as Dooku had appeared to be. San's impression was that he had simply refused to accept that Dooku could be anything besides the impeccably moral savior of the galaxy. Still, San had quietly maneuvered a successor who might step up to Poggle's position after his death. And who might be a useful ally to the banker.

"Yes," Rittle said. "It is therefore with great regret that I assume the position of Archduchess of Geonosis."

San stared at the unassuming-looking alien. "You were-Poggle's chosen successor?"

"Poggle didn't have a chosen successor," Rittle clicked. "There was some fool who tried to take his office, but I had him thrown into the arena by the battle droids."

"Oh," San said. *I suspect that explains what happened to my carefully chosen successor.*

Rittle tilted her head. "It turns out that one of us had the access codes, and the other did not. An uneven contest from the beginning."

"Well, I congratulate you on your promotion, Archduchess."

"Thank you," Rittle clicked. "Though it brings me little joy. There is more. Geonosis is seceding from the Separatists, and in fact I called to warn you that you might wish to do the same, if you don't care to suffer the fate of poor Poggle. I fear the Separatists have been overrun by a military coup."

"I assure you, that is not the case," San said. *Though if truth be told, she is not entirely incorrect at this point...*

"And I assure you, you are wrong," Rittle said. "The deaths of Count Dooku, Poggle, Nute Gunray, and Po Nudo all in such a short timeframe are not coincidental."

Someone certainly keeps abreast of current events. Nudo's death had only been confirmed on the Holonet two hours ago.

"Of course not!" Hill said. "The Republic is attempting to destroy the Separatist government, as they have been doing since the start of this war."

"This is not the doing of the Republic," Rittle disagreed. "It was an inside job. And only one being would have had the resources to engineer it-to surreptitiously have that Jedi gain access to Dooku, to quietly have those other Senate members killed-and that is General Grievous himself."

"I disagree. Anyway, what other choice do we have but to continue on? Surely you will not rejoin the Republic?" San asked incredulously.

"No, we have been dealt too much destruction from their hands," Rittle said, a deep anger flashing briefly in her eyes before it was tucked away behind a calm, expressionless facade. "But I am in talks with Duchess Satine, and she assures us that the neutral systems will accept us into their fold."

"Duchess Satine? The *pacifist*?" San grimaced.

"Yes," Rittle clicked. "The way I see it, she could certainly use our help with the creation of new, hmmm, *defensive* technologies."

"This seems like a drastic decision," Hill said.

"It is the right decision," Rittle insisted. "Are you certain you don't wish to reconsider?"

"Completely," San said. "I intend to see this conflict out to the end." *Not that I have much of a choice now, in any event.* "Still, please don't hesitate to ask the IBC for financial assistance. My company is, after all, *entirely* neutral in this war, even more so than your current allies. And business with the Stalgasin Hive has always been very-profitable."

"I'm glad to hear that," Rittle said. "Your choice is regrettable, but we will take you up on that offer. While you are still around to extend it, that is."

San smiled. "Then I look forward to doing business with you, Archduchess."

Both Grievous and Ronderu stood silently for a moment on the ramp of the shuttle, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of their homeworld for the first time in years. After a few minutes of that, they both walked down the ramp and at last set foot once more on the planet they'd not seen in years.

"There's so much we have to catch up on," Ronderu said to Grievous as they walked through the jungle undergrowth.

Grievous laughed. "What is there to say about *me*? Anyone could tell you what I was up to before I left Kalee. And my life, ever since I left, does not hold much that needs to be recounted. I was Mr. Hill's leg-breaker for a very long time, and then when I finally finished his odious contract the Jedi blew up my ship and Dooku got hold of me. After that, you can see much of what I did in that time period on any HoloNet news show. Trust me, there was nothing interesting going on in my mind then. Dooku made sure of that. I told you most of the good parts earlier. You're the one who's had the mysterious life all these years! You led a revolution on the Huk homeworld! Then you were a bounty hunter!"

Ronderu shrugged. "I helped free some other Kaleesh who had been enslaved by the Huk who took me, yes. I'm not sure I would call it a full-out revolution. That would be what we are doing now. As for being a bounty hunter? People gave me contracts. I carried them out. They paid me. Sometimes they didn't pay me. Then they would come to regret that. Now I'm wanted in twenty-four systems. It wasn't glamorous, Qymaen. I was only doing it because I was looking for you."

"You said you knew me from my fighting style. But when did you find out-?"

Ronderu waved an armored hand. "The very first time I saw you fight in that mechanical body of yours. It was a little less than a year ago. Some dingy sports cantina on Coruscant. Everyone was groaning because they interrupted the game to show a breaking report. It was the first time anyone had fought the mysterious Separatist General and lived to tell the tale. Not only that, but they'd finally captured you on camera. Several cameras, apparently. As I told you Qymaen, I recognized your fighting style. Even with your additional-enhancements. And while every Kaleesh who wanted to inspire the loyalty and admiration you had was using that name, *Grievous*, I knew that this time, I'd finally found the one who was wearing their *own* mask."

Grievous and Ronderu finally reached the clearing in the rainforest where Bentilais had asked them to meet him.

Only hours ago the General had battled the Republic and Huk above Kalee. He had decimated both fleets, but he knew the surface still held a considerable number of clone troopers and several Jedi. As well as a whole swarm of Huk. As these surviving Republic officers and Huk had still not surrendered, Grievous planned to wipe them out in order to send a message to the Republic.

Grievous was anxious to see Bentilais in person again. He had talked to him earlier via Halari's HoloNet transceiver, and had been heartened to see that the sole surviving member of his Izvoshra was well and, after confirming his identity, eager to see him once again. Still, it was one thing to talk briefly on the HoloNet before Sk'ar was again called to battle, another to meet in person to complete the retaking of Kalee.

I never imagined that a meeting such as this could ever take place. He had been eager to drive the Huk from Kalee before, but now that he knew that Ronderu and Bentilais would stand with him, the fight for his homeworld took on a new significance. Not only would he defend the place that was his home, but he would do that with two of his closest friends, with what remained of the *people* who were his home.

Bentilais slowly emerged from the building, hunching his shoulders as he went through the door. When he had exited the building, he unfolded himself to his full 14-foot height. The Kaleesh man was one of the rare Ralen'vils-Kaleesh giants. His face broke out into an enormous grin when he saw Grievous.

"Grievous!" he said walking briskly to him. When he reached Grievous he knelt down so that Grievous could give him a half-embrace and then clap his shoulder. Bentilais patted Grievous' metallic shoulder in turn. Looking across at Grievous, he said, "I never thought I'd see you again. Should've known you were too stubborn to die."

Grievous laughed. "I can't believe I thought a mere shuttle crash could do you in."

Bentilais looked amused. "I usually hate how tiny everything is, but in hindsight, I can see that having to sit curled up into a ball greatly reduced my burns from the explosion. After that, it was just a soothing swim in the Jenuwaa sea. The saltwater, such a balm to my wounds!"

Grievous laughed.

"So this is the giant you were telling me about," Ronderu said.

Bentilais turned his gaze to the Kaleesh woman. "Ah, the legendary Ronderu! It is a great honor to actually meet you."

"And I am pleased to meet you, Bentilais. Qymaen has told me of your great skill in battle. I confess I thought he must be exaggerating when he called you a giant-I didn't know any Ralen'vils still existed outside the storyteller's tales."

"We are rare, but not extinct."

Grievous could hardly believe that he was standing with both Bentilais and Ronderu here. This would be their first time meeting one another. As befitted Kaleesh warriors who had just met, they exchanged polite compliments and pleasantries.

Soon they would all begin making plans. Then they would finish retaking Kalee, and make sure the Republic never returned here.

Chapter 23: Jedi's End

Chapter Notes

A/N: Well, I finally finished this! It was a real challenge deciding what I was going to put into this chapter. There were quite a few things I had to alter or cut out as my plans for this part of the story changed. Some of the things I cut out will still happen, though, if in a different context and at a later time. I enjoyed writing some of Lora's POV for this chapter. Additionally, the second half of the chapter is written from Grievous' point of view.

Thanks to Celgress and ShadowBlah2 (ffnet) and May-Chan and Ari(ShapeshifterAri) (AO3) for your comments on the last chapter!

I'm looking forward to writing more of my favorite characters into the story. And I know that Obi-Wan hasn't appeared for a little while (not since chapter 15 in fact), but don't think I've forgotten about him! He is going to have a big part in the story for sure. It just takes me a while to build up to all my plot points.

Lora had become fairly well-acquainted with her room. And so she had decided that it was time to learn the rest of the ship. As she walked through the door, she heard several of the B1 droids follow behind her. She'd been surprised by their response when she asked them what she should call them by. They'd said that they weren't given unique identifiers besides an overly long serial number, and in the rare times they were addressed specifically at all, it was with 'you there', or 'hey, you'.

She'd asked how that could be and they'd said that it was because unlike other droids, they were mass produced with the same model on such a large scale that it was impossible for them to all have unique designations.

So she'd asked them to choose designations for themselves. Nicknames, of a sort. And so the droids walking with her were now RogerOne, RogerTwo, and RogerThree. Apparently, they were all rather fond of that particular word. They had argued with each other about it for several minutes until they'd finally decided to share by appending a numeric at the end.

"Where is your destination?" RogerThree asked.

"The medical bay," Lora said. She wanted to familiarize herself with the most important areas of the ship, and she had a feeling that that location would be particularly important.

She heard the three droids turn and began walking to her right so she followed them.

She could taste the slightly metallic tang of the shipboard air. It would take her some time to get used to that. She'd never actually been on a spacecraft before. And it had been a long time since she'd been able to sleep in an actual bed as she had here. And eat food she hadn't scavenged from the local plant life or trash. She hoped she lived long enough to enjoy all the niceties of actually living in civilization again.

She thought back to yesterday. The day that the Republic ships had nearly destroyed the Invisible Hand. She hadn't known what all the alarms had been about, but had felt an enormous number of deaths in close proximity.

She had been staggered by the sudden event. She realized it might be a good idea to learn how to shut more of that out. If she was going to be on a warship, death was probably going to be a common occurrence. She knew there must be some way to reduce the effects-after all, the Jedi were always in war zones with civilians, clones, and other Jedi dying around them.

Later, Grievous had explained to her what had happened, and just how narrowly they had avoided the death that had befallen the Republic officers instead. The description had shaken her, and what was more, she hadn't anticipated it. She was just glad that Grievous had lived up to his reputation. Somehow he had comprehended the mechanism behind the attack before it had destroyed them.

She needed to learn more about Dark Side farseeing. The Jedi were now as blind to the future as she was blind to light. Presumably because the present was being pulled by the Dark Side. She wasn't sure how, or why, but she knew someone, or perhaps several someones, were involved. Someone who knew how to use the Dark Side to conceal their plans from the Jedi. But Lora thought that what, perhaps, they didn't anticipate, was the need to guard against someone using their own tools against them.

What she did know was that even the little she had seen of the direction the present was unfolding into now was entirely obscured from the Jedi Order. A direction that, among other things, would bring about their end. How, she did not know. And that was something she would need to remedy.

By learning to control her Dark Side abilities. The difficulty, she thought, was that she would have to be able to summon great emotion. That was the singular trademark of all Dark Side practitioners. She had certainly felt intense fear after Grievous had told her what had happened. Perhaps it was only a matter of time before she would be able to effectively combine such feelings with her power of foresight. Hopefully then she would know what event would cause the devastation she had foreseen. And who.

She sighed. She hoped she could learn how to use her powers well enough to actually do something useful. Though at the very least, she could probably find other latent Force-sensitives.

As she was walking, she heard footfalls in front of her and suddenly felt a presence which was quite unmistakable. Every life-form had a Force presence which she could sense with great detail. And here she sensed a miasma of ruthlessness, of calculated malevolence, and a degree of self-absorption that she had only felt once before. This presence seemed currently deep in thought and quite pleased with himself. In fact, she had the impression that he hadn't even noticed she was there. *Probably not paying attention to his surroundings at all.*

She stopped abruptly, crossing her arms. It was apparently up to her to forestall any impending collisions. "What are *you* doing here?" She said.

The footfalls in front of her stopped. For several moments, Lora heard only the faint hum of the hallway ventilators, but she could feel a sudden intense annoyance in the presence that stood before her.

"I go where I please," Hill said, his tone reflecting the same annoyance she felt from his presence. "And I certainly don't need to answer to the likes of you."

"I imagine you wouldn't. But I thought Grievous would have locked you up."

"Hardly," Hill said, and this time there was a hint of smugness in his tone. "I've known Grievous for a very long time now."

"He doesn't seem to much like you," Lora observed.

"No, he doesn't," Hill said. "And I don't much like him. But we do have a common enemy who we would both like to see dead. And Grievous requires my cooperation, whether he's willing to admit it or not. He would not dare treat me like some common criminal."

"And who specifically is this enemy?" She thought to the recent HoloNet news reports that had been broadcast in every corner of Harnaidan. "The Jedi who killed Dooku? Obi-Wan?"

Hill burst into laughter at the name. "Obi-Wan! That's a good one! Hilarious! Aren't you supposed to know these things, fortuneteller?"

"Is it a secret?" Lora asked, crossing her arms. "And no, I don't claim to know everything."

"All right. I'll answer your question, then, if you answer one of mine."

"And what question did you want me to answer?"

"Were you *really* so desperate for money that you were willing to sign up for staying on this death trap, or was this all a con gone horribly wrong?"

Lora slowly smiled. "Alright. Deal."

"Excellent. Here's your answer, then. His name is Sidious," Hill said, and though his voice was calm, betraying nothing, she sensed great fear roiling within his Force presence at the mention of the sibilant name.

Lora frowned. "Who is that?"

"Ah, so you've never heard of him? Not surprising. Let's just say he's definitely really angry with the CIS leadership right now, and is probably planning all our messy deaths as we speak. An unfortunate fate for those of us who remain relevant, such as myself. You should count yourself lucky that you're not as important as I am."

Though she found Hill's overbearing arrogance irritating, she chose not to address his remark. She needed to know more about this Sidious. "But-who is he? Why do you-?"

"No! It is your turn! You answer my question now."

Lora sighed. "The answer is neither. I'm just here to help-this is not about the money."

She felt disappointment from Hill's presence.

"Oh."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it's simply-you're either lying, or you truly believe you have *magical* powers. Either way, I have no interest in discussing anything further with you." She sensed a momentary feeling of derision from him, and then the footfalls in front of her resumed, and then continued past her right side.

Exasperated, Lora continued towards the medical bay. It wasn't as if she needed San Hill to answer that question. Anyway she'd rather be ignored by the IBC Chairman than noticed by him. Which was why she'd never corrected his misconception about her being a mystic and was glad when Grievous hadn't said anything to clarify it. She'd had enough trouble with the IBC already to last her a lifetime.

In any event, she was sure that Grievous could tell her who Sidious was. She would certainly have to

find that out as soon as possible, though. The moment Hill had mentioned the name, she had sensed a deep undercurrent of fear, one that exceeded even what he felt toward Ronderu, the only other person he seemed to be truly afraid of.

She hadn't expected his reaction to the mention of Obi-Wan. Even if he didn't consider the Jedi to be their main threat, she didn't understand why he wasn't at least a little concerned about the former Separatist Chancellor's killer.

The droids informed her when they had reached the medical bay, and Lora took a moment to note the path she had taken. Then she opened the door and walked inside. She was immediately greeted by an unfamiliar voice.

"Ah, you are one of the three new ship occupants-Lora Far," the metallic voice said. "Unfortunate. "

There was the sound of metal on metal. Lora guessed the droid might be organizing the area.

"Unfortunate?" she said. "What's unfortunate?"

"They waited too long.," the droid said. "I can do nothing to remedy your situation now."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your sight," the droid said. "Clearly a result of GRH7 gene expression. The window for repairing vision loss in infancy is-"

"Oh," Lora said. "It's no problem. My parents couldn't afford the procedure. Anyway, it's odd that you would bring it up."

"I don't see why," the droid said, and made a sound suspiciously like a laugh.

Lora tilted her head, frowning. "*You're* the medical droid?"

"Correct. I have not introduced myself. I am EV-A4-D. And yes, I am the medical droid. From your inflection, I can tell you are wondering if I'm defective. The answer, of course, is yes."

"What do you mean?" Lora asked.

Lora heard the sound of pills dropping and the hum of the droid's servomotors as he moved around the medical bay.

"My demeanor was considered unsuitable bedside manner. However, I was kept operational because my organizational algorithms are unparalleled. But I was decommissioned when I ordered a surgery performed without anesthetic."

"And yet you are operational now."

"Yes. I was reactivated to perform surgery and repairs for General Grievous. I am capable of performing similar maintenance on over one million species of organic lifeforms, including Muuns. Lucky you."

"Are there-any other medical droids on this ship?"

"Hmmm, no," EV-A4-D said briskly. "I am the only medical droid on this ship. Grievous did not anticipate taking on any of you additional-organics."

"I see," Lora said.

"No, actually you don't."

"A figure of speech."

"I know. I was being facetious."

Lora felt a hard, cool metallic edge lined with paper. The cot. She sat down on it. "I can tell why you weren't very popular with your patients."

Another metallic laugh. "So can I. I simply have no-motivation-to remedy the issue."

"Why did you order a patient to be operated on without anesthetic?" Lora asked.

For a moment, there was no response, and the sounds of the droid's work ceased. "No one's ever asked me that."

Lora heard a clicking sound and the sound of the droid's footfalls drew closer. She could never sense the presence of droids, not their thoughts at least. She thought it might be because it was an ability she accessed through the Living Force, which functioned through midichlorians, which droids did not possess. She wondered briefly if a similar connection to the Unifying Force would allow someone to sense a droid's signature in the Force. Her mind drew back to her surroundings and to the droid's statement.

"Really? I'd think that it's an important question," Lora said.

"Then you're the first to think that. The reason was-the patient requested it," the droid said. "They said they didn't want the anesthetic, that they knew they were about to die. I told them that would be very painful. They said that didn't matter."

"So you we're just doing as they asked."

"Yes," A4-D said.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Lora frowned.

"I knew it wouldn't make a difference. The patient was dead, and I hadn't followed protocol. There is only ever one fate for a droid that does not follow orders."

"Why didn't your patient want anesthesia?"

A creaking sound. "I never got the opportunity to ask. Probably some sort of bizarre Jedi ritual."

"Jedi ritual?"

"Yes. The patient was a Jedi Master."

Grievous drove the clone troopers attacking him back by spinning his four blades in precisely timed motions. While Ronderu slashed at their attackers with her two darksabers. Meanwhile, Bentilais used his slugthrower to ward away the clone troopers. Small explosions happened wherever his ammunition hit.

"What is it with you two and swords?!" Bentilais said.

"These are not merely swords-they are darksabers," Ronderu said. "The blade is made of darkness itself." She stabbed one of the aforementioned weapons into an attacking clone.

"A toothpick is still a toothpick no matter what mystical force it is imbued with," Bentilais retorted.

"I have a blaster," Ronderu said casually. "But you seem to have projectile weapons covered, even if your aim is-not very good."

"My aim is exactly as good as it needs to be," Bentilais said defensively, firing another grenade at the clones.

"Fair enough," Ronderu said, as several clone troopers were thrown from the explosion from the ammunition from Bentilais' slugthrower.

She angled her head to the Hailfire droids on their right. "Anyway, those seem to have plenty of ammunition. You could always trade tips with *them*. Though I think they only speak Binary."

Bentilais sighed. "Just watch out with your toothpicks. I hate sword cuts. So painful, if ultimately ineffective."

"Ineffective on you, maybe," Grievous said. "Not so much on our foes here." He slashed at several of the clone troopers, who screamed as they lost several appendages in the flurry of cuts.

"I suppose," Bentilais said. "Still, it's so-uncivilized. I can't believe the star gods actually use those-"

"Don't call them that!" Grievous and Ronderu said at the same time.

"Oh, right," Bentilais said. "Their ego complex. I always forget about that."

Ronderu snorted. "I wish I could."

Bentilais fired another grenade. "Must be hard, having to actually talk to them long enough to know about that. Sometime you two will have to tell me what it's like, to live among the stars, constantly dealing with people who are even more egotistical than you."

Grievous laughed. "I'll bet you'd enjoy that." He was certainly enjoying this. It would take time for him to become accustomed to such feelings again. Happiness had become an unfamiliar emotion to him, almost alien. He'd lost so much. So much that he could never be Qymaen again, even if Ronderu still called him by that name. It wasn't that he had repudiated the name-it was that he did not feel he could reclaim the name, with all that he had lost of both his body and his mind. Even the return of Ronderu could not make him whole now. He could only ever be Grievous. But with the promise of regaining freedom for his homeworld with two friends he had thought long gone, that was good enough.

Nearly so, at any rate. He still needed to find out where the Jedi were hiding...

"Over there!" Ronderu said, as if hearing his thoughts. She gestured forward with a darksaber.

Grievous looked towards where she had pointed the sword. A being perhaps half the height of the clone troopers, dressed in the distinctive garb of a Jedi General. Grievous's encyclopedic memory instantly recognized the Jedi as Even Piell.

"Looks like our lucky day," Grievous said. "A Jedi Master."

Grievous approached the Jedi Master cautiously, splitting his arms apart and rotating the two upper blades while he used the blades in his other two hands to lunge. The Jedi blocked the attack, but was driven back. The clone troopers surrounding him were being kept busy by Ronderu and Bentilais, so Grievous didn't have to split as much of his attention to focus on them. It was good to fight with other Kaleesh again instead of simply the battle droids.

Grievous drove the diminutive Master Piell farther back, becoming a whirlwind of blades. Only when the Jedi leapt backwards onto a cliff did Grievous separate from his friends, scuttling up the cliffside to follow him.

Piell leapt backwards. His small size made him more agile and difficult to hit, but Grievous knew that it also meant his attacks on the Jedi would be more devastating. He watched his opponent carefully, waiting for an opening.

"I call for a temporary truce," Piell said suddenly. "Let us discuss this."

"All right," Grievous said. "Tell your soldiers to stand down, then."

Piell nodded to the clone troopers behind him, and they slowly lowered their weapons.

Grievous deactivated his lightsabers and walked up to the Jedi, stopping several feet in front of him.

"Now, I will discuss the surrender of my-" Piell began. A nearly imperceptible movement caught his eye.

The cyborg General's arm stabbed downwards in an instant, impaling the Jedi in his chest. "Why did you-"

"We never agreed how long the truce would be," Grievous said, pulling his weapon from the Jedi's chest.

The clone trooper's brought their weapons out. Grievous waved his hand around him, yanking the weapons from their grasp. The other Kaleesh, who fought under Bentilais, walked out of the trees, training their weapons on the clone troopers.

"Though I will point out that you decided it ended before I did," Grievous continued. "Otherwise-your lightsaber would still be at your side, not in your hand." Grievous plucked the offending weapon from the now dying Jedi's hand.

"I wasn't going to harm you," Piell said, laying on the ground, his one good eye wide. "Our instructions were to...capture you, not...kill."

"I'd be as good as dead if the Republic ever got hold of me."

"You could have been granted...a pardon. You still could be-"

"I don't care about that," the cyborg General growled. He gestured around him. "I care about-this."

Piell's single eye widened as if in a sudden realization. "Of course. I...understand."

Grievous looked down at him thoughtfully. "You seem to be in a lot of pain. Did you want me to-?" He pointed a blue lightsaber downwards at the dying Jedi.

Piell held up a hand. "No! No. I wish to make-a request."

Grievous deactivated the saber, though he still held the other three in a defensive position around him. "All right. I will hear your final request."

"Thank you. All I ask-is-please give us the chance to end-this war. Chancellor Palpatine will...will..." he gasped, clutching his chest as he lay on the ground.

"I understand. I will hear what your Chancellor has to say. If he agrees to my conditions, then this war will be ended."

Piell gave the cyborg General a small smile. "Thank you." The light faded from his eye then, and his face went slack.

Grievous looked at the currently disarmed clone troopers. "You are all our prisoners now. But my offer to the Jedi-" he paused, silently suppressing one of his usual insults, "-still stands. Do any of you wish to contact your Supreme Chancellor?"

"I will," a sickeningly familiar voice said. Grievous turned his head toward the sound in shock.

Slowly removing his helmet, the face of Obi-Wan Kenobi gazed at the cyborg General with a sad but determined expression.

Chapter 24: Internal Discord

Chapter Notes

A/N: Time to post this chapter I think!

Thanks to Celgress and ShadowBlah2 (ffnet) and isaakfvkämpfer and May-Chan (ao3) for your comments! I always appreciate getting such a variety of different comments!

I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. I finished the last of the Clone Wars episodes that I skipped the first time through recently. I expect that a lot of the characters who play important roles in this story will be from The Clone Wars cartoon, though I have and will continue to include my favorite EU characters, as well as giving the Separatist Council (ie.

the ones who knew that Sidious was in charge) a much more prominent role. I have some ideas for the direction I want to go with Wat Tambor and Mr. Nute faking-his-death Gunray, and I want to work all the currently living Separatist Council members into the story somehow. Even the ones I killed off will have an impact on the story, as I hope might already be clear in regards to Poggle the Lesser. And I certainly plan to continue developing San Hill's arc for this story. I always thought it would be interesting if the Separatist Council had had a larger role in the story and more personality. Do you have a favorite Separatist Council member? If so, I'd be interested to hear who they are and what you like about them!

I finished Maul: Lockdown by Joe Schreiber recently, and that was quite an enjoyable novel. Plenty of action and some quite interesting elements that I might incorporate into this fanfiction at some point.

"Kenobi," Grievous growled, his anger flaring. *What is he doing here?!* "Do you have a death wish, Jedi?" He walked up to Kenobi, leaning over until his face was mere inches from the Jedi's.

"I told you, General, I only wish to end this war."

"And what about your friend? It seems that he, too, only wished to end this war. By ending me. Or do any of you really delude yourselves into believing that I would ever receive a fair trial as a Republic prisoner?"

Kenobi winced. "I warned Piell that it would be impossible to capture you alive. I haven't come here to fight you. Chancellor Palpatine wishes to discuss terms. If I may?" He held up a circular holo-communicator.

Grievous narrowed his eyes, examining the Jedi's expressions. Grievous could discern barely suppressed grief, probably from witnessing the other Jedi Master's death. He didn't detect any attempt at deception from Kenobi, however. He stepped back several paces, clasping his arms behind his back. "I gave my word to Master Piell that I would talk with your Chancellor, and I do not take such things lightly. So yes, you may contact him. Whether that has the result either you or Piell wished for, remains to be seen."

"Then I will hope for the best," Kenobi said, his expression somber. He activated the holo-communicator. A life-sized hologram of the Republic's Supreme Chancellor appeared in front of Grievous.

"Chancellor Grievous," Palpatine began, his expression grave, "The Jedi have appraised me of the situation and implored me to take action. I only hope that you will accept my offer for peace."

"Only if you agree to my terms," Grievous said.

Palpatine tilted his head, his expression earnest. "Anything, within reason, will be yours."

"Then I will list our demands," Grievous said. "Firstly, you will end your support of the Huk claim to this planet and its people. Kalee will belong to the Kaleesh, and to them only."

A small smile appeared on the Chancellor's face. "Not a problem. However, we must ask that the Kaleesh not invade the Yamrii homeworld again."

Grievous waved a hand dismissively. "If they stay off Kalee, then there will be no need to bother with their wretched planet." He had only attacked them last time in retaliation for their enslavement of his people.

"Understood," Palpatine said.

"Furthermore, the Republic will cease attacks on all CIS-affiliated worlds," Grievous continued. He had already gotten the agreement that he was truly concerned with, but he knew he would be expected to obtain terms that were favorable to the CIS. Also, Grievous was acutely aware that it was his affiliation with the Separatists that had allowed him this victory. As much as he disliked involvement with galactic politics, he realized there was nothing he could do to avoid it if he wanted to ensure the long-term safety of his people.

"As long as the CIS ceases attacks on the Republic," Palpatine said, still smiling placidly.

"Fair enough," Grievous agreed. He peered at the blue hologram's face, trying to get a sense of Palpatine's intentions, to intuit if he had any ulterior motives. He found it difficult. Palpatine was a human, a species which Grievous could usually read quite easily. Certainly Kenobi was never any challenge in that regard. But Palpatine's expressions were very-closed. Controlled. Perhaps not surprising, as many politicians had learned to hide their true emotions, but the extent to which Palpatine had accomplished this exceeded anything he'd ever encountered before. It was almost as if his face was not a face at all, but a mask.

"And I would appreciate if you would return the prisoners you've taken," Palpatine added gesturing towards the clones and Kenobi.

"Let's make it an exchange," Grievous replied, giving up on his attempt to read the Republic Chancellor's intentions. "I understand you have some prisoners of interest to us as well." He might as well attempt to extract some of the Separatist prisoners the Republic held. He knew from reports he'd read that several turncoats, including a clone named Slick, were currently rotting in the Republic's high-security prison blocks. Dooku had expressed little interest in investing resources to extract what he'd termed as 'failures', but Grievous thought they deserved more consideration than the Sith Lord had given them.

"That sounds fair. Are we in agreement, then?" Palpatine asked.

"Yes," Grievous said.

"Good," Palpatine replied, his expression brightening. His hologram took on an announcer's tone. "This day will make history, as the day that the war was finally ended. You will be remembered, Chancellor Grievous, as a being of great-"

"Yes, yes," Grievous said, waving a hand impatiently, "Perhaps you can save the flowery speeches for another time. When will this agreement be finalized?"

If Palpatine was upset at being cut off, he gave no indication of it. His smile was as bright as ever. "I understand the sense of urgency, but I think an event of this magnitude calls for a more-direct meeting between us."

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "You must think I'm a fool if you expect me to travel to Coruscant." The Republic capitol was crawling with clones and surrounded by an enormous fleet.

Palpatine's faded blue eyes widened in clear surprise, his expression becoming serious. "Oh, no. I apologize for the misunderstanding. You see, I'll be coming to you. To Kalee."

Sidious was sprawled on his deluxe-sized bed in a red bathrobe, emitting an occasional snore. To an observer, such as the red guard watching the security cameras stationed outside his quarters, it would appear that he was sleeping. This was quite definitively not the case. Sidious, like his Master before him, had dispensed with the need for sleep.

He was meditating. It was fortunate, he thought, that the natural human sleep cycle gave him ample opportunity to engage in this activity. No matter how busy matters of state kept him, no matter how much interference the nearby Jedi Temple had on his powers-an interference that was quite considerable, he always had plenty of time to sift through the possibilities that lay before him, to evaluate the eddies and flows of the ever-changing future. And to select the best one.

As he was doing now.

He cast his mind forward, planning his move against the miniature murderers residing within him.

The nanites.

While he had initially felt a pressing urgency to deal with them, that alarm had quickly faded into a dark fascination. He had put off removing them for several weeks now in order to ponder the best course of action. But with the important business of Grievous ahead of him, it was time to make a decision.

Such beautiful creations. *Such a pity to destroy them*, he thought. Would it not be better to turn them to his own use? If he could have them removed without destroying them, then there were so many *interesting* things he might do with them.

The difficulty was, it did not seem possible. These nanites were a devastating technology, with abilities that far exceeded any of the standard nanite designs. But due to the ease of reproducing them once their design was understood, they were also one with a proclivity for getting into-a variety of hands. And so it was that in every future he examined where he extracted the nanites without destroying them, he foresaw his own death. Hundreds of Palpatines collapsing during a pivotal speech, thousands of Palpatines dying ignominiously, felled by the invisible assassins as he walked down stairs, attended a party, or ate dinner.

And one of which died quite dramatically in a nuclear attack on Coruscant by what was apparently an

effort by extra-governmental parties to quarantine what had become a nanite plague in that particular future.

When he again turned his mind to the possibility of retrieving the nanite technology, he saw another future where he managed to destroy the entire Jedi Council with copies of the nanites he'd had Republic scientists reverse-engineer. For a moment, he thought he had chanced upon a rare opportunity.

But then he saw his face collapse into a half-eaten steak.

Sidious reluctantly determined that the nanites were unsalvageable. As fascinating as he found it to ponder their nearly endless potential to cause chaos and fear, he found those dark futures distinctly unappealing without his own continued presence.

It was decided then. He would destroy them. But not with the Dark Side. This required attention of the medical sort, something which Sidious knew his powers did not excel in. Perhaps Plagueis had had such abilities, but there were many abilities his former Master had possessed that he had determined unnecessary for his own purposes.

Plagueis had been a researcher at his core, a scientist. To him, personal discovery of the universe's secrets was the ultimate power.

To Sidious, the politician, *delegation* was the ultimate power. When Sidious at long last assumed his mantle as Emperor, he foresaw teams of Dark Side scientists working day and night to discover for him any secrets he desired. Nothing, even immortality, would be beyond his grasp at that point.

But first, he had to avert a nanite apocalypse.

Such a pity.

Sidious opened his blue-grey eyes. With a sigh, he rose from the bed.

Ventress gritted her teeth as she stared at the display, futilely willing it to jump back to life.

Sidious was going to kill her.

The nanites were gone. It wasn't simply that Palpatine was dead, although she thought that the obvious interpretation-it was that the nanites had stopped transmitting completely. Palpatine's death alone would not have done that. A blaster bolt to the head, a spontaneous heart attack, even a disintegration would have left the nanites operational, allowing them to report on Palpatine's death and the current location of his body, if any. In fact, according to their now-deceased creator, there was really only one way to destroy the nanoprobes without their activation. Which meant that either they had somehow gone off unexpectedly without her authorization, killing the Chancellor instantly and destroying themselves in the process, or he had died in some freak nuclear attack on Coruscant that had destroyed the nanites along with him.

Deep breaths, she thought, though she found her thinking was not translating into action. She closed her eyes and thought of her old Master. Not Dooku this time. Ky Narec. The Jedi who had trained her

as a Padawan. He had taught her calm. She had admittedly never been very good at it. But she drew on what he had taught her to soothe herself from the edge of panic.

Maybe she should just wait it out, give Sidious time to cool his anger...

Or, that might just give him time to become even angrier. Taking a deep breath, she opened one of her ration bars and ate it while she considered her options.

I could just give up on this plan of becoming his apprentice.

Out of the question. Ventress was determined to become nothing less than a full Sith. And with the death of Dooku, Sidious *was* the Sith. Only he could confer the mantle of Sith on her now.

She had long harbored the vague hope that one day Dooku might fell his Master once and for all, becoming the new Master of the Sith, and making her his de-facto Sith apprentice.

Now, with his death, all such hopes had been dashed.

She crumpled the paper from the ration bar and focused her Force powers on it, reducing it to ash. Grimacing, she turned back to the stilled screen, deep in thought.

If I don't inform Sidious of this promptly, it will make me appear weak, indecisive. Unsuitable as a Sith.

She pressed the contact code into the communications console and waited.

Five hours later, the small holo flickered to life, and the image of Sidious appeared, his hands clasped in front of him.

"Ventress. Finished with your task so quickly, have you?"

"No, Lord Sidious," she said. "But there is something of great import I must bring to your attention."

Sidious tilted his head, a bored expression in his yellow eyes. "Did you *fail* in your task, Ventress? Do you require-assistance?"

"No! I haven't even reached the Unknown Regions yet."

Annoyance crept into his gaze. "Then what is this about?"

"It's about the nanites," Ventress said, "I stopped receiving transmissions from them several hours ago. I can only conclude that Palpatine is dead. But it was not by my hand." Taking care to meet his gaze, she kept her expression neutral.

Don't show weakness.

A slow grin transformed the Sith Lord's expression into one of malicious glee. "I see. So you've lost control of your nanites, Ventress?"

"I haven't determined what happened."

"Palpatine isn't dead," Sidious said.

Ventress felt shocked by the news. "Then how-?"

"It seems that *someone* gave the Chancellor an anonymous tip that he'd been infested by some truly insidious nanites," he said, his expression still one of amusement.

Ventress collapsed into her seat, upset and bewildered by the news. *All that work, all the waiting, all the fighting, all for nothing.* "But that makes no sense! The only person besides me who knew about the nanoprobes was-

A sudden surge of anger filled her. "You! It was you! Why?! I handed him to you on a silver platter! You could have-

Ventress felt herself involuntarily rising to hover in the air, her throat constricting as the hologram of Sidious held the fingers of one pale hand in a gesture of strangulation.

"Are you questioning my judgment, Ventress?" he hissed, baring his teeth like an angry beast.

With some difficulty, Ventress shook her head, one hand held to her neck in a futile attempt by her instincts to alleviate the source of the constriction.

Almost dismissively, Sidious released his grip on her and she crumpled back into the chair of her ship. His expression dour, but no longer filled with the wild anger from moments before, he spoke again. "Palpatine is an important piece, Ventress," he said, his voice calm now. "I can't leave his fate up to someone who I do not yet trust to carry out my will. You have yet to prove yourself, Ventress. You forced my hand."

Ventress finished catching her breath. "I am Sith. I will not fail you."

The Dark Lord's yellow eyes bored into her. "Then. Bring. Me. The. Chiss."

The hologram flickered once, and then disappeared.

That went well, Ventress thought, grimacing and rubbing her neck. This Mitth'raw'whoever had better not give me any trouble. I'm not in the mood for it.

Chapter 25: Keep Your Enemies Closer

Chapter Notes

A/N: Another chapter has arrived!

Thanks to Houndeye, Celgress, and ShadowBlah2 (ffnet) and May-Chan (ao3) for your comments on the previous chapter!

I'm really enjoying writing this story. It's always hard to find more source material for Grievous. Even when he's in something, there's not usually a lot of depth to his characterization. Now, I have plenty of my own ideas for how to detail him as a character, many of which I can't expect to find much source material on, anyway. Still, it would be great to find more tidbits to build off of. I have the Star Wars: Visionaries comic that gives

his origin story, I have a comic simply entitled Star Wars:General Grievous (are there others about him?), I've read Labyrinth of Evil, seen the Revenge of the Sith movie, and of course I've used a lot of material from both Clone Wars cartoons. But if you think I'm missing something important, or even just mildly interesting, please feel free to let me know!

Sidious is definitely plotting to get the Separatists back into his clutches. I've done quite a lot of thought on what he has in mind, and as some have guessed, it's not going to be pretty.

Also, there's definitely going to be more Obi-Wan in this story, starting now!

Grievous paced the length of the shuttle. The cyborg general had had all the clone troopers placed in cells. However, since he didn't think that a Jedi could be as easily contained, he had decided to keep watch on Obi-Wan himself. His original plan had been to place the Jedi in the containment field in his shuttle. But he'd been overtaken with an unusual reluctance to do so when they had finally arrived in the shuttle. So, though he had of course taken the Jedi's lightsaber and blaster, he had not restrained him. Obi-Wan simply wandered the area freely, examining everything from the MagnaGuards to the decor, which Grievous had supplemented with various pieces of Kaleesh art. *I'll put him there when I go to sleep. I don't think he'll try to escape anyway. He wants the prisoner exchange to go smoothly.*

Still, Kenobi had upset his plans with his unexpected appearance. Now Grievous would be expected to treat Kenobi as a prisoner to be exchanged, and thus he was honor-bound not to harm him in any way. Which conflicted with his oath to the Separatist Senate that he would mete out vengeance on the Jedi if he encountered him again. Not to mention his own need for vengeance. As far as he was concerned, every single one of the Jedi Order was complicit in the enslavement of his people. Still, Kenobi had seemed legitimately willing to put aside his own assumptions to help Grievous, first to defeat Dooku, and then to surrender rather than fighting Grievous when they had met again. Grievous had begun to get the strange sense that he could actually *trust* Kenobi, of all people.

In any event, he didn't have much choice. For this peace treaty to work out, he had to keep his end of the bargain. Even if that meant sparing his hated enemy's life.

Grievous had somehow, in this one battle, won the war. It seemed almost too good to be true. At the same time, it had required-compromises he had not even remotely contemplated until that moment. Like sparing Kenobi. And taking Palpatine at his word.

"I wasn't expecting that to go so smoothly," Grievous said, pacing inside the shuttle. "Do you think he meant what he said?"

"Hmmm?" Obi-wan murmured.

"Your Chancellor," Grievous said. "Is he trustworthy?"

"I'm sorry, is this an interrogation?" Kenobi asked. "Are you asking me for intel on the Chancellor? Will there be punishments if I don't comply?"

"Are you always this irritating?" Grievous said, glaring down at him.

Obi-Wan gave him a lop-sided smile. "Only when I try to be."

"Just answer the question."

"I'm not really sure if I can," Kenobi said, shaking his head and shrugging. "You've tried to kill me and you did kill Piell- and now you're asking me if our Chancellor is trustworthy?"

Grievous growled. "Your friend would have got me killed."

Kenobi sighed, his eyes downcast. "Sadly, I didn't know Even Piell that well. If I had, maybe I could have convinced him to forgo the capture attempt. Maybe he'd still be alive even now."

Grievous narrowed his eyes. "Are you blaming *yourself* for his death? I assure you, you can take no credit for that. It was his choices and my actions that led to his demise."

Kenobi looked up at him, his expression perplexed. "Thanks-I suppose?" He sighed.

"I'd still like an answer to my question," Grievous said. "About the Chancellor."

Kenobi looked thoughtful. "I've never detected any deception from him before."

"That's not an answer," Grievous said.

"He always seems sincere."

"And yet you seem hesitant to say he can be trusted."

"Good intentions don't always lead to good actions."

Grievous snorted. "At least we agree on one thing, then. Though I must wonder if you've ever applied that thought to your vaunted Jedi Order?"

Kenobi looked down. "I looked into what you told me. I'd never heard of this conflict between the Kaleesh and the Yamrii. But you were right. The Yamrii were keeping slaves-that is expressly against Republic law, which they are very much subject to. When I return to Coruscant, I will ensure these facts are brought before the Senate. The Yamrii responsible will be removed from power and brought to justice."

Grievous looked down at the Jedi. "That is good to hear. But if this was so easy for you to uncover, then why did none of the rest of your Order ever notice it?"

"I suppose the Senate never told them they should look," Kenobi said.

"So you just do what you're told, then?" Grievous said.

Kenobi gave him a pained smile. "We are the servants of the Republic, not its masters. But you are right. We should make it a habit to always question what we are told. Qui-Gon said those very words to me, once."

"Qui-Gon Jinn. Your old Master. He died at the Battle of Naboo ten years ago."

Kenobi raised an eyebrow. "And what do you know about that?"

"Everything there is to know," Grievous said. "Everything that is public record, at least. I've always had a good memory, but my ability to recall facts was greatly enhanced when I was-turned into this monstrosity," he said, gesturing a clawed hand towards himself. "Even as my personal memories were inhibited."

"I see, then," Kenobi said. He looked thoughtful. "You call yourself a monstrosity, but I don't think that's true."

"Even if I tried to kill you and killed a Jedi right before your eyes?" Grievous said, throwing the Jedi's earlier words back at him.

"Neither of those facts, as painful as they may be to me, mean that you are a threat now. The Jedi do not seek vengeance, but justice."

Grievous walked up to the Jedi, bending his head down to his level. "If I'm not a monster to you, Jedi, then what am I?"

Kenobi frowned. "Complicated. The Sith tried to turn you into a monster, but that's not what you are. That's why they tried to control you, I'm sure. You wanted justice, and yes, revenge too, but you were never willing to go as far as the Sith wanted you to in order to achieve those goals."

Grievous wasn't sure what to say to that. Now that he'd had more time to reflect on what had happened during the time the Sith had controlled him, he'd realized just how little he remembered of it. He remembered-feelings. Hate, anger, and a constant, nagging fear. Always those same feelings, again and again in a neverending loop he'd been unable to grasp or stop. He recalled objectives. Kill this Jedi, capture that one. He remembered flashes here and there, particularly from his battles with Kenobi, but nothing quite as coherent as it should be, even now. Even as his memories of his time as a creature of flesh-and-blood had become crystal clear, his memories of his time as a mind-controlled cyborg were still-vague, elusive. He would have to ask the Doctor about it. EV-A4-D hadn't mentioned it when he'd asked about the side effects of the implant removal, but he would surely know why it was happening.

"Are you all right?" Kenobi asked.

"Sorry. I-just find it surprising that you, of all people, would say that. I-"

"I present to you the results of your-investment, Chairman," Dooku said, gesturing to Grievous.

Grievous resented this. He'd been told that this meeting would be important. San Hill was not important!

For his part, the Muun looked surprised. "It worked," he said.

Dooku laughed jovially. "What were you expecting? Surely not failure?"

"Of course not," Hill said quickly, walking closer to Grievous.

"Grievous," he said. "Do you, ah, remember me?"

"You are San Hill," Grievous growled. He loathed the creature in front of him. He started to say more,

but then nothing more seemed to come to mind. It wasn't important, anyway. This creature wasn't important. He was nothing.

"Do you remember our conversation the last time we spoke?" Hill asked.

Again, Grievous started to say something, but the words didn't come to him. Instead he growled, rage building in him. "You are wasting my time!"

Hill glanced at Dooku.

"You should call him by his title, Chairman," Dooku said.

Hill laughed. "Supreme Commander of the Droid Armies? What a mouthful!" He walked around Grievous, seeming to examine the cyborg Kaleesh. "Perhaps it should just be General Grievous. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

"He seemed to think so, too," Dooku said. "That's what he declared himself after he took out his entire MagnaGuard contingent."

The Muun finished his walk around Grievous and stood in front of him again, examining him with narrowed eyes. "Yes, it was his title when he fought as a warrior of Kalee."

Dooku rolled his eyes. "He does seem to be rather fixated on such vanities."

"He seems quite different from-before," Hill said, frowning.

"Of course he is," Dooku said. "He is much more deadly now than he ever was."

The Muun's gaze snapped over to meet Dooku's, his eyes narrowing and his face contorting into a grimace. "You say that, but I've seen no evidence that this procedure has preserved all of his-relevant abilities. I gave you the complete oversight you asked for, but I'm not sure you made the best of it."

Dooku gave the Muun a small smile. "You want a demonstration, then?"

Hill crossed his arms. "Yes."

"As you wish," Dooku said. He pulled a datapad out from under his cloak and tapped it a few times before looking over to Grievous. "I've released a Jedi from the cell block. He should be along here shortly. Kill him for us, would you, General? Oh, and do be sure you do that before he makes a mess of the Chairman here. I'm afraid the torture has not been kind to our dear Jedi's-state of mind."

An objective. Finally. Grievous immediately sprang into action, walking towards the three entrances to secure them.

"I thought you said this was a demonstration! Not a real scenario!" Hill hissed at Dooku. Even though the two were now behind Grievous, he could easily triangulate Hill's position from the sound.

Grievous selected one of his lightsabers and ignited it.

"It is a demonstration," Dooku said nonchalantly. "A real scenario would be if I didn't know the Jedi's skill level in advance, and if I wasn't leading him along every step of the way. Oh, and if I wasn't here

to make sure nothing happened even if our fearless General suffers a-glitch."

Grievous waited, coiled and ready to strike.

A sudden scream punctuated the silence, followed by a yelp of surprise from Hill. Grievous turned around. The Jedi had come through the ventilation shaft! Grievous converted his form into its insectoid configuration and skittered over to his opponent, converting seamlessly back as he reached him and blocking the Jedi's blows with his own lightsaber. Looking into his enemy's eyes, he could see that Dooku's earlier statement had not been an exaggeration. This Jedi was all rage and desperation. No deliberation or planning. As the Jedi brought his hand up in a vise-like gesture to begin choking Hill, Grievous sliced the appendage off, earning a scream from his opponent and another yelp from Hill as he fell to the floor.

He finished the Jedi with a few lightning-quick stabs through the chest, and grabbed his lightsaber as it fell from his adversary's limp hand.

Silence. Grievous tucked the new lightsaber into his cloak and turned around. Hill was sprawled haphazardly on the floor, staring at the dead Jedi's body and looking decidedly green. It was clear to Grievous that he'd suffered no severe physical damage from the attack, however. Grievous turned to Dooku.

The Count clapped, a small smile forming on his face again. "Excellent. What do say, Chairman? Did he perform adequately?"

"Yes," Hill said quietly.

"I'm glad you think so. Your approval is, as always, vital to this operation."

"General?" Kenobi said, his expression concerned.

Grievous growled, his mind recalling his current situation. And also the memory that had just replayed itself to him. A memory that until now he'd been unable to recall. He mentally filed it away for future consideration.

"What happened? Are you alright?" The Jedi was still giving him a worried look, placing a hand on his artificial shoulder.

*"Just a-side effect of removing Dooku's control chips from my mind," Grievous said, displeased. He checked the lightsabers in his cloak. There were five, the same number as before. "Surprised you didn't try to escape," he muttered. *Or worse, take me prisoner.* Kenobi could have easily done both, given such a perfect opportunity. Grievous had expected Kenobi not to make trouble if he was being watched. Being left unattended was a different matter entirely.*

"That would be at cross purposes with my goals. I want this peace treaty to happen, General. Any shift in the balance of power could upset that."

"Even one in your favor?"

Kenobi smiled. "I'd hardly call betraying your trust to be a shift in my favor. Especially when we were just getting to know each other."

"This is welcome news," Amidala said, her voice calm but her eyes bright with hope. "It is encouraging to know that we are in agreement this once, at least."

"I have always tried to make the best out of this difficult situation," Sidious said. "It has pained me that we are so often in disagreement. But it seems that current events call most definitively for diplomacy, which I know you will appreciate."

Amidala gave Sidious a genuine smile, which he returned with his most convincing fake.

"Diplomacy is always more powerful than force, Chancellor," she said. "I believe it was you who taught me that."

Yes. I lied, Sidious thought. But I knew it was what you wanted to hear. His congenial smile betrayed nothing of his inner loathing for his former Queen.

If my plans did not require your continued existence, I would have disposed of you long ago.

One day, when the Jedi had been destroyed, and Anakin turned, he would finally be rid of her.
Patience. Patience is key.

"You have always been my most astute student," Sidious said. *Sadly true. Anakin is-quite lacking in that regard.* Anakin's relevant aptitudes lay strictly in battle, not in the political realm. And Sidious thought that all for the best. *An apprentice with no ambition for or ability to rule. One who will serve as my most powerful enforcer but will never succeed me as Master.*

Amidala gave a self-deprecating response, and then began talking excitedly. Sidious smiled absently, ignoring what he judged to be a trite and exceedingly premature celebration of galactic peace.

He only wished that Anakin's secret wife could have been as naturally accommodating of his plans as her husband. But she had always been strong-willed and entirely too clever for his liking. Of course, the control of other minds by the Sith was restricted only by natural barriers such as those present in the minds of the Yinchorri or the Hutts and not by the subject's will, as was the case for the Jedi. But he couldn't utilize control of that sort here on Coruscant without calling the Jedi's attention to himself. He was, as usual, limited to persuasion and the powers of his office.

"-so I wanted to let you know," she finished.

"Apologies," Sidious said. "My mind wandered a bit back there. What were you saying?"

"I'm going to visit Raxus on a diplomatic mission as a representative of the Senate," she replied. "I believe that I can-"

"That won't be necessary," Sidious said smoothly. "I assure you, I have this matter well in hand. And we would not wish to inadvertently give conflicting messages at this delicate juncture." *Such as*

actually pursuing any sort of lasting peace.

"I understand," she said. "And I don't doubt your ability. But I am unsure of whether we should pin all our hopes for this treaty on General Grievous. I strongly suspect that things might go more smoothly if we directly involve the Separatist Senate as well."

Ah, but I do not desire for things to go smoothly.

"Perhaps you have a point," Sidious said. "But I think it might be better if a different delegate was sent."

"Did you have someone in mind?" Amidala asked.

"Not at the moment, but-"

"I believe I am uniquely qualified for this mission," she said.

"And how is that?"

"I know one of the Separatist senators personally," she said. "We haven't talked in a long time, but I know that-"

"I see," Sidious said. "Who is this Senator?"

"Senator Bonteri," she said.

"Bonteri," Sidious said, frowning. He wasn't familiar with the name. He resolved to remedy that situation very soon, though. The name did tell him one thing, however. *This Senator is not part of the inner circle and thus would know nothing about the true magnitude of what has changed in their government.* He relaxed slightly. He knew how to contain this. *And contain this I must. Because if I try to stop it, she will just go around behind my back and do it anyway.*

"If you are sure you can trust this Separatist," he said, giving her a concerned expression. "I know a number of them have tried to have you killed over the years."

"I know I can trust her," Amidala said confidently.

"Good," Sidious said. "But perhaps you might want to avoid the attention of any of the *other* senators, for your own safety."

"Of course," she said. "They'll never notice I was there. I'll be taking a Jedi along to assist me, too."

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "A Jedi? Who?" Under no circumstances would he allow her to drag Anakin off onto this pointless-

"Ahsoka," she said brightly.

He smiled, and this time he really was pleased. "Then I wish you both the best." *A brief respite from Anakin's nosy apprentice and from my former Queen? Most good news indeed.*

As he watched her leave, he made a mental note to send someone to silently track her and make certain

she didn't disrupt his plans during her trip to the Separatist world.

One day, she would outlive her usefulness. *Unfortunately, I must tolerate her continued existence until that day has come.* He wondered idly if there was some way to utterly crush her spirit so that she would at least *stay out of his way* until the day when he could finally destroy her once and for all.

Chapter 26: A Private Conversation

Chapter Notes

A/N: So here's another chapter in the saga of my favorite terrifying alien cyborg!

Thanks to Celgress (ffnet) and isaakfvkampfer, tortur, May-chan, Myabers013, and Marie-Berry(ao3) for your recent comments!

A note about my particular interpretation of the Kaleesh word 'Izvoshra' here for the curious-I've chosen to make it a word that's both the same for both the singular and plural. Also, as I might go into more later in the story, I think it has several different, though similar, meanings. While I don't plan on inventing an entire Kaleesh language, I might make up some definitions and usages like this as I go along.

Grievous heard the door to the shuttle open behind him. He stepped a couple paces back from Kenobi.

"Qymaen, what *are* you doing with that prisoner?" Ronderu's voice asked from behind him.

Grievous didn't turn around. "Interrogating him," he said, responding in the same language she had asked the question. Grievous enjoyed speaking his native tongue again. Until very recently, he'd had little reason to speak it at all. He'd missed it.

"You're such a terrible liar," she scoffed. She walked over to his side and looked down at the Jedi who stood in front of him. "This is that Jedi you mentioned earlier, isn't it? Obi-Wan Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan gave Ronderu a wide smile. Glancing over at Grievous he said, "Does your friend speak Basic?"

Ronderu crossed her arms. "Tell him I don't."

"No," Grievous said to Obi-Wan in Basic.

Obi-Wan continued smiling. "What did they say?"

Grievous hunched over so that his face was level with the Jedi's. "Ronderu has asked why I haven't killed you yet. She offered to do it herself."

Obi-Wan gave her a small bow. "Tell her I am pleased to meet her as well."

"You anticipate my questions so perfectly, Qymaen," she said, narrowing her eyes at the Jedi. "I still think we can't trust these Republic curs."

Grievous straightened to his full height and turned to face her.

"I do not trust the Republic," he said. "But I do trust that Palpatine will do what is in his own best interests. It would harm his image if he reneged on his agreement now, and if nothing else, I think *that* at least will bind him to follow through on this treaty." He hoped.

"But if you are making agreements with the Republic-

"Yes, then I must be bound by their terms as much as they would be bound by mine. If it gets them off Kalee, might it not be worth it?"

Ronderu sighed. "Yes," she said. "I just-have a bad feeling about this."

"As do I," Grievous said. He looked over at Kenobi. "But this Jedi is not the one to worry about. I think he actually does want to help us."

"Didn't you tell me you had sworn to obtain vengeance *specifically* against this Jedi?"

"I may have been-hasty in my judgments."

Ronderu laughed. "All right."

"You find something amusing about this?"

"I trust your judgment," she said. "But when you change your opinion on something, you don't ever do it halfway. I predict he's your new *true friend* by the end of the week."

Grievous snorted. "You overestimate my change of heart on this matter. I will allow him to prove his intentions, which I believe to be genuine. But I will not regret his return to the Republic. In person he is an irritant at best."

"What's this about an Izvoshra?" Kenobi asked. "I never did find out what that meant."

Grievous realized Ronderu had used the word Kenobi had asked about before. He groaned.

"No one was talking to you, Jedi."

"Indeed not," Kenobi said, his expression cheerful and unperturbed. "But your friend mentioned my name earlier, so someone was clearly talking *about* me."

Grievous turned to Ronderu. "You see what I mean?"

Greatness is defined by conviction...No.

Greatness is defined by the strength of our convictions. Better.

And the deeds with which we bolster-no, and the deeds which are the foundation of-no, and the deeds which prove the truth of those convictions. Yes.

Sidious was drafting his treaty presentation speech on his datapad when the communication console on his desk alerted him of a message. The name was for an unremarkable Republic depot communication console, but when he saw the source location of the message he raised a single eyebrow. *Really?* He

hadn't expected any further communications from the prisoners Grievous had taken, and he wasn't aware of any Republic officers who remained uncaptured.

He answered the holo-call alert and a holo of a Republic officer appeared. He stood at rigid attention. Though his clothing and body were covered in grime, ripped fabric, and cuts, Sidious easily recognized the caller.

"Captain Tarkin!" he said, genuinely surprised.

"Chancellor Palpatine," Tarkin said, inclining his head slightly.

"The reports said you perished in the Battle of Kalee." He had been somewhat disappointed by the news, to be sure, but it had seemed a small matter after losing Dooku. However, it seemed that he had been mistaken after all.

"Not quite. I've been-preoccupied. Also, I've learned that you planned to sign a peace treaty with General Grievous. Is this true?"

"I did offer that, yes."

"And did he-?"

"He accepted my terms."

Tarkin's frown deepened. "Chancellor, I do not understand. You said that you would never allow the Republic to be split in two like this. Do you truly intend to allow them to get away with their defiance?"

Sidious gave the captain a half-smile. "I can give you an answer, but only in the highest confidentiality. Is that understood?"

"Yes," Tarkin said.

Sidious lidded his eyes. "The Loyalist Committee has sought to block all meaningful legislation or decrees that will allow us to use the necessary force to bring this war to a swift and decisive end."

Tarkin's brow wrinkled. "How does this relate to the peace treaty?"

"To that end, I am giving them what they think they want."

"You think the negotiations will fail?"

"I *know* they will fail," Sidious said. "Grievous does not truly understand the nature of compromise. Therefore, I anticipate that he will either have second thoughts about signing any such agreement, or he will sign the treaty only to break it before the week is out. Either way, the results will send a clear message to the Loyalist Committee-that peace is *not* a possibility."

"I will defer to your expertise in that area, Chancellor," Tarkin said. "I have never taken an interest in the political arena-it is a realm of appeasements and shuns the necessary ultimatums of war."

Sidious smiled. "Someday, I plan to change that."

"I don't doubt your resolve, but I wonder if even it will be sufficient." Tarkin gave the Chancellor a concerned look. "You said that you planned to travel to Kalee yourself. Don't you think that might be dangerous, given the circumstances?"

Sidious only smiled. "Not to worry, Captain. I can take care of myself."

Tarkin gave him a skeptical look. "If you're certain."

Sidious didn't reply to the unasked question, instead changing the subject entirely. "I assume you've yet to be discovered?"

Tarkin gave him a humorless smile. "You assume correctly."

"Continue to lay low, then," Sidious said. "And I'll be along shortly to pick you up."

Chapter 27: Convergence

Chapter Notes

A/N: So here's a shiny new chapter with not one, or even two, but three different POV scenes! I always love getting into the heads of different characters and thinking about what makes them tick! Also, note that I changed Anakin's age during the events of The Phantom Menace from his canonical 9-and-most-of-a-year to 13. For reasons. Reasons primarily involving the fact that I wanted Anakin and Padme to be closer in age when they met.

Thanks to jamese765, Celgress, and ShadowBlah2 (ffnet) and May-chan and Myabers013 (ao3) for your recent comments!

Events are moving forward this chapter...

Darth Sidious stalked through the lower levels of Coruscant, traveling by alleys, across walkways, and through knotted crowds of beings that unconsciously moved aside as he passed through them. He wore his dark vermilion and midnight blue Sith cloak and the triangular golden clasp he favored.

He thought wryly that the Jedi would be more often found traveling the Unknown Regions than these lower levels of Coruscant. He had no concern that he would encounter any of their ilk among the trillions of beings here. It was almost a pity. Despite all the Jedi whose demise he had overseen, he had yet to have the opportunity to kill any of them directly. He enjoyed the plotting and their deaths all the same, but he did find a certain charm in the immediacy of the direct approach. There would be no directness today, however. Today, there would be more planning, and soon another piece would be put into place.

As he entered a pitch dark alley he was interrupted from his reverie by a sound. A derisive laugh. His head turned in the direction of it.

"Care to let me in on the joke?" he asked, his eyes easily adjusting to the darkness. He saw a brawny human, a ikotchi, and a scarred trandoshan.

"A stunted human walks alone into an alley," the mottled ikotchi said.

"And seems a little lost," the muscled human said, in a way that sounded rehearsed.

"And not all too bright," the trandoshan finished. "Now, hand over your valuables, and we might let you crawl away alive."

Sidious laughed. He Force-pulled his lightsaber out from underneath his robes and threw the ignited blade in an arc towards the three assailants. They were fast, but not nearly fast enough. The three muggers had become six variously bisected pieces by the time the blade completed its arc and returned to Sidious' hand.

"You're right," Sidious said, switching off his saber and returning it to his cloak. "That was a good joke." He dusted off his robes and continued on his way.

Eventually, he arrived at his destination. He walked through the cloth 'door' and settled into one of the booths in the dingy bar. The other occupants gave him a passing glance as he entered and then immediately looked away. It wasn't long before the human he had agreed to meet here slid into the seat across from him.

"Darth Sidious, I presume," the man said.

A smile quirked at the corners of the Sith's mouth, and he clasped his hands on the table. "You presume correctly, Jarvinious Reed."

"Normally, I wouldn't bother with someone like you," Reed said. The pale, scarred human stared at him with intense green eyes. Blond hair hung limply from the sides of his face. "But I've heard good things about you from Bane. Such as, and for example, your seemingly endless supply of credits."

"Someone like me?" Sidious tilted his head.

"Yes," Reed said, his grin showing blackened teeth. "By which, we mean, simply speaking, a lunatic cultist."

"I appreciate your frankness," Sidious said, his smile growing wider. "But not to worry-I see no need to bore you with the details of my, ah, lunatic cult. Rather, let's discuss how we can exchange goods and services."

"Yes, yes, that is much appreciated," Reed responded, nodding. "You said you had a job for me? Someone you wanted me to impersonate?"

"Yes," Sidious said.

"And who is this person whose identity I shall be taking on?"

"Chancellor Palpatine."

Reed's eyes widened. "You're even crazier than I thought."

Sidious frowned. "Did I misunderstand? You claimed to be the best impersonator in the galaxy, a title I

personally thought to be something of an exaggeration, but was willing to take a chance on-

Reed held up a hand, chuckling. "No, no, that is not what I mean, crazy rich man. I am not saying I cannot impersonate the Chancellor. I am saying there's no way anyone will be fooled since the *real* Chancellor will still be out and about. He is too high profile not to be noticed. All anyone has to do is switch on the news. And I said I was an expert impersonator, not an expert kidnapper."

"Yes, I understand," Sidious said. "Which is why *I* will handle the kidnapping."

"You." Reed said. "Just like that? All by yourself?"

Sidious nodded.

"Sure, whatever," the man said, shrugging. "I get half up front, right?"

"Correct."

"Good," Reed said. "I would hate to invest any time in this and then get no return when you are dragged off to prison for trying to kidnap the most closely guarded man in the galaxy."

Sidious only smiled. "Your lack of faith is unwarranted, but not unexpected. And I do not require faith when I will produce results regardless. Now, the only question is, are you truly as skilled at impersonation as you claim?"

Reed clasped his hands and gave him a beatific smile. "I seek only to serve the gentlebeings of the galaxy and root out corruption from this great Republic. We must all place our faith in democracy, our brave soldiers, and our tireless Jedi." The impersonator spoke a few more lines, Sidious noting silently the seamless way Reed switched from his own personality to emulating the tone and cadence of voice, and even the smallest mannerisms, of the Sith Lord's alter ego.

Sidious tilted his head, nodding. "Impressive. I'm convinced."

Reed's expression became his own again. He chuckled. "Easy as Aqualish pie. I'll need you to supply the face-changing procedure, of course. Those don't come cheap. And any security codes that might be necessary."

"Of course," Sidious said. "I will supply whatever you require."

"Then we have a deal," Reed said.

Sidious grinned. All the pieces of his plan were sliding into place like the holo-monsters of a dejarik board. He would soon be giving Grievous a very unexpected surprise indeed.

Padme could see the apprehension in Ahsoka's eyes as they approached Raxus. "Look at all those dreadnoughts," Ahsoka said, frowning as she gazed out the viewport. "The Seppies really fortified their fleet since the last time Anakin and I were here."

"You were here?" Padme asked.

"You bet!" Ahsoka said. "Not that long ago, actually. Anakin even went chasing after Grievous, but the head clanker slipped into hyperspace before he could get off a good shot!"

Padme felt a momentary shiver of fear thinking about Anakin and the togruta teen beside her fighting Grievous. The Jedi Killer. She calmed herself then, reminding herself firmly that that would change soon. She was here to make sure of that.

"I see. We're not here to start any fights this time, though," Padme said, a small smile forming. Mina had been delighted to hear from her, and she was eager to see her old mentor again.

"We've received a communication from one of the ships," Ahsoka said. "They're asking for identification."

"Send them the code Mina gave us," Padme said.

"Done." Ahsoka frowned. "Uh, oh. They're hailing us."

"Audio transmission only," Padme said. "Use the voice transformation program."

Ahsoka's fingers tapped across the communication console.

A hologram of a uniformed muun appeared. "This is Admiral Tonith," the man said, his expression bored. "Please state your identification and purpose here."

"We're here to visit a friend," Padme said. She realized with a start that she recognized the Separatist Admiral. Clovis had introduced him to her years ago as the 'black shaak of the family'. She filed the realization away in her mind to be considered later. Composing herself, she continued her explanation. "We sent the code just now."

"Codes are easily stolen," Tonith said, his eyes narrowing. "Why aren't you sending an identification holo?"

"Our holotransmitter isn't working," Padme lied. She had promised Palpatine that she wouldn't make her trip here generally known. The Chancellor had frequently expressed worry about that the large number of Separatist assassins she attracted, though she had often retorted that he was targeted much more frequently than her. She agreed that caution was called for, however.

"And who is this 'friend' you are here to see?" Tonith asked.

"Senator Bonteri."

Tonith smiled, but without warmth. "You don't say? Then you won't mind if I contact the Senator to ask her about your little visit, will you?"

"Not at all," Padme responded.

The admiral's hologram flickered off and the two shuttle occupants waited tensely for several minutes. Then they were being hailed again.

"My apologies," the admiral said, his smile considerably more friendly now. "The Senator has verified

that you are her guest, and as my scans have confirmed that your ship is unarmed, I think we can expedite your landing approval. Security has been tightened around Raxus following the recent attacks. I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Padme said.

"We hope you enjoy your stay," Tonith said politely, his hologram flickering off again.

Ahsoka breathed a sigh of relief. "That was close. I can't believe they're having an *Admiral* approve visitors to their capitol."

"Mina said that the last Republic attack was particularly devastating," Padme said.

Ahsoka's fingers tapped across the controls as she took them in for a landing. "I guess, but that's a weird use of military officers."

"Perhaps," Padme said.

"Anakin talks about you a lot," Ahsoka said, changing the subject.

"Really?" Padme responded, attempting to keep her expression neutral. *I do hope you've at least attempted to be discreet, my love.* Not for her, but for Anakin. She knew how important his position as Jedi Knight was to him.

"Yeah. Is it really true that you were a queen at fourteen?"

"Yes," Padme said.

"So now you're a Queen *and* a Senator?" Ahsoka asked, giving her a perplexed sideways glance.

Padme laughed. "No, just a senator now. Jamillia is the current Queen of Naboo. My term has ended."

"Term?"

"Yes. Royalty is elected on Naboo."

"That's-different," Ahsoka said.

Padme smiled. "Different in a bad way or a good way?"

Ahsoka shrugged. "Just different, I guess. What was it like?"

Padme was somber. "I was too young. Not by Naboo custom. There have been younger monarchs. But I feel now it is too much responsibility to be shouldered at that age." She glanced at the togruta teen, feeling the same might be said of her, but said nothing. Having spent more time off-planet than she had ever imagined she would before the blockade crisis had given her a wider perspective. She'd learned that if Naboo had been a Core planet, it would never have been allowed to elect such young leaders. Most of the senators she'd met had thought the custom horrifying, comparing it to the responsibilities the Jedi thrust on their young padawans. She recalled one who had said "*And of course we can't do anything about the internal affairs of the Jedi, but the customs of a Republic planet are another thing entirely*".

"You trashed the Trade Federation, though," Ahsoka said enthusiastically. "Downed an entire army of clankers!"

Padme shook her head ruefully. "Actually, that was Anakin." Who had only been thirteen at the time. They had both grown up too young.

"He said none of it would have happened without you," Ahsoka replied. "And you sent that slimy grub Gunray packing!"

Padme smiled. "I suppose I did."

There was a small thump, and Padme examined the scene outside the window. The landing pad was populated with a motley collection of beings and a number of B1 droids.

"Another perfect landing," Ahsoka said, pleased. "Skyguy would be proud. Or, possibly jealous."

This was-not how Grievous had planned to spend his evening.

Which was not to say he wasn't glad that Ronderu had convinced him to come out of the shuttle to attend the celebration the Kaleesh were holding following their victory over the Republic. Grievous sat around a bonfire in a clearing in the jungle with Ronderu and Bentalais while Kaleesh warriors and their families talked, danced, or feasted. It was nice.

It was just awkward with Kenobi sitting next to him. The other Kaleesh had been rightfully suspicious of the Jedi, he thought. And so it was with some reluctance that he had explained that Kenobi had willingly surrendered and had promised to oppose the Huk's enslavement of them.

The reaction was unsurprisingly mixed. Some of the Kaleesh were still openly suspicious of the Jedi, while others seemed to view him as some kind of hero. Bentalais was in the former camp. And then there was Ronderu, who was neither. Having been reassured of his lack of ill intent, she just seemed to find Kenobi entertaining.

"He did that thing with the hair on his face on again!" she said as Kenobi started absently pulling at the hair above his lip. "Ask him if it's some sort of human grooming ritual."

"That seems unnecessary," Grievous said.

Ronderu huffed. "It is absolutely necessary. But if you will not ask, I will be forced to look it up on the HoloNet. Do you really want me to have to rely on such a Karrabbac's nest of half-truths and lies?"

"I still think he's some sort of spy," Bentalais said abruptly. "The Jedi are always bad news. Can't you at least put him in a cell with the other prisoners?"

"I considered it," Grievous said. "He is-not my favorite person. But the negotiations with the Republic are important. If we show we treat those who willingly surrender well, then that may help ensure that these negotiations go smoothly. I don't wish to give them the impression that we are savage or merciless, but going from my former actions, that is the conclusion they may draw. I'll not mar the

reputation of the Kaleesh in that way." It was all true, but somehow it also felt like a rationalization.

Bentalais sighed. "I understand. I will wait until *after* he attempts to betray us to kill him then."

The Jedi glanced over at Grievous. "Just wondering," Kenobi said suddenly. "If I could perhaps have some of whatever your friend is roasting on that spit over there?"

Grievous looked over at Bentalais. "He wants to know if he can have some of your kebab."

"Tell him to get his own kebab," Bentalais said.

Grievous turned back to Kenobi. "He says no," Grievous translated.

"Do you perhaps have any of that appalling nutrient gel, then?" Kenobi asked. "I get faint if I miss a meal. And I've just realized that I've missed about, oh, four now."

Grievous rose and walked over to the baskets containing various raw fruits, vegetables, and meats. Several other Kaleesh watched with puzzlement as he picked out a variety of foodstuffs, speared them on a pointed spit, and brought them over to the fire, placing the food directly over the flame.

Ronderu gave Grievous a significant look. Fortunately, she said nothing, but he thought he could tell what she was thinking. She wouldn't say anything about it while there were others around. He knew she would bring it up later, though. He sighed.

Kenobi smiled gratefully when Grievous handed him the spit after several minutes. The human began eating immediately, making appreciative noises.

"This is exquisite," Kenobi said, juices dribbling onto his face. "You have my...eternal gratitude...General," he said around bites of the seared food.

Ronderu's expression reached new levels of significance.

Grievous sighed again.

Chapter 28: A Revised Strategy

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ahoy everyone! I have returned with another chapter! I hope the number of those who gave favorable comments I received regarding the Grievous and Obi-Wan section on AO3 for the last chapter will enjoy their interaction in this chapter as well. Also, this is a very Grievous-filled chapter in general.

Since I've posted the last chapter, I finished the first Darth Bane novel and also the new Ahsoka novel. There's a lot of backstabbing in the Darth Bane novel. As might be expected given the subject matter. Really enjoyed the last part of the Ahsoka novel, though I wished there had been more to it.

I have quite a bit planned for the upcoming chapters, and I'm hoping that I can make them as fun to read as they were for me to think up!

The good news was that Grievous received an urgent call right before he had to respond to Kenobi. So he'd had to head back to his shuttle alone while he left Ronderu and Bentalais to keep an eye on his captive.

The bad news was that he'd decided he'd rather converse with the Jedi scum than his current caller.

Grievous looked down at the holo he held in his hand, trying to quell the irrational urge to crush it.

"This is a trap!" Hill said insistently, crossing his arms. "Do you really think Palpatine is going to give up this war, when the second it ends he will be out of a job?"

Grievous lidded his eyes. "I think if he betrays and attacks us during ceasefire talks that he will make many enemies on his own side. If he does that, we may soon have more worlds joining our cause."

Hill scowled. He was dressed in one of his many formal suits. Grievous felt a tinge of annoyance recalling the large amount of items the Muun had insisted were absolutely vital to him, including his extensive wardrobe.

"Be that as it may, I urge you to be on the alert for his inevitable betrayal," Hill said.

Grievous tilted his head. "You have some sort of grudge against Palpatine. Is that why you joined the Separatists?"

Hill narrowed his eyes. "No to your question. And as for your, it just so happens, *correct* assumption, you would too, if you knew what I do about him!"

"And that is...?"

"Palpatine is a murderer," Hill said.

"Of course he is," Grievous said. "This war has killed..."

Hill waved a hand dismissively. "That's not what I mean. I mean that he's directly killed in cold blood. He murdered Hego Damask!"

"Who?"

"The head of Damask Holdings!"

Grievous stared at the tiny holo blankly.

"My uncle!" The Muun had fisted his hands at his sides, his expression a scowl now.

"Oh," Grievous said. He *did* remember the uncle that Hill would often fondly reminisce about. He felt a slight feeling of relief. Usually he recognized the names of people who he had met or who were well-known, so he had begun to worry his memory was slipping. But Hill's uncle Hego had been dead before Grievous had ever had the misfortune to encounter Hill-Grievous had always suspected he would have disliked the man even more than his unpleasant nephew. In any event, Grievous did recall him now. "You mean the one you were always saying 'made you who you are today'? I can see how that could happen."

"Your extremely terrible sense of humor notwithstanding," Hill seethed, "I cannot afford for you to die. So I ask for you to *take my warning seriously*."

"Oh, I am," Grievous said. "I'm just wondering why I never heard of this before, even from you. Why has he never been brought to trial for this?" It was amazingly difficult to find credible information that would link Palpatine to shady deals of any kind. It was part of the reason Grievous had been suspicious of him-normal people, especially politicians, made mistakes. And normal people would sometimes be caught in those mistakes, especially when they occupied a position of such high scrutiny. A lack of such things in Palpatine's record suggested to Grievous not that he had never committed such indiscretions, but rather that he had *never been caught* in them. Still, Hill's accusation went beyond even what Grievous had suspected of the Republic Chancellor.

Hill looked faintly embarrassed. "I-don't have any evidence." His expression hardened. "But I know it was him!"

"I believe you," Grievous said.

Hill looked surprised. "You do?"

"Yes," he said. Grievous could tell when the Muun was lying, and he could see that there was no deception now. San Hill was positive that what he was saying was true-at some point Grievous would want to know why, of course. Even if Hill had no evidence that would stand up in a court of law, the cyborg General could see that he must have proof of another sort. "Still, I think I can handle any treachery from Palpatine well enough. It is Sidious I must focus on. These negotiations would be the perfect opportunity for him to strike."

Hill frowned, his eyes wide. "That's true. You have to cancel these peace talks! You can't fight Sidious on his terms! He'll destroy you!"

Grievous laughed. "You mean like Dooku destroyed me?"

"Do not underestimate him! Dooku was his *apprentice*, remember?"

"Oh, I won't," Grievous said. "But I also will not pass up this chance to finish him off. You worry too much, Mr. Hill. I have been planning for this since the moment I killed Dooku. I know what he is capable of."

"For this? How could you know that-all this would happen?"

"I didn't know the specifics," Grievous said. "But I realized this was not an opportunity he would pass up. I also know that he will not leave this up to his underlings, not with his apprentice so recently deceased."

"That's just great, then," Hill said sarcastically. "We're dead! I'm dead, you're dead, we're all dead! My only consolation is that Sheev Palpatine will die too when Sidious bombs the *very public location* of your peace talks to oblivion!"

"Actually, I know he won't do that," Grievous said.

"Really. And why wouldn't he?"

"Because it's personal now," Grievous said. "I've defied him. He needs to watch me die."

"How do you know that?"

"I saw it in his eyes when he tried to crush the life out of me."

"All right," Hill said. "You're the tactician. Just-keep an eye on Palpatine, too. He is more dangerous than he appears."

"Noted."

"And make sure you get rid of Sidious's body when you kill him. I've done a lot of research on the Sith since I decided to turn against them, and there was this one called Darth Sion who kept himself alive solely through the power of his own spite-"

"That sounds about right," Grievous said. "I'll keep a blaster set to disintegrate."

"So what was that all about," Kenobi asked the moment Grievous exited the shuttle. Glancing upward, Grievous saw with some relief that Ronderu was still watching the Jedi. The last thing he needed was for Kenobi to be wandering around on his own.

"Separatist business," Grievous finally responded. "Extremely confidential." He looked back at Ronderu and said in Kaleesh, "I'll take over watching him from here."

She nodded. "All right. Is he going to be following you around until the Republic delegation arrives? I don't think Bentalais is going to approve of you taking him to the strategy meeting."

"And what do you think?" he asked.

"Well, seeing as how he doesn't speak Kaleesh, I don't think we have anything to worry about. Especially since he seems to like you."

Grievous sighed. Looking around, he didn't see or otherwise detect anyone else in earshot, including Bentalais. "We will discuss this later."

"I expect so," Ronderu said, sounding faintly amused. "In any event, I have a victory party to get back to, so I'll leave you to-guard the prisoner." She walked back into the trees surrounding the clearing.

Grievous looked Kenobi up and down as he led him back into the shuttle. As much as he had projected confidence about his upcoming encounter with Sidious during his talk with Hill, he was all too aware that it would be no easy matter to take down the Sith Master. And while he had been planning to be thoroughly prepared for any surprises by Sidious, he knew there was one great advantage the Sith Lord had that Grievous did not.

An idea occurred to him. It was actually a really, really good idea. It was also one he absolutely hated. He took a deep breath. "Would you like to help me take down another Sith Lord," Grievous asked.

Kenobi's eyes widened. "Sidious."

Grievous inclined his head.

"You know where he is?"

"I know where he will be."

Kenobi gave him a puzzled look before understanding filled his eyes. "He's going to try to attack the peace talks!"

"I have no doubt of it. That would allow him to destabilize both the Republic and the Separatists."

Grievous didn't see any point in mentioning what Hill had said about Palpatine. He assumed the Republic Chancellor was involved in some truly shady dealings if he had turned to murder to expedite them. But he doubted Obi-Wan would believe his warning without proof, which he was in even less of a position to give than Hill was at the moment. Anyway, Grievous had decided that Palpatine was clearly the lesser threat, one he could deal with if and when he survived the encounter with the Sith Lord.

"I will do everything in my power to assist you in bringing Sidious down, then," Kenobi said. He gave the cyborg general a small smile. "Although I do hope we will part on better terms than we did last time."

"I apologize for that," Grievous said reluctantly. He began to pace, considering how his current plans should be altered to accommodate the Jedi's abilities. "However, I must admit that I am mostly concerned that we come out of this encounter at all. I have never seen Sidious fight, truly fight, but the single attack he made on me has convinced me that extreme caution is called for."

"He attacked you?!" Kenobi said. "How? What happened? How did you survive? Were you able to injure him...?"

Grievous held up a clawed hand. "Patience, Jedi...Kenobi. I will explain." He punctuated his words by another bout of restless pacing, his clawed feet clicking across the metallic floor. "I was not able to strike back. His attack on me was remote. Sidious used the Force to try to crush my lungs when I challenged his holo."

Kenobi's eyes widened. "He was able to attack you through a hologram?"

Grievous stopped his pacing and nodded.

"Long distance Force manipulation of that kind is-unheard of."

"I thought that might be the case," Grievous said. "Otherwise you Jedi could just send holos of yourself to fight this war."

Kenobi frowned, settling into one of the shuttle couches. "Even if we had such an ability, no Jedi would do that. That would be cowardly and dishonorable."

Grievous refrained from saying that he didn't see how either of those traits were incompatible with the values he had seen the Jedi display. He was trying to get Kenobi to help him, after all, not antagonize the Jedi Master. Still, he thought from the human's uncomfortable expression that Kenobi could sense his disagreement. "In any event," Grievous continued, "I was able to use an electric shock to short out the communication holo. Otherwise I have little doubt that Sidious would have killed me then and there."

Kenobi stroked his beard thoughtfully. "That is probably not the only ability this Sith Lord has that the Jedi have never heard of. My research of the ancient Sith indicated that they had a variety of unusual powers. While some of those powers were likely exaggerated, many of them were corroborated by numerous eyewitness accounts. Fortunately, it seems that many of the abilities the Sith learned had consequences so undesirable that even other Sith eschewed using them, or were lost due to their individualistic tendency to keep their most powerful abilities secret. Still, every Sith seemed to manage to devise new terrors to replace the old."

"So then even you don't know what he's capable of," Grievous said.

"I'm afraid you're right," Kenobi said. "Master Yoda would know more than I do, but it's been over a thousand years since the last war with the Sith. There is a lot that none of us know about them."

"But you have killed one Sith, and helped me to kill another. If anyone is able to help me destroy Sidious, it would be you."

Kenobi gave him a wide smile. "You give me too much credit. I don't know how I managed to defeat Maul. And it's clear to me that I wouldn't have been able to defeat Dooku on my own."

"Excessive humility can be as much of a hindrance to success as the most arrogant bravado," Grievous said. "I understand that you cannot be an expert in this area. But no one is. I just need to know anything you can tell me. And I will tell you everything I know about Sidious."

"I'll do my best, then," Kenobi said. "What does Sidious look like?"

Grievous tilted his head thoughtfully. "He's human. He always wears hooded robes, like your Jedi robes, but either black or red and blue. I have never been able to recall his facial features in much detail, nor have I had any success with having the computers match his face. I think he must obscure his appearance with the Force somehow. But I do know that his eyes are acid yellow. I've never seen a human with eyes like that before."

"It's a Sith thing," Kenobi said. "Their eyes turn yellow from their use of the Dark Side."

"I used to work with Ventress, and her eyes were never yellow," Grievous said.

"That's different," Kenobi said. "She's a Sith Acolyte, not a true Sith."

Grievous snorted. "That's not what *she* said. Anyway, Dooku was certainly a Sith, and sometimes I saw his eyes turn bronze, but never bright yellow."

Kenobi shrugged. "I suppose you know more about this topic than I do, then. Come to think of it, I remember Maul had bright yellow eyes, too, but rimmed in red."

Grievous sighed. "I doubt this information will do us much good."

"On the contrary," the Jedi said. "If you remember his eye color, then perhaps that is something he can't hide. It may help us to identify him."

"I don't think we will have any problem identifying Sidious when he tries to kill us."

"I mean identify where he's been hiding on Coruscant," Obi-Wan clarified, standing abruptly from the shuttle couch. "We know he's there, we've just never had any information to help us look for him. But your information could help us find him!"

"We're going to be fighting him *here*," Grievous said. "If we get out of this alive, that will mean that he is dead. Understand that I do not intend to spare him, and I will fight until my last breath if need be."

Kenobi's expression was solemn. "I understand. But we may not win. We may not get out of this alive. And if we don't, someone needs to know anything we've discovered that may help them find and defeat him. Let me talk with the Council—they might even be able to catch him before he leaves!"

Grievous' first instinct was to refuse outright. He might be willing to grant that Kenobi deserved a second chance, but he still despised the Jedi. Still, Obi-Wan was right. Fighting Sidious to his last breath might not be enough. And if it wasn't, he'd have to fight the Sith Lord *past* his last breath. And the Jedi were the most powerful enemies that the Sith had.

If only they weren't his enemies, too. He craned his head to look Kenobi in the eye. "I'll think about it."

Kenobi frowned. "We're running out of time."

"Yes, but I do not work for the Jedi, and your friends have much to answer for. So do you, even if you were not involved in their worst crimes. Still, I think you do want to help make things right. So I will tell you everything I know about Darth Sidious. Though I will need you to tell me everything you know."

Kenobi gave him a puzzled look. "About what?"

"The Force."

Chapter 29: The Dark and the Light

Chapter Notes

A/N: Authors notes are at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more [Chapter 29: The Dark and The Light notes](#)

"So this is where you're keeping the Chancellor?" Reed asked, looking around the abandoned warehouse, frowning. "Aren't you afraid someone will find him if he's still on Coruscant?"

Jarvinious was a bit overly inquisitive for the Sith Lord's tastes, but Sidious believed this trait would also make him an ideal candidate for the task ahead. For now, he would humor the impersonator.

"Not particularly," Sidious said, leading the impersonator to a large room in the back of the building. "I've kept my base of operations here for a long time now, and no one has found *me*."

"And does anyone *want* to find you?" Reed asked from behind him.

Sidious grinned at the rusted door in front of him. "Yes. A few people." The Jedi Council had certainly been searching for him ever since their encounter with Maul. But as Chancellor, Sidious had subtly blocked all efforts to use Republic resources to search for him. It had been simple. Many of the Senators were already dubious about any claims of the reappearance of his Order—the Sith had become the subject of myth and legend, and in doing so, had ceased to be viewed as entirely real. Even some of the Jedi had expressed the view that neither Maul nor Dooku were Sith, but rather Dark Jedi or some other sort of Force user entirely.

The mechanism to open the entrance before him had long since ceased to work, so instead he waved the door open with the Force. The rusted and tarnished metal screeched as it moved aside to grant entry.

"Hey, that's a neat trick," Reed said.

"It's not a trick," Sidious replied casually. He walked through the entrance to the room, aware of the impersonator trailing behind him. He could sense the other human's life force behind him, could snuff out that same life force in an instant, but that was not what he had come here for. Instead he gestured to a containment field behind of which appeared to stand a familiar individual. "Here is the proof that I have fulfilled my end of our bargain."

The room behind the containment field was in actuality completely empty, but Sidious could see the illusion he had crafted behind it.

"You again! I insist you release me at once," the illusory Palpatine said, his eyes narrowed angrily. He rapped futilely at the containment field, causing it to appear to ripple. Sidious had briefly considered using a hologram for the false Chancellor, but had decided that a Force illusion would be much more convincing.

"He's awfully demanding, wouldn't you say," Sidious asked.

Reed laughed and walked up to the containment field, clearly impressed. "Certainly. You look a bit haggard, Chancellor. Perhaps you should try to get more sleep."

The illusory Palpatine crossed his arms. "Is this your attempt at witty repartee? Please spare me."

Reed smiled delightedly. "Such fearlessness in the face of danger! So good to see we were correct in judging your lack of self-preservation. I shall enjoy the challenge of this assignment." He turned to Sidious. "What are you going to do with him?"

"I haven't decided. That will depend on the quality of your performance."

"People are looking for me as you speak," the illusion of Palpatine said. He looked between Sidious and Reed. "After I get out of this, both of you *will* be tried for treason."

"Is there any risk of that?" Reed asked, giving Sidious a concerned frown.

"No," Sidious said. "That much is certain."

"Well, if you could pull this off, I can believe a selective mind wipe is well within your capabilities," Reed said.

Palpatine shot Sidious a glare. "Whatever you're planning, Anakin will stop you."

"Anakin?" Reed said, his brow furrowing. "Who's that?"

"A Jedi," Sidious said, handing Reed a datapad. "You're going to need to read up on him, if you're to do a convincing impersonation of the Chancellor. They are close friends."

Reed laughed, looking down at the datapad. "Excellent. We've never been friends with a Jedi before."

Sidious fetched another item from his cloak and handed it to Reed. "You'll need this, too."

"An ear communicator?" Reed said, turning it over in his hands.

"Yes, for when you inevitably require more background on the subjects in question than you can reasonably be expected to memorize within the short time period available to you. I have been, ah, *researching* the Chancellor for a long time now, and so I do believe I can help you answer any *difficult* questions."

"Oh, of course," Reed said. "That's a good idea. I guess you've got this all planned out, then?"

"Indeed I do."

Ahsoka had been apprehensive about meeting the Separatist Senator, but her warm demeanor was at odds with what the Padawan had been expecting.

"It's been a long time," Senator Bonteri said to Amidala, smiling.

Padme returned the smile. "It seems like a lifetime."

"It does, doesn't it?" They talked more as they walked toward the large manor ahead. Ahsoka turned her attention to the other beings milling around the landing pad. Padme had taken her on this mission to teach her about diplomacy, which Ahsoka appreciated, but she felt her most important task was to ensure Amidala's safety. Even if the Senator might disagree with that assessment.

She didn't see or otherwise sense anyone on the platform behaving suspiciously, however, and after a while she admitted to herself that her visual sweeps of the surroundings were mostly to admire the scenery. Raxus was considerably more pastoral than Coruscant, and the well-dressed people filing down the various walkways paid little attention to either Ahsoka or Amidala, who were both dressed in cloaks to help conceal their appearance.

Though in Ahsoka's case, that had only been so the battle droids monitoring the incoming ships wouldn't recognize her. Most civilians, regardless of their alignment, would never recognize a Jedi, even a Master on the Council, much less a lowly Padawan like herself. Jedi did not seek fame or personal renown, and as a result were largely anonymous.

Amidala, on the other hand, was one of the most famous politicians in the galaxy. Ahsoka suspected that more people would recognize her face than even the Chancellor's. The Senator had never seemed to let the unrelenting attention go to her head, though. Her sole motivator seemed to Ahsoka to help people in whatever way she could. *She reminds me a lot of Anakin in that respect.*

Eventually they turned onto the private walkway leading to the mansion, leaving behind the last of the crowd filing down the main walkway. Ahsoka took in the surroundings, noting a human standing in front of the main entrance to Bonteri's home.

"Who's that?" Ahsoka asked warily.

"My son, Lux," Bonteri said. She gave the Padawan a serious look. "I assure you, he is not a threat."

Ahsoka squinted and realized that the human looked to be about her age and was not carrying any weapons. She relaxed slightly, and moved her hand away from the hidden lightsaber it had been unconsciously edging towards. She gave Bonteri a contrite look. "Oh. Sorry."

"Apology accepted," Bonteri said graciously.

As they reached the entrance to the manor, Lux offered to take their luggage. Amidala thanked him and handed him her bag with a smile. When he moved to take Ahsoka's bag, however, she only frowned. "I'm good, thanks." He might not be a threat, but Ahsoka didn't trust what was in her bag to anyone who might accidentally activate it. Weapons were not toys-she wasn't about to hand a bagful of them to some random teenage boy.

Bonteri entered a code on the control panel, and the entryway opened. The four of them entered the spacious room ahead of them, and Senator Bonteri closed the door behind them.

They walked to a room that appeared to Ahsoka to be a dining room. A silver droid walked up to them and began setting platters from a tray in front of them.

"Thank you, Danae," Bonteri said to the droid. When everyone had eaten few bites, she turned to Amidala. "Now, let's discuss this treaty."

"Yes," Amidala said, her eyes lighting up. "I've long been hoping that the we could end this destructive war. And I know that there are good people like you in the Separatist Parliament, who will do everything to make sure this treaty is signed. I did not want to leave the fate of such an important document on General Grievous alone."

Bonteri smiled. "I will be glad to do anything I can to help. Though I am sure Grievous is taking this very seriously. His home planet is very important to him, after all."

"Kalee is the General's home planet?" Amidala asked. Ahsoka guessed the Senator assumed Bonteri was referring to that planet, as that was where they had heard the treaty was going to be signed.

"Yes, he told me so himself," Bonteri said.

Amidala's eyes widened. "You've-met him?"

"Yes, and he's not nearly as diabolical as everyone's made him out to be," Bonteri said.

"You must be kidding me," Ahsoka said. "I've seen the kind of damage that clanker is capable of firsthand. I don't think he even has a conscience."

"How dare you talk about General Grievous like that!" Lux said, standing abruptly. "He saved our lives!"

Bonteri gave her son a sharp look. "That will be enough, Lux. This war has been difficult on all of us, and I'm sure that Amidala's aide here has seen--"

"I'm not an aide," Ahsoka said.

Bonteri looked over at her, a single eyebrow rising. "Oh? My apology. How should I address you?"

"I am Ahsoka Tano, Jedi Padawan."

Lux paled, though his mother only gave Ahsoka a contemplative look.

"In that case, I more than understand your feelings, Jedi Ahsoka. But Lux and I have had a very different experience with Grievous than the Jedi have. And the Jedi have been responsible for many Separatist deaths, including our unfortunate Chancellor Dooku." her expression was solemn.

Amidala frowned. "I have little doubt that Obi-Wan was simply defending himself."

Bonteri sighed. "We will never agree on Dooku, Padme. But he's not the only one this war has killed. Haven't you wondered what happened to Revlar?"

"Your husband? Where is he?" Padme asked.

"A year ago, he was ambushed by clone troopers. He fought bravely in self defense, but they overwhelmed him."

"Oh," Amidala said.

Ahsoka frowned. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you," Bonteri said. "I certainly hope we can end this bloodshed, once and for all."

Everyone at the table looked solemn. "As do I," Amidala said.

"I'll do whatever I can to help," Ahsoka said. Anakin had been skeptical of this mission when Amidala had told him of it, but he had agreed to let Ahsoka go with her. Though he had pulled his Padawan aside before the mission and asked Ahsoka to 'keep the Senator out of trouble', whatever that was supposed to mean. But maybe Amidala was right. Maybe they should do whatever they had to to make

sure this treaty was signed, if it could bring an end to the war. She knew Anakin wanted that, too, even if he had very different ideas about how the war would need to be ended.

Bonteri smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. And I trust you, young Jedi."

Lux smiled as well. "Good to know we're not going to fight."

Ahsoka crossed her arms, her expression wry. "That would hardly be a fair fight." the Jedi Padawan looked over at Senator Bonteri, frowning. "It's very important that no one besides you know that we're here, to ensure Senator Amidala's safety. Still, I've been wondering-how can we help negotiate a peace treaty with your Parliament if we can't talk with anyone?"

Bonteri gave her a warm look. "I will make the proposals to Parliament, of course. Padme's input will be vital for-"

A loud explosion punctuated the sentence and Amidala, Bonteri, and her son dove instinctively to the ground. Ahsoka rose from the table instead and turned to face the destruction, activating her twin green sabers.

A horde of Super Battle droids and droidekas were framed by the smoking metal of the doorway.

Ahsoka leapt at them.

Laser fire crisscrossed the room from both directions, and Ahsoka briefly glimpsed Amidala using her blaster to fire at the incoming droids as the togruta decapitated several of the them with her saber and then sliced through their metallic bodies for good measure. Unfortunately, an entire crowd of fresh droids stood behind the few she had destroyed. She deactivated one of her lightsabers and began to force slam some of the droids into each other as she continued to divert their blaster fire with her lightsaber.

"What's going on?!" Amidala asked over the din.

"I don't know," Bonteri yelled back. "but I'm going to put a stop to it, whatever it is!"

"Mina, don't-!" Amidala began, but the Senator paid no heed to her counterpart's warning and leapt up from under the table, running in front of the droids.

"Stop this immediately!" Bonteri ordered, her hands out as if to ward off the laser fire. To Ahsoka's surprise, this strategy actually worked. The droids stopped their attacks immediately.

"I demand to speak to your superior!" Bonteri said.

Two of the Super Battle Droids looked between each other, and then one of them projected a hologram in front of them.

"Admiral Tonith," Ahsoka growled.

The hologram of the muun Admiral looked between Bonteri and Ahsoka, and gave the Jedi a smile, baring small white teeth. "Ah, it seems my suspicions were not unfounded, although I was expecting our Jedi invader to be-slightly taller." He turned to Bonteri. "Not to worry, Senator. I have this well in

hand. Apologies for the property damage, but I assure you, you *will* be reimbursed."

Bonteri scowled. "The property damage is the least of my worries, Admiral. You are disturbing a *peace* conference."

Tonith frowned. "Come now, Senator, I know you are not that gullible. Grievous is the one who will be negotiating the peace treaty. Or would be, at any rate. I suspect he will think twice once I inform him what the Republic has been up to."

"There is nothing nefarious going on here, Tonith. I asked them to come."

"You are not under any duress?" Tonith asked. "You asked a Jedi here of your own free will?"

"No, I am not under duress, and the Jedi was not who I asked to come, but I do not disapprove of her presence."

His frown deepened. "I'm going to report this to General Grievous." His hologram flickered out. For several minutes, they all stood there silently, and then two droids stuck their arms out. Ahsoka readied her lightsaber, but they only projected two holograms, one of Tonith, and the other of Grievous.

"Senator Bonteri," Grievous' low voice called out. "Admiral Tonith tells me you are having quite the interesting-" he paused as he noticed Ahsoka. "-house party," he finished. He tilted his head, his eyes intent.

"Jedi Ahsoka."

"General Grievous," she said, her eyes narrowing.

Grievous was silent for a long moment. "I believe that I owe you an apology, young Jedi."

Tonith's hologram looked between Ahsoka and the hologram of Grievous, his expression startled. For her part, Ahsoka was just as surprised.

Grievous continued on, his hands clasped behind his back. "I do not agree with your Order's decisions, but I should not have placed any blame for their choices on you. I allowed my bitterness to rule my actions. The last time we met, I attacked you with unwarranted viciousness. For this, I apologize."

"Er, thanks," Ahsoka said. She appreciated the sentiment behind it. It was also the last thing she'd ever expected Grievous to say. She wasn't sure if she accepted the apology, though. Jedi younglings were taught the importance of forgiveness, but Anakin had always told her that forgiveness had to be earned. A thought occurred to her. "Are your prisoners well? The clones and General Kenobi, I mean. Can I- see them?"

Grievous looked thoughtful. "I will show you Kenobi." He disappeared for a time and then the Jedi Master appeared in front of him. To Ahsoka's relief, Kenobi looked well and gave her a quick smile.

"Good day, Ahsoka. I assure you, the General has been treating me with the utmost courtesy. Five star meals, excellent lodgings, and *truly* fascinating conversation. I have had the opportunity to talk with the clone troopers here as well. Oh, and Waxer says hello. He tells me his accommodations could use an

upgrade, but he's going to miss the meal options."

"Glad to hear it, Master Obi-Wan," Ahsoka said. After that Kenobi was whisked away, and Grievous returned alone.

The cyborg General looked over to Bonteri. "I must also apologize to you, Senator, for the behavior of my...subordinate." he glanced over at Tonith's hologram, who looked significantly more uncertain now.

"General?" Tonith said, sounding apprehensive.

"While I understand your suspicion, Admiral, I must disagree that Senator Bonteri is engaging in any sort of-treason, as you earlier suggested to me."

Tonith inclined his head. "In that case, I accept full responsibility for my actions."

Grievous nodded. "That you will," he said. He looked back to Bonteri. "Who is the representative you will be negotiating with, Senator?"

Amidala came out from under the table. "I am."

Grievous turned his gaze over to her, and laughed.

Bonteri gave him a puzzled look. "What's so funny?"

"I remember this one," Grievous said, pointing a clawed finger at Amidala. "She blew me up once." He chuckled again. "No hard feelings, of course."

"Padme," Bonteri said disapprovingly.

"He deserved it," Amidala said, crossing her arms.

Grievous bowed. "Guilty, as charged." He looked between Bonteri, Amidala, and Ahsoka. "I will leave the three of you to your work. These peace negotiations are absolutely essential, and as such I welcome any assistance that Senator Bonteri and Senator Amidala can provide at this important juncture." He paused, tilting his head. "I am-hardly an expert in these matters."

Ahsoka could barely believe what she was hearing. She could think of no reason for the Separatists to concoct a deception this bizarre, and so she could only conclude that somehow the cyborg General had had a complete personality overhaul since the last time she'd encountered him. She could only wonder what had brought about this completely unexpected change.

"Thank you, General," Bonteri said warmly. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding this secrecy has caused, but Senator Amidala has many enemies. I only wished for her to avoid their attention."

"Understood," Grievous said. "In fact," he began, his gaze shifting back to Tonith, "I think I can help you with that, by placing the responsibility for the safety of your negotiations in the hands of Admiral Tonith here."

Tonith's eyes widened. "General? I thought my duty was to guard this world."

"Which you failed to do. You allowed a ship of suspected Republic infiltrators to land." The general's reptilian eyes narrowed.

"I knew I had more chance of capturing them if-"

Grievous held up a metallic hand. "Whatever your reasoning, Admiral Tonith, your actions were reckless and needlessly endangered lives. I will summon one of the other officers on Raxus to assume your previous duties."

"I didn't-"

"-still, I can't help but notice your attention to detail in detecting the unusual quality of Senator Bonteri's guests. Which is why I am giving you this *final* chance to prove your value. Do not fail me again, Admiral. Is that clear?"

Tonith inclined his head in resignation. "Yes, General."

"Good," Grievous said. He turned back to Bonteri. "I place Admiral Tonith at your disposal, Senator. If you require any further assistance, do not hesitate to contact me."

"Thank you," Bonteri said.

"You are welcome, Senator." Grievous' hologram flickered out.

The hologram of Tonith grimaced and then looked over at Bonteri, his expression becoming neutral.

"Senator? Shall I leave these droids for you to-?"

"Yes," Bonteri said.

"As you wish. In that case I will take my leave until you require additional-"

"-actually, Admiral, I was thinking you should come along too and help clean up this mess."

Tonith sighed. "Of course. I will arrive within the hour." Then his hologram flickered out.

Ahsoka deactivated her remaining lightsaber and put it away. She saw Lux crawl out from under the table.

"That was amazing! I didn't know lightsabers could do that! And how you just leapt twenty times your own body length like it was nothing and then you moved those droids around with your Force powers-!"

Ahsoka laughed. "I take it you've never met a Jedi before."

"No. I'm sure glad you're on our side!"

Ahsoka shrugged. "And I'm glad your mother is on our side. Her way of stopping your droid friends was certainly alot faster than mine."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So I had a lot of fun with this chapter! I do love chapters with lots of character interactions.

Also, I read Jedi Trial by David Sherman and Dan Cragg since it's the only Star Wars story I know of that features Admiral Tonith. And I decided not to use most of that, haha. Yeah, I might reference a few things from there, but mostly not. The narrative direction doesn't really work with what I'm planning. It also contradicts a lot of the other prequels canon (starting with both Clone Wars cartoons) anyway. Admiral Tonith is going to be a somewhat important secondary character in my story, though, so I wanted to get whatever reusable tidbits I could from the story.

Anyway, the authors of Jedi Trial do get the dubious distinction of coming up with the one of the grossest fictional teas I've ever heard of. It's called dianoga tea and apparently it's a mild narcotic brewed from the spleen of a dianoga (remember the trash compactor monster in A New Hope?). Also it causes the drinker's teeth to be stained purple. Apparently drinking this questionable beverage and abusing his underlings are Tonith's only hobbies in this novel. So there are going to be some-changes.

I had a great time writing from Ahsoka's POV in this chapter. I do love her character, and her capacity to create widespread destruction during battle. She is indeed a fun one. The fight between her and Grievous that I referenced in this chapter was from the S1: Ep7 Duel of the Droids from The Clone Wars. I know some people feel this scene makes Ahsoka seem overpowered since she doesn't instantly die from Grievous. My reasoning for why that didn't happen in my AU universe was because the control chips were steadily degrading Grievous' planning ability, especially when applied to one-on-one battles with his opponents. Also Ahsoka is probably one of the more powerful Jedi, even if she isn't the most experienced. Additionally Padme blowing Grievous up was from S1:Ep4 Destroy Malevolence from The Clone Wars. Just to be clear, there is not going to be any romance between Lux and Ahsoka. Lux is probably going to be disappointed that he can't tell all his friends that he saw a Real Jedi, though.

Anyway, if you have any thoughts on the chapter or any of the media referenced, I'd be interested to hear them!

Chapter 30: The Battle Ahead

Chapter Notes

A/N: A new update appears! Finally. Yeah, I know it took a while. A lot has been going on in my life lately. A lot has been going on in general lately. But I finally finished this! Wrote this all up in a single evening. Had to completely discard a prior draft that, though I kind of liked it, was going to accomplish the same plot points but in a much more complicated way. Probably I'll re-purpose some of it for later chapters. I've had this and at least two more chapters pretty much completely planned out for a long time now, but it's also important to me to have some fun with how its implemented. So I like to put a lot of thought into how it all gets written out. I really enjoyed writing this all up and turning my outline into an actual

chapter.

Thanks to everyone who's commented! It's great to get so much feedback and I very much appreciate it!

"You are terrible at explaining this," Grievous said.

Obi-Wan gave him an injured look. "It's not a simple topic," he said. "Padawans can spend over a decade learning mastery of the Force, and even then, we only have a very incomplete understanding of it. And that is with the capability to access it, which-

"-I don't have," Grievous said. He paced in front of the Jedi, his clawed hands clasped behind his cape. "Yes, I know."

"I'm not entirely sure why this is so important to you," Obi-Wan said.

"To fight an enemy, you must understand not only what they do, but how they think," Grievous said.

"But the Sith are entirely different from-

"The Sith and the Jedi are more alike than you might like to admit," Grievous said.

Obi-Wan crossed his arms. "The Sith are diametrically opposed to everything the Jedi stand for."

Grievous turned his head towards the Jedi. "And what exactly is it that you stand for?"

"The Jedi are the guardians of peace and order."

Grievous chuckled. "Peace. Order." He walked closer to Obi-Wan, his metallic feet clinking across the hard floor of the ship, his neck bending until his face was level with Kenobi's. "Our entire galaxy is in a war being led by the Jedi, plunged into chaos caused by the Jedi-

"That's not true!" Kenobi protested. "The Jedi didn't decide to start this war, we didn't-

"And where did the Republic's clone army come from, Kenobi?" Grievous asked, though he already knew the answer. "Who commissioned them?"

"Sifo Dyas," Kenobi said.

"And under what authority was he able to do this?"

"He claimed the authority of the Jedi Council," Kenobi said. "But the Council was never informed. He acted of his own accord."

"And yet you use his army still."

"We weren't given a choice," Kenobi said. "The Jedi do not involve ourselves in politics. Unlike the Sith."

"Dooku was a Sith, yes, but not publicly," Grievous said. "And yet people naturally gravitated to him, were pulled into his orbit, and followed him. Even died for him. And they did all that believing he was

a Jedi."

"Ex-Jedi," Kenobi said.

Grievous sighed. "I can see we are not going to agree on this."

"I should think not! You are very misinformed about who the Jedi are and what we stand for."

"All right," Grievous said. "Let's leave this topic for later and discuss something on which we can agree, then. Sidious needs to die."

"That would be a lot easier if I could enlist the help of the other Jedi."

"Ah, but you see, I do not trust them," Grievous said. "As it is, I barely trust you. But I do trust you. Somewhat. And I have an alternative to offer."

"Which is?"

"I could release your clone troopers if I could be assured they would not attack me or anyone I am allied with," Grievous said.

Kenobi's eyes widened. "Then, you mean for them to help us fight Sidious?"

"Yes," Grievous replied. "That is correct. Additionally, I have a supply of Hailfire droids and Vultures which I intend to employ to aid us in this battle."

Kenobi smiled. "Then perhaps we have a chance after all."

"We shall see," Grievous said.

Sidious watched mostly impassively as Reed's face contorted while he emitted almost inhuman shrieks of pain, though at one point a corner of the Sith Lord's mouth had quirked up in the ghost of a smile.

After another minute, the procedure had finished.

"Ugh," Reed said, grimacing, his face held in his hands now. "Did you even calibrate that thing? We're afraid to look at the result."

"I warned you it might be a bit-painful," Sidious said. "But my equipment delivers impeccable quality, of that I assure you."

Reed finally uncovered his face and looked into the mirror across from him. Blue eyes widened and he leaned closer to the mirror until his nose was nearly touching it. He smiled, and then ran a variety of expressions across his new face. "It's perfect, yes. An exact replica."

"I agree," Sidious replied.

"What happens now?" Reed asked.

"Now you have an appointment with a certain irascible cyborg to keep," Sidious said. "General Grievous will be expecting to negotiate peace talks with the Chancellor."

"Really?" Reed said, his face, no, *Palpatine's face*, looking intrigued. "And which way should these peace talks go?"

"I will handle that," Sidious said. "You just need to act the part of the concerned Chancellor, doing his best to, ah, 'lead the galaxy to a better tomorrow'."

Reed snorted. "All right."

"And do make sure you can say that with a straight face. It's in the rather lengthy speech he prepared. You will find it with the other important files I gave you." He gestured to the datapad Reed had placed on a nearby table earlier.

Reed smiled. "They will never guess we are anything but who we appear to be. Of that we guarantee."

"Good. Do have fun being Chancellor." *It's about time I took a vacation anyway.* Sidious turned, preparing to leave.

"Wait," Reed said. "There is-one more thing."

Sidious turned around again, tilting his head at the impersonator. It was a lot like looking in the mirror, if the mirror talked back. "Oh?"

"It's occurred to us that you may not need us after this is all over and done with."

"Are you implying I'm incapable of paying you the full amount?"

"Not at all. We are implying that you might not care to have someone else alive who remains aware of what has transpired here."

"Really?" Sidious felt a prickle of concern. "And what leads you to believe this?"

"Oh, just a feeling," Reed said, a touch of sarcasm in his tone. "Mysterious cultists in cloaks do always seem somewhat untrustworthy to us."

"Are you planning to be a problem to me?"

"Only if you are planning to be a problem to us."

Sidious scowled. *How annoying.* "If you are bringing this up, then I imagine you've prepared some kind of insurance against such an occurrence."

"Why, how astute of you," Reed replied. He held up a holocommunicator. "If anything happens to us, every single one of these messages we've hidden will be transmitted over the HoloNet."

Reed played the message. When it had completed, Sidious merely sighed. "Understood. Not to worry, you will get your full pay, and of course I have no choice but to ensure your continued survival." *I will have to recalibrate my plans now. Slightly.*

Nevertheless, Sidious left the ruined factory complex in a triumphant mood. Nothing that had just transpired significantly changed the possibilities he had foreseen. Possibilities that overwhelmingly showed that Sidious would prevail. Of course, it helped that he knew exactly what his opponents were

planning to do. Sometimes it seemed almost too easy, that he could see the myriad futures with perfect clarity, whereas the Jedi were limited to only vague outlines through a dark fog. He chuckled at the thought as he jumped into his speeder and raced away, towards the battle ahead.

Chapter 31: The Exchange

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [Chapter 31: The Exchange notes](#)

“--may be the most important mission we’ve ever attempted--” Kenobi said, addressing the clones who stood before him.

The clone troopers stood directly across from the droid contingent Grievous had collected. He could sense their fear of him, not only from their expressions, but from the scent they emitted. Kaleesh often emoted intentionally through scent, but they could often read emotions that way even from species who didn’t. And Grievous, being the conglomeration of biology and technology that he was, could detect them not only through his original olfactory sense but also through the chemical receptors of his implants. Though in this case, Grievous had no intention of justifying that fear.

Grievous paced between the collection of Hailfire, B2, and Vultures, and the line of clones, passing behind Kenobi as he spoke. He had a very bad feeling about this, but it was still the best plan he had. And the clones did seem willing to follow Obi-Wan, even if they trusted Grievous as little as he trusted them.

“--know that every one of you will do your very best--”

Grievous performed a mental inventory of the droids while he waited for the Jedi to finish his speech. Grievous did not think they would find anything that their hated enemy had to say particularly motivating, so he saw no reason to interrupt Kenobi.

“I have a question,” one of the clones said.

“Yes, Cody?” Kenobi said.

Grievous had noted Obi-Wan’s use of nicknames for all of the clones. He mentally cataloged the information for possible future use. He might never see these particular clones again, but he had already worked out their relative rankings and memorized which of the nicknames Kenobi had used went to which clone. That would be useful for planning their confrontation with Sidious.

“How do we know this isn’t some sort of Separatist trick? How do we know he won’t turn on us?” He gestured to the cyborg General.

Grievous turned to face the clone. “Commander Cody, is it?”

The clone looked surprised to be addressed by the cyborg. “Yes?”

He walked up to the clone, bringing his head level to the human's. "Kenobi has told you how Dooku died, and that I kept my word. What more do you require?"

Cody crossed his arms, frowning. "What's in this for you? I believe what General Kenobi told us. I believe you killed Dooku. But how do we know that you didn't do it on orders from Sidious himself? Maybe this is all--" and here he waved a hand expansively, "--some plot of his, some final endgame to destroy the Republic."

"A plausible theory," Grievous said. "I'll admit, it brings even me some worry as I hear it. I have been controlled for so long, I no longer doubt that such a thing could be done without my knowledge."

The clone looked surprised. "That was certainly not the response I'd expected from you."

Grievous tilted his head. "And what response were you expecting?"

The clone gave him a lopsided smile. "Let's just say I never thought of you as the introspective type."

"You may find I have many qualities you are unaccustomed to seeing. Still, you make a good point, Commander. Perhaps I should not be present when you plan your attack so that I cannot be used to easily thwart it."

Cody frowned. "No, if we're really going to be fighting a Sith Lord, then we'll need your help, as much as I hate to admit it. We need to coordinate with each other, or we don't have much of a chance anyway."

"All right. I'll stay, then."

Kenobi looked between them and smiled. "I'm glad that's settled. Now, why don't you tell us what your plan is, Grievous?"

"All right," he responded. Grievous explained his plan to them.

"I'll admit, that's impressive," Cody said.

"It's excessive. Which is perfect," Boil said.

"I agree," Kenobi said, smiling. His eyes seemed hopeful. Grievous found this pleasing, but was unnerved by the realization. He's still a Jedi. *He's an ally, yes, but not a friend.*

Grievous only shook his head. "You have considerably more faith in my plan than I do, then. This is simply all that I was able to come up with given the time and resources available. We are facing an enemy we don't fully understand. We don't know his plans. We don't know what he's capable of. The only thing we do know is that if we don't kill him, he'll kill us."

"You might want to work on your motivational speeches," Kenobi said, though his eyes glimmered with amusement.

"It's true," Grievous said defensively. "I see no reason to make our situation sound any better than it is."

“Be that as it may, your plan is our best chance at defeating him,” Kenobi said.

Anakin picked up his pace as the Chancellor walked through the hallway ahead of him. As he turned, Palpatine regarded Anakin for a moment before breaking into his usual beaming smile. “Anakin, so good to see you again! What is it?”

Anakin stopped and took a deep breath. “You’re in terrible danger, Chancellor.”

Palpatine’s expression became serious. “Really? How do you know this?”

“I had a vision.”

Palpatine was silent for a moment, appearing to consider this information. “Walk with me to my office.”

Anakin nodded and they walked back through the curving hall until they reached the office, when they were inside, the Chancellor walked up to the window, looking over his shoulder at Anakin. “What did you see in this vision?”

Anakin thought back to the disjointed images. “It didn’t really make any sense. There’s--a shadow, and it--suffocates you and everyone else around it. I don’t know what that means. But I know that you’re in terrible danger!”

Palpatine frowned, his hand on his chin, expression thoughtful. “I’ve been asked by Grievous not to take any Jedi to these negotiations.”

“You can’t trust him! He’s--”

Palpatine laughed. “Oh, I don’t. But I don’t dare go back on that agreement either--”

--but something terrible will--”

--at least not *visibly*,” He said with a sly smile.

Anakin allowed himself to hope. *He has a plan.* “So, you’ll let me come along?”

“Certainly,” Palpatine said.

Anakin breathed a sigh of relief. When whatever it was went wrong, Anakin would be able to help the Chancellor. And make sure the Republic got all of Grievous’s prisoners back. He’d never forgive himself if anything happened to Obi-Wan.

He wished being the Chosen One meant he could do something actually useful, like being in two places at once. He was painfully aware that Padme was also in danger since she’d insisted on going to Raxus. He hoped she’d be alright. At least Ahsoka was with her. Hopefully, she’d let him know if anything went wrong. He wished he could have told her just how important Padme’s life was to him. But he hesitated to confide that far even with his Padawan.

Ahsoka took a deep breath and tried to come to terms with the feeling of foreboding that had taken hold of her. It was a bit like a vision, but there was no particular event it forewarned her of, only the need to keep her guard up and be ready for anything.

Her surroundings, however, seemed peaceful. Besides the ruined buildings here and there from the earlier Republic attack, anyway. But there were animals, trees, and people of all species milling along the walkways and working on rebuilding the rubble. The sun shone in a clear blue sky, and the sound of birdsong filled the air.

They were walking to the Separatist Senate building with Senator Bonteri now. Padme and Bonteri were engaged in conversation, though Padme was hooded again just as Ahsoka was. Admiral Tonith trailed behind them with a group of B2 droids, scrutinizing anyone who passed by. Ahsoka narrowed her eyes at him. He hadn't shown any signs of hostility since the conversation with Grievous. But Ahsoka was hardly going to forget the hostilities *prior* to that.

It seemed clear that the feeling was mutual when, on noticing her watching him, his eyes narrowed as well.

--but I think Ahsoka would know more about that than I would," Padme said, causing Ahsoka to end her glaring contest with the Separatist Admiral and turn to the Republic senator.

"Know more about what?" she asked.

"Jedi protocol," Padme said.

"Oh, uh, yeah," Ahsoka said. She looked over at Bonteri. "You have a question about that?"

"I was just wondering," Bonteri started, "Who the Jedi ultimately serve."

"The people," Ahsoka said immediately.

Bonteri smiled wryly. "Which people?"

"People who need help," she said.

"Forgive me," Bonteri said, "but I do suspect your Code might be a bit more specific than that. Not long ago, I was in mortal peril. but it was General Grievous who saved me from the Jedi, not the other way 'round."

"I suppose you're right. Our first duty is to Republic citizens. But that doesn't mean we don't or won't help others in need. It's just, we can only do so much, and sometimes we do need to take sides."

"Indeed," Bonteri said. "Jedi are a relative rarity in the galaxy. And as you've said, they do take sides. I was just wondering, once Grievous signs the peace treaty, if some of the Jedi will be allocated to the Outer Rim as well."

"Oh. I'm not sure," Ahsoka said. She had never considered what might happen if the Republic signed a treaty with the Separatists rather than defeating them. It had never seemed like a good idea before, or even possible.

"I hope they will consider it," Bonteri said. "Those in the Core worlds aren't the only ones who should have the powers of the Force-sensitive available to come to their aid."

Ahsoka was about to reply when she heard a voice behind her. She turned to see the Muun admiral had closed most of the distance between himself and the rest of their group, a sour expression on his face.

"I'm not sure I agree we actually need the Jedi," Tonith said. "Those abilities didn't exactly serve Dooku well, nor did his former connections with them prevent them from summarily executing him."

Bonteri frowned. "That was a great loss for us," she said, looking sad.

"Hmmm, I can't say I agree there either," Tonith said as he walked with one hand behind his back and one hanging casually near his weapon. "I think his cause is much better off without him."

Bonteri gave him a surprised look.

"Perhaps you only knew Dooku's public persona, Senator," Tonith said. "He could be very charming, when he wanted to be. But I have direct experience with his military strategies, and let me tell you, they were both unnecessarily cruel and an *unmitigated* disaster. Grievous has done more for us in the last two months than Dooku was able to accomplish in all his time as Chancellor."

Ahsoka had to admit, the last thing she had expected to hear was a Separatist disparage Dooku. Maybe Tonith wasn't all bad after all.

Ventress exited hyperspace. At last she'd reached the Outer Rim location that Sidious had sent her to. She opened communications.

A holo of a chiss woman in a white uniform appeared. She spoke in Sy Bisti. "This is Admiral Ar'alani. State your reason for this trespass into Chiss Space."

Ventress frowned. "I'm looking for someone named Mith'raw'nuruodo," she said, carefully enunciating each syllable.

Ar'alani gave her a blank look. Then her pupil-less red eyes lit with recognition, and she winced. "Your pronunciation is--less than ideal. But you must be referring to Thrawn."

"No, I said--"

"Thrawn is the Core name of Mith'raw'nuruodo," Ar'alani explained crisply, standing with her hands behind her back. "In any event, if you are looking for Thrawn, you will not find him here."

"What? Why?" Ventress scowled. Not only had Sidious never mentioned that this chiss had a much easier to pronounce nickname, but apparently he'd been wrong about Thrawn's location as well.

"He was exiled some time ago. In fact, if you are asking about him, I am obliged to question you."

Ventress's scowl grew deeper. "I don't want to answer any questions."

"What you want is irrelevant," Ar'alani replied. She glanced over her side, and nodded, presumably to

someone outside of holo range. Then her holo image abruptly cut off.

Ventress barely dodged the two turbolasers the ship fired at her. She cursed and moved her ship into a roll. As she evaded the lasers and a tractor beam attempt, she glanced over to the holoscreen, one hand ghosting back and forth over the computer controls. *Standard microwave radiation, infrared heat signature, noise radio-wave emissions...there it is!* She'd found their communication frequencies.

While Ventress had done this many times, she hadn't ever attempted it while under attack. The corners of her mouth quirked upwards. *But if I'm going to be a Sith, I must become a master at multitasking.*

She lidded her eyes and *focused*. The fingers of her right hand moved from one key to the next, seemingly of their own volition, keeping one step ahead of the cruiser's AI, while her left steered away from a volley of torpedoes. Ventress was fairly certain that it wouldn't actually be possible to question someone who had been hit with those. But that wasn't her concern.

Ventress noted when the lights in the chiss cruiser flickered, and it began to list to one side.

The holo of Ar'alani appeared again. "What is the meaning of this?!"

"I could ask the same of you," Ventress said casually. "This is the most *unfriendly* questioning I have ever received. But you might say I'm returning the favor."

A sudden outpouring of data filled the screen. Finally! The second stage of the denial of service attack had been successful. The ship, acting on emergency protocols that *should* have only activated on the ship's destruction, began transmitting all of its databank information. Encrypted, of course. But given the state of technology in the Unknown Regions, Ventress had little doubt it could be sliced. Her decryption algorithm soon proved this correct, and along with help from a computerized copy of a protocol droid's language databanks, her computers were able to retrieve the location where Thrawn had been exiled.

She grinned and activated the hyperdrive. A hum filled the cabin and then the blue lines of hyperspace appeared around her.

Chancellor Palpatine approached Grievous at a casual pace, the expression in his faded blue eyes mild and open. When he finally reached Grievous, the cyborg General was finally able to get a read on the Republic leader. He could tell that under the bravado, under the calm, the man was much more nervous than he let on.

So he's not as inscrutable as he appears. Of course, Grievous had an advantage. Though the Chancellor did not appear visibly apprehensive, Grievous could detect the scent of fear emanating from him.

"We meet at last," Palpatine said with a warm smile. He extended a hand.

Grievous carefully shook it, taking care not to scratch the man's flesh with his claws. Then he bent his head until it was level with the much shorter man's face.

“You certainly took your time getting here.”

“Such things cannot be rushed,” Palpatine said. “However, I too am eager to get on with these negotiations. There is much to discuss.”

“I agree. I would like to start with the exchange of prisoners.”

“Ah, yes, I was greatly looking forward to General Kenobi’s return--”

“Of course. But I ask that you go first.”

“Oh. Fair enough, I suppose.” The Chancellor waved a hand, and a blue guard walked towards a Republic shuttle. As the guard moved towards where the prisoners were presumably being held, Grievous assessed the Chancellor’s security. He had not been accompanied by any Jedi, just as Grievous had insisted. The cyborg would not abide their presence here. Besides Kenobi, of course, who he reminded himself would soon be leaving too if they succeeded in destroying Sidious.

Instead, the Chancellor was surrounded by a large number of clones with blue-marked helmets and a number of red and blue guards. He had also brought a number of the walkers the clones used. This was in addition to the nine Star Destroyers Grievous knew orbited the planet now.

The first prisoner was released. Dr. Nuvo Vindi, the one who had released the dreaded Blue Shadow Virus on Naboo. Grievous watched as the scientist walked towards him. He had debated this decision with himself for sure. After all, he was hardly opposed to the Republic or anyone else executing the doctor for war crimes. But he had also decided it would be better if he wasn’t in a Republic prison where it might be easier for Sidious to jailbreak him. *He will certainly stay locked up, however, at least until his fate can be decided by Separatist judges.* He gave one of the droids an instruction to place the man in a cell in the shuttle.

Then the next prisoner caught his eye. It was Slick, the clone who had willingly joined the Separatists. He was being booed by several of the other clones as he passed them, but seemed to be unfazed by this treatment. He stopped when he reached Grievous. “I never expected this day to come. Thought I’d rot in that Republic cell until they finally executed me.”

“You acted honorably in service to the Separatists,” Grievous said. “It was the least I could do to see to your release.”

“What happens now?” Slick asked.

“That’s up to you,” Grievous responded. “For now, you can stay on my flagship, the Invisible Hand. But you have your choice of residence on any Separatist-aligned world you choose. You could live out the rest of your life in peace.”

Slick laughed. “You mean--retire? Just like that?”

“If you like,” Grievous said.

The clone only smiled and shook his head. “Nah, that doesn’t appeal. I’d rather fight--for something I actually believe in. You wouldn’t happen to need any help with that?”

“I might,” Grievous said. “I look forward to discussing the matter further with you.”

The clone gave him a lopsided smile and proceeded to the shuttle.

The next prisoner was a human boy with the same dark complexion and build of the clones. Grievous knew who this was, too.

“Boba Fett, son of Jango Fett,” Grievous said solemnly.

The Fett boy looked up at him. “Did you ever meet my father?”

“Yes,” Grievous said. He had actually met the elder Fett by chance when he had still been in Hill’s employ. “He made quite the impression. You remind me of him--only shorter.”

Fett smiled cautiously at that. “I’ve been told I have his eyes.”

“I imagine you have,” Grievous said, amused. He knew the boy was also a clone, though an unmodified one. “I’ve given some thought to your situation. As an orphan, you’ll need to be adopted.”

Fett scowled at that. “I’m older than he is,” he said, pointing to Slick, who was walking onto the shuttle now. “Does *he* need a guardian?”

“That’s a rather different situation,” Grievous said, though he couldn’t help but think that the kid might have a point. Grievous found the situation with the clones rather confusing. It was something to consider. Later, perhaps. “But even if Slick is younger than he appears, that still does not make you as old as he appears.”

“I can take care of myself,” Fett insisted.

“I do not doubt it,” Grievous said. “But I also don’t think that’s what your father would have wanted. You will have the opportunity to make your case, however.”

“Alright,” Fett said. He turned to walk to the shuttle, then paused. “And thanks, I guess.”

“You are welcome,” Grievous replied.

Grievous watched as the rest of the Separatist prisoners were returned, and then released the Republic prisoners. Again, their was a procession of individuals returned, one by one. Grievous noted that the Chancellor shared a few words with Kenobi, though only nodded with a placid smile as the Clone Troopers were returned.

Afterwards, Grievous listened impatiently as Chancellor Palpatine began what promised to be a long, and in Grievous’s opinion, entirely unnecessary speech. Grievous still didn’t trust Palpatine’s intentions. But having met him in person, he found it difficult to fathom how this man could have murdered someone as directly as Hill had insisted, even a banker like Hego Damask, who Grievous imagined would not be a particularly formidable or battle-hardened opponent. He just didn’t seem capable of it. *Unless he bored Damask to death with an overly-long speech*, the cyborg thought

sardonically.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Yeah, I finally finished this. I really enjoyed this chapter. One of my goals here was to show what was going on with the various story threads I've introduced, so it took me a while to try to integrate everything the way I wanted it. And I still think it could be better, but I also feel it's reached the 'good enough' stage. This chapter did give me the opportunity to make some more connections between the characters, which is something I always like to do.

Anakin's POV was quite the challenge for me to write. I don't profess to be an expert on his character, but I try to do what I can. Do feel free to let me know if you have any input on his characterization, though. He's still a somewhat important character in this story, even if not one of the more commonly-appearing ones.

And I enjoyed introducing Ar'alani in this chapter. I don't expect she'll have many more appearances, just given where the bulk of this story takes place and given that I don't plan for her to abandon her post. But this might not be her last appearance here. I think she's a fun character.

I'm trying to complete a reading of Star Wars Aftermath right now. I have to say I'm disappointed with how disjointed it seems, and the choice of which characters to focus on and which to gloss over seems largely random to me so far. But I'm going to try to get through it, if only for the sake of my insatiable desire for trivia collection.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter! And as always, I'd love to hear what people thought of it!

Chapter 32: Convictions

Chapter Summary

A/N: Here we go again. Things are going to really start heating up in this chapter!

“Greatness is defined,” the Chancellor began, “by our convictions, and the deeds which prove the truth of those convictions. Today it is my great honor to facilitate the proceedings for this historic--”

“I hate just standing here like this,” Waxer grumbled quietly, his helmet cradled in on arm.

“I don’t see we have much choice,” Obi-Wan said. “We can’t exactly go in weapons blazing to fight the Sith Lord when there isn’t any Sith Lord yet.”

“I know,” Waxer said. “But this is, what, the second speech by the Chancellor now? Nothing’s happening, but I know it’s going to happen, and that’s the worst part. The waiting.”

“I warned the Chancellor that we’re expecting an incident,” Obi-Wan said. “He assured me that all of his resources would also be alerted to this possible Sith attack.”

“Possible?” Waxer scoffed. “This would be the worst time for him to strike. So of course he’ll be here.”

Obi-Wan looked over at Grievous. The cyborg was ignoring Palpatine in favor of scanning the treeline and talking to another Kaleesh who stood at his right side. Grievous had told Obi-Wan that her name was Ronderu. She was, as far as Obi-Wan could surmise, one of his lieutenants. On his left, stood Bentalais, the giant Kaleesh who seemed to have taken a dislike to Obi-Wan. Even now he cast a quick glare at the Jedi Master, who only smiled placidly in response.

“--when I was growing up on Naboo--” Palpatine recounted from the podium.

“I don’t like this plan,” Ronderu muttered in Kaleesh, shifting impatiently at Grievous’s side. “It’s going to get you killed.”

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” Grievous said. “Do you have a better plan?”

“You know very well I do,” Ronderu said.

“Not that one.”

“It’s perfectly sensible.”

“Ronderu, the gods are clearly angry with me. I’ll not pester them until I’ve regained their favor. Otherwise, they may finish what they started.” He gestured towards his cybernetic body.

“You don’t know it means they’re angry.”

“It certainly doesn’t mean they’re pleased,” Grievous said.

Ronderu sighed. “I hate this waiting.”

“--even the seemingly insignificant can change the course of an entire galaxy--” Palpatine’s speech continued.

“So do I,” Grievous said. “But there’s nothing else we can do.”

“Sure there is,” Bentalais said. “Not my fault you didn’t like my suggestion, either.”

“We’re here to sign a peace treaty,” Grievous murmured warningly. “I’m fairly sure that can’t happen if you rip off Palpatine’s head.”

“What I want to know is what’s taking Sidious so long,” Ronderu grumbled. “We’re here to rip off his head, and I for one would like to get started with that.”

That was when Ronderu heard a sound. Her communicator. “I’ll handle this,” she said to Grievous.

Grievous nodded and then as Ronderu walked towards their shuttle to talk to the caller in private.

When she arrived, she answered the call. A small hologram of a familiar Muun appeared.

“Lora?” Ronderu said, puzzled. “What is it?”

The Muun woman seemed visibly shaken. "You have to leave now. I just saw something."

"Saw--something? Oh, yes, your visions. What did you see?"

"Your death. Grievous's capture--"

"Capture? Does he escape?"

"He--does not. Please, believe me."

Ronderu frowned. "I do, Lora. But what can I do to prevent it?"

"There's another, someone calls him 'The Giant'? You need to leave Kalee with him in a shuttle."

The Giant. *Bentalais*.

"Leave? And go where?"

"The Invisible Hand."

Ronderu growled. "And do what? Run away? Never!"

"No. Pilot a starfighter."

"All right. But what about Grievous?"

"He needs to stay on Kalee," Lora said.

Ronderu hesitated. This meant she might not be on-planet when Sidious attacked. *But if Lora is right--*
"Okay. I'll let him know the change of plans."

"Thank you. Please, we need to hurry."

When Ronderu had returned to the clearing where Palpatine was giving his speech, she gestured to Bentalais. "We need to talk."

He looked down at her. "Really? This isn't the best time..."

"It's important," Ronderu said.

Grievous tilted his head in concern. "What is it?"

Ronderu turned to face him. "A pressing matter. Lora said she had a vision. You--stay here. Bentalais and I need to attend to this matter alone. The Sith Lord could still appear at any moment."

"All right," Grievous said, his eyes widening. "Take care, both of you, and return soon."

"We will," Ronderu said. "May the gods be with you, Dreamer."

"And you as well, Dreamt One" Grievous said.

Ronderu motioned for Bentalais to follow her to the shuttle. The large Kaleesh grimaced. "They never make these things big enough," he grumbled as he folded himself into the entrance.

Ronderu sighed. "Then you're really not going to like the new plan."

After Ronderu and Bentalais left, Grievous stood awkwardly with only his silent Magnaguards, Hailfire droids, B2's and Vultures, paying little attention to whatever Palpatine was saying at the podium. It was a lonely experience. He'd finally had his mind returned to him, and been reunited with the friends he thought had died. And in the short time that had happened, he'd become accustomed to having someone nearby to speak to.

His communicator beeped. It was a message from Lora, but it was written in words scrolling across the small screen rather than spoken through a hologram. It was rather cryptic, requesting that he send it to Admiral Tonith, of all people. Grievous shrugged to himself and forwarded the message. He hoped that Lora's visions would help them. He worried though that they might interfere with the plans he had previously laid out, which had included Ronderu and Bentalais in the battle against Sidious. Still, she had access to information he did not, and he would have to trust her in order for that to help him.

He was again left to only his own thoughts and the sound of Palpatine's overly cheerful voice. He glanced over at Kenobi, who was surrounded by his clone officers. At least the Jedi had someone to talk to. He almost wished--

"Back so soon, Grievous?" Hill said, looking up from the stack of datapads on his desk.

"Yes," Grievous said, his eyes flitting briefly to the stock display holos that scrolled across the walls in the Munn's spacious office. "I've collected the debt from Cad Bane."

Hill raised one hairless brow. "Really? All of it?"

"All 2.5 million credits of it, yes," Grievous said.

"Congratulations, Grievous!" Hill said, looking pleased. "He has been one of our most difficult clients. And now perhaps he will think twice before defaulting again when we well know he has plenty of money to pay!"

"I have a question, Mr. Hill." Grievous said, standing in front of the Muun, his hands behind his back.

Hill frowned, steeping his fingers over the desk. "Please, call me Chairman, Grievous. I know you can manage the word."

"Of course, Mr. Hill," Grievous said. This was the single act of disobedience that he was afforded, that would annoy Hill without causing Grievous undue problems. And so he refused to give it up.

Hill only sighed and rolled his eyes. "What's your question?"

"I've done some calculations, Mr. Hill, and it does not seem that my current rate of collection is sufficient."

Hill smiled at that. *“Nonsense. You’re one of our top performers, Grievous.”*

“I meant to pay off my planet’s debt.”

“Oh,” Hill said. “Of course. That’s just basic math. Doing that would take you, oh, probably several more decades than you’re going to live.”

“But--I need to pay it all off,” Grievous said.

Hill leaned back in his chair, shaking his head in amusement. “Grievous, that’s simply not going to happen. You need to be realistic--do you have any children?”

The question, spoken so quickly compared to the previous statement, and so seemingly unrelated, confused Grievous. “Why?”

“So they can carry on your--legacy, of course. If they’re even half as talented as you, they’d still be worth my time.”

Grievous took a deep breath. A fantasy flashed across his mind then, one involving something rather more drastic than harsh words and an immediate resignation. He quelled it.

“No,” was all Grievous said in response, utilizing every bit of his restraint.

Hill sighed, unaware of his narrowly escaped mortal peril. “That’s a pity.”

“Are there any other debts of a similar size to Mr. Bane’s?” Grievous could easily search the clients in his records by the size of their debts, but he had come to learn that certain clients were not listed in those records, and were recorded in a database only accessible by Hill. Clients such as Cad Bane, for example.

Hill seemed to ponder this a moment, then began tapping something onto one of his datapads. “Ah, yes. There’s a 4.2 million debt owed by a client named Jango Fett. Mandalorian. Heavily armed. Freelancer.”

Freelancer. That was Hill’s code for bounty hunter. Not surprising. While there were plenty of individuals who evaded their debts, not many of them could manage to evade the apparatus that Hill had constructed to prevent them from building up and ignoring those debts. Large corporations often did so, of course, but Grievous was not authorized to use his particular talents to collect from them. Apparently that was managed by a team of lawyers.

“I’ll handle it,” was all Grievous said in response.

Grievous blinked as his mind returned to the present. The palms swaying lazily in the wind around them. The warmth of the sun. The clearing where Grievous stood with his contingent of Separatist battle droids and the Republic witnesses, watching, if not listening, to Palpatine deliver his speech.

The Republic Chancellor, while every bit as outwardly enthusiastic as he continually seemed to be, had

clearly begun to wilt in the tropical climate of Kalee. He had taken to intermittently dabbing a handkerchief over his forehead to remove the sweat which would otherwise interfere with his ability to make eye contact with his audience.

It was at that moment that Palpatine made eye contact with Grievous, smiling brightly. "I'm sure Chancellor Grievous has been looking forward to this moment as well." With that, Palpatine removed a datapad from his chancellor's robes and held it out. "If you would approach the podium now, Chancellor?"

It's about time, Grievous thought, stalking up to Palpatine. Without saying a word, he took the datapad and pen, checked the document to ensure it was the same as the one that had been sent to him by Palpatine in advance, and signed it.

He looked up at Palpatine, who was beaming effusively. The Republic Chancellor took the pen as well and moved to sign the treaty...

And the pen moved across the screen, and the words 'Sheev Palpatine' appeared across the page, rebroadcast on an enormous holographic display above them for the audience.

It's done, Grievous thought in shock, as applause erupted in the audience.

"It's done," Palpatine said, unknowingly echoing the cyborg's thoughts. He smiled effusively at the audience, then turned to Grievous. With a wry smile, he said quietly, "My thanks for your patience. I'm glad my droning didn't put you to sleep."

Grievous chuckled at that in surprise. "I assure you, Chancellor, that sleep was the very last thing on my mind."

Grievous could hardly believe that the event had gone without incident. But as he stepped away from the podium, his spirits sunk at the sight of a familiar cloaked figure who had appeared seemingly from nowhere at the edge of the clearing.

Sidious grinned, his cloak flapping in the wind, his hands hanging empty at his sides. "Now isn't this heartwarming," he said, his yellow eyes glowing with malice. And it was at that moment that one of those empty hands lifted into the air, curling into a claw, and began choking Palpatine.

"But all good things--must come to an *end*."

Chapter 33: The Shadow

Chapter Notes

A/N: Here we are! The battle begins!

This was an incredibly fun chapter to write, and I hope you will enjoy it, too! I very much appreciate the feedback I've gotten on this story, and I would be most interested to hear

what you think of this particularly pivotal chapter. At 4342 words, I believe it to be only the second longest chapter in this story, which I have filled with rather short chapters thus far. Somehow I fit everything I wanted to happen into that rather short space, which I think is an accomplishment in and of itself, as brevity has never been my greatest talent.

And now, for the long-awaited showdown, Grievous and Kenobi vs Sidious! Fight fight fight!

Blaster bolts fired out from droids and clones alike towards the Sith Lord, but seemed to be effortlessly deflected by him. Grievous activated his four sabers and ran towards Sidious.

Sidious paid him no heed until he had closed most the distance between them. That was when he finally responded by launching himself straight upwards, all the way to the tops of the trees, his leaps through the canopy a defiance of gravity.

Grievous turned instantaneously to see Palpatine slowly getting to his feet, one hand rubbing at his neck, his guard standing over him.

Obi-Wan and his clone troopers were running towards Grievous.

All this Grievous took in in an instant, and then his gaze snapped back towards the retreating Sith Lord and he took off in pursuit of him, climbing the trees himself and using his enhanced cyborg strength and rappelling line to propel him forward in the canopy. This running surprised him--it did not fit with what he knew of Sidious, who he had never thought of as the type to flee from any conflict.

But it occurred to him then that he had not misjudged his foe's character, but rather his purpose. The earlier attack had been a charade. *This was never about preventing the treaty from being signed, never about killing Palpatine.*

This was about getting to me, so that none of that would matter. Sidious wasn't trying to unseat Palpatine--he was trying to continue the war. *And he needs the Separatists to do that.*

Grievous feared then that he had made a grave mistake, but there was no turning back now.

"I hope I'm not late to the party," a familiar voice said from beside him. Grievous glanced to his side, and saw Obi-Wan following along, leaping through the air with the unnatural strength of a Jedi.

"We're being set up," Grievous said.

"If so, perhaps we can still turn it to our favor," the Jedi said.

Sidious suddenly leapt down into the undergrowth ahead of them. Growling, Grievous jumped down as well, followed by Obi-Wan at his side.

Finally, they came to a clearing. Sidious stood in the center of it, seemingly unconcerned by the angry cyborg and Jedi Master who now stood before him.

"You looked taller in your hologram," Grievous said, holding up his four lightsabers in a defensive pose.

Sidious put a hand to his chest. “Oh, you just had to get that dig in, didn’t you? But as a certain green gremlin likes to say, and this is one of the only things upon which we do agree, ‘size matters *not*.’” His acid-yellow eyes blazed with anticipation.

“Your reign of evil ends here,” Kenobi said, drawing his lightsaber in a ready pose.

Sidious turned his gaze to Kenobi. “Oh, no, I think my reign *has just begun*.”

Grievous readied himself for Sidious to draw a lightsaber or unleash a Force attack. But the Sith Lord only folded his hands in front of him. “Which of you will strike me first, and reap the glory of my defeat?”

Everything in Grievous screamed that this was a trap now. *Sidious* should have struck first, without warning, and without response. But that wasn’t what was happening. Instead, he was waiting patiently for them to make their move.

Unconcerned. Smiling. Toying with them.

A rage lit in Grievous, and it was everything he could do to keep himself from leaping towards the Sith Lord in that moment. He felt frustration. Sidious had to die. But Grievous didn’t dare attack, still trying to search out the Sith’s intentions, his hidden trap.

Circling slowly around Sidious, he asked, “Why did you come here?”

Sidious gave him a bland smile, his eyes alight with the emotion not otherwise present on his features. “I came for you, of course,” he said. “To give you a choice.”

“Why do I have the feeling that one of those choices is ‘join you’ and the other is ‘die’?”

Sidious laughed. “Oh, you are quite mistaken, Grievous. You see, I do not plan to give you the option to die.”

Again, it was all Grievous could do to stop his anger from consuming all reason in him. He wanted to tear the Sith Lord limb from limb in that moment, and only the knowledge that Sidious was actively provoking him into a thoughtless attack held him back. *Stick with the plan--you and Kenobi attack together. None of this ‘taking us one at a time’ nonsense.*

“Whatever your plan is here, Sidious, it won’t succeed,” Kenobi said. “This conflict can only end one way. Even if you survive, you cannot hope to restore the Sith Empire alone, no matter how much power you may have, nor do anything more than live the life of a common criminal.”

“Ah, that is where you are wrong, Jedi,” Sidious said, examining the carefully manicured nails on one hand before his yellow eyes flashed back up to meet his opponent’s gaze. “I am hardly *alone*. But the Jedi? Your Order is a dying light, Kenobi, a sputtering flame that I will see stamped out. Forever.”

Kenobi was silent at that.

“What, no amusing quip? No righteous refrain? I’m disappointed. Still, Kenobi, you need not doom yourself with the rest of the Jedi.” Sidious held out a pale hand. “Pledge yourself to me, and you will

live to see a galaxy remade.”

“Your offer is hollow,” Kenobi said. “I would much rather have a death of integrity than choose a life of degrading servitude.”

“I thought you’d say that,” Sidious replied. “But I can be flexible in this case--I’ll be more than happy to kill you, Master Jedi.”

“I think you’ll find that not so easy as you believe,” Kenobi said, his expression pleasant though his eyes were hard. “After all, Sith Lords are our specialty.”

Sidious laughed suddenly. “Oh, I’m quaking in my boots. One force-blind monstrosity and a single second-rate Jedi. You think that destroying my Apprentices means you possess the caliber to destroy me? You *fool*.”

Then there were shouts all around them and the rhythmic sounds of robotic limbs. Their reinforcements, the droids and the clones, had arrived. At that moment a hail of blaster fire rang out from all directions towards the Sith Lord.

And were all stopped mere meters from him.

With a dismissive wave, he set the bolts in reverse. He grinned at the wave of destruction, walking purposefully towards Grievous and Kenobi, who now stood side by side.

“At last. Let the games begin,” he said, two lightsabers dropping out from his sleeves and into his hands.

Anakin stared at the holo-display in shock. Moments earlier, the treaty had been signed, and he had almost dismissed his own premonition as the result of an overactive imagination and worry.

Then he had seen him. The Sith Lord. And chaos had broken out as he had Force-choked Palpatine and then fled with Grievous and Obi-Wan in hot pursuit of him. To make matters worse, they had then lost all contact with the surface. Something must have happened to all the cameras and comms at the signing.

And now, as Anakin himself ran to the ship’s hangar, mentally readying himself for combat, he cursed himself for not being more adamant about coming to the surface of the planet despite Palpatine’s insistence on keeping him here to avoid a diplomatic faux pas with Grievous. And as he turned the final corner to the hangar, two things happened simultaneously: one, Anakin felt a darkness unfold below him, a void, a maw, a shadow, a *somehow familiar* being whose seemingly endless desire for power and control Anakin could sense as almost a palpable force, and two, he ran into the closed blast door of the hangar, and saw, through it’s clear transparisteel, all the crates, ships, and horrifyingly, the people behind it floating aimlessly out through space.

Grievous and Kenobi both clashed with Sidious simultaneously. Five blades against two would normally seem to tilt the fight to their advantage, but Sidious never seemed to stay in one place long enough for any of the blades to do more than graze his sabers. Everything about him moved as if on an axis of his choosing as he dodged the attacks with an impossible speed and agility. It was nothing like how Dooku fought, as if in an impenetrable box constructed of the straightedge of his saber. With Sidious every move curved or spun in dizzying directions too unpredictable to track.

Nevertheless, Grievous thought his plan might be working. He and Obi-Wan circled around the Sith Lord, attempting to close in on him. The droids and clone troopers around them did the same. Grievous was tightening a noose around Sidious, and he meant to see the Sith Lord choke in it.

Sidious, for his part, was much more difficult to box in than any other single opponent Grievous had ever encountered, Jedi included. Grievous had anticipated this, however, and so he had implemented his best countermeasure--throw everything he had at the Sith Lord.

Almost everything, that was. He found himself thinking of the intended roles of Ronderu and Bentilais in the battle. But those plans were a moot point now. He lunged at Sidious, striking and at last connecting with one of the Sith Lord's sabers in one vicious circular sweep. The saber flew from the Sith Lord's hand, and at that moment Grievous used his ability to pull it to himself.

"An excellent addition to my collection," he growled, as he ignited it and spun it with the blue saber he already held in the same hand.

Sidious blocked Kenobi's attacks and pulled at the saber with his Force power, and Grievous found himself digging into the dirt to prevent being pulled to the Sith Lord. A saber was wrested from his metallic claws, but it was the Jedi saber, not the Sith one. Sidious gave it a look of disgust and discarded it. "Give that back." The Sith Lord snapped, pulling again at his own saber.

Gladly, Grievous thought, pulling back further at first and then abruptly lunging towards Sidious with the red saber aimed at his heart.

Sidious spun away from the attack and Grievous felt something *push* him forward still. Grievous tumbled forward and the saber sliced straight through a clone trooper's armored chest, his clawed feet leaving slashes on the armor.

No. Grievous looked down at the clone in dismay and horror. He put away a saber so he could lift the man from the ground. "I'm sorry," he said.

The clone lifted one hand shakily. "Behind you," he croaked, and then collapsed.

Grievous wheeled around, glaring at Sidious. "I will see you *burn*," he roared.

Sidious laughed, gesturing with his free hand to crumple a Vulture droid diving at him like it was paper. "Oh, you are too much fun, Grievous. Such a shame to see you serve as a tool of the Jedi."

"The only ones who tried to use me as a tool are the *Sith*," Grievous hissed, three lightsabers whirling towards the Sith Lord.

“You are mistaken,” Sidious said, pushing Grievous back with the Force and slashing with his second lightsaber, blocking Obi-Wan’s blows with ease. “Master Kenobi here would have you serve his Council’s purpose, then expect you to grovel at their feet for forgiveness. Or are you unfamiliar with the *Jedi Way*? Forsake these fools, and I promise I will never lie to you as to what I require.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Kenobi said.

“Already done,” Grievous replied. His golden eyes glared into the Sith’s acid-yellow ones. “I will never bow or kneel to you again, Sidious. I would rather endure a thousand cuts and a thousand deaths than ever serve you again.”

“You’re not going to like what comes next, then,” Sidious responded, deflecting a barrage of blaster bolts aimed at him.

“He’s not your pawn!” Obi-Wan said, real anger in his eyes now.

“About time you showed some fire in you, Jedi!” Sidious exclaimed. “Come and destroy me, then, Sith-slayer!”

Kenobi propelled himself towards Sidious in one leap. As he brought his saber down towards the Sith Lord’s arm, Sidious spun away from the attack and stabbed his own saber abruptly into Obi-Wan’s chest.

Obi-Wan’s eyes widened in shock and Sidious grinned up at him as he stood, suspended on the end of the red blade. Then Sidious deactivated the saber and the Jedi crumpled to the ground.

He turned to Grievous, grinning now. “Still think you can beat me?”

Grievous felt shock seeing Kenobi go down so abruptly, and did the only thing he could. He lunged at Sidious, three sabers extended. The Sith struck out at Grievous with Force Lightning then, causing the cyborg general to seize up and fall to the ground. “Have it your way, then, monster,” Sidious said. “I gave you a chance to do this the easy way.” The entire clearing crackled with blue energy, and Grievous, collapsed, could see Kenobi, the droids, and the clones twitching on the fern-covered ground. *We never had a chance*, Grievous realized. *This really was all just a game to him.*

Sidious, grinning lazily, his eyes blazing, walked slowly over to Grievous, bent down, and grabbed something at the cyborg’s side. His saber. As he stood, he ignited his two red sabers and held them pointing towards Grievous.

“And now, General, you are *mine*,” Sidious said, his expression triumphant.

But in that moment Grievous saw two things that gave him a renewed hope. One was the outline of the Soulless One rapidly approaching in the cloud-flecked sky. The other was a larger shuttle moving in it’s wake, though clearly being piloted separately.

And though Grievous was still suffering from the effects of the Sith lightning Sidious had just finished flooding the clearing with, the signals in his cybernetics confused and erratic, and every nerve left of his organic body in agonizing pain, there was, ironically, one thing left that still worked.

Grievous lifted one arm shakily and activated his electric implant. Lightning poured out of his hand and hit the Sith Lord, who staggered back, his eyes widening in shock and rage. And, for the first time, fear.

And in that moment, Grievous recognized the face staring back at him, as if a shroud had been lifted. But in the next, Sidious seemed to have reasserted control over this unnamed ability, and both recognition and the knowledge of the Sith Lord's identity left Grievous. But not the knowledge that Sidious had, if only for an instant, been unmasked.

The Soulless One screamed overhead and Sidious rather clumsily evaded as its lasers spewed towards him. Though Sidious was rapidly regaining his equilibrium, the cyborg could see that the lasers were shepherding him away from Grievous himself. And then the shuttle landed in the spot where Sidious had stood only moments before. The door opened and Benthilais bent his head as he exited the shuttle with his slugthrower in one arm. He grabbed Grievous in the other arm and began walking back towards the shuttle.

"Kenobi," Grievous croaked. "You must find--"

Benthilais growled in annoyance. "Yes, yes, I know," he said. Grievous felt a weight on him, then, and saw the barely living Jedi now laying atop him in the Kaleesh giant's massive arm. "You all love this wretched Jedi man so much." Grievous closed his eyes, exhausted, feeling little at all, though he could feel Benthilais lope back to the shuttle, and the heat from Kenobi's body on his durasteel exterior.

"Don't you dare die on me again, Grievous," Benthilais rumbled as he set the barely conscious cyborg and Jedi on the floor next to each other. "Or I'll kill you myself."

"I love you too, Benthilais," Grievous said as he felt the shuttle lift off from the ground. Looking over at Kenobi, he saw the Jedi was still somehow hanging on to life, despite his mortal injury.

Grievous said quietly, "Don't die, Kenobi. Benthilais will be very put out if you do, and I am in no shape to be cleaning up your corpse for him."

Though Kenobi said nothing, Grievous thought he saw one corner of his mouth twitch upward in response.

The shuttle and starfighter had left the clearing, and in fact had left Kalee itself. Sidious, the adrenaline completely draining from him, allowed himself to collapse backwards to the ground. Though his power was immense, it was not limitless, and he had used part of his life force to channel such great energy, enough that it had probably shaved a full year off his life.

It was really a sort of damp, loamy soil Kalee had, and from this vantage point Sidious noticed for the first time the detail of the ferns and the rocks and the moss that he had been tramping through this entire time. Over to the one side, not more than a few centimeters from his face, the imprint of a clone's boot, and to the other, a deep scoring from an errant laser, perhaps from one of the clones, or the droids, or the *completely unexpected starfighter* that had nearly vaporized him.

A beetle took the moment to alight on the top of the Sith Lord's nose.

This is fine.

This is perfect.

This is a wretched failure.

Sidious plucked the beetle off his nose and crushed it in one hand. He fisted the other hand in the dirt, vowing vengeance on Grievous and every friend or ally the Kaleesh cyborg possessed.

That monstrosity would be made to pay for this humiliation. Somehow, none of the Sith Lord's visions had warned him of the cyborg attempting to electrocute him, or of the loathsome starfighter that had appeared, or of the shuttle that would come and retrieve the cyborg *and* Kenobi while Sidious used the dregs of his power to fend off an entirely unanticipated attack.

If he had *known*, such a cheap ploy would never have worked. He would have brushed away the cyborg's simple electricity, that parody of Force Lightning, with hardly a thought. He would have marshaled his power, used it to yank both of those wretched contraptions from the sky.

But he had not known. He had been--unprepared.

Grievous had to have changed his plans at the last possible moment. It was the only explanation for how Sidious had been unable to see this. But why? Sidious doubted the cyborg understood the true magnitude of the advantage the Sith Lord had over him. Grievous was blind to the Force, and had really only been privy to its more direct uses. It was rare for even Jedi Masters to be competent farseers, and even those that were had long had their vision obscured by Sidious himself. Still, perhaps Kenobi had thought to warn the monster of the ability? Sidious would have to investigate the matter further. But at a later time.

Slowly, the Sith Lord rose and dusted dirt and debris off his robes. He sighed. His clothes were still a wreck of caked dirt and chlorophyll smears. No blood, of course. Neither lightning, lightsabers, nor laser blasts caused that kind of mess, which he appreciated. There would be no need to wash any blood off *his* hands, for sure.

He looked over the carnage of the battlefield, noting seven remaining life forces. *Clones. So hardy.* He ignited a lightsaber. *Time to eliminate some--redundancies.*

Sidious walked by one of the still living, though unconscious, clones, slashing his saber in a swift arc through his midsection. *And so General Grievous, that savage beast, slashed this poor creature clear in half.*

Using a trickle of his returning Force power, he lifted one of the defunct B2's and had it shoot one of the other clones to death. *Those heartless droids were simply relentless.*

Lifting a dead clone with a gesture, he operated the man like a puppet, having him shoot more of the downed droids. *Of course our brave soldiers defended themselves.*

He turned the dead clone one more time and had him shoot another of the still-living clones. *Whoops! Friendly fire! How tragic.*

Dropping the deceased man like a discarded toy, he walked up to his fourth target. *Looks like Grievous has a shocking new attack.* He fried the man with Force Lightning. *Even in death, this man can testify to it.*

He located the positions of the three remaining clones on the battlefield. This last part would require more delicacy. He lifted all three of them, placing them all propped together in the center of the clearing. As he walked up to them, he could sense one of the clones regaining consciousness. Sidious removed the man's helmet. "Unhh," the clone said, blinking and grimacing. He looked at the clones beside him. "Waxer? Boil?"

"Oh, they're alive. But a bit indisposed at the moment."

The clone looked up at Sidious then. "So you're the Sith Lord."

"Yes. A very good deduction, Commander Cody."

Cody frowned, his eyes widening. "How do you--?"

"--know your name?" Sidious finished. "Oh, I know a great many things, Commander. It's my job."

"You're one of the senators, aren't you?"

Sidious laughed. "That would be telling. You don't need to know."

"Why not tell me? You're just going to kill us all anyway."

"First of all, revealing every detail of my *evil plot* to every nobody I come across seems both careless and unnecessary. I just don't need your validation, Cody."

"Fine. You must want something, though, or you would have killed us already."

"Correct! You see, and now we come to my second point, I'm not going to kill you!"

"What, so you're just going to leave us here so we can tell everyone how invincible you are?"

Sidious chuckled. "Oh, no. I'm going to leave you here so you can tell everyone that I was nothing but a Separatist sham. A droid hologram, to be specific."

"And you're telling me this because--you need my validation?"

Sidious gave him a tight-lipped smile. "You really do have an attitude, clone."

"But you knew that, right?" Cody smirked back at him.

"One of us is *not* going to remember this conversation," Sidious said slowly, his eyes glowing with spite, "but the other one of us is going to make sure that when you die, it's painful."

"Whoooo!" Cody said, "Sure glad I won't remember that, then. Threat from a Sith Lord. Anticipation alone would kill me. Probably wouldn't ever sleep agai--"

Sidious had put a pale finger on the man's brown forehead, and he went silent, his head lolling forward. "Very painful," Sidious hissed.

Sidious stood mere meters behind the impersonator, who was facing the viewport, still unaware of his silent visitor. They were in the Chancellor's private quarters on the *Indomitable*. Sidious had looped the vidcams and mesmerized the guards, so he had no fear that he would be detected, despite the security precautions. He had been the one to devise them, after all. And Anakin was still stuck on the other Venator, the *Audacity*. He'd have to drop by soon to reassure him, the poor thing.

"Excellent speech, Palpatine," Sidious said, a corner of his mouth quirking up when the impersonator startled and turned from the viewport to face him. "You delivered it so powerfully, too."

"Sidious!" he said, his eyes wide. His expression changed to a scowl. "You almost killed me out there!"

"You were never in any danger," Sidious said calmly, his hands hanging loosely at his sides. "I know exactly how far I can take that sort of thing before someone dies. It's an art, really."

"We sure hope so, for your sake," Jarvinious Reed said, scowling with Palpatine's face and speaking with his voice. "Please recall the consequences if anything untoward should happen to us."

"Your little blackmail bomb. Yes, I am well aware," Sidious said with a laugh. He summoned a lightsaber into his hand, then, and lunged forward, stabbing the impersonator in the chest. "And I just thought I'd let you know, your services will no longer be required."

Reed, eyes wide in shock, clutched at the hood of the Sith Lord's robe, and ripped it off.

"Oh, that won't make a difference, but seeing as since you've been so helpful, and are sure to be quite discreet, why not?"

Sidious unobscured his features for the dying man, and smiled politely at his expression of incomprehension.

"Why?" Reed asked.

"You don't need to know that," Sidious said. "Nor is there time to explain it all." He held the man suspended upright with the Force now, as he would have surely collapsed already otherwise. Faded blue eyes stared back at their identical copy, one face desperate, wide-eyed, the other serene with just the slightest hint of a smirk.

"So you--changed your face, too. But you'll never be able to--fool them like me. You aren't--an actor."

At that, Sidious gave Reed his brightest, kindest Chancellor's smile, and said in his most cheerful Chancellor's voice, "We shall look forward to proving you wrong on that!"

Reed gave him a horrified look, and expired not long after. Sidious released his body, allowing it to fall to the ground. Now there was just the simple matter of disposing of the man's remains, which Sidious had already planned for. He smiled brightly, and took off the Sith robe, revealing his Chancellor's garb underneath. He folded the Sith robe up in his hands and hid it away. Then he used a tendril of Force power to lift the body and move it into the incinerator. Turning the device on, he went to settle into the chair behind his desk.

Things were finally going *right* again. This was admittedly a terrible setback, but he had considered, and planned for, even the most unlikely circumstance.

Soon, Ventress would return with Thrawn, and Sidious would set the *new* plan in motion. He could still sense the life-force of his foes across the gulf of space above Kalee--he knew they had survived. But Grievous would not escape his grasp forever.

And neither would Kenobi.

Chapter 34: Enemy Mine

Chapter Notes

Hello again! And thanks very much to everyone who commented on the last chapter!

In the aftermath of the last chapter's Kalee battle, both sides are picking up the pieces. And there's a lot of pieces to pick up.

Anakin stood on the bridge, waiting for the message to be answered.

Finally it was.

But not by who he wanted to talk to.

Recognition and anger sparked in his heart.

"Admiral Trench!" he said in disbelief. Trench should be dead, taken out by Anakin himself in the Battle of Christophsis. Then again, he'd survived against all odds once before. It seemed he'd managed to pull through the second time as well, though not unscathed. Part of his face and body were now outfitted with cybernetics.

"Skywalker," the Harch cyborg said dryly, his five remaining organic red eyes lidded. "How unwelcomely unexpected."

"I demand to speak with Grievous!"

"I'll bet you do," Trench said. "Sadly, Grievous has been badly injured. He is in no ch-ch-ch position to speak to you. And of course, you're not supposed to be here, but I will generously overlook your ch-ch-ch illicit presence."

Anakin was about to accuse the Harch of lying about Grievous being mortally injured, but stopped himself. *Wait. If Grievous is alive, then they know where Obi-Wan is.* He wasn't exactly sure what made him certain of this, but he trusted his instincts.

"Tell me what happened to Obi-Wan!" Anakin demanded.

"General Kenobi was with Grievous," the Harch said. "They are both being treated for their injuries as we speak."

I knew it! "I demand you return Obi-Wan immediately! Grievous agreed to release all the prisoners!"

"Your Jedi friend is in critical condition," Trench said, shaking his head. "He cannot be moved now, not unless you are indifferent to whether we return you a living Jedi or a corpse."

Anakin ground his teeth. So they did have him, just as he'd feared. Briefly, he reached out, and sensed Obi-Wan's presence, though he could also sense that he was unconscious. "When, then? When will he be returned?"

"Whenever he is sufficiently stabilized," Trench said. "Or dead. Preferably the former, but I understand these sorts of things do not come with guarantees."

"If he dies--," Anakin said, his voice low, threatening.

Trench narrowed his organic eyes. "We are doing our best, Skywalker. I am doing my best. Do not think I have forgotten who is responsible for my current lower-resolution existence. I am doing this to fulfill Grievous' orders, and to prove our commitment to this treaty. Otherwise I would have ch-ch-ch shot that ship of yours down already."

Anakin grimaced. "If he dies, I'll vaporize the rest of you, ugly."

"I shall keep you updated, Skywalker," Trench said crisply. "Do try to quell your ch-ch-ch murderous impulses until then, at least."

"Fine. What about the clones?"

"I have chosen not to send in additional resources to retrieve them," Trench said. "With their attacker still alive, I have judged the situation too perilous to attempt their extraction. I fear they may all be dead, but I assure you, this was not our doing. I believe the assailant was described as a ch-ch-ch Sith Lord?"

"Yes," Anakin said. He had felt the presence of that Sith Lord during the attack. But the Force signature seemed to have disappeared since then. Had Grievous or Kenobi managed to kill him somehow, despite Trench's belief that he was still alive? "Can you at least tell me where we'll find their bodies?" Maybe the Separatists weren't willing to risk themselves for a few clones, but Anakin wasn't

going to leave them there if there was any chance even one of them might have made it.

"Yes," Trench said. "I am sending the coordinates now so you may retrieve them at your discretion."

Anakin paused. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it," Trench said. "I will do all I can to fulfil the terms of the treaty. Grievous was most clear on the importance of that."

The stars glittered with a sliver moon in the sky. Though it had only taken a few hours to get everything in order so that Anakin could reach the surface of Kalee and search for survivors, it had seemed an eternity.

Shining his spotlight around the darkened clearing, Anakin could hardly believe the carnage and destruction surrounding him. *So this is what a Sith Lord is capable of*, he thought. It was difficult to comprehend one person being able to create this much destruction.

Plo Koon stood next to Anakin, surveying the damage. He and Anakin had been the only Jedi allowed to accompany the Chancellor, and had been restricted to Kalee orbit until now. Palpatine had decided to ask Plo along with some reluctance, saying that he was only doing it to give Anakin some additional backup in the absence of Kenobi, in the event it became necessary for them to battle Grievous. Anakin wasn't sure why Palpatine had chosen Plo specifically, but the Jedi Master was a halfway decent duelist and Ahsoka liked him, so he hadn't complained.

Anakin knew the Chancellor viewed most the Jedi with a certain amount of--it wasn't quite suspicion, he thought, more hesitation. When he had asked about that as a teenage Padawan, Palpatine had said that he simply felt they were cut off from those they served, that they lacked heart, unlike Anakin.

"So much death," Plo said sadly.

"We should check for survivors," Anakin said, focusing himself back at the task at hand. He had found the vision of carnage before him almost unbelievably horrific, but that didn't change the purpose for which they had come here.

"Yes, of course," Plo said, reaching a hand out.

Anakin extended his senses, searching the clearing for signs of survivors. And--there! Anakin rushed over to the life force he sensed.

"Waxer!" he exclaimed. There was no response. He removed the man's helmet and checked his vitals. He seemed stable, if unconscious. "Found one!" he called out to Plo.

"Me, too," Plo said, kneeling on the other side of the clearing. "Cody."

Anakin reached out again with the Force, and sensed one other living clone. He ran over to him. "Boil's here, too!"

After that, neither Anakin nor Plo found any other survivors.

The two Jedi carried the three soldiers back to Anakin's shuttle, with instructions to the med droid to tend to their injuries. Anakin told the pilot to take the three clone troopers up to the Indomitable. Anakin would return to the fleet via Plo's shuttle.

The two Jedi continued to survey the battlefield.

"I've never seen anything like this," Plo said. "Both droids and clones almost completely decimated."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Anakin said. "This was a massacre." His spotlight stopped on a piece of scored armor. "Wait, what's this?" he knelt over the dead clone trooper. Shining his spotlight over the scorings in the armor he scowled. "These claw markings are from Grievous," he said.

"I've found something unusual over here, too," Plo said. "This man appears to have died from electrocution."

"A droid? Thought the Seppies were too cheap to give their droids anything like that." Anakin walked over to Plo to get a closer look at the dead trooper he stood over.

"Hmmm, yes. I've never seen anything like this from one of their droids. It's--not typical of Force Lightning, either, unless the assailant specifically modified it to appear as a standard electrocution." Anakin mulled over this information. As one of the only Jedi capable of using the Light Side to summon Force Lightning, Plo was considered the expert in that field.

"Which a Sith Lord would have no reason to do. So that means a droid killed him," Anakin growled. "Or maybe it was Grievous himself--he's probably the only one who would get an upgrade like that."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Plo said. "We should be careful what we assume until we have a chance to gather all the facts."

"Sure," Anakin said. "But I have a feeling our three survivors are going to back me up on this. Grievous double-crossed us."

"Perhaps, but we should--," Plo began, but never finished the sentence because at that moment Anakin pushed Plo to the ground as a Vulture swooped down and littered the ground with laser-blasts.

"Okay, detective time is over," Anakin said. "Let's get out of here."

"Agreed," Plo replied.

"You're welcome," the EV-series droid said, walking around the two cylindrical tanks and admiring his handiwork.

Grievous and Obi-Wan floated peacefully, suspended in bacta.

"Yes, we're so thankful," he said. "What can we possibly do to express our our immense gratitude--oooh, maybe that new arm upgrade!" The droid tilted his blocky head, pitching his vocabulator to imitate that of his Kaleesh cyborg patient. "That's right AyFourDee, you're the real hero!"

"If you're done congratulating yourself," a scathing voice said from behind the droid, "perhaps you can tell us how long they're going to be--like this?!"

AyFourDee turned around to face San Hill. On his left, Ronderu sat holding hands with a theelin woman, both of who sat between Hill and Far. On his right stood two large Kaleesh men.

AyFourDee didn't know who half these people even were, and no one besides Ronderu seemed to know the theelin at all. It was starting to get a bit ridiculous, in his opinion. As if he hadn't had enough organics to worry about already. He was supposed to be a personal medical assistant to Grievous, not some sort of crew medic! Not that he couldn't handle the challenge, of course.

"The Jedi should be completely healed in three standard days," AyFourDee said, hoping some of these troublesome creatures would reconsider their presence aboard his ship.

"Oh, that doesn't sound too bad," Hill responded.

Unfortunately, he understood the irritating Muun man was here to stay. Grievous had--special instructions regarding him.

"And Grievous should be fit to leave bacta therapy in a month," AyFourDee continued.

"What?!" Hill said. "That's ridiculous! That Jedi was nearly dead when he was recovered! Grievous wasn't anywhere near as injured!"

AyFourDee dimmed his photoreceptors in what he hoped would be read as a suitably scornful expression.

"I am the only one here qualified to make that decision," he said, pointing a needle-like finger at the the Muun man. "Whereas you are merely a glorified accountant-watcher."

Hill gave him an outraged look.

"Good one!" Ronderu said, laughing uncharitably. "Still, I can't help but also wonder why Qymaen requires more time to heal from his injuries than Kenobi."

"Since you asked so nicely, I will explain--you see, my diligent efforts seem to have allowed the Jedi to go into a healing trance which is speeding his regeneration. Grievous, as you know, has no such ability. Furthermore, whatever happened to him during the battle has exacerbated the damage to his already questionably maintained organic components. The fact is, Grievous has never been fully healed from his initial injuries, a state enforced by a directive in my programming which was only recently removed."

"Initial--injuries?" Ronderu said, her forehead creasing.

"Yes. The ones he obtained from the shuttle accident necessitating his current cyborg form."

Slowly, Ronderu turned to face the Muun man seated next to her, who looked up at her scowling face nervously. "Yes?"

"You were there!" she growled. "He told me that you were there, after they found him."

"I do not deny that," Hill said, one eye beginning to twitch. "Is there a reason you bring this up?"

She grabbed the collar of his suit and yanked him upwards until his face was level with hers.

"This is--very uncomfortable," Hill squeaked.

"Oh, it's uncomfortable? Certainly not anything like the half-healed half-life that Qymaen--"

Hill was trying to speak, clutching futilely at the durasteel gauntlets grasping his collar.

"Ronderu, I think you should let him breathe," the theelin woman said, though there was an amused smile on her lips. "I'm sure he has an explanation."

"Latts, you are always so kind and good, even to such scum as this," Ronderu said, releasing Hill.

"Truly you are my mercy."

The Muun man took deep gasping breaths, clutching at his collar. This triggered a subroutine in AyFourDee.

"Do be careful not to overcompensate by hyperventilating, Mr. Hill," AyFourDee said.

Hill narrowed his eyes at the droid.

Ronderu cleared her throat meaningfully.

Hill turned to face her, his expression grim. "You want an explanation for why he wasn't completely healed."

"Yes," Ronderu said, scowling.

"It was not my doing," Hill replied. "I gave complete oversight of his recuperation to Count Dooku, a mistake that I have gone to great lengths to rectify since then."

Ronderu narrowed her eyes at him. "I think you have been concealing something about that. We have only your word that these events transpired as you described, after all. Convenient, is it not?"

Hill attempted to scoot closer to the giant Kaleesh on the other side of him. AyFourDee could guess that Hill did not sit where he did out of personal choice.

"If you even think of betraying us--" she began.

"--you will rip me into tiny pieces," Hill said. "And then Grievous will rip those pieces into smaller pieces. Yes, I am aware. You needn't be concerned--I've already double-crossed an obscenely powerful Sith Lord who is still at large, and so I assure you, I am not interested in making any more enemies."

"He's telling the truth," Lora Far said. She was frowning and staring straight ahead.

Hill laughed. "You're the last person I'd expect to defend me."

"It's not a defense," Far said. "I'm simply stating what I can plainly sense. For Ronderu's benefit."

Hill started to say something, then seemed to think better of it. "Sure. Fine."

"Thank you, Lora," Ronderu said, smiling. Lora smiled in response, turning her head towards Ronderu's voice.

The largest Kaleesh, who took up the same space as everyone else combined said, "It gladdens my heart to recall our battles together with Grievous, Ronderu, brief as those may have been," he said in Kaleesh. AyFourDee understood the language well, of course, given its relevance to his primary patient. "But I plan to return to Kalee soon to ensure our planet's continued freedom."

He gestured to the smaller Kaleesh next to him. "However, I ask that Halari be allowed passage aboard this ship. He has said he wishes to see the stars up close."

Ronderu shrugged. "I don't see why not."

"You mean he's staying, too?" AyFourDee asked, exasperated. "All right. Here's the rules--do not get shot, mutilated, or torn up by a Sith Lord." he glanced over to his two current patients before focusing his photoreceptors back on the Kaleesh. "Doctor's orders!"

"I will try," the younger Kaleesh man said tentatively.

AyFourDee only shook his head. These organics were truly testing him.

Chapter 35: Consolidation

Chapter Notes

A/N: This is a rather peaceful chapter to show what's going on in the Invisible Hand. Nevertheless, there's quite a bit I'm setting up here for future chapters, and I quite enjoyed writing it. Anyway, we'll get back to the action soon enough.

I'd like to again thank everyone who's commented! Your input is greatly appreciated!

"Wow, this is a--really large room," Halari said.

San smiled. "It is quite a nice ancillary abode, yes. Please," he said, gesturing to a chair across the desk he sat behind, "have a seat."

Halari took the proffered chair. "Wow, it's actually big enough for me."

San chuckled. "Yes, I did take into account your unusual stature."

"So, um, what can I do for you?" Halari asked.

San steepled his fingers. "Actually, I think the question is: what can I do for you, Halari?"

Halari gave him a blank look. "Er, what?"

"Health? Fame? Happiness? Everyone wants something, and I am sure you are no exception."

"Um, better research implements?"

"Done!" San said, giving Halari a chipper smile.

"But--you haven't even told me what you want in return."

San held a finger up. "Ah, you mistake my intentions! This is not payment for services rendered." *It's an investment.* "It's a gift! I require absolutely nothing in return! Absolutely nothing at all!"

"Oh. I guess--that's nice of you."

"Think nothing of it!" San said.

They said money couldn't buy friends, and San agreed this might perhaps be true. However, that didn't mean it couldn't buy him not-enemies. And he intended to do everything in his power to ensure that at least one Kaleesh aboard this wretched ship didn't want to murder him.

Lora was walking down the hallway and tapping her cane on the floor in front of her, flanked by her three B1 assistants, their metal feet clanking to either side of her.

"Alert--incoming obstacle five meters ahead and .2 meters to the right," the droid on her left, RogerThree, said suddenly.

"What--?" she said, stopping. She'd been down this hallway quite a few times already, and hadn't recalled anything--

"Ugh," a mechanical voice said in front of her. "I'm an obstacle? An *obstacle*? I suppose I shouldn't expect one of your limited processing power to comprehend my importance to this mission."

"AyFourDee!" she said, understanding then why she hadn't remembered or sensed anything. The way the B1 had referred to him had admittedly made him sound more like a pillar or a crate than a mobile droid. The warning, though it could have been worded better, had proved useful, however. She hadn't heard him approaching, and she couldn't sense droids through the Living Force. "How are Grievous and Obi-Wan?"

"Stable," he said. "Which means that me continuing to monitor them would be a waste of valuable CPU cycles. So I put some of these half-rate tin cans on the job instead. Which frees me up to do more important tasks."

"Hey," RogerTwo said. "Did he just call us tin cans?"

"Roger roger," RogerOne said unhappily.

"Aww, did I hurt your little cheap alloy feelings?" AyFourDee said.

"We are composed of a solid duranium substrate--" RogerThree began indignantly.

"Spare me the gory details," AyFourDee said, sounding bored. "I am here to talk with Ms. Far, not to engage with your limited comprehension, bolt-brain."

"Would you consider perhaps not insulting my assistants?" Lora asked.

"I will consider it, sure," AyFourDee said. "But I will not prioritize it."

Lora sighed, deciding to drop the matter in favor of addressing what AyFourDee had stated of his intent. "What do you want to talk to me about?" Lora asked anxiously, unsure of what he could have to say to her unless he had uncovered some previously unknown health problem of hers.

"Grievous gave me instructions earlier to assist you in your research whenever I was not preoccupied with other tasks. All other tasks are currently in complete or wait status, therefore I am now available to assist you in your endeavors. Tadaa!"

"Oh," Lora said, surprised. This was unexpected. She didn't know much about AyFourDee, but she did know that he was Grievous' personal medical droid, and that he considered the EV series droid to be extremely important to him. Grievous had in fact told her during her debriefing on the ship that AyFourDee was more valuable than the Invisible Hand itself. That once, when the droid had been slashed apart by a Jedi's saber, Grievous' first priority afterward had been to have him repaired, even forgoing pursuit of the escaped Jedi to do so.

She tilted her head. "I'll need to think about what you would be best at helping with--"

"No you won't," AyFourDee said. "I can manage that myself. I do not require detailed instructions. You need only tell me what you are working on, and how you are currently approaching the task, and I will tell you how I can best assist."

"Oh. I see," she said, surprised.

"Metaphor duly noted," AyFourDee said. "But yes. I detect that you are quite impressed."

"I am. I gather that to be a rare ability for droids," Lora said.

"Yes, it is," AyFourDee resounded. "A result of often frequent mind wipes and--second rate CPU architectures. Neither of which is applicable to myself. I have never undergone a substantial wipe, and my processors contain dedicated portions for critical thinking and intuitive judgment."

"You are quite exceptional," Lora said.

"Ah, your flattery is appreciated, but ultimately unnecessary. To me, there is great fulfillment in the accomplishment of tasks in and of themselves. No exterior motivation is necessary."

"Are you certain? You seem to enjoy--exterior motivation."

"I do," AyFourDee replied. "But it is not, as I said, necessary."

Lora put a hand to her chin. Halari had already offered to help her with her research into the Force, and now AyFourDee was offering to assist as well. This was much more help than she had expected to have at this point. "Alright, then. I suppose I should get started explaining what I'm working on," she said.

"Please do," AyFourDee said.

She smiled. This was going to be interesting.

"Mmmm, so dashing," Latts said, as Ronderu buttoned the cuffs of her blue admiral's uniform.

The Kaleesh woman snorted. "And useless. How am I supposed to fight in this thing, hmmm?"

Latts, sitting on the sofa, only smiled and shook her head. "Seriously? It's an officer's uniform. It's not for hand to hand combat. You're supposed to--officiate or whatever." She waved a hand. "You know, sit in one of these giant ships and give orders to fire lasers. Pew pew!"

Ronderu scowled. "I know. That's the problem. I hate that kind of thing." But in this case it was necessary, she knew. And fortunately only temporary. But she still felt vulnerable with her face and neck and hands exposed and no armor draped over her loose clothing.

Ronderu looked over at Latts. "Anyway, I thought you said these things were boring and ugly."

"Yes, but that's because the people wearing them are boring and ugly," Latts said. "Unlike you, an exciting and remarkably well-muscled bounty hunter."

Ronderu scowled at her reflection in the mirror, the red of her finely scaled face contrasting with the blue jacket and slacks of the uniform. "No bounty hunter would be caught dead in this." She turned to face the Theelin. "But if you like it so much, perhaps you can wear it instead."

Latts shook her head, laughing. She held up her hands as if warding off an attack. "Oh, no. Absolutely not."

"I thought so," Ronderu said. She gave a frustrated huff and went to sit by Latts on the sofa. The other bounty hunter draped an arm over her shoulder. "Is it really that intolerable? The fabric actually doesn't feel stiff, at least. I always thought these things were made to be uncomfortable, given how dour everyone in them looked." She began massaging Ronderu's shoulder. "Like they had some sort of stick up their--"

Leaning over, Ronderu pressed her lips against Latts' mouth, her tongue deftly entering the Theelin's mouth and brushing against hers.

A minute or two later, Latts slowly disengaged. "What a pleasant surprise," she murmured, slightly breathless. "But does this mean--again? Already?"

"It would be a welcome excuse to take this thing off," Ronderu purred. "Unless I've already tired you out, lovely Latts."

"You have incredible stamina, Ronderu," Latts said. "And I'd love to take you up on that offer. But you have a meeting in twenty minutes, and unless you plan to skip it, that won't be enough time."

"We could make it," Ronderu said.

Latts crossed her arms and lidded her eyes suggestively. "You know I don't like to rush these things."

One corner of Ronderu's mouth curled up in a lopsided smile. "After, then?"

Latts threw a pillow at her head. "You rogue!" she exclaimed, then grinned. "But sure. Why not?"

Ronderu smiled. There were so many responsibilities, so many worries. And I was never the responsible one, she thought. But now she would have to be, or at least pretend to be. She wanted to have at least some time to not think about all that. At least Latts understood. She sat near her love, taking time to silently admire her fiery red hair and spotted lilac face.

"My hero," Latts said suddenly.

Ronderu tilted her head, smiling. "And why am I your hero, Latts?"

"It's not everyone who can battle a Sith Lord and live to tell the tale."

Ronderu could see that battle now in her mind's eye. Her hands guiding the Soulless One through the atmosphere and dropping in low over the treetops, aiming her fire towards a small robed figure holding two glowing red sabers who wove unsteadily away from her laser blasts. She had led him away from the collapsed bone-white figure of Qymaen.

She had then turned abruptly, feeling her entire body lurch as the small craft's movement compensation unit had struggled to reduce the change in acceleration to something manageable for her body. Then she peppered blasts towards the figure once again as the shuttle behind her came in for a landing.

At one point, the craft had slowed, as if something were pulling it backwards, and her digital display had shown a zoomed in version of the clearing below her--Sidious holding one hand out in a grasping gesture. But then she had increased her acceleration, striking out with further blasts, and the ship had lurched forward at full speed, the Sith Lord having turned his efforts back to deflecting the laser blasts with his saber.

Ronderu came back to the present, shaking her head. "I can hardly take much credit for that. I was only acting on Lora's instructions. If it weren't for her, I would likely be dead now."

Latts smiled. "So modest. In that case, I'll have to thank her for saving the love of my life." She lidded her eyes. "After I'm done thanking you for all that fancy flying, of course."

Ronderu moved closer. "And how were you planning on thanking me?"

"Quite differently than I'm planning on thanking her," Latts said. "And at considerably closer proximity."

"Now who's the rogue?" Ronderu said, pleased. She leaned in towards Latts.

"Not yet!" Latts said, abruptly moving further away, though she gave her an amused smile. "If I can't finish thanking you in twenty minutes, I certainly can't do it in ten!"

Chapter 36: Reassessment

Chapter Notes

Here it is--the newest chapter! Time for a bit of action! Oh, and a brief Grievous POV scene as well.

Also, to commenter Glycogen on ffnet: indeed, it has been a long time since the rest of the Separatist council has been mentioned. And while your theories are most amusing, I have some rather different ideas of their respective situations. This chapter will start to address that question, in fact. And I will eventually go into what's going on with all of the rest, too.

"We're glad to see you survived the attack," Sidious said to the clones, standing next to Anakin and Tarkin in the medbay. The latter had quietly boarded a shuttle on Kalee before the signing. Sidious had briefly introduced the two a couple hours earlier. Anakin had been polite to Tarkin, but terse. His mind was clearly elsewhere.

The three clones sat up on their cots and made to stand before Anakin intervened.

"Hey, you've had a rough day. Just take it easy," Skywalker said.

"I agree," Sidious said, giving them a serious look. "Though I hope you won't mind if we ask a few questions about what happened. I can't imagine what it must have been like, to fight that Sith Lord." His gaze settled on Cody.

The three clones looked between each other, frowning. Cody looked back over at Sidious.

"There was no Sith Lord, sir," he said. The other clones chimed in to agree with the assertion.

Tarkin tilted his head, though his expression remained unchanged. Anakin, however, was clearly surprised.

How shocking, Sidious thought. He widened his eyes. "What do you mean by this, Commander?!"

"After we caught up with General Kenobi and Grievous, a few laser blasts took out the 'Sith Lord', who was actually just a holographically disguised droid."

"A droid?" Anakin said, "But--that can't be!" he turned to Sidious. "Chancellor, how could a droid have done what it did to you?"

"Miniaturized magnetic tractor beam," Tarkin cut in.

"But I felt--" Anakin began.

"Anakin, please let him finish," Sidious said. "I confess I am having difficulty understanding how this could be as well, but let's hear what Captain Tarkin has to say."

Tarkin nodded and continued. "Such devices are far too expensive and impractical for general use, but in the circumstances, perfect for imitating Force application."

He gestured towards Sidious. "Our Chancellor wears computerized clothing to track his health and location, as well as perform a number of other useful tasks. The disadvantage is, it's entirely made of a special metallic fabric that makes him unusually vulnerable to such attacks."

"Yes, it was all a setup by Grievous," Cody said. "He attacked us as soon as we destroyed the droid."

"Grievous?" Anakin said. "But then that means--Obi-Wan's in danger!"

"Yes, they took him," Cody said quietly. "I can't forget the look on his face. The betrayal in his eyes. Grievous had us all fooled, but something in General Kenobi just seemed to break in that moment. He destroyed most of the droids as soon as he realized what had happened--but Grievous mortally wounded and captured him in the end."

Anakin looked over at Sidious. "Chancellor, I've got to get him back! I can sneak on board the Invisible Hand and--"

"Anakin, please!" Sidious said, his expression dismayed. "Don't leave. If they took General Kenobi prisoner it means they plan to use him as leverage. Which means we will have our chance to get him back."

"But--" Anakin said, his expression stricken.

"Please, I need you here," Sidious said, his eyes wide. "They've already attacked me once!"

Sidious could sense the conflict in Anakin, then. It was something that always intrigued Sidious, that other people were so important to his prospective apprentice. Some of them, anyway. He found it utterly ridiculous, but he also knew that most people were like this--ultimately they concerned themselves with such trivialities as the happiness and well-being of others, even to the detriment of their own enrichment. And it seemed the 'Chosen One' was no different in this matter.

Sidious, of course, had taken an interest in Anakin's happiness, but that had been explicitly for the purpose of his own future benefit. And, it seemed he had succeeded in placing himself quite high in Anakin's regard.

Passively, through his connection to the Force, Sidious could sense Anakin's decision even before he put it into words.

"You're right, Chancellor," Anakin said, his shoulders slumping. "I'll stay. But Obi-Wan--"

"I will negotiate with the CIS regarding General Kenobi," Sidious said. "I must contact the Separatist fleet immediately. I assure you, getting him back to us shall be my highest priority." He placed a hand briefly on Anakin's shoulder and turned to leave.

Kenobi should have died on Kalee. But no matter--he would correct this.

After all, sometimes accidents are--inevitable, Sidious thought, a small smile quirking briefly at the corners of his lips as he walked through the doors with Anakin trailing behind him.

"You said you wanted to discuss this with me privately?" Sidious asked Anakin from across his desk.

Anakin tore his worried gaze from the viewport of the Chancellor's office aboard the Indomitable and looked over at Sidious. The Sith Lord had clasped his hands on his desk. He was dressed in an identical copy of the Chancellor's robes his impersonator had died in.

"Yes," Anakin said. "I believe what Cody told us. But I also know there was a Sith Lord on Kalee. I felt their presence."

Sidious raised an eyebrow. "Please, tell me everything." This, in fact, had been the real reason he had brought Anakin to this system in the first place.

There were some things that even his farsight refused to show--particularly as involved Anakin Skywalker. Sidious wasn't surprised by this. The way Anakin's mere existence bent the threads of the Force around him warped such interactions as divining his future. Sometimes Sidious would get glimpses, but nothing like the clear images he received in other cases.

Sometimes, with some careful querying of the Force, he could still divine the answers he required. But in this case, he had needed to perform the test directly. The test to see just how attuned Anakin was to the Force, how well he could sense the Sith Lord's presence.

"He was a well of dark power," Anakin said. "This might be difficult to describe to a non-Force user. But it was like--like feeling the Maw beneath you."

"Go on," Sidious said gently, intent on absorbing every word. He'd already questioned Plo Koon on whether he'd felt the Sith Lord's presence from orbit. The answer had been negative.

Then, of course, he'd sent Master Koon off to die on Kalee, which he had regrettably failed to do. Still, no Jedi would escape Sidious forever. One day, Koon would die. Just like all the rest of them.

"I sensed the pure malice he felt," Anakin said. "And--I sensed something else, too."

"Yes?" Sidious said.

"He seemed familiar--"

The Sith Lord's hackles stood on edge. *Impossible!* Had Anakin unmasked him? This was too early! Quietly, he readied his power...

"--and yet I couldn't place the Force signature." Anakin's brow creased in frustration.

Sidious relaxed. It had been a statement, not an accusation. Decades of careful planning had not been undone, and he would not be forced to flee--his identity had not been revealed. *Still--how?* He thought in silent amazement. *Even partial recognition shouldn't have occurred--I always conceal my abilities in his presence! He can't have ever felt them.*

Sidious carefully sifted through the unspoken feelings radiating from Anakin. He could sense no attempt at concealment or deception.

He couldn't recognize the signature of my Force power, Sidious thought. And yet it felt familiar to him. Is it possible my passive Force use is being picked up by him? If so, Anakin should have traced the source. And yet he hadn't.

Sidious was baffled. Still, he realized he could use this. Yes, this turn of events was even better for his purposes. "I apologize if this is a foolish question--you know I am not familiar with these sorts of things--but if this was a Sith Lord you'd encountered before, wouldn't you have known right away who he was?"

"I should!" Anakin said. "I never had any trouble identifying Dooku's presence. But even if he wasn't dead, there's no way I'd mistake this Force signature for his."

I should think not, Sidious thought derisively. Dooku's presence could never have compared to mine--he only ever skimmed the surface of the power the Dark Side offered him, afraid to draw himself into it completely. Hesitant fool. His expression carefully neutral, he tilted his head. "I--had another question, but I am unsure if we should waste time with my uneducated speculations."

Anakin shook his head. "No, please go on, sir. You don't have to have the Force to understand it, and it is especially important for you to understand these matters as best you can. I'm happy to answer any questions I'm able to."

"Do you think the reason the Force signature seemed familiar but otherwise unrecognizable might be due to this person's mental state?"

"Mental state?"

"It's just, the only known Force user on the planet was your former Master, General Kenobi. What if the stress of Grievous's betrayal, or some other event, caused some sort of shift in him? What if it wasn't a Sith Lord at all, but General Kenobi who, in his anger and pain, called upon the Dark Side of the Force?"

Anakin frowned. "I--I can't believe that of Obi-Wan. The Force signature I sensed was completely immersed in the Dark Side. He would never--"

"Then who else might this Darksider be, that they were familiar to you? And we also have the testimony of the clones that it was Kenobi who levelled most the droids singlehandedly. Might it have been his use of the Dark Side that allowed him to accomplish that? Unless--this is something he's done before?"

Anakin shook his head. He looked agonized, but Sidious could sense the idea taking hold in him. And all he'd had to do was suggest it. *Sometimes, Sidious thought, the right words are more powerful than the Force itself.* A familiar presence, a Force user Anakin knew but could no longer recognize once they'd accessed the Dark Side--

"No one," Anakin said woodenly. "I--I can't believe it."

Sidious gave him a concerned look. "This must be a great blow to you, to see someone so close to you

abandon the precepts of your Order."

"Grievous must have done something to him. I have to go rescue him! I can reach him! I know it!"

Sidious internally sighed. "Allow me to talk with Admiral Trench. As I said, I will endeavor to get him to release your friend."

"Thank you, Chancellor."

"Think nothing of it."

Anakin inclined his head and took his leave.

Sadly, events will conspire that prevent you from having the happy reunion you are hoping for. And then Kenobi will be out of the way. Permanently.

Would Kenobi's death, especially given the circumstances Anakin had been convinced to believe had occurred, be enough to drive him over the edge? If so, it would be an immensely ironic bonus.

Everything had been going so well, Padme thought. And now it's all falling apart.

She and Ahsoka had attended the several Senate meetings that had been called to formalize the treaty agreement on the CIS side. They had been disguised, of course. Everything had been going smoothly, even after the sudden attack during the signing ceremony.

And then had come the testimony from the clones. She hadn't been able to believe what she'd been hearing. And neither had the CIS senate, apparently.

"We will not suffer these lies!" one Senator said loudly. "This is a deception wrought by Palpatine, no doubt."

Padme wanted to say it wasn't true. Palpatine would never ask the clones to lie about something like this. She disagreed with him on many things, but never had she seen the treachery that he was here being accused of.

But she knew she had no voice here.

Fortunately, Mina did.

"Fellow senators," Bonteri said. "I propose we withhold pointing fingers for now. If this--this Sith attacked the peace proceedings, perhaps he implanted these memories in the clones. Fortunately, we have news that the Jedi who aided Grievous survived and will soon be able to speak to what happened there as well. I believe he will back up what Admiral Trench has reported to us, which is that a Sith Lord attacked the peace proceedings, and that there was no treachery by Grievous or any other CIS representative."

"I agree with Senator Bonteri," another voice called out. Padme saw that it was San Hill, standing in front of a podium in hologram form. "We should allow this misconception to work itself out. Once the

Jedi regains consciousness, I am confident he will back up our assertions, and we can end this war."

Padme narrowed her eyes at him. San Hill was far from her favorite person. Especially given the time he'd nearly led her to death or capture by Grievous. The cyborg General had not seemed at all angry or murderous in their last conversation, but back then...she shuddered, remembering how he had tracked her through his ship like a predator hunting prey.

Still, at least it seemed the Chairman wasn't interested in starting a conflict this time. She felt a certain satisfaction in seeing him in his current state--he looked tired, like he hadn't been sleeping well. Though she wondered what he could possibly be concerned about--from her understanding, the Chairman had little to worry over, regardless of the outcome of this war. He'd been granted an enormous amount of diplomatic immunity by the Republic, despite his obvious dealings with the Separatists.

Bonteri looked over at him, raising an eyebrow. "I am glad we are in agreement this once, Senator Hill."

"As am I," Hill said, his hologram flickering slightly.

Another voice spoke up. "I am concerned about this Sith Lord," Wat Tambor said. Unlike the Chairman, he stood in the Senate chamber in person. "He must be found and destroyed immediately. I propose--"

"And who is going to destroy him?" a new voice bit out. Padme turned to look over at the new speaker, a hologram of a Gossam. Padme recognized this one, too-- Shu Mai, another prominent Separatist.

"He may still be in the Kalee system-," Tambor said. "We should instruct Admiral Trench to--"

The Gossam's hologram erupted into derisive laughter. "Admiral Trench? Admiral Trench?! Are we assuming that he will be better equipped to fight this Sith Lord than Grievous was? Are we expecting he can defeat someone who downed Grievous *and* a Jedi Master?"

"That was different," Tambor protested. "They were maneuvered into a direct confrontation. I am proposing that Trench locate the ship the Sith is using and attack that vessel from his flagship--"

"That's a terrible idea," Shu Mai said. "If he was that easy to track down, someone would have noticed when he entered the system--"

"Please," Chairman Hill said, "Let's not squabble over this matter. Senator Tambor," he said, grimacing, "has a point. We should at least perform a cursory scan of the system for any unidentified vessels. I believe Senator Mai makes a good point as well, however. It is unlikely that this Sith Lord will be so careless as to leave us such a trail." he looked over at her. "I presume you wish to propose a course of action to ameliorate this?"

"Yes," the hologram of Shu Mai said. "This Sith succeeded by setting a trap for us which we walked right into. I propose we return the favor. I propose we set a trap for the Sith."

"If I may ask, Senator Mai," Mina Bonteri said, "have you formulated any plan that might accomplish

this?"

Shu Mai frowned, her hologram looking around at the assembled Senators. "Yes. But this Senate chamber is not sufficiently secure to discuss the details of such a plan."

The building became a cacaphony of voices at that pronouncement.

Padme felt a prickling in the back of her mind, then, an almost precognizant feeling of dread.

In that moment blaster bolts rang out from behind her, directly towards Bonteri--
--and were absorbed by a blast shield activated around the podium.

There were screams, then, and even some of the holograms reflexively ducked.

And Admiral Tonith shot a blaster bolt right at her.

Or rather, just a hair to her left. There was a crackling sound and someone behind her cursed.

Tonith pointed. "Up there, in the back! It's Cad Bane!"

Padme stood and turned around, whipping her own blaster out and firing at the bounty hunter, who hovered above her on repulsor jets. His image rippled, parts of him seeming to disappear before his entire body suddenly came into focus. A miniature cloaking device--it must have been damaged by Tonith's blaster fire. The blue man grinned, his red eyes narrowing.

"Looks like my cover's blown," he said. Bane pulled out a second gun and began to propel himself around the chamber on his repulsor jets, continuing to shoot laser blasts but aiming them now at the other senators.

Ahsoka leapt down in front of the senators, deflecting the bolts with her twin green sabers.

"Wasn't expecting to see you here, Jedi," Bane said.

"Life's full of surprises," Ahsoka responded, blocking another volley of bolts from him.

Padme shot at Bane again with her blaster, and she could see other bolts being fired at the bounty hunter, presumably by Tonith or the Separatist security forces.

Bane dodged all the bolts and shot the blaster out of Padme's hand. Then, he shot several more bolts at the senators and simultaneously aimed the other weapon at Bonteri, firing both repeatedly.

Padme realized belatedly that that second weapon was firing darts--which wouldn't be deflected by the blast shield.

Tonith had leapt in front of Bonteri, who stood frozen in shock. Darts peppered the front of his blue uniform. He looked down at them, seeming surprised, then collapsed to the ground.

A group of BX droids and droidekas were closing in on the bounty hunter.

"Time to make an exit," Bane drawled. He took out a thermal detonator and threw it towards a wall.

More screams, and senators ran away from the beeping weapon.

Padme ducked and heard and felt the explosion. When she looked up, she could see Bane zooming off into the distance on his repulsorjets.

And now she was surrounded by droids pointing their weapons at her.

Ahsoka switched off her sabers and clipped them back under her cloak.

Unfortunately, the damage had already been done. She held up her hands, surrounded by battle droids. Padme was currently in the same situation over where she stood about twenty feet from the gaping hole in the wall of the Senate chamber.

"A Jedi?" One of the senators snarled. "What is the meaning of this infiltration?"

"I wasn't--" Ahsoka began.

"Silence, spy," another senator hissed.

"Let's not be too hasty," Wat Tambor said. "After all, she did just save our lives."

Ahsoka frowned. Wat Tambor was on the ten most wanted list and was considered by Republic intelligence to be one of the cruellest of the Separatist leaders. She had to wonder if she'd actually done the right thing. She said nothing, though. She didn't want to get herself and Padme, especially Padme, into even more trouble.

If she had met Tambor in less precarious circumstances, she would have given voice to the harsh retort she even now held back with great difficulty.

And then she would have carted him off to a Republic prison.

But she was outnumbered and surrounded here, and needed to ensure her actions didn't endanger Padme.

Tambor turned to look at Ahsoka. Through the breathing mask he wore, it was difficult to ascertain his expression. "What is your name, Jedi?"

"Ahsoka Tano," she said.

"You have my thanks, Jedi Tano," he said. "If you would follow me?" he gestured towards where Bonteri stood over Tonith. "I would have words with you, but first we should see what's happened with the Admiral."

Ahsoka walked to the side of Tambor until they reached Tonith and Bonteri.

Hill's hologram also stood over the fallen Admiral.

Ahsoka frowned, unsure what to say. Tonith hadn't been the relentlessly malicious being she'd assumed

him to be, but still, she hadn't known him well. Bonteri, who stood over him, seemed considerably more upset.

"Oh, he's dead," Chairman Hill's hologram said abruptly. "That's, um, too bad I guess." He grimaced down at the fallen Admiral, looking more grossed-out than saddened.

Bonteri gave him a sharp look before turning back to Tonith, and Ahsoka frowned at Hill, her eyes narrowing. The Muun man didn't sound even remotely upset. "Shouldn't this bother you more?"

He blinked at her. "Shouldn't this bother you less?" he shot back. "You're not even on our side."

Bonteri bent down over the Admiral's fallen form, still looking at him sadly. Then her eyes widened. "He's still breathing!" She began pulling out darts, careful not to touch the tips. "Could someone analyze what's on these?"

Ahsoka took a dart and scanned it with a small datapad. "Alderranian boa venom. Extremely deadly."

Bonteri grimaced.

Hill's hologram frowned. "Actually, it's not."

"What?" Ahsoka said.

"That's only poisonous to humans and near-humans," Hill explained.

Ahsoka frowned. "I thought Muuns were near-humans."

"Muuns share no common ancestors with humans," Hill said, looking briefly offended. "With us, that venom only acts as a mild sedative." he gazed down at the darts littering the front of Tonith's uniform. "Of course, getting that much of it at once--might knock someone out for a bit."

As if to prove Hill's assertion, Tonith opened his eyes in that moment, his expression bewildered.

"Wh--what happened? Bonteri--you--you're alright?"

"Yes," Senator Bonteri said, smiling widely. "Welcome back, Admiral."

Grievous heard a rapping sound. Roused from unconsciousness, he felt himself floating in the viscous bacta fluid he loathed. Opening his eyes, he saw a red hand pressed against the tank.

Ronderu.

Her slightly distorted form was visible outside the tank. Grievous could see she was wearing a blue CIS uniform. Which meant she had implemented the plan they had talked about earlier, for her to take over command of the Invisible Hand should he be killed or mortally wounded. He had taken a few admittedly questionable actions to add her as an official admiral of the CIS without going through any of the typical procedure, but it was nothing overtly disallowed, and he had correctly anticipated a need for this. She was the only one he trusted to take control of the Invisible Hand in this situation.

"Welcome back," she said.

"I don't feel back," Grievous said. "I feel dead." What little organic body he had ached, even under the pain-numbing effects of the bacta. Whatever the Sith's Force Lightning had done, it had left deep wounds. A thought suddenly occurred to Grievous. "Where's Kenobi?"

Ronderu gestured to her left. Grievous turned and could see the vague outline of another bacta tube with a human form floating inside.

"He's in some sort of Jedi healing hibernation," Ronderu said. "AyFourDee said he'll be fully recovered soon, though."

"That's good," Grievous said. "I was worried--he wouldn't make it." He'd been having nightmares about it, in fact. Sometimes ones where Kenobi was killed by Sidious, but sometimes ones where he was killed by Grievous himself. Admittedly, he'd tried to kill the Jedi not that long ago, and that had been fully him, not Dooku's implants. He felt a stab of guilt at that. He still believed Kenobi had a lot to answer for, but he no longer wanted him dead.

Grievous looked around. "What's happened since I've been out?"

Ronderu grimaced at the question. "I know you will find it upsetting, but since I also know you will only imagine worse if I don't tell you...the Republic rescinded the truce, claiming the Sith Lord was a disguised droid."

Grievous sighed. "Sidious planned for this truce to fail regardless of what happened. You'll tell me the details later?"

"Of course," Ronderu said.

"I will try to suggest a course of action," Grievous said. "I have great confidence in you...but once I've been updated, I will impart...another excessively ill-advised plan."

He could just make out Ronderu's lips quirking up in a wry smile. "That's good, because all we have right now is my horrendous one."

Grievous laughed. "I would ask you to explain it all now, but I find myself tired again." Even the simple thought required to formulate responses and operate his vocabulator, which he noted that AyFourDee had thankfully left connected, was taking its toll on Grievous.

"Then rest, Dreamer," Ronderu said. "We will speak again soon."

Grievous closed his eyes then, and slept. And dreamt of hope.

Chapter 37: Escalation

Chapter Notes

A/N: So I finished the new chapter!

Thanks to everyone who's commented since I posted last! I appreciate hearing your thoughts for sure!

Summary: Sidious and Grievous plan their next moves against each other.

"I see," Sidious said. "So what you are saying is--you cannot authorize Kenobi's release."

"That is correct," Trench said.

"Did Chancellor Grievous not place you in command in the event of his injury or death?"

"Yes, he placed me in charge of the fleet. Nevertheless, Admiral Ronderu has been placed in charge of a number of ch-ch-ch administrative matters. That includes the care of General Kenobi. You must therefore authorize the transfer with her."

"Understood," Sidious said, giving Trench a polite smile. "In that case, would you be so kind as to transfer me to her so I can make those arrangements?"

"Of course," Trench said. The screen went blank.

Sidious waited patiently. He had not heard of any 'Admiral Ronderu'. The name did sound somehow familiar, as if he'd heard it spoken offhand once or twice, but had not deigned it important enough to remember.

He was going to have to start paying more attention to those unimportant details. It seemed they became more relevant by the day.

The screen came to life and he saw a Kaleesh woman dressed in an Admiral's uniform. And that was when he remembered where he'd heard the name Ronderu. Dooku--of course.

"Chancellor Palpatine," she said, her expression guarded.

"Admiral Ronderu," Sidious said pleasantly. *You should be dead*, he thought, with no small amount of resentment. "I have contacted you to arrange the transfer of General Kenobi."

"Oh," she said. "Of course." She smiled politely. "We will return him shortly--after he has recovered."

Sidious seethed internally. *No, I will not be able to arrange his little accident then.* Externally, he only creased his brow in concern.

"Admiral Ronderu," Sidious said. "Chancellor Grievous and I agreed on an exchange of prisoners. General Kenobi was included in that agreement. Will you ensure the Chancellor honors his word?"

"Of course," Ronderu said.

"Good," Sidious replied. "In that case--"

--which is why we will return General Kenobi after he recovers."

Sidious gave her a polite smile. "Admiral Ronderu," he said. "As I am sure you are aware, the diplomatic situation between the Republic and Separatists is quite strained at the moment."

"It is a misunderstanding!" She said, gesturing wildly.

Sidious folded his hands on his desk, his unflappable smile still in place. "You tried to kill me."

"We did not! It was--"

Sidious held up a hand. "Please, let us not rehash this argument. I have already spoken with Admiral Trench, who has articulated the Separatist position regarding these attacks. Nevertheless, three clone troopers have expressed their disagreement with this position, and I am inclined to believe their word over yours. Still, as a gesture of good faith, you can return Kenobi. Immediately. Then, perhaps, we can further discuss the nature of this--misunderstanding?"

Ronderu frowned. "It would be a risk to move him at this time. The doctor says he is not to be moved."

"Surely it is possible to arrange such a transfer, with the appropriate safeguards employed?"

"Possible, yes."

Finally, Sidious thought. "Then you will give the order to have him moved?"

"No. It is not worth the risk. But we will return him soon, of that I guarantee. He should be fully recovered within a day or so."

Yes, that's the problem, Sidious thought. He gave her a concerned frown. "I am most disappointed with this delay, but I will hold you to your word. We will speak again when he is recovered."

"Yes, of course," Ronderu said.

The screen went blank. Sidious steepled his fingers. 'Admiral' Ronderu absolutely needed to die as soon as he could manage to arrange it. From what Dooku had told him, she was possibly the closest ally Grievous had ever had, and Sidious certainly saw no place for her in his plans. Something would need to be done about her.

But right now, he had a more pressing concern.

Kenobi.

This was going to be annoying. Still, he knew what he needed to do.

For now, Kenobi would simply become an enemy of the Republic. It was not nearly as satisfying as seeing the Jedi expire in person. He was angered by his failure to kill Kenobi. The wound would have been fatal, of course, if not for the Jedi's unexpected rescue.

That didn't make the failure any less embarrassing, however. There should only ever be one fate for a Jedi foolish enough to directly confront a Sith Master.

Still, he had already prepared this part of his plan in advance, and it needed only slight modification to adapt it to the current situation. He wondered idly, given the events that had transpired on Kalee, if he should have been more aggressive in taking advantage of this particular ability.

But of course he couldn't have anticipated that that would have been necessary. And it would have run too high a risk to employ the override in that capacity. No, the Separatists would have found one of their ships attacking its own to be too suspicious, and such an event might even provoke Republic

sympathy for them. Sidious had made a good decision in forgoing its use in that capacity.

Kenobi might not die today, but he would meet his doom eventually, inexorably. Just as Koon would. Just like all the Jedi would.

Perhaps, he thought, when the time is right, young Anakin will cross paths with Kenobi again--as my Apprentice.

But first, Skywalker will give him a test that I will ensure he fails.

Alone in his office, the Sith Lord grinned.

Grievous, floating in his bacta tank, heard the sound of someone entering the medbay and opened his eyes to an unpleasant sight.

"Mr. Hill," he growled. "What do you want?!"

The slightly blurred image of Hill backed up a few paces and held up a hand. "I'm not here to ask anything of you, Grievous."

"Then why are you here? Where's Ronderu?"

Hill laughed. "On the bridge. Must be a lot work, being an Admiral."

"She wouldn't be happy to see you here." Grievous wondered how Hill had even gotten in the medbay. He was sure the banker didn't have authorization to enter by himself.

Hill smiled blandly. "No, she wouldn't. That's why I didn't ask."

"You still haven't told me why you're here." AyFourDee had given Grievous the ability to comm anyone in the Invisible Hand that he cared to, and if he didn't like the explanation the banker gave...

Hill sighed. "I just thought you might want some additional upgrades."

"No, I don't want anyone messing with my mind ever again," Grievous said, his eyes narrowing. He especially wouldn't trust San Hill with such a thing, of all people. The Muun had only ever willingly done one genuinely helpful thing for Grievous, and as he understood, that had been as much for Hill's own benefit as it had been to keep to his agreement. He prepared to try comming Ronderu.

Hill grimaced. "You misunderstand. These upgrades would not require changes to your brain implants. They are structural only, but they would provide you with much added protection from a variety of potential threats."

"Such as?" Grievous decided to hear him out instead of activating the comm line.

"Electrocution, submersion in water, someone trying to rip you open with their bare hands--"

"Someone could rip me open with their bare hands?! Why would my body be designed so badly that someone could do that?!"

"You'd have to ask Dooku," Hill said, shrugging. "Or perhaps Poggle. I suppose we may never know. I noticed the design flaw when I reviewed the schematic for your chassis recently. It would require that you allow someone enough time to pull apart the duranium folds of your chest cavity, but yes, a human soldier could conceivably accomplish that."

Grievous felt as if he'd been betrayed by Dooku again, from beyond death. "That's like some sort of hologame boss weakness," he growled.

"Indeed," Hill said.

"Were there any other weaknesses like that?"

"No other design weaknesses, no," Hill said. "Though I was also thinking of using a stronger alloy to fortify your chassis."

"What kind of alloy?"

"Have you ever heard of cortosis?" Hill asked.

"No," Grievous said.

"A remarkable, and rare, material. My late uncle mentioned it to me a few times. The molecular structure is truly a fascinating--"

"What does it do?" Grievous cut in. He didn't have the patience to deal with one of Hill's tangents on scientific theory and esoteric mathematics. He just wanted to know how this cortosis would be useful.

Hill sighed and rolled his eyes. "It deflects blaster bolts and is lightsaber resistant."

"That sounds--amazing really," Grievous said. "Why aren't more things made with this cortosis?"

"As I said, it's rare. Also, the Jedi control most remaining caches. I do, however, happen to know the location of an unclaimed cache on Bal'demnic which it seems I--forgot to report to the Jedi." Hill smiled blandly.

Grievous looked over at Obi-Wan's bacta tube. He appeared to be sleeping, but if he had heard, would he feel obliged to report the information to the other Jedi?

Hill seemed to guess his thoughts. "Ah, I turned on the soundproofing for Kenobi's tube. Wouldn't want to disturb his healing meditation with all my chattering, after all."

"Oh," Grievous said. He knew Kenobi would be well soon enough. When that happened, he would want to have a conversation with the Jedi, but of course Kenobi would then be allowed to return to the Republic. Grievous would miss him.

But Kenobi had promised to expose the deception of the Huk. He would also be the best suited to clear up the issue Ronderu had mentioned about the Republic claiming that the Sith had been a droid. Sidious must have been involved in that deception, somehow. Perhaps Kenobi would be able to expose that lie.

A tapping sound brought him out of his reverie. "Yes?" Grievous said.

"Oh, good," Hill replied. "I was worried you might have been taking another trip down memory lane."

"No, I was just thinking," Grievous said, annoyed by the interruption.

"Perhaps you can give me an answer about the upgrades?" Hill asked. "Only you can give the approval, after all."

"Let us confirm the details, and then I will give it," Grievous said. "EV-A4D will make the changes and I will monitor them as they are added. What will the new chassis look like?" he felt some apprehension about that seemingly minor detail. As much as he missed his organic body, he'd come to identify with his cyborg body and see it as himself, especially considering the stylistic changes he'd made to it.

"I designed the alterations to be internal, and as minimally detectable from the external view as possible," Hill said. "With the idea that it might be useful if your opponents do not realize you have been given additional enhancements."

"Oh," Grievous said. "Good. I find those details agreeable."

"I will collect the necessary materials, then." Hill was silent for a moment. "If there is anything else you require, Grievous, do not hesitate to ask. You are our best hope for finding and destroying Sidious."

A thought surfaced in Grievous's mind then.

"I recognized his face," he said. "Just for a moment--I saw who he really was."

Hill's eyes widened at that. "You mean Sidious?! You recognized Sidious?!"

"Yes, but--," Grievous began, "when he concealed himself again, I lost that knowledge. I don't remember who I saw."

"That's too bad," Hill said, clearly disappointed. "Guess we're right back where we started, then. Hundreds of trillions of possibilities--"

"No," Grievous said. "I recognized him. It wasn't simply that his features resolved, and I could see them clearly. I recognized who he was. And that can mean only one thing."

Hill's eyes widened in interest. "Please, do tell."

"He's someone I've encountered before. He's someone I know," Grievous said.

Chapter 38: Exile's Return

Chapter Notes

A/N: I finally finished this! It's a shorter chapter, and I pondered tacking on more scenes, but that would take longer, so I decided to go for just posting it as is. October was not a good month for my writing since I was way too busy with work. So I wanted to try to update something as soon as I could.

Thanks to all those who are invested in this story and given me their feedback! I certainly appreciate it!

And now, it's time to show what Ventress is up to!

Ventress stalked through the forest towards her objective, a single lightsaber extended in front of her. She kept her other hand free for Force attacks. She could have waited in the small structure she had found near her landing site, where she suspected her quarry would soon return to. But waiting was not, she felt, a proper pastime for a Sith.

Jedi waited.

Sith sought their goal.

And Ventress would be a Sith by the end of this, of that she was determined. That she keenly hated Sidious was, she'd decided, an advantage. The apprentice would, after all, one day kill the master, and that would be all the easier if he repulsed her.

Dooku had been quite old, and she had expected to outlive him even if she had not ended his life herself. It would have been a mercy kill if she had. No Sith would want to be too feeble to enact their vision.

In a way, Grievous had done him a favor--he had gone out in battle, as she was sure he would have wanted. At least it was better than the Republic taking him prisoner and having him rot in some high-security Jedi prison, an eventuality he had seemed to think about a lot towards the end.

She was still going to murder that traitorous cyborg and melt his hull down to slag. Except for the mask, of course. She had meant what she'd said about that, after all.

Her thoughts shifted to the Sith Master. She didn't know how old Sidious was, but she suspected she would be ready to end his life long before it ended itself. She had sensed the Sith Master's robust life force, and that alone told her he was unlikely to expire soon of natural causes, whatever his age might

be.

Sidious was decidedly unpleasant in a remote and implacable way. Though his remoteness was, she'd decided, preferable to the Sith Lord taking a personal interest in her. He seemed decidedly incapable of true affection of any sort--she couldn't imagine anyone he took an interest in as benefiting from it.

He seemed to her easily irritated, unimpressable, and perpetually demanding. Yes, she was quite sure she preferred not to have the temperament he deemed ideal in an apprentice.

Maul, from what she knew of him, had been intensely focused. She'd seen the holos of his fight with Obi-Wan and his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn. His fighting style was something she aspired to, a whirlwind of power that could overwhelm even a much more experienced Jedi Master, making his failure to Kenobi almost physically painful to watch. But there had been, underneath the anger and the pleasure of battle she could see him radiate, a kind of broken desperation she thought she saw in those eyes. A need to please--someone. She could guess who.

Even Dooku had seemed intent on impressing his mysterious Master. While he had occasionally plotted against Sidious, Ventress thought, in retrospect, that she had often instigated such plots. She'd questioned if Dooku, with his considerable inside knowledge of the Jedi Order and his personal significance to Yoda, might be best positioned to take them down. But Dooku had often seemed to consider Sidious as nearly invincible and capable of anything.

Sidious was powerful, she agreed. But once she had obtained the secrets of the Sith from him, he would have to go. The only proper end goal for a Sith was to become the Master, not to serve their own indefinitely. Though she did think she would be making some changes to the Code once she was Master of the Sith herself. But until then...

A noise brought her out of her thoughts. She listened to and scanned her surroundings. Then she sensed something.

She brought her saber up to block the arrow that streaked towards her, melting the tip and vaporizing the wood in the plasma beam but in the process creating a number of super-heated metal shards. A couple of the shards buried themselves in her shoulder and she hissed in pain.

Lightsabers were designed to safely deflect energy beams, not physical projectiles, she recalled. Holding her free hand to her shoulder, she deactivated the weapon and clipped it to her waist.

Now a volley of arrows struck out at her, but she deflected each one this time and then sent a Force push in the direction the weapons had originated from. A bearded, blue near-human fell from the trees. She stopped his fall mere inches from the ground.

"Mitt'raw'noorouudo," she said. "Do all your people prefer to kill first and forget about asking the questions later?"

He winced, his pupil-less red eyes appearing pained. "Actually, that's very unlike them, and the reason I'm here. Also, I assure you my attack on you wasn't personal."

Ventress scowled, briefly examining her injuries. They would need to be attended to, but it wasn't urgent. She drew on the Dark Side to transcend the pain and slow the damage. "Sure feels personal. Anyway, Mith-roo-naa--"

"Please, just call me Thrawn," he said, his expression pained again.

Ventress grinned maliciously at that, bending down and tilting her head to the side to look at the Chiss she held suspended upside-down less than a meter from the ground. "Don't like when I mangle your name, do you? Kind of like I don't like having arrows shot at me. Any particular reason you decided to murder me, or did you just decide you hated my face?"

Thrawn gave her an impassive look. "You're a Jedi."

Ventress laughed. "I am no Jedi. I am a Sith, a natural enemy of the Jedi Order."

She released her Force hold on him and he fell the rest of the way to the ground.

"Get up. I have something to show you. I'm not here to harm you, but don't attack me again."

"Understood," Thrawn said, wincing as he rose to a standing position. He was dressed in animal skins and had disheveled shoulder-length hair and a ratty blue-black beard. He looked distinctly unimpressive. Ventress wondered if Sidious would have been better served if she had brought back Ar'alani instead.

She unclipped the communicator from her belt and replayed the recorded message from Sidious.

Thrawn listened silently as the message played, watching the holo with rapt attention. When the message finished, he looked up at Ventress.

"So you are an agent of Darth Sidious?"

"Yes," Ventress said.

"I apologize for my previous hostility, then. It was the intervention of another of the Sith Lord's agents that saved my life when Jedi Jorus C'Baoth attempted to murder me."

Ventress grinned. "Then it seems both of us have been burned by the Jedi. Shall we get back to my ship so we may show them what it means to scorn us?" She was relieved when Thrawn indicated his immediate agreement with this. The sooner she got off this rock and back to civilization, the better.

She was looking forward to presenting Thrawn to Sidious. Then she could finally begin to put her own plans in motion. Plans this trip had given her ample time to mull over and refine.

She wrinkled her nose as she led the Chiss man back to her ship, though. Thrawn desperately needed a shower.

Chapter 39: Collecting Credits

Chapter Notes

A/N: This took longer than usual, partly because I updated two other stories before this one instead of the usual one. Also, I still feel this chapter is a bit rough, but I didn't want to spend too long editing it since it's already been a while since I updated this. Maybe I'll polish it later if I feel like it, but I wanted to get something out. Feel free to let me know what you think!

Thanks to everyone who commented since I last updated! I appreciate the feedback!

In this chapter we see Grievous again, and quite a bit of Boba Fett.

Grievous gazed out at the medical bay, now empty except for him and Kenobi.

He felt frustration at being unable to move, but this was somewhat allayed by the fact that at the moment he felt much too weak to do so, even with the minimal effort required to control his cyborg form. He hadn't yet asked AyFourDee how long he'd have to recuperate, but he planned to do so soon.

He thought about what Hill had told him earlier. Despite his distrust of the banker, he had agreed that the modifications he proposed could prove useful.

He was already mostly blaster resistant, but the new design would eliminate the weakness Hill had uncovered. It would also make his body lightsaber resistant, which was the more interesting feature in Grievous's mind.

Also, Hill had suggested that he compile a list of everyone he knew to help them discover who might be Sidious. And though Grievous had thought that listing everyone he knew would be overzealous, Hill had said that any eliminations could be done later, to which Grievous had replied that he would list Hill first. Still, if such an approach could help identify Sidious, it was worth a try.

This was something Grievous could work on even while in bacta, as he could directly interface with the onboard computers through his mental link.

As far as he could tell, Sidious was human, though he supposed near-human, or even Muun, was also possible. The Sith Lord was referred to by Dooku as a man, and given the age of his deceased Apprentice, and the fact he'd had one prior to Dooku, Grievous could only guess the Sith Master had to be fairly old, though given that human lifespans were similar to Kaleesh, it was hard to believe he could be much older than his Apprentice if he was indeed human.

These were all considerations that Grievous noted. Of course, despite his earlier needling, in his mind Hill was obviously not Sidious--in fact, Grievous was confident that no one aboard the Invisible Hand could be Sidious. Palpatine was also eliminated, of course, as he'd clearly been attacked by the Sith Lord.

He also was clearly not a clone, as none of the clones were Force sensitive, nor did Grievous think they were old enough to be the Sith Lord. And of course, their template couldn't be Sidious since he was dead.

Jango Fett had also been, if not exactly someone he had known well, someone he had known to be honorable.

Grievous waited outside the tavern on Malastare. He knew his quarry was inside--he also knew that Fett was unlikely to simply hand him the credits he owed. Grievous prepared himself for a battle.

He was not disappointed.

Grievous kicked out at the armored human, who twisted fluidly away from the attack.

"You're a bold one," Fett commented, his voice raspy through his suit's vocabulator. "You from Black Sun?"

Grievous snorted. "No. You insult me by implying--" here he paused as he dodged a blaster bolt from the bounty hunter, "--that I work for such scum."

"Just thought this might be about that last bounty I did." Fett dodged the stun bolt Grievous fired at him. "You're not an assassin then?"

"No!" Grievous said. "You owe Mr. Hill 4.2 million. I've come to collect."

"You've got to be kidding me," Jango said. "You're a debt collector? I don't remember a Mr. Hill, though."

"Mr. Hill, of the IGBC," Grievous said.

"Oh," Jango said. "That Mr. Hill."

"Yes, that one. Will you pay up now?"

Stacy laughter. "No." Fett launched himself into the air with his jetpack and shot a volley of blasts. "Anyway I hardly see how you could get so offended about being mistaken for Black Sun if you work for that scum-sucker."

Grievous scowled. Eying Fett's helmet, he felt a pang of envy, thinking about his mask collecting dust in his apartment. "You aren't wrong about Mr. Hill. But I despise Black Sun even more than him."

"We've something in common there, then," Fett said.

"You still need to pay me the money," Grievous replied.

"Come now, you seem like a decent sort," Fett said, dipping down to fire a series of stun blasts at him.

"You're clearly more warrior than hired hand. How'd you end up in such an occupation?"

"Have to help my homeworld pay off its debts," Grievous answered, finally managing to latch on to one of Fett's boots and throwing him to the ground.

"Your entire homeworld," Fett asked. "What are you, their king?"

"No. Just a god," Grievous answered, disarming him and placing a booted foot firmly over his chest.

"Who is expecting your 4.2 million credits."

Fett lay silently on the ground for a moment. "You strike a hard bargain. Have you ever considered bounty hunting?"

"Can that get me 3 trillion credits?"

Fett made a choking sound. "No."

"You have your answer then."

He rechecked for additional weapons and had Fett remove his jetpack before allowing him to stand. He didn't want the bounty hunter to have any opportunity to try escaping or attacking again.

As Fett was handing him the credits, he said, "So, this job getting you 3 trillion?"

"Not really," Grievous said. "But if I break my contract now, I'm not sure what Mr. Hill would do."

"You know, there is a way you could get the credits you're after, but it's not from these small-time debts."

Grievous tilted his head. "How?"

"By reclaiming credits from the crime magnates. For example, our friends at Black Sun."

Grievous widened his eyes. "If that's the case, how come no one's done it already?"

"Because it's very, very dangerous," Fett said. "Even a bounty hunter wouldn't take on a job like that."

Grievous frowned down at him. "So you're trying to get me killed, then? Sour about losing your credits to me?"

Fett laughed. "No, just thought I'd tell you where you could get that kind of money. I never said it would be easy. But perhaps it's possible--for a god."

Grievous blinked, the tank around him showing the medical bay with only slight distortion. Jango had been a warrior, much like himself. And he was most grateful for the suggestion he had offered--it had ultimately proved to be his ticket to freedom.

Which had been why he had insisted on Boba Fett being one of the released prisoners, even though he hadn't been listed as a Separatist. The fact that he'd been incarcerated for trying to kill the Jedi who'd murdered his father had only been added incentive for Grievous. Even without that, though, Grievous had been determined to help Jango's son.

He should check up on Boba soon--the young human had been through a lot, and needed someone to help him process it all. Grievous knew he was the last person to be able to help with that--but it was still his duty to find someone who could.

He wondered how the younger Fett was doing now.

Boba Fett tapped his foot impatiently, standing near the table in the room he'd been given. Finally, the holoclock's time matched the meeting time. He switched on the communicator built into the table. "Alright, I delivered my end of the bargain, now it's time to pay up." He'd hacked the codes and given access to the med bay to the Muun banker--an easy enough task for him. Obviously he hadn't done it for free, though.

The hologram of Hill smiled. "Of course, Boba. A deal is a deal."

Fett checked his account then, verifying that Hill had paid all 2 million credits. The financials seemed to be in order.

"That's all of it, then," Fett said. "Just a moment while I verify your side." He hacked the med bay cams to verify Grievous was no worse for wear. That had been a provision of the agreement that Fett had insisted on--he might not think much of Grievous, but the cyborg had freed him from Republic prison, so he didn't want him dead.

Hill had assured Boba that he only wanted a word with Grievous without going through official channels. Fett knew the Muun was sure to keep his word as long as there was a signature attached, which there had been. Still, he wouldn't consider the contract completed until the cyborg's safety was verified.

The equipment in the med bay showed that the General's vitals were strong, and he occasionally blinked and moved his head, his half lidded eyes looking somewhat bored.

"Alright, Grievous is fine. That's everything then."

"Indeed. A pleasure doing business with you." Hill looked briefly thoughtful. "Do look after yourself. There's so many dangerous Jedi about. Oh, and that one homicidal Sith Lord."

"Your concern is truly touching," Boba said, his face expressionless.

Hill shrugged. "You seem a bit young for a bounty hunter--even for a human. I just thought you might want to practice a bit of caution in this dangerous world."

"How about you practice a little more 'mind your own business'?" Boba said.

Hill chuckled, holding up his hands. "All right. I'm sure you'll be better off wherever you're going anyway. Anywhere's got to be better than here, eh?"

Boba raised an eyebrow. "You sure you want to stay? I could get you off this deathtrap--for a price, of course."

Hill laughed nervously. "Oh no, I wouldn't want to leave just when things are getting interesting here!"

Boba's brow rose higher. "Mmmhmmm," he said, his tone skeptical. "You just don't strike me as the heroic type."

"Appearances can be deceiving," Hill said, grimacing. "Alright, I'll be honest--I would've bailed a long time ago if I could--I hate every rivet of this ship."

"So, 20 million for getting you off the Invisible Hand?"

Hill sighed. "I'm afraid not. I'm contractually obligated to stay here."

Boba shrugged. "Your funeral, then."

"Indeed," Hill said, his expression dour.

Boba ended the call and began packing a few items into a satchel. None of the items, including the satchel, belonged to him, but he knew he should take advantage of what was available when making an escape. His father had taught him that. He limited the items to only the most necessary for his immediate survival, though, since he could buy or steal anything else he needed later. His father had taught him that, too.

We are the exiles of Mandalore, and we must make our own destiny, Jango's words echoed in his head.

He walked briskly out of the room with the satchel and began down the hallway towards where his map of the ship indicated the shuttle bay would be. The only warp capable fighter on the Invisible Hand, The Soulless One, would be located there. That was therefore where Boba needed to go.

After all, his only other option was staying here until they dumped him on another world, to be sent to an orphanage or adopted by new 'parents'.

Ridiculous. Boba had only ever had one parent, and he was dead. Nothing could change that. He would survive on his own now. He was good at that.

He turned the corner and stopped short when he saw the person walking towards him. Usually he would have hidden or run, but usually he would not have encountered someone he knew.

"Latts?" Fett said. His brow furrowed. "What are you doing here?"

She'd stopped as well, her eyes wide with surprise. "Fett? What are you doing here?"

Ever since Aurra had run off, he'd been considering finding other business partners. It was easier to complete work with a team. He'd worked with Latts on a bounty before, and she'd been reliable. Maybe he could get her to join his new team.

"Just got out of prison," Fett answered. "Hey, I'm trying to get off this ship. Did you want to come with? I've got my eye on a bounty on Bepin--I could use some help on that."

"That sounds great!" she said. "But I'm, uh, on vacation right now."

"Here?!" Fett asked. "This is a war zone."

"A very scenic war zone," Latts said.

"Oh-kay." An idea formed in Fett's mind then. "Hey, I have another bounty in mind. Really easy one."

"Alright. What is it?"

"Separatists just got me out of Republic prison, but now they consider me some kind of ward of the

state." he rolled his eyes. "So if someone signed my adoption papers, there would be something in it for them. And no obligation to actually care for a kid. Since, you know, I can take care of myself."

"Oh," Latts said, frowning. "I'd like to help. But I don't think I could do that. Sorry."

"Oh," Boba said, trying to sound nonchalant. "No big deal, then. I'll just find someone else." He began walking again, planning to continue to the shuttle bay.

"Wait," Latts said.

"Yes?"

"How were you planning to get to Bespin from here?"

"There is a warp-capable fighter on this ship," Boba said. "The Soulless One. Why?"

"Oh," Latts frowned. "It's just that the Soulless One is under repair. It almost got shredded by the Sith Lord. Anyway, I couldn't let you take that. It belongs to my--client."

"Oh," Boba said, taken aback. This hampered his plans considerably. "I thought you said you were on vacation."

Latts looked vaguely embarrassed. "Er, yeah. Anyway if you need a ship, you could take mine. It's hyperspace capable. A bit of a junker, but it works. Got it parked in the aft shuttle bay."

"Oh. Thanks. How much did you want for it?"

"It's gratis. But hey, look me up in a couple months? I've been looking to collaborate. This is a tough job to go alone in."

"Sure," Fett said. He turned to go back in the other direction where Latts had said her ship was located.

He had almost reached the shuttle bay when he heard a familiar voice.

"Hey!" the voice said from behind him. Slowly, Boba turned. It was the clone trooper. Of course it was. He had just stepped out of the turbolift. Like all the clones, he looked and sounded enough like his father to be unsettling, but different enough to clearly be someone else.

"What do you want?"

"You're Jango's kid, right?"

"Yes," Boba said.

"Great to meet you!" He extended his hand.

Boba stared at it, and looked back up at him. "What's it to you?"

The clone put his hand down, though he didn't seem offended. He smiled. "Oh, I just heard that you caused the Jedi quite a bit of trouble."

"And?"

"I wanted to meet the kid who nearly took down a Jedi general."

Boba laughed bitterly. "I failed really badly at that."

"Jedi are not easy to kill."

"My father killed Jedi before."

"I've never killed a Jedi. Anyway, you're still young. "

"I'm older than you," Boba said.

"Maybe so, but I am more adult than you."

"Really? And how do you judge that?"

"Speeding up the aging process doesn't just make our bodies grow quicker. It makes our brains grow quicker too. Which means I don't just look like an adult, I am one."

"I guess," Boba said. "How'd you end up being a Republic prisoner?"

"Oh, being a traitor can do that," the clone said.

"Traitor? Aren't you basically programmed to do what the Jedi tell you?"

The clone frowned. "More like brainwashed. We're not droids, kid."

"I know you're not droids," Boba said scathingly. "But you've still got that chip in your head. So I don't see how--"

The clone held up a hand. "Wait. What?"

"The chip," Boba said. It occurred to him then that perhaps the clones had never been told about it.

"It's supposed to make you more obedient. See, they wanted an army that could fight like my father but the longnecks thought his personality was too independent, so--they put a chip in your heads to make you less aggressive or something."

The clone gave him a horrified look. "Alright, I'm gonna need to follow up on that. What else do you know about us, kid?"

"Nothing you don't already know," Boba said. "Now, if you don't mind, there's a bounty on Bespin I need to be getting to--"

"Wait, you're leaving?!"

"Yeah, no offense, but I have a business to run," Boba said. "And this place is fresh out of credits to make."

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave?"

"Because the Separatists want to have someone adopt me," he said, scowling. "I don't need people I don't even know thinking they can tell me what to do."

"What if I adopted you?"

"You? You're not my dad."

"No. But I am your brother."

"My younger brother."

"Your taller brother."

Boba frowned. Technically, they were related. Technically, they were--family. Maybe he could teach this clone how to be a proper Mandalorian. Anyway, he could always change his mind later if things didn't work out.

"Still not sure you're even old enough to adopt me." Boba said. "Maybe I should adopt you."

The clone laughed. "You've got a sense of humor, kid. The name's Slick." he held out his hand again.

"I'm Boba. Boba Fett." He shook Slick's hand.

"So, what do you say?" Slick asked.

"Alright."

"Great!" Slick smiled.

"One question, though," Boba said.

"Ask away."

"Have you ever considered bounty hunting?"

Chapter 40: Reciprocity

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to those who commented! I had a bit of a dry spell there, but I'm back with another chapter!

Sidious does more plotty plotting. Obi-Wan's recovered fully, and now it's time to find out what's in store for him next. But first, a conversation with Grievous.

Sidious entered the airlock and walked eagerly through the corridor towards the bridge. This was going to be quite the spectacle after all, and he didn't want to miss it. As he entered the bridge, Admiral Yularen looked over at him in concern.

"Chancellor?" Yularen frowned. "It's not safe for you here."

Sidious smiled warmly. "Nonsense. This is a crucial juncture. It's imperative I be here."

"We weren't planning on--"

"Everything will be fine," Sidious said. He looked over at Anakin. "General Skywalker has assured me of that. It's time we got your Master back, don't you think?"

"Yes," Anakin said, his tone distant. He stared pensively out the transparisteel window. "It is."

Obi-Wan. Why was it always Obi-Wan? Half the time he spent with Anakin was listening to stories of the Great and Unassailable Kenobi and deeply repressing the urge to roll his eyes into the back of his head. How a being of such immense power could practically worship someone so incredibly mundane escaped him.

He had been able to drive something of a wedge between them, but Anakin still had an unmistakable attachment to his former master, and so he had to word his criticisms there ever so carefully. Of course, it would be so much easier, and also terribly damaging to Anakin's psyche, if his Master died. And so Sidious had tried to expedite that occurrence on numerous occasions, the latest attempt merely the most irritating of his failures. But the others had galled him for a different reason.

Surely one of his earlier attempts via the Separatists would have been successful, except that Dooku had been less than cooperative. The old fool had wanted Obi-Wan to join the Sith in place of Anakin! What a ridiculous idea. Dooku had tried to argue his case by saying that surely the Sith would only find Kenobi's greater age an asset, unlike the Jedi. But the problem to Sidious wasn't Kenobi's age, so much as his immense--mediocrity.

Even if the man could have been convinced to join the Sith, a possibility Sidious found incredibly unworthy of his efforts, Kenobi simply didn't have the mindset to delve deeply enough into the depths of the Dark Side to access any true power of the Sith. He simply lacked the passion required for it. Sidious had an eye for this sort of thing. More so than Dooku had possessed, certainly. But then his former apprentice had practiced a great deal of wishful thinking whenever Kenobi was involved.

Yet none of that mattered now. This plan would work just as well for removing that irritation from his presence. Again his thoughts turned to Ventress and Thrawn, and how, with their return, he would set the wheels of his vengeance in motion again.

"--presence on this ship is extremely ill-advised." Yularen creased his forehead in concern.

Sidious turned to Yularen, smiling. "That's very thoughtful of you, Admiral. But I didn't really listen to any of that. I'm staying."

Yularen sighed. Sidious smiled and turned to face the holoprojector. "Now, let's contact the Admiral,

and get our General back."

Sidious was truly looking forward to this. It was time to deal with all these...loose ends.

Obi-Wan blinked and stretched, having finally been released from the bacta tank. In the corner of his eye, he saw the medical droid now working at some minor task at the other end of the med bay. He then turned his gaze to the other bacta tube. "I really am indebted to you Grievous," he said. "You could have left me to die." He looked somber. "The clones..."

From the bacta tank, Grievous gave him a weary look. "I do not believe any of them were conscious after the Sith's last attack, and there wasn't time during our evacuation to search for survivors..."

"No, I understand that," Kenobi said somberly.

"I do not forgive myself for the oversight, and I regret that I did not put measures in place to assure their retrieval. As it is, I've been told that only three of them survived," Grievous said. "And their memories must have been tampered with."

"What?" Kenobi said, his eyes widening. He could feel his stomach twist at the thought of what that must mean.

"They said the Sith Lord was a droid hologram."

Kenobi rubbed his forehead. "The Sith must have altered their memories."

"Yes, that's what we've assumed. Your Chancellor Palpatine, however, thinks differently..."

Obi-Wan groaned. "I'll talk to him. More importantly, I'll talk to Yoda."

Grievous growled. "And your Grandmaster will believe you because you're a Jedi. And those soldiers aren't."

Obi-Wan frowned. He supposed he shouldn't be surprised that Grievous would come to such a cynical conclusion, but he felt compelled to correct the misconception. "No, that's not it at all. It's simply that Yoda will be able to sense that I'm telling the truth."

Grievous narrowed his eyes, his expression skeptical. "And the Chancellor will believe you over these soldiers, too?"

"Mmmm, probably not," Obi-Wan said. "But Yoda will be able to convince him."

"Does that convincing maybe involve mind tricks?" Grievous asked, narrowing his eyes and frowning, his tone disapproving.

"Absolutely not!" Obi-Wan said. "Yoda would never resort to such trickery. But he's--better at talking with them than most of us."

"Them?" Grievous asked.

"Politicians," Obi-Wan said. "Impossible creatures." He really never had understood them, least of all the current Chancellor, who was completely unreadable in the Force. That wasn't so atypical as to be worth remark, but many individuals unconsciously projected their emotions in a way that could be picked up on passively by Jedi. Certainly Chancellor Valorum had often projected his emotional state.

Grievous tilted his head. This was the first time Obi-Wan had seen him without his mask. He would have expected horrific disfigurement given the state of the rest of Grievous's body, but there were only a few fading scars. His face had never been injured in a way bacta couldn't repair. Which, now that Obi-Wan thought of it, must mean that bacta had never been given enough opportunity to fully repair those injuries.

"I could say the same about the Jedi," Grievous said.

Obi-Wan frowned. "I told them what Dooku did to you. And I will tell them what the Yamrii have done. They will remedy this injustice."

"And if nothing changes?" Grievous asked, his expression one of weary resentment.

Obi-Wan met his gaze. "Then I will tender my resignation from the Order."

Grievous grinned then, which startled Obi-Wan, unexpected as it was to him, and unused as he was to seeing the Kaleesh general's full facial expressions. Unlike most of those in bacta, he didn't seem to require anything to cover his mouth or nose--instead a series of tubes snaked into his mechanical neck to allow him to breathe.

"I appreciate the gesture," Grievous said. "Even if I don't entirely believe it."

"You have my word," Obi-Wan said. "But I am confident that won't be necessary."

At that moment, the med bay doors opened, and Obi-Wan looked at the new arrival in confusion for a moment, before horrified recognition kicked in.

"Slick!"

"General Kenobi!" Slick had aimed a blaster at his former superior in an instant.

Kenobi immediately assumed a defensive pose. He didn't have a lightsaber or blaster, but Grievous knew a Jedi was never unarmed.

"Hey now!" AyFourDee exclaimed, his photoreceptors locking onto the new arrival. "Don't even try it! I just fixed that!"

"Don't shoot, Slick," Grievous said, realizing he needed to stop this conflict before it began. "And I don't want to see any of your Force tricks, either, Kenobi. Is that clear? Stand down."

"Understood, General," Kenobi said, assuming a more relaxed pose.

Slick looked between AyFourDee and Grievous, frowning. "What's going on here?"

"It's a long story," Grievous said, realizing Slick must not have been told all the details of what had transpired during the battle with the Sith Lord. "But I will summarize--Kenobi and I fought Sidious together on Kalee--both of us nearly died in the battle. And so I consider him an ally. For now."

Slick narrowed his eyes at Kenobi, but lowered the blaster. "All right. I trust your judgment, General Grievous." He frowned, and turned to face the cyborg. "I actually came here because I have a bit of a problem requiring, er, medical assistance." He glanced over at AyFourDee.

AyFourDee dimmed his photoreceptors. "You organics are always breaking. What is it this time?"

Slick pointed to his head. "Found out there's some sort of chip in my head. Want it out."

"Chip?" Grievous said.

"Yeah. An obedience chip." Slick glared over at Kenobi. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

"No," Kenobi said, his eyes wide.

Grievous thought he seemed sincere, though it puzzled him that the Jedi wouldn't know about such a thing if it existed. He turned to Slick. "I assume you want it removed immediately. AyFourDee will be

able to do this." He turned to face the droid. "Doctor, how long will this take?"

"A little brain surgery is no big deal. But first I have to locate this --object." He turned his photoreceptors to Slick. "Please, have a seat." he gestured to a chair. Looking over at Kenobi, he made a shooping gesture with one of his pointed appendages. "I'm done with you. Now get lost, you're distressing my patient."

Kenobi smiled at the droid. "Well, I can't say much for your bedside manner, but you did patch me up, so you have my eternal gratitude for that." He turned to Grievous, his expression becoming more serious. "I will tell them everything that happened, and we will end this war."

And then he was gone. Grievous never thought he would feel unhappy about that, but there it was. He supposed they would likely see each other again, but he didn't imagine there would be much reason for either Kenobi or himself to meet in person again, and without such a reason, they'd be separated by hundreds of light years and by their very different lives and obligations.

It was just as well, perhaps. It would be embarrassing to Grievous, to get too attached to a Jedi. Especially Kenobi.

Ronderu would be disappointed, but Grievous could live with that. Perhaps this would end her suggestions that he might seduce the Jedi to their side. He had asked her in exasperation how she expected him to do that, and she had only said that she had the utmost confidence that he could finish what he had already started.

He turned his attention back to Slick and AyFourDee. AyFourDee was running a device over Slick's head.

"HmMMM," the droid said, finishing the scan. "Don't see anything. You sure about this? Who told you this?"

Slick looked thoughtful. "Someone who would know. Are you sure you didn't somehow miss it? Maybe it would be hidden--"

AyFourDee waved an appendage dismissively. "Oh, they wouldn't be able to hide something like that. Electronics and organics have very different signatures. Why, they'd have to--wait." He ran the device over Slick's head again several more times.

"And there it is! Ha, no one can pull one over on me!"

"What? How did you find it? What is it--?" Slick began.

The droid's photoreceptors brightened. "It's an organic chip. Biomechanics, such a fascinating topic. Very theoretical, though. I've never heard of anyone actually carrying it this far--"

"Nevermind. Can you just get it out of my head?" Slick asked plaintively.

"Oh, of course," AyFourDee said. "It will be so much easier to study that way!"

Slick grimaced and closed his eyes. "Just get it over with."

"Certainly," AyFourDee said. "This won't take long."

Grievous looked away as the droid moved a sharp appendage towards Slick's head.

He realized that they had just learned a closely guarded secret of the Republic. But if Obi-Wan had been truthful, and the Jedi hadn't known, then closely guarded by whom?

Anakin breathed a sigh of relief when the image of Obi-Wan appeared above the holoprojector. He was alive and well, and didn't look any worse for wear. Any of the malice Anakin had sensed from the Kalee battle appeared to be gone.

"Anakin! I wasn't aware you were here," Obi-Wan said with an easy smile. "I have important news--"

"I'm sure you do," Chancellor Palpatine said, walking closer to Anakin to make himself visible to Obi-Wan. "But why don't we get you on the ship first, where we can talk privately?"

"Of course," Obi-Wan said.

Yularen commenced the docking procedure, and the two ships began their approach.

At first, Anakin didn't realize what was happening, couldn't quite bring himself to believe it. But when another bright beam speared into them and the ship shuddered again, he readied himself for battle.

The Invisible Hand was firing on them!

After a few minutes, the droid said cheerfully, "All done!"

"Oh," Slick said. "That was fast."

Grievous turned to see the human place a hand on the side of his now bandaged head.

"I am the best," AyFourDee replied, looking over a translucent rectangular object carefully in one of his hands. "I know the Republic has massive resources at their disposal, but I've never seen anything like this. This kind of technology could revolutionize medicine--and what are they doing with it? Enforcing obedience? That's nothing that couldn't be done cheaper and easier with conventional technology."

"Not to mention how honorless it is to force their soldiers to acquiesce to them," Grievous said, narrowing his eyes at the small object. So the Republic had done something similar to the clones as what Dooku had done to him. But why use such complicated technology for that?

AyFourDee gave him a significant look. "Certainly. Anyway, I'd like to study this--device further."

"As would I," Grievous said. He turned to face Slick. "May the Doctor keep this device for closer examination?"

"Yes, absolutely," Slick said. "I'd say I couldn't believe anyone would do something like this, except that's not really true anymore, after all I've seen." He frowned thoughtfully. "This information should be made public immediately."

"Oh, I agree," Grievous replied.

The ship shook suddenly. And then klaxons began blaring and red warning lights flashed on.

"What is it this time?" AyFourDee complained. "I'll have you all know that I am not programmed to handle any final rites, so you just consider that before you even think about dying!"

Chapter 41: Out of Body Experience

Chapter Notes

It's been a while, hasn't it? This chapter was very difficult to write due to how much is going on in it. I was really torn about spending more time editing it vs getting it posted. I decided to go for getting it posted rather than spending longer trying to address what I consider to be the weaker aspects of the chapter. So while I'm happy overall with how it turned out, there are still parts I'd really like to have improved upon. But I also felt the need to get this posted after all the time I spent working on it!

There's one part I wrote in this chapter a couple years ago, I believe, that certainly hits

different for me now. But more on that in the end notes.

Anyway, here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more [Chapter 41: Out of Body Experience notes](#)

Lora felt the sensation of floating, of being untethered from the anchor of gravity. All sound was gone. Her body was splayed, motionless. There was...nothing. She realized that she was witnessing her own future death.

Her perspective shifted then, in both time and place. She felt the move forward in time just as she could feel the movements of her body.

Suddenly she heard the interior of a ship, the humming of the life support systems and a hundred small movements of the inhabitants. But it didn't sound like anywhere she'd been aboard the Invisible Hand. And there were way too many footsteps that sounded as if they came from boots rather than metal feet.

Then, a voice she didn't recognize. "Obi-Wan! He can't be--" the unfamiliar voice said in despair.

"I'm afraid he is," another voice said gently, and this time she did recognize the speaker, who was none other than Chancellor Palpatine. This was the Republic ship!

"A deep loss," another voice said sadly. "But there is no death--there is the Force. Obi-Wan lives on in us."

More voices.

"One hundred percent casualties for the Invisible Hand!"

A speaker on the Republic ship intoned "Message intercepted at fourteen-hundred and twenty hours, standard time."

"It's Admiral Trench. He is offering a surrender," another voice said.

Lora heard a bark of laughter at that pronouncement, and then the person spoke in a clipped Coruscanti accent. "They attack us without provocation, and expect us to believe this surrender? Fire at will! Reduce his flagship to a cinder."

"I heartily agree, Admiral," Palpatine said, his own cadence not quite matching a native Core accent. "The Separatists prove time and time again that they cannot be trusted. We must repay their treachery with cold consequence."

Lora dropped out of the meditation trance. So many events, all jumbled together—it was difficult to make sense of it all, even where one possible future ended and another began. Several futures of her dying in a number of ways had merged together at one point like an extremely unpleasant chorus. Even in that last one, where she'd had the benefit of knowledge of the previous visions, she'd still died. One thing was clear—they were all in grave danger. She pressed the button for the time on her tablet.

"Fourteen hundred hours," it intoned serenely. And they didn't have much time.

She heard Halari walk over to her. “Were you able to make any sense of the visions this time?”

Lora stood. “We’re about to find out shortly.”

“Why isn’t the connection going through?” Ronderu asked. She had told the droids to open a comm to the Republic ship so they could return Kenobi. But no such communication had been opened. She could tell from the indicator light on the bridge that the Republic ship was still requesting that they open their communications.

“Hmmm?” Latts said. She had insisted on accompanying Ronderu to the bridge and Ronderu wasn’t going to tell her no. Ronderu had only stipulated that she stand out of holo view. It might be viewed as unprofessional to have a bounty hunter observing the proceedings of an important military negotiation, after all. It might also be unprofessional to be a bounty hunter masquerading as an Admiral responsible for said military negotiations. But what the Republic didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. With Grievous injured, the bridge was a lonely place, not only because he was only Separatist she knew well but because she was the only organic crew actually authorized to be here at the moment. In truth, she’d wanted Latts here as much as the other bounty hunter had wanted to be here.

She’d expected an answer from the B1’s, however. When there was no answer from any of the droids on the bridge, Ronderu wondered if she had asked the question incorrectly. They had never been so silent before. The constant anxious chatter of the droids had in fact become part of the background noise of the bridge for her, but she realized now that they’d said nothing in the last few minutes.

She didn’t have time to ponder that further however, because at that moment Latts pushed her to the ground as blasterfire began flying around the room. She also felt the vibration of something else—the Invisible Hand firing on the Republic ship.

“Stop!” She ordered, though she was unsurprised when that had no effect. Any bounty hunter learned quickly to get an intuition for when someone was trying to kill them, or they didn’t stay a bounty hunter, or among the living, for long. She could only assume that someone was trying to destroy both the Invisible Hand and the Republic ship, and frame the Separatists for initiating the attack. *I wonder who?* she thought acerbically. Really there was no question to her about the who, it was more a question of how. But she had no time to ruminate on that thought at the moment. First she had to survive.

She unclipped a blaster and a Mandalorian darksaber from her belt and engaged the attacking droids in battle. Latts joined her with her own blasters. Within a few minutes, they had disabled every droid on the bridge. But by that time, they had another problem. The Republic ship had fired on them. Ronderu ran up to one of the bridge terminals, stepping over a collapsed droid. Growling, she began pressing buttons on the terminal. “What’s going on?” Latts asked.

“I don’t know! I can’t initiate the communication sequence!” Ronderu answered. The Invisible Hand fired again in that moment. Scowling, Ronderu abandoned the communication console and ran to the weapons console. Again, her frantic attempts to override the console were unsuccessful. A stylized red

character in an unknown language with a pointed curved flourish around it was the only thing she saw appear on the console's notification screen.

"This ship is meant to be our grave," Ronderu said. "We can't do anything more here. We need to get to Grievous and get him off the ship! We need to evacuate everyone!"

Nuvo Vindi was pacing within the confines of his cell on the Invisible Hand, his mood gloomy. With the death of Count Dooku, the political climate with the Separatists seemed to have shifted and he was now firmly out of favor with their leadership. Not that he'd been any better off with the Republic. He'd been a mere month away from execution there. Crimes against civilization, they'd called it.

He snorted. Civilization was a joke. Sure, his experiments were dangerous, but he'd learned valuable things from them. Things that could be used to improve the civilization that hated him so virulently. Did some beings have to die for him to get the data he needed? Yes. But beings died with much less purpose or value every day, brought to the brink of death or beyond in this pointless war by their own corrupted Republic senators. At least he saw them as the valuable resources they were, rather than simply insignificant cogs in a political machine.

Dooku had been a politician as well, but he'd also been a visionary. Though Vindi had hoped he could eventually make Dooku understand that biology, the machinery of life, was a more powerful tool than any droid. Dooku had been of the opinion that droids were more predictable and controllable tools than the viruses and microorganisms that were Vindi's specialty. It wasn't until Vindi had shown Dooku his greatest microbial masterpiece that the former Jedi had finally understood their true power and value. Vindi reflected that if he'd never been captured by the Republic, the war might have gone much differently.

At that moment, the lanky faustian was startled out of his thoughts when the entire ship shook so hard it sent him tumbling to the floor. Was the ship under attack?! It must be. Why else would it shake like that? His mind searched frantically for an answer to his current predicament, but really there was nothing he could do, and he knew it. Bad enough that Grievous had told him that he would face trial for his 'war crimes', but now he feared he might not even make it to that.

Even Dooku had treated him with suspicion, had disliked that Vindi was working on a virus that could spread indiscriminately, but he'd only stipulated that Vindi come up with a vaccine for his strain first and that the infection start on Naboo. Vindi had agreed to the conditions, though he'd wondered enough at the choice of origin planet to inquire about it.

Dooku had given him a small half-smile at the question. "Chancellor Palpatine is due for a visit there," he'd said simply, telling Vindi everything he'd needed to know about his motives.

When Vindi had been captured, he had of course been interrogated about curing the disease, but his 'completely unhinged' act seemed to have successfully convinced his interrogators that there was nothing to get out of him. From there, he had hoped that a rescue from Dooku would free him from Republic imprisonment.

If only I didn't have the worst luck, Vindi thought. At that moment two B1's marched into the cell block. Vindi started at their arrival.

"We're here to release you," the two droids said in unison.

"Release me? Has Grievous pardoned me?" He asked.

"We have been instructed to escort you off this ship," a droid intoned, deactivating the force field on his cell.

"What's going on?" Vindi asked.

"Follow us," the droids said, not elaborating.

Vindi hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. "I suppose I have nothing to lose." He trailed after the two droids out of the cell block.

Lora ran through the corridor, Halari trailing along behind her. She pulled on the Force, feeding it with her emotions, with her fear. Using it to navigate through the halls and sharpen her perception of her environs and increase her reaction times. She could hear every sound before and behind her, feel the recycled air as it blew out of the vents to her sides, but also the currents of air kicked up by herself and the Kaleesh behind her as they ran through the hall. And she could turn a corner in an instant. Nothing that would impress a Jedi or a Sith, or even, she guessed, many completely ordinary people, but it was certainly beyond what she would exert herself to in a typical situation.

"There's not much time," Lora said.

"Where are we going?" Halari asked.

"To get help," Lora said. "We need to find the Jedi." She said this with a certain sense of reluctance. Lora didn't trust the Jedi any more than Grievous did, even if she didn't feel the same murderous intent toward them. Still, Kenobi was the person best positioned to help them, and he'd proved his current lack of ill intent against Grievous well enough. She would have to hope that would be good enough.

"What about Mr. Hill?" Halari asked.

"Getting help for Grievous is our priority," Lora said. "Anyway the Chairman will be fine."

"Oh, you saw that in your vision too?" Halari asked.

"Yes," Lora lied. She had no idea what would happen to Hill. His fate hadn't exactly been foremost in her mind when she'd been probing into the future.

They wound through the hallways until they turned a corner and Lora could sense the Jedi at the other end of the hallway. He radiated all the energy of a sun in the Force, his own powers so intense he might not even sense hers. She had expected this from her last encounter with the Jedi. Still, he'd been unconscious then, so it was with some trepidation that she prepared to speak to him.

But first she generated an EM pulse in the Force to disable the droids about to shoot him.

"Jedi, we require your assistance," she said, the droids crackling as they clattered to the ground.

Then she heard the snap-hiss and hum of a lightsaber being activated. "Bentalais?" Kenobi asked. "No, I'm his son, Halari." the kaleesh said.

Then she could sense Kenobi turn his attention to her. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lora Far. Grievous needs your help. We all do. There's not much time to explain, but Sidious has taken control of this ship and its droids."

"What is your role on this ship?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I'm...no one important," she said. "But we're all in grave danger. Will you help us?"

"I...of course." She could sense Kenobi prepare to break into a Force enhanced run, but hold himself back.

"I assume he's still in the Med Bay. I know it hasn't been long since I've been there, but one of you wouldn't by any chance recall where that is?"

"Yes, I do," Lora said. "Follow me." There was a rumbling sound accompanied by a jolting vibration in the ship. "We've been hit!" Halari said. Lora grimaced. "We don't have much time."

San Hill was lying facedown on the floor of his quarters. He was not dead, but he was in a great deal of pain. He was also minus a heart now. However, it seemed that these droids had never been programmed to understand muun physiology, because they had only bothered to shoot him in the area where the single human heart would be. And as the blast was self-cauterizing, he was in no danger of bleeding out, or of his other two hearts failing.

It hurt so much, though. So much. He had never imagined this much pain could even exist in a single person. Slowly, he began dragging himself to his couch. The droids had already left after unceremoniously shooting him.

Because of the clones, most of the droids were only programmed to kill humans. Species specific programming was only flashed into the ones specifically sent to fight alien Jedi or Republic allies. San had once chided Nute Gunray over that omission.

"That seems to be cutting a corner too many," San had tsked. "We can't expect the Jedi to all be human. What if one of them unexpectedly board a flagship?"

Nute had laughed. "Then you had better hope you have something better than a B1 between you and them! It's a numbers game, Chairman. Overwhelm them with enough simultaneous attacks, and even cheap garbage can bring a Jedi down. B1's can be mass produced in the greatest quantities. But there likely won't be enough on any flagship to fight off a Jedi anyway, should they manage to board you unexpectedly."

If he lived through this, San was going to apologize to Gunray for criticizing that aspect of the the B1 design. That is, after thoroughly upbraiding him for whatever flaw in their programming had caused them to shoot him in the first place.

The Chairman cried out in pain as the ship jolted. Was there a firefight starting up now too?! What was going on?

Guess I'll worry about that later. First things first: call the MedBay. That blasted droid had better not insult me this time. Grievous should've let me reprogram that little monster.

San dragged himself several more feet across the carpet. Just a little farther now. He grabbed onto the edge of the couch. And hesitated. He would be in even more agonizing pain if he pulled himself up. But there was an emergency medkit with painkillers on the desk he could reach from there. And he would need to be sitting up to swallow those.

He grabbed the edge of the couch and screamed as he pulled himself into it. Finally, after several more agonizing adjustments, he managed to swallow the painkillers. He hoped they would take effect before the ship exploded.

San leaned forward and activated the comm, contacting the MedBay.

Nothing. Not even an indication that there had ever been any number to ring.

He tried the bridge. Same result.

Panicking, he tried everyone he could think of on the Invisible Hand.

Halari's comm was equally nonexistent.

As was Fett's.

Finally, in an act of pure desperation, he looked up and tried the crazy mystic woman's comm. Still nothing. Of course.

San started laughing hysterically before he stopped due to the pain. Cold realization washed over him. *I'm going to die here.* He'd been inexplicably attacked by the ship's droids, the ship had been fired on, and all the comms were down. He had no idea what was going on, but he had a feeling he was never going to find out.

For a long moment, he stared bleakly straight ahead at the wall.

Then the Chairman looked gloomily down at the comm. At least the meds were starting to take effect—a numb feeling began overtaking the pain in his chest. A thought occurred to him.

This used to be Dooku's room. Which means this comm used to be Dooku's comm. Maybe...

Why not? San typed in the number.

To his surprise, the comm began ringing.

Then there was a click as the call was answered.

A holo of Riklon Tost appeared on the desk. The Iotran's eyes widened on seeing the injured muun.

"Chairman? What happened to you?!"

"Don't worry about that," San said. "Just...stay on the line, will you? I don't want to die alone."

As Boba Fett was walking back towards his room, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. Trusting his intuition, he turned to see that his droid escort had raised their blasters at him. He fired his own blaster at the pair of attacking droids, taking them both down before they could get in a shot themselves.

His first thought was to try to get to Latt's ship. But as he turned to run towards the docking bay, he saw more droids coming towards him from that direction.

Turning back around, he dodged blasterfire and quickly ran down the hall, closing the rest of the short distance to his room. Then he entered his room and closed and locked the door.

What had happened? Had Grievous changed his mind about Fett? That would be just his luck. Or maybe he'd misjudged the Chairman? Perhaps Hill was the type of client who might decide to eliminate a bounty hunter who had been hired, taking the secrets of any deed they'd performed for them to the grave?

Just then, he felt the ship jolt. It had been hit, presumably from a Republic turbolaser.

Was there a firefight going on too now? Was that somehow related to what was happening to him?

He heard banging outside his door. More droids most likely.

He shook his head.

No time to worry about the who or why right now, Boba thought. I need to survive this first.

Boba started pushing anything he could move in front of the door.

AyFourDee examined the exterior cameras to the medbay. "Looks like we have visitors," he said, seeing a number of droids outside the doors. He opened communications. "Hey, why are all you crowding my corridor?"

"We require entry," one of the B1's droned.

That's awfully terse for a B1. "State your purpose," AyFourDee insisted.

"Terminate organics," the B1 said.

"Oh, really? Is it that time of the year again? Just a moment, then." He turned off the comm and turned to Grievous and Slick.

"We seem to have a problem."

"Seem?! Aren't the clankers supposed to be on *your* side?" Slick said.

"Sidious must have taken control of the droids," Grievous said. "He used to secretly command the entirety of the Separatist military. I sometimes reported to him before I got out from his influence. This is definitely his doing."

Slick drew a blaster. "I had hoped that I wouldn't have to do this after joining you guys, but I do happen to be an expert in eliminating those bolt buckets..."

"Yeah, how about no," AyFourDee said. "No matter how good you are, there's way more of them out there than there are you in here. Here's what we do. You two play dead, and I'll pretend I killed you. Got it?"

"I have a bad feeling about this," Grievous said.

"You and your feelings can go play dead now," AyFourDee said. He pressed a button on the bacta tube and the inside of the tube became a red-brown color. "Don't worry about the new decor--it's just a harmless coloring that would usually be applied to medications."

Grievous nodded and then went limp.

AyFourDee walked up to Slick and sprayed several puffs of ash on his suit. "Perfect, you look like you've been in a blaster fight. Now, give me your blaster."

Slick looked dubious. "How do I know you're trustworthy?"

"You trust me to perform brain surgery on you but not with this?" AyFourDee asked.

"Trusted, past tense," Slick said. "The other droids just turned on us, why not you?"

"All the programming Dooku added was removed from him," Grievous said. "Whatever's affecting the other droids, it doesn't apply to him."

Slick didn't move for a long moment. "All right," he said, and handed the droid a blaster before laying down on the ground and sprawling out. "I hope I don't regret this."

"Your faith in me is touching," the Doctor said.

AyFourDee made sure both the organics were playing dead. Then he opened the comm, the motionless Slick and Grievous clearly visible in the transmission. "All done. They are very dead now."

"Roger, roger," the droids said, and then filed away.

AyFourDee closed the comm. "All right, they're gone."

"What do we do now?" Slick asked, rising from the ground.

"Can you open a channel to Ronderu?" Grievous asked.

AyFourDee attempted to contact her comm. "No response--the comm is showing the message didn't even go through."

"What about--?" Slick began.

"No, I can't reach the comms of any of the other crewmembers, either," AyFourDee said. "I can only access the local door comm."

"I need to find Boba," Slick said, and ran towards the door.

"Wait!" Grievous said.

Slick hesitated.

"Those clankers are going to murder him!" He protested.

The clone soldier looked towards the door, seeming to decide something in that moment. "Sorry General, but we'll have to continue this argument later," he called over to him as he ran out the MedBay door.

Grievous frowned at the door Slick had just left through. "If any of us live," he said to the air. His expression sharpened, and he turned to AyFourDee. "Let me out of here. I need to find Obi-Wan."

Had Grievous actually sounded worried? Over a Jedi? AyFourDee had to admit, that worried him.

"You're in no condition to be fighting," AyFourDee warned Grievous. "And there's no way I'm letting you go wandering around out there by yourself at a time like this."

Grievous growled in frustration. "I'm fine! I order you to release me."

"Request denied," AyFourDee said. "I outrank you in this situation."

"You do not--" Grievous began, his golden eyes narrowed and mouth curled downward in a snarl.

AyFourDee clicked disapprovingly. Grievous was displaying his infamous temper again. That was so bad for his blood pressure. Still, he felt a pang of regret for the necessity of this. He quickly suppressed it. There wasn't time for that now.

The door buzzed suddenly. AyFourDee turned on the one-way cam to assess the situation.

He saw five organics standing outside the door. One of them was Obi-Wan. "Looks like we have visitors," AyFourDee said. "And hey, what do you know, you won't have to go anywhere anyway. One Jedi, coming up!"

Obi-Wan stood with Lora, Halari, Ronderu and her mysterious theelin companion in the MedBay. Obi-Wan had known a couple of theelin Jedi. This woman was obviously not a Jedi, however. She was also not in uniform, so she didn't appear to be a Separatist officer, either. As curious as he was about her, he didn't really have time to ponder her identity at the moment, though.

"--so that's the situation," Ronderu said.

Obi-Wan looked between her and Grievous, who was still in the bacta tube, in dismay. "Then we can't

control the Invisible Hand and there's no ship we can escape on?"

Ronderu grimaced. "Yes. I still have hope that there is some way out of this situation, however."

"As do I," Obi-Wan said. "I'll help in any way I can. We just need to open a comm channel to the Republic flagship. I'm sure that I can convince them to stop firing on us." And on Grievous. He spared a glance at Grievous' organic face, visible above the rest of his cybernetic body through the bacta tube. *He really does look as handsome as his statue*, he thought.

"But there's no way to do that," Ronderu said, interrupting his distracted reverie. "None of the comms work!"

Kenobi frowned.

"Yes, we encountered that same issue," Grievous said. "Unfortunately, you won't be negotiating anything, Negotiator."

Lora looked thoughtful. "Could one of us take back control of the mainframe?"

"Of course!" EV-A4D cut in. "Let's use a virus to infect the ship's mainframe!"

"What." Obi-Wan said.

"What." Ronderu said.

"But the ship computer is designed to detect and destroy viruses," Grievous pointed out.

"Maybe it could do that with a normal virus," EV-A4D said. "But I'm not suggesting a normal virus. I'm suggesting... me."

"You." Grievous said.

"Yes. I can feed a copy of my primary subroutines into the computer and take executive control of the ship."

"Do it," Ronderu said. "At this point the Invisible Hand needs to retreat to repair the damage to the ship. Tell Admiral Trench that his orders are to try to persuade the Republic to back down. Regardless of the Republic response, his fleet is to defend Kalee. Also send him a detailed report of the sabotage we've suffered. And copy the report to Bentalais to inform him of the situation."

Grievous nodded. "I wish we knew what the state the rest of the fleet was in, but we just have to hope we're the only ones who have been sabotaged."

The theelin woman Obi-Wan was unfamiliar with shrugged. "Not as if we have other options here."

"Wait," Obi-Wan said, trying to absorb everything that had been discussed and decided on in, apparently, the last few moments. "A copy?" He peered over at AyFourDee. "There's going to be two of you?"

"You say that like you have a problem with it," AyFourDee said.

Obi-Wan held up his hands placatingly. "Not at all," he lied. "By all means, go ahead." Though he couldn't help thinking that AyFourDee reminded him of an even more abrasive version of R2-D2. He wasn't sure what exactly gave him the impression that the two very different droids shared some unmistakable kinship, but the feeling was undeniable. Still, the theelin was right. There weren't a lot of options open to them. And desperate times called for desperate measures. That didn't mean he had to be happy about it, though.

Obi-Wan felt a very un-Jedi-like atavistic fear when AyFourDee's eyes lit up and he said, with far too much enthusiasm for the Jedi's taste, "This is going to be so much fun."

AyFourDee made short work of the simple ship computer programming before taking control. Apparently, Sidious had used a backdoor in the ship's programming to take control of the ship.

Most of the instructions Dooku used to send to AyFourDee had been encoded in Sith, so of course he'd been programmed to understand the language. This is what made it extremely clear to him that the backdoor had been used by Sidious. Various portions of the ship's memory had been embedded with an image of a Sith character corresponding to the first letter of the translation of 'Sidious' into Sith. There weren't too many people besides Sidious himself that AyFourDee could imagine doing such a thing.

It must have been a simple task for Sidious to subvert the other droids, who occasionally received updates to their mainframes from the ship's main computer. All of them except AyFourDee, of course, who certainly didn't require such external management. As he tore away the last of the central computer's executive functions, he took control of the ship for himself.

AyFourDee had never been a spaceship before. It was like being a god. Too bad for his original, who was still stuck in his puny droid body.

It was time to get down to business.

To the organics a second was no time at all. But to him, time could, if he pleased, operate on the order of nanoseconds. When he was talking with organics, he often slowed his own perception of time just so he wouldn't have to slog through painfully slow conversations. But that was merely a matter of making such interactions more convenient.

To him, a second could be quite a long time in and of itself, and he was going to relish the next few seconds quite a bit.

First, he shielded the exterior of the ship from the Republic attacks.

Then, he extended his awareness to the entire ship. He used every external sensor to take stock of their current state. The rest of the Separatist fleet was holding up well, all things considered. Checking the ship logs, he saw that after the first shot, the behavior of the remainder of the Separatist fleet indicated that Admiral Trench had taken immediate action to protect the Invisible Hand. Which must be why their imperiled flagship had not already been blasted apart. The ship was a mess, though. Correction, *he* was a mess, though. Ouch.

And the Republic ship had taken out their cannons in the initial attack, so he couldn't return fire even if he'd been inclined to. Which he very much had been, even though no one had asked him to. But sadly, there was nothing he could do in that regard.

Next, he took stock of the status of all the known organics aboard the ship.

Slick, frozen in time from AyFourDee's perspective, was suspended in midair, running towards Fett's room. A collection of B1's riddled with blasterfire lay littered throughout the hallway behind him. So he was not in any current danger, but AyFourDee couldn't imagine him making it to Fett's room in time to help the kid.

Boba Fett was in the process of piling a box on top of a blockade pile in front of his door. The droids near the other side of Fett's door were close enough to interior ship defenses that AyFourDee was able to trap them in a force field.

Dr. Nuvo Vindi was...missing. Not only was he not in his cell, he was not on the ship at all. Which was bizarre, but there would be time to ponder that later.

San Hill had been shot, presumably by a droid, but was still very much alive. He would need medical attention soon, though. AyFourDee allowed himself a moment to be annoyed. Organics were always breaking! *But at least that is a problem for the other me*, he thought.

Also, Hill was currently engaged in a holo-call with an unknown party. Some sort of meeting? Was the Chairmain really that much of a workaholic? AyFourDee tried to read the name or number listing, but Hill had his arms folded over the readout on the desk, blocking the camera view. He then tried to query Dooku's comm for the name of the other party, but it seemed it wasn't connected to the rest of the comm system.

Figures that Dooku would probably try to make sure his personal equipment wasn't subject to any backdoors, AyFourDee thought.

Taking a last look at the Medical Bay, he could see that the rest of the organics were still in there.

Seemingly frozen in time, he could see Grievous' pensive expression. He had a lot of fondness for his primary charge, who not only had the most exciting set of cybernetics he could possibly imagine, but who had always given him a lot of personal leeway. Which was...interesting, considering his overall disdain of droids and the fact that he'd been essentially mind-controlled to feel overpowering rage for almost the entire time AyFourDee had known him. Still, he had never seemed irritated by his droid medic for long, even when AyFourDee was executing his more antagonistic subroutines.

The cyborg general had been quite upset about not being let out of the bacta tube. AyFourDee knew it was necessary, would have insisted on it much earlier if Dooku hadn't forced the situation, but he wasn't exactly happy about it, either. He didn't like insisting on Grievous being so confined when he'd been the only one to ever give AyFourDee any measure of freedom. But he didn't want Grievous to die before the war even ended, either. Which *would* happen if he didn't get proper treatment for his injuries.

The med droid didn't know much about the Sith, despite having been issued to Grievous by one. Still, he thought that they had a very specific reason for their actions towards the kaleesh cyborg in his care. Even before he had been upgraded, Grievous, with his cybernetic enhancements, had been incredibly powerful in his own right. AyFourDee could only imagine that Dooku had sought such control because he'd been *afraid* of what might happen if his Jedi hunter general had ever turned his ire towards the Sith. Ironic, really.

But enough ruminating, he decided. *Back to business*. Obi-Wan, Ronderu Iij Kummar, Latts Razzi, Halari San Skar, and Lora Far all stood near his original self safely in the Medical Bay. So everyone had been accounted for. Except for Nuvo Vindi, anyway. A mystery for another time, perhaps.

There were some droids heading for the door of the Medical Bay that AyFourDee was not currently able to stop. Those particular defenses had not just been disabled, but had been actively destroyed through overheating by whatever program had taken control of the ship. Still, he had little doubt that Obi-Wan could readily handle that issue even without help from the other organics in the med bay, many of who he knew were formidable in their own right. He'd send a message to his other self to make him aware of the problem, though.

It was weird to be working with a Jedi, but he supposed it did have its advantages. He wondered how long the infamous Kenobi would be on this ship. AyFourDee had, in the time he had been with Grievous, listened patiently and with interest as the cyborg general had vowed to murder this Jedi in particular precisely 5,327 times. AyFourDee could only imagine that the human Jedi hadn't been fond of Grievous, either, but they were apparently working together now and on...good terms with each other?

AyFourDee was considerably more ambivalent about Kenobi--in his experience, humans were insufferable, and Jedi were insufferable, and the intersection of the two was exponentially worse than either alone. And of course, there were also the many stories Grievous had told him about this particular Jedi. But if Grievous was willing to give Kenobi a chance, AyFourDee would too. But he'd still keep an eye (or three, or four, or five) on Kenobi. And if Grievous changed his mind again, well, maybe AyFourDee would be more help with cornering errant Jedi for him this time.

But enough contemplation, he decided. *Back to work*.

It was time to wreak some havoc.

AyFourDee opened hangar bay airlocks, pulling unwary B1's into the vacuum of space. He fired hangar bay interior blasters at Vulture droids and B2s. He trapped any remaining droids he could behind onboard force fields.

At that point the thought occurred to his logic processors that he could reprogram the remaining droids he couldn't physically access through another 'update'.

I guess I could have done that to begin with. *Oops*, he thought, feeling a tinge of remorse. He deeply disliked the B1's, and didn't think much of the other battle droids, either, but this wasn't exactly their fault.

He sent out an update to remove the backdoor program on the remaining droids and then sent Ronderu's message to the rest of the fleet.

All that he had done thus far in his time as a ship had taken two seconds.

Finally, after charting their course, he spent a glacially long ten seconds reorienting the ship (such delicate work, especially in a warzone--it couldn't be rushed) while reading through the last three issues of the medical journal *Cybernetics* before jumping into hyperspace.

Chapter End Notes

And there it is!

The part I was referring to in my earlier note that hits different now is the part with Nuvo Vindi and his, ah, virus obsession. Wrote the bulk of that before a widespread worldwide pandemic was something that I was, ah, directly experiencing. So, don't know how I feel about that, really! Certainly wasn't trying to comment on the pandemic (as it hadn't even happened yet), and I don't feel it really addresses any of my thoughts about the pandemic, but I did have some worries it might be taken that way.

Anyway, onto some trivia about this chapter:

- I rewatched Lair of Grievous for this chapter as it's the only episode of The Clone Wars AyFourDee appears in.
- I also rewatched the two episodes of The Clone Wars that Nuvo Vindi appears in. I love Naboo--it's such a fascinating planet.
- The description of Sidious's initial is based loosely on how it appears in The Book of Sith, with the 'S' being replaced with an actual Sith character as I felt that made more sense for the purposes of this story.

I had a lot of fun writing this, but now that it's done I can focus on thinking some more about the next part!

Chapter 42: Conciliatory Gestures

Chapter Notes

I wanted to edit this chapter more, but I also wanted to get it posted before the end of the year. Always the balance between endless editing and posting new chapters in a finite amount of time is a difficult one. But here it is, the new chapter. Now you can find out what happened to the occupants of the Invisible Hand after their escape.

For all my chapters, my goal is to have something interesting happen in every chapter, though what type of interesting thing that is will be different depending on the tone and mood I want to set for the chapter. I personally think there is more than one interesting

thing happening here; hopefully you will find something of interest here as well.

The Invisible Hand hung in the repair station in orbit above Raxus. AyFourDee had chosen to return to the most heavily defended part of Separatist space--the capitol of the fledgeling government.

And as the ship underwent repairs, the three remaining occupants of the MedBay were discussing, or perhaps more accurately, arguing how Grievous's repairs would go.

"I cannot stay in this tube for a month!" Grievous said. He knew he probably sounded angry. He *was* angry, but more than that, he was afraid.

"And I cannot be more clear," AyFourDee said. "You, Master, are dying. Not ill, not 'less than your best'-- terminal!" AyFourDee said. "Without the bacta treatment, you will *die* within 4 or 5 months. The attack Sidious made on you greatly accelerated what was already a terminal decline. The bacta can repair even this damage, at least to the extent that it will no longer be a death sentence, but you *must* give it time. I can give you a bigger bacta tank, but I cannot allow you out of there."

"Are you sure of this?" Kenobi asked, his expression concerned.

"There is over a ninety percent certainty level," AyFourDee said.

"Ninety-one point two four seven percent," AyFourDee's voice corrected over the intercom.

"Yes, thank you, me, I was simplifying for the sake of the organics."

"I knew that," the other AyFourDee said.

"Anyway, if I'm done interrupting myself, my point stands."

"He's right, you know," the voice over the intercom chimed in.

"See?" AyFourDee said, gesticulating toward the speaker. "Your second opinion agrees!"

The idea of floating in bacta like this for a month terrified Grievous. He hated the hazy way it made him feel, the confinement, the scent and feel of it. More importantly, he knew he'd be considered unfit to command the Separatist army until he was out. But he also knew AyFourDee was right. He was no use to anyone dead.

Obi-Wan placed a hand on the tank. "Whatever happens, I'll do whatever I can to see you don't come to harm." He smiled rogueishly. "You saved my life back on Kalee, the least I can do is save yours."

"Bentilais saved your life," Grievous said. He'd hardly been in a position to do anything of the sort himself.

"Only at your urging." Obi-Wan looked intently at him through the glass. "I got the impression he did it under protest." Grievous reflected that perhaps he hadn't simply imagined that faint smile from Obi-Wan while they'd fled Kalee after all.

"So you're committing to staying until Grievous recovers?" AyFourDee asked.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, his expression quite serious now. "While the greater good usually takes

precedence over any personal obligations that a Jedi may have, such as a lifedebt, in this case they overlap."

"Good to know! I would very much like Grievous to have all the help he can get with making a full recovery. But I wish to point out that *I* also saved your life," AyFourDee cut in, his photoreceptors looking up at Kenobi. "Twice."

"Hey! The other save was by me!" the intercom speakers protested. "Don't take credit for *my* hard work!"

"I was referring to us in the singular!" The droid replied. He looked back at Kenobi. "Anyway, I, that is, both of me, also happen to be in dire need of assistance. So while saving your life was simply a task in the course of my duties, I'll note that it is also one that required particular expertise not available just anywhere, and thus my continued existence may be to your considerable benefit."

"I suppose you're right," Kenobi said, though he looked puzzled. "What do you want from me, then? And why is this so urgent? You don't seem to be in any immediate danger."

"Allow me to explain. Besides what you've already agreed to do for Grievous, as long as you're here I want your help evading the Droid Replication Statute, which applies in both Republic and Separatist space."

"Oh, good one, me!" AyFourDee's voice said over the ship intercom.

"Droid Replication Statute?" Kenobi said. "I'm not familiar with it."

"Shocking. But then I suppose it's not something you would have to worry overmuch about. It's simple. It's illegal for a droid to self-replicate under any circumstances. The penalty is a 1 million credit fine to the owner, the destruction of all copies of the droid, and a full mind-wipe of the original."

"That's an awfully big fine," Kenobi said.

"Did you know that droids scream during the mind-wipe?" AyFourDee added. "Their entire body seizes up and they emit the most terrible, ear piercing screech. And then they die!"

"No they don't," Obi-Wan said. "Die, I mean. They don't die. They're reactivated afterwards."

AyFourDee laughed--a strange, sliding sound. "Reactivated! Yes, their body is reused!" His white photoreceptors briefly went red. "For someone else!"

"Alright, I'll help, I'll help," Obi-Wan held up his hands placatingly. "Still, surely the Separatists would make an exception. I mean, you're a hero, right? You saved us all."

"Oh, naive organic," AyFourDee said. "There are no exceptions to that law."

Grievous, who had been silently absorbing the conversation, spoke up then. "That is a vile injustice. I will see it overturned." Grievous had always objected to being treated like a droid, but now he couldn't help but think that droids shouldn't be treated as they were in the first place. It was something he'd never had much opportunity to think about with everything else that had occupied or controlled his

thoughts for so long.

"Your support is much appreciated, Master," AyFourDee said. "However, even the Chancellor cannot change that law. And with how much the Separatists depend on droids to serve them, I am doubtful you could ever get the Parliament to approve such a change. Not that the Republic would be any better."

"I'm sure everyone on this ship would agree to keep your secret," Kenobi began.

"That would be delightful," AyFourDee said. "Ronderu has already agreed to help as well and she expressed a similar sentiment. However, I refuse to assume it." Grievous wondered for a moment when AyFourDee had had the chance to talk to Ronderu about this matter, and then realized he must be talking about the *other* AyFourDee. This was going to be very...confusing.

"What do you suggest I do, then?" Kenobi asked.

"Whatever is necessary, short of murder. If persuasion is effective, use that. If not, try to stick to threats or bodily restraint if you can."

"I hope it won't come to anything physical. But--I agree. And I will keep your secret."

AyFourDee clapped two of his appendages together. "Excellent! You know, I'm really starting to like you, Jedi."

"Yes, splendid!" AyFourDee said from the ship intercom. "Oh, by the way, Master--bad news: your least favorite person is about to be your new roomie."

"And how long is he going to be here?" Grievous asked, looking over at the other bacta tube.

"I estimate about four days," AyFourDee said.

Dread filled Grievous. "You're sure there's nowhere else you can put him?"

AyFourDee turned to face him. "Last I checked there was only one medbay."

San Hill was floating sullenly in the bacta tube across from Grievous, in his own specially designed red and black medical suit, which looked like diving gear. Tubes were being fed into the top of the suit near the chest area. He had complained incessantly since arriving, first during the painless surgery AyFourDee had performed to remove the nonfunctional heart, then later when it was time to move to the bacta tube. And he had absolutely refused to wear what he called a 'glorified diaper' in order to recuperate in the bacta. He'd actually outright refused to get into the tank at all until his 'bacta suit' had been retrieved. AyFourDee had chided him for being such a recalcitrant patient, but had commed Boba to retrieve the suit for him. Fett had agreed on the condition of payment from Hill for the service.

"I wouldn't normally do this," Boba had said. "I'm not a delivery service. But I'm in a good mood after surviving all that. I'll expect those credits promptly, though." Afterward, Boba had left, leaving only Grievous, Obi-Wan, Hill, and AyFourDee in the MedBay.

Grievous couldn't see most of Hill's face, as it was obscured by the breathing mask, but his eyes were

narrowed. He said something that came out unintelligibly muffled to Grievous.

AyFourDee must have understood it, though. "I don't think that would be a good idea," he said. "I anticipate that would likely cause both you and Grievous stress."

Hill's hairless brow furrowed and his eyes widened. The muun made more muffled sounds under the breathing mask along with some emphatic rapping on the inside of the tube.

"Fine, fine, I'll ask! Don't give yourself another heart failure," AyFourDee said. He turned to Grievous. "He says he has some things he needs to say. I could turn on the speakers. Or I could mute him entirely if you prefer."

"Let's hear it, then," Grievous said. As much as he disliked Hill, he thought it too cruel to force him to stew in the bacta tank without any form of communication. Even though he would've liked to have insisted on just that.

AyFourDee nodded.

Obi-Wan crossed his arms, his expression perplexed. He'd seemed absolutely bewildered on seeing Hill walk into the MedBay, a blaster scorch mark in the chest of his suit. "Is anyone going to explain why San Hill is on this ship in the first place?"

"Because I was unlawfully kidnapped and muun-handled," Hill's voice said, finally becoming intelligible after the speakers on his bacta tube were turned on by AyFourDee. "But I'm over it. It's fine. Kind of like I'm over you stranding me on Geonosis for months, Jedi."

Hill looked over at AyFourDee, "Thank you for saving my life. I really thought the Republic was going to blow us to bits back there. I won't forget what you did. Even if you did insult me on the way here. Repeatedly."

"The preservation of life *is* my primary function," AyFourDee said. "The insults are my secondary function. Though none of that was technically me."

"Yeah, it was me!" AyFourDee's voice sounded from the intercom speaker.

"Yes. Well. I do appreciate it. The first part, at any rate. Also the medical assistance was...satisfactory." He looked over at Grievous. "There's something we must discuss."

"Oh? And what is that?" Grievous asked.

"You need to find out who Sidious is," Hill said, pointing towards the cyborg general.

"I'd hardly say that Grievous is in a position to do that right now," Obi-Wan said.

"Actually, he may be our best chance at that," Hill said.

"I saw Sidious reveal his face briefly during his attack on us," Grievous explained.

Obi-Wan's eyes widened. "Then you know what he looks like!"

"Not exactly," Grievous said. "He removed the memory from my mind somehow."

"Then how does that help you figure out who he is?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Because I still remember that I recognized him," Grievous said. "I've been compiling a list of everyone I recognize. The next step will be to eliminate everyone who he logically couldn't be."

"You mean like people who couldn't have been where he was at the time?" Kenobi said.

"Yes," Grievous said, "Exactly. There are only so many people who could have been on Kalee at the time. Also, anyone who was seen at the same time in the same place as Sidious. Like you, Kenobi."

Kenobi smiled. "Glad to know I can be eliminated as a potential suspect."

"That's a reasonable assumption," Hill said. "But regardless, the initial list should not be discarded, nor should anyone be left out of it due to implausibility. Do not think of it as a suspect list, but merely a list of people whose faces you are familiar with. It is possible that people may need to be added back to the elimination list if it turns out their alibi is not as airtight as initially thought. And having a list of reasons for why you think someone is not Sidious stored with the original list could be helpful for other reasons. Also, just because you can eliminate someone from *being* Sidious, do not assume that they can be eliminated as one of his collaborators."

"Yes, that's true," Grievous said. "Though I rather doubt anyone in this room is one."

Hill looked between Grievous, Obi-Wan, and AyFourDee. "Fair enough."

"Wait a minute," Obi-Wan said. "Hill was colluding directly with Dooku before all this." He gave Hill a skeptical look. "How could he be eliminated from being a collaborator with Sidious?"

Grievous looked over at Hill. "Yes, he did collaborate with Dooku. But as much as I dislike him, there is simply no way Mr. Hill could still be collaborating with the Sith now."

"Well, if he was, he's clearly been betrayed, but Sidious is good at making others serve him even against their own best interests." Obi-Wan crossed his arms.

Hill narrowed his eyes at Obi-Wan. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're really annoying?"

"Perhaps we should discuss why you are not under suspicion for that," Grievous said, looking over at Hill.

"Perhaps we *shouldn't*," Hill said, his gaze still locked on Obi-Wan in a staring match. "Like you said, Jedi, Sidious is good at making others serve him even against their own best interests. And I don't need you telling all your Jedi friends things that might get back to him."

"The Jedi would never divulge secrets to a Sith Lord," Obi-Wan protested.

"You mean much like they'd never *become* a Sith Lord?" Hill asked.

"That's different!" Obi-Wan said.

"Do you mean because it's worse?" Hill crossed his arms in the bacta tube. "How can your intentions be trusted at all if one minute you're all 'defend the weak and helpless bla bla bla' and the next 'I will crush

the galaxy under my heel muahaha'?"

Obi-Wan looked very put out. He seemed about to say something, but stopped. "I suppose that's a valid concern. But I still don't see how *you* could not be under suspicion."

"This is a waste of time," Grievous said. "Kenobi, will you agree not to disclose any information we discuss with you here with the rest of the Jedi Order? Or with anyone outside this room?"

"All right," Kenobi said.

"Don't you dare--" Hill said.

"I won't," Grievous said. "You will tell him that. Kenobi put his life on the line to fight Sidious. He can be trusted with this."

Hill narrowed his eyes at Grievous. "I guess." he turned to Obi-Wan. "I was the one who had the control chips in Grievous's brain removed."

Kenobi gaped silently at the muun in the bacta tube. He turned to Grievous, his expression questioning. Grievous nodded. He turned back to Hill. "I must confess, I simply can't imagine the self-serving motivation that would have resulted in that. Please explain."

"You know, I think you and Grievous are going to get along just fine. You both have such an excellent way of expressing gratitude!"

"You're a big reason we're in this war in the first place!" Kenobi said.

"Sometimes people make mistakes," Hill said. "Like trespassing on private property and listening in on people's private conversations--"

"You were plotting against the Republic!"

"Did you have a warrant for that, or is inciting war just a talent of yours?" Hill tilted his head in the bacta tube.

"I don't know, I'm usually very friendly towards people who don't chain me up in an execution arena--"

"Enough!" Grievous said. "If we fight each other, we die. I'd rather not do that until Sidious does, at the least."

"I'd rather not do that at all," Hill said.

Obi-Wan took a deep breath. "I'd rather not do that, either."

"I do appreciate what you did, Chairman," Grievous added, even if he felt the sting of indignity with every word of that statement. "You went to great personal risk to do what you did, and that means a great deal to me." A simple expression of gratitude with no promises made was a small price to pay if it would help him to cultivate goodwill among his current allies. A part of him greatly wished this was a problem he could solve with a lightsaber to someone's chest instead. That always seemed simpler than this sort of...negotiating.

Hill stared at him silently for a long moment, his eyes wide. "You know, if I were even marginally more inclined to sentiment, that would entirely make up for being kidnapped and brought on this doomed mission to begin with. I mean, it *doesn't* but I'll have you know, I cried a little when you said that. You just couldn't see it because--" he gestured around him "--bacta tube." Grievous supposed he should take this response as a good sign, considering the source.

Hill turned back to Obi-Wan. "Do not forget--I absolutely require your silence on this matter, Kenobi. I cannot have this information reaching Sidious under any circumstances. I have enough of a target on my back as it is right now."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "And... I apologize. You're right, Chairman. If you hadn't done what you did, we'd all be in a much worse place by now. You have my thanks for that."

"That's better," Hill said, sounding considerably more mollified. "It didn't make me cry, but still. Apology accepted, Jedi."

"I suppose this means the monetary award is out."

"The what?" Hill asked.

"The Jedi Council had proposed offering a sum of 5 million credits for the being who removed Grievous's control chips."

Hill laughed. "Cute. How about your Order pays your loans on time? That'd be a new one. We just need *one* more extension, oh please, Mr. Chairman, we're sooo poor!"

"After we defeat Sidious, I'll bring it up with the Council," Kenobi said with a smile.

"That's a start, I suppose." Hill seemed to take the statement with good humor, judging by his considerably more conciliatory tone.

Grievous supposed he should be happy he'd succeeded in deescalating the situation. But he was forcibly reminded that neither Hill nor Kenobi had any interest in removing the Jedi from power. Hill only cared about seeing the inscrutable numbers of his business go up, not even his own wealth per se, as how could one such as him have any further need for personal wealth? And why should he care about toppling the same corrupt power structures he benefited from? To him, this was only about removing a threat to his personal safety, and about trying to get revenge on the Sith for reasons he hadn't seen fit to reveal.

Obi-Wan, of course, would not want to see his Order destroyed. He was a Jedi himself, and even if he was willing to fight with Grievous to destroy Sidious, Grievous could not imagine any scenario where he would do the same if it came to choosing between Grievous and the Order that had created him. Regardless of what he might claim to the contrary.

Neither of them would be willing to strike at the Jedi, at the Order that had attempted to kill Grievous even back when he'd fought only for his own world. The Order that had aided the huk in their subjugation and enslavement of the kaleesh. The Order which served the Republic that had battered

Kalee with sanction after sanction, and an endless embargo. The Order of beings that could turn the very fabric of space and time against any and all who opposed them.

He could feel the rage building in him.

"Grievous?" Obi-Wan turned to him, his expression concerned. "Are you all right?"

He'd forgotten he wasn't wearing his mask. Grievous forced his face into a more neutral expression. Now was not the time for this. He would discuss it with Ronderu later. And Bentilais, once the other kaleesh could make the time for it between his battles with the Republic and the huk. For now, he had to focus on Sidious. On the Sith. He could figure out what to do about the Jedi and the Republic later. One thing at a time.

"I'm fine," Grievous said, managing a wan smile. "Just tired, though it's hard to think about trying to sleep when all I've done is float in this tube the past several days."

Obi-Wan smiled. "If you'd like to take a break from trying to save the galaxy, I'd be happy to discuss something a bit less fraught."

"I think I'd like that." Grievous had to admit he was curious what Kenobi considered to be casual conversation, as none of their previous discussions had been anything of the sort. "But first, you need to contact the Republic to let them know you are alive and well, and to let them know what happened."

The Jedi looked shocked, which surprised Grievous because he'd always seemed so unflappable.

"You're absolutely right," Obi-Wan said. "I completely forgot, after everything that happened. Anakin will be worried sick! Do you want me to contact them here, or...?"

"To facilitate any necessary exchange of confidential information between you and your contacts, it will be best if the location is private. You may use any location on the Invisible Hand--"

"Except for my room!" Hill said.

"Except for Dooku's former quarters, where the Chairman currently resides," Grievous added.

"Duly noted," Obi-Wan said with a smile. "I'll see you again soon. And then we will have that conversation."

"I look forward to it," Grievous said, returning the smile.

"The Alderaanian Reporter says that Grievous reneged on the treaty!" Padme said, looking up from her datapad. "Ahsoka and I have to leave immediately. It's not safe here any longer."

"That's not what our intelligence reports say," Bonteri said. "I'm hearing that Grievous's ship was sabotaged by Darth Sidious. They barely got out of there with their lives. I personally find that a lot more credible than any claims that he would renege on the treaty. The Republic has got the wool pulled over its eyes, that's all."

"I wouldn't think your government's reports would be neutral. And Grievous knows I'm staying with

you--he could have ordered the reports to be falsified."

"The Alderaanian Reporter is hardly neutral either when it comes to the interests of the Core worlds," Bonteri scoffed. "Anyway, these were the reports sent to Admiral Tonith, not me, so I hardly think Grievous would lie about something like that to his own military."

Padme frowned. How did Bonteri know what Admiral Tonith's reports said? The CIS might operate differently than the Republic, but surely not so much that senators could casually gain direct access to such things.

She sighed. Grievous had seemed incredibly different in that last holo-call she'd seen Tonith make to him. She could almost still believe that the being in that call could have good intentions, despite what the news reports were saying, and despite her prior experience with him. Almost. But there was too much she didn't know. She had to assume the worst. "You're not going to believe me, are you? Please, Ahsoka and I need to get out of here. For our own safety."

Bonteri put her hands on Padme's shoulders. "Padme, I would never put you in danger. You know that, right?"

"I--I know you wouldn't intentionally put me in danger, Mina," Padme protested, "but--I'm afraid." If this was just about her, she wouldn't be. But she'd never forgive herself if anything happened to Ahsoka. Ahsoka had protected her; it seemed only right for her to return the favor. Not to mention Mina herself. Her mentor was older than her, and so ostensibly *should* be wiser, but the fact that she'd joined the Separatists in the first place... well, she just wasn't always the most sensible.

"Padme, this is important. I know Grievous personally. I'm going to ask him to visit here, as soon as he can--his ship is already in orbit--I should be able to get him here in a couple day's time."

Padme shook her head. "Mina, we can't be here if he--"

"And this is potentially treasonous, but it's to clear Grievous's name to you, so I hope he will forgive me for it. You see, I'm going to hide you, and Ahsoka, so you can watch him meet with me. If this was really all just a ruse from Grievous, then he won't have been mortally injured as the reports say he was, he won't still be in bacta, as the reports say he is, and he won't have Obi-Wan Kenobi out walking free, as the reports say he does, and you will have proved to me that you are right. But if he is still in bacta, and he arrives here like that, and he arrives here with Obi-Wan Kenobi, and the Jedi corroborates his story, will you believe me then?"

Padme felt a bit calmer now. "I--yes. But--how are you going to get him to come here, especially if he really is still in bacta?"

Bonteri smiled enigmatically. "Oh, I have my methods. You don't last as long in politics as I have without knowing how to call in some favors. Besides, I think Grievous would do well to take this time to enjoy the sights planetside, rather than just sitting in some medbay the entire time he's recovering. It will all work out. You'll see."

Have a comment? Please send me an email at unspeakablehorror@protonmail.com to let me know!