Finding Happiness

 *Years after Order 66 ended the era of the Old Republic in one swift and brutal stroke, after the clone army that was meant to lead the Republic to victory had turned on the Jedi that had fought, bled and died beside them, I had almost given up hope of finding anyone that had once held a lightsaber. I didn't know if they'd consider me a friend, or if they'd even remember me, but something kept me searching the far reaches of the Outer Rim and any planet that was just outside the Empire's sphere of influence. Old habits, like the workings of old regimes, die hard.*

*I can't even remember what planet I was on when i heard; just a brief exchange in a conversation a table away from me in some cantina. I'd tuned out the music and was getting ready to drown these nagging doubts with a glass or two when I heard a name I hadn't heard in a long time. It wasn't said out loud, of course, but even then it would have been hard to pick up over the band's wailing tunes. This name was whispered in an almost admiring tone.*

*Cloudbreaker.*

*Despite all the propaganda, all the lies that Palpatine spread about the "Jedi Rebellion," there were still people who remembered the good they had done, who weren't so quick to follow the Emperor's proclamations. They didn't react well to my sudden intrusion - one almost pulled a blaster on me - but after telling a story or two and showing a scar I'd gotten on Jabiim, they warmed to me. It was only a rumor, they cautioned, and it had been circulating almost since the Empire came into existence, but to me, it was worth the chance.*

 Once the planet’s surface came into view, Jace was struck by the desolate terrain of Tatooine. Deep canyons carved jagged scars in the planet’s surface, and barren desert stretched out in all directions, only interrupted at rare intervals by small, lush oases. It was no wonder the Empire had not extended its search into the Outer Rim. Such hostile terrain was bound to make life difficult, but that was a small price to pay for the relative safety afforded by the planet’s remote location.

The Empire was still growing in strength, but the last, best chance at stopping it had died when Anakin Skywalker betrayed Master Windu and submitted to Palpatine. The Jedi Order as it had existed was no more. Their numbers were few, and those that remained were scattered across what had been the Republic. Some, he heard, had even gone past the Outer Rim to escape the Empire’s persecution. There would come a time when the Empire would be vulnerable again, but until then, the most that anyone could ask of loyal Republicans was that they keep their heads down and live their lives as best they could. Jace couldn’t think of anyone who deserved the opportunity to live a normal life more than them.

A small space port came into view that seemed close enough, so he throttled down his engines and settled his ship into one of five empty bays. The cantina attached to the port was far from empty, but the bull standing behind the bar turned to him immediately with a frown.

“Your weapons stay behind the bar.”

With a nod, Jace swung the rifle off of his shoulder and laid it gently on the smooth metal counter. The barkeep shook his head and lifted the heavy sniper rifle behind the bar. He relaxed slightly as he finally tucked the long-barreled slug-thrower under the counter. There was a soft clack and the sound of a key turning. Then he straightened himself and asked what his guest would like to drink. His guest asked for a tall glass of water. Jace noticed that he still seemed hesitant after he’d brought his drink and returned to cleaning upturned glasses behind the bar. Just as quickly as he drained his glass, the barkeep replenished it.

“What brings you here?” he mumbled, turning around to replace a drained bottle with a fresh one. “Mercs don’t pass through here that often.”

“I’m checking in on someone,” Jace replied, pausing to take another gulp of water. “We met during the Clone Wars, and I was hoping we could sit down and chat.”

The bull turned back toward Jace, furrowing his brow slightly.

“Are they expecting you?” he rumbled.

“Not likely.”

“Does this friend of yours have a name?”

“Wielder Cloudbreaker,” Jace said, taking another deep gulp from his glass.

 Before he could swallow, Jace heard the quick rustle of metal on leather and the click of a slug-thrower’s safety being disengaged. The wolf-dog straightened his posture and glanced around the room, then looked back at the bartender, who was glaring at him over his tiny spectacles. The barrel of a seven-chamber revolver rested on the counter, angled up at Jace’s heart.

 “Was it something I said?” he chuckled, finishing his drink.

 “What’s your game here?”

 “Like I said, I’m just visiting.”

 “She doesn’t take kindly to unannounced visitors, and neither do we. Maybe you’re looking to collect the bounty on her head, eh?”

Jace slammed his glass down on the bar and his lips curled back in a snarl before he could control himself.

“I don’t. Hunt. Jedi,” he hissed through gritted teeth. “I’d sooner hang myself than fire on one of them.”

The bull narrowed his eyes and snorted.

“It would be in your best interest to just get back in your ship and leave, mercenary.”

 “I don’t want any trouble. I just want to speak with a friend I haven’t seen for years.”

 “Which is why you walked into my bar with a sniper rifle on your back, I suppose.”

 “Look, if she were here, she’d tell you-”

 “That you’re *still* a scrappy, good-for-nothing scoundrel with no concept of privacy.”

 Jace snapped his head around. He’d have known that voice anywhere. Sure enough, a tall eastern timber wolf was already striding toward him from the other side of the bar. He wondered if she’d been there the whole time, or if she’d just walked in, but then he realized he wouldn’t have been surprised in either case. She’d kept her Jedi tunic and vest, and she wore no cloak to disguise it. Though her face was clean, the few creases there were told of the anxiety an exile suffers; living as a member of an order that had been hunted almost to extinction could not have been easy. Her eyes, though, still held the same fire he’d first seen on that Outer-Rim cesspool, and the playful grin she flashed him still brought out just a bit of fear in the ragged wolf-dog. As she drew up to the bar, he stood and stuck out his hand.

 “Miss Cloudbreaker…” he said with a small smile, but it faltered when the timber wolf stopped at arm’s length, crossed her arms and cocked an eyebrow. Keeping his hand outstretched, Jace tried again. “Wielder…?”

 “Just when I was beginning to think I’d gotten rid of you,” she chuckled. “What are you doing here, Jace?”

 The mercenary dropped his hand.

 “I wanted to find… To see how you were doing after…after the…”

 Wielder’s posture stiffened, and though she kept her calm, focused expression, for a moment, he could see the deep sadness in her eyes. Jace suddenly felt ridiculous for coming at all.

 “You tracked me down and came all the way out here, after almost ten years, just stop in and say, ‘Hi’?”

 Jace sighed.

 “No, not exactly. I was hoping we could talk. It’s been a while since I’ve seen a friendly face.”

 Wielder frowned for a moment, but then her expression softened.

 “He’s alright, Tomar,” she said, nodding to the bartender. “And give him back his weapon before he has an identity crisis.”

 Once the bull had handed Jace his rifle, Wielder led the mercenary outside, where a small landspeeder was waiting. As they buzzed across the scorching-hot sand, Jace turned to Wielder.

 “What was that all about?”

 “Tomar, he’s a friend. Keeps track of comings and goings for me.”

 “Does every visitor get the same pleasant welcome?”

 “Have you considered that perhaps he didn’t like the idea of a gun-for-hire waltzing into his peaceful corner of the planet?”

 Jace nodded, and for a while, they rode in silence.

 “How did you find me?” Wielder said finally.

 “It wasn’t easy,” Jace replied. “The night Order 66 was exec- I mean, implemented, the Emperor sent a whole legion, the 501st, to storm the Temple… After that night, they posted guards and waited for any stragglers. The next morning, I arrived to find a squad of eight clones that had been cut down on a landing pad, giving me an easy route inside. The rest of them were more concerned with keeping everyone out than with pillaging the place.

 “Tactically sensible,” Wielder observed, “but short-sighted.”

 Jace nodded.

 “Lucky for me, there were only a handful of clones in the Archives; nothing I couldn’t handle. Except for a few sections hit by stray blaster fire, the database was largely intact, and I was able to access the personnel files, where the records of each Jedi recruit were kept. Name, age, description, homeworld…” He glanced at Wielder, and continued. “I copied the entire roster, then physically removed the memory banks containing that data and took them with me. And I started searching; tracking Imperial legions to monitor their progress, occasionally shooting up a search party to distract them. I wasn’t stupid enough to think that a personnel file from the Archives would lead me to any surviving Jedi, but oddly enough, it seems a lot of that data was ultimately useless. It was a rumor overheard in a cantina that helped me find you, though I can’t say I’m surprised.”

 Wielder laughed and to Jace it sounded genuine. The speeder cruised into a grove of trees shading a small pond, and the rush of cool air was a welcome change from the blazing sun overhead. Too soon, they burst out into the desert again, then dipped into a canyon. After a few quiet minutes, she spoke up.

 “Have you found many others?”

 “A few, but precious few,” Jace mumured, shaking his head. “They’re scattered across the Empire and the Outer Rim. Most of them I didn’t know before I saw their names on the roster. It’s a blessing the Empire hasn’t made it out this far yet.”

 “They’ve probably decided the search wasn’t worth the resources… But yes, it has been a blessing.”

 “So, where are we going?”

 Even in the shade of the canyon’s walls, there was no mistaking a genuine smile, even for Wielder.

 “Home.”

 Just then, they burst into the sunlight again, and up ahead, Jace could just make out a small homestead. As they pulled up, he clambered out of the speeder and glanced around. Aside from a squat, one story building, there was little to be seen. Once Wielder cut the engine, all that could be heard was the whistle of the wind and the quiet hum of machinery. Though the pads of his feet protected him from the sand’s heat, the shifting dunes were already finding their way into his clothing. Overhead, the planet’s twin suns beat down mercilessly, without a single cloud to shade the ground. As he was about to speak, the air shifted, and an odd scent reached him. Though it was not completely foreign to him, he nonetheless could not identify it. The vaguest memory teased his mind.

 “Come in,” Wielder offered, brushing past him. “You arrived at the hottest part of the day. We shouldn’t even be outside.”

 Jace fell in behind her as she approached the small, square hut. She pushed a few numbers into a keypad by the door, and it hissed open. They ducked inside, and the door slid shut again. It was then he realized that what had originally appeared to be the whole structure was in fact only the entryway to a much larger, underground complex surrounding a central courtyard where half a dozen tall, thin machines hummed quietly.

 “Moisture condensers,” Jace observed. “A valuable occupation on a planet like Tatooine, I’d imagine.”

 “It’s tedious work, and the machines are unbelievably delicate, but we make do. Even manage to set aside a surplus to sell at each harvest.”

 Across the courtyard from their entrance was a modest kitchen, and Wielder motioned for him to take a seat at the table while she fetched a pair of glasses and a pitcher from the cooler. Jace tried to wave off the offered water.

 “I wouldn’t want to abuse your hospitality on top of diminishing your livelihood.”

 “One condenser collects enough to provide for three people,” the timber wolf quipped. “I have six. I think I can spare a glass for you.”

 “Point taken.”

 “That’s a different piece than the last one I saw you use.” She nodded to his rifle, still slung over his shoulder. “With all the commotion Palpatine’s been causing, you must be keeping busy.”

 “His new troops aren’t the professionals he had in the clones. They’re recruiting from all corners of the Empire, and then tossing them straight onto the front lines. They’re useless without their officers to guide them. It’s almost sad.”

 “I heard they’ve already got a name for you: Stalking Death.”

 “I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted. In white armor, they’re not exactly hard to follow.”

 “What about your other clients? Are you still serving as a body guard, or do you prefer to start conflicts rather than prevent them?”

 “There will always be wars and rumors of wars,” Jace sighed. “And no shortage of those with grievances to settle.”

 “Still at the beck and call of every poor civvie with a sad story.” There came that grin again. “They have a different name for you, you know.”

“I’m good at my job,” Jace snapped.

“I never said otherwise,” Wielder shot back. “It must be nice to be able to make your home wherever it’s convenient for you.”

“I was going to say the same about you settling down.” He glanced around the kitchen. “Your home seems a bit large for just one person.”

Wielder’s gaze never faltered, but the edge of lips did curl up in a tiny smile.

“I think we’ve reached our limit on small talk,” she said, folding her hands. “Why don’t you ask me what you came to ask me?”

Jace’s gaze fell to the floor, and he fidgeted in his seat.

“Wielder, you’ve been through a lot. Survived shit that would kill three men. Risked your life for no other reason that you wanted to. Saved plenty of lives. Taken plenty of lives. You’ve lived in the grey for just as long as I have.” He looked up, and Wielder saw fear in his eyes. “What do we do when we can’t tell the black from the white anymore?”

She raised her brow and settled back in her chair. Jace sighed and took another sip of water. After an anxious few minutes, the eastern timber wolf sat up and folded her hands on the table. As she was about to speak, though, another voice interrupted.

 “Back so soon?” came a smooth, relaxed voice from out in the courtyard. Jace’s ears snapped forward as the voice drew near. “That was by far your shortest trip yet.”

 A collie mix stepped into the kitchen. Though the years showed in his eyes, his well-kept brown hair and goatee assured Jace that the man had at least maintained some semblance of normalcy. Like Wielder, he’d kept his Jedi garb and he still carried his lightsaber on his belt; there was no mistaking Obi-Wan Kenobi. For a long moment, Jace and Obi-Wan regarded each other in silence. It was hard to tell what thoughts crossed the collie’s mind, as neither his face nor his posture gave any indication, but after a few tense moments, he grinned and pointed a furry finger at Jace.

 “If I recall, the last time I saw you, you were about to be loaded onto a cruiser bound for Coruscant. That mercenary, Jace, am I right?”

 “Your memory serves you well, Master Kenobi.”

 Wielder couldn’t hide a snorted laugh. Obi-Wan scowled at her, but continued.

 “So what brings you out here, my gun-toting friend?” he said, raising an eyebrow. “I believe the Emperor’s long since given up on those bounties he posted.”

 “Not without some encouragement,” Jace replied, patting the shoulder strap for his rifle. “I just stopped by to say hello. I’m glad you’re both still doing well. Ah, I almost forgot.” He inside his cloak and undid one of his vest’s pockets. “Saii’ve asked me to pass this along to you.”

 He held out a small holoprojector, and though Obi-Wan reached out to take it, Wielder snatched it from Jace’s palm with the aid of the Force.

 “Thank you.”

 “Of course,” Jace nodded.

 Just then, another, smaller voice echoed from the courtyard.

 “Dad, who’s here?”

 Before either Obi-Wan or Wielder could answer, a young canine slipped into the kitchen behind Kenobi. The boy locked eyes with Jace, and his gaze shifted over the mercenary’s right shoulder at the rifle, then refocused on him. Jace couldn’t hide a momentary look of shock. Though he had a wolf’s pelt and piercing blue eyes, clearly inherited from Wielder, the boy also bore a pair of ears too large and lopsided to belong to a wolf. Jace glanced up at Obi-Wan, but the young boy spoke first.

 “Who are you?”

 “Janus, that’s not how we greet our guests,” Wielder corrected softly. “Be polite.”

 “No, no, it’s alright, I should have introduced myself,” Jace replied. He noticed that the boy looked up at his rifle again with a bit of a frown, and he looked at Wielder. “I’m sorry, I should have left this outside.”

 “You’re forgetting where we live,” Obi-Wan replied. “Mos Eisley’s not far from here, and it’s a hive of every ill-minded villain and vice known to man.”

 Jace crouched down and extended his hand.

 “Nice to meet you, Janus. My name’s Jace. I’m a friend of your mother’s.”

 The collie-wolf mix took a step toward him, but didn’t accept his hand.

 “You hunt people, don’t you?”

 His tone was low and accusatory.

 “Not all people. Just the bad ones.”

 “Dad says you can’t always tell the bad ones from the good ones.”

 Jace glanced up at Obi-Wan and nodded.

 “Your father’s right. It’s hard to tell the difference sometimes. That’s why it’s important to be sure of what you’re doing before you do it. Especially when a life hangs in the balance.”

 “If you’re a friend, then why did you bring your gun inside?”

 “For the same reason your parents carry their lightsabers – protection,” Jace replied, shifting his rifle off his shoulder and leaning it against the counter. “But you’re right, I don’t need it in here.”

 “Of course you don’t need that one, it won’t do you any good inside,” Janus said with a smirk, flicking his wrist. Jace felt his cloak shift, exposing his vest and belt. “I meant your pistol.”

 “I carry this one for the same reason.” Jace patted the holstered pistol. “Would you like to see it?”

 Jace had hardly undone the flap over the pistol’s grip when he felt it fly off his belt to go sailing into Janus’ open palm. The boy wasted no time dropping out the clip, sliding the hammer back to eject the chambered round and setting them on the table in front of his mother. Jace couldn’t help but laugh.

 “Now, I wonder who taught you that trick…” he said, glancing at Wielder. “Well done, Janus.”

 He stuck out his hand again, and this time, Janus took it. Jace was relieved to see the boy smile.

 “Well, I don’t wish to intrude any further,” he said, straightening up. “Thank you all for you hospitality. May I re-holster my pistol?” Obi-Wan, still chuckling, nodded. Jace took the clip and pistol from Wielder and slipped them back in their proper place. Janus picked the extra round up off the floor and held it up to Jace. “Why don’t you keep that, to show that you beat me to the draw?”

 Janus smiled and nodded. Obi-Wan ushered him out into the courtyard and together they went back to tinkering with one of the moisture condensers Jace snatched up his rifle and Wielder showed him the way back out. Before they lost sight of the courtyard, though, they watched Janus challenge Obi-Wan to a game of tag, and the two were soon racing about the room, growling and laughing. Jace noticed Wielder held her gaze on them with a wide smile of her own.

 The ride back to the spaceport seemed shorter, perhaps because there was less to talk about, but after they’d stopped at the cantina and Jace had clambered out, said goodbye and turned to go, Wielder called him back.

 “It’s hard to tell the difference, now more than ever,” she said. “But you’ve never come down on the wrong side yet, Jace. Trust your instincts and that bleeding heart of yours; they won’t fail you.”

 And with a wave, she turned her speeder around and sped off.

 Jace climbed into his ship and took off, flying low over the ground. When he passed a small hut with a speeder pulling up, he did a quick barrel roll and shot straight up, leaving the deserts of Tatooine behind. And though it might have been the shift in gravity, he settled back in his seat with less weight on his shoulders than he remembered before.

 *Seeing them the way they were, together, happy, I guess they decided it was worth a chance, too. I'm glad someone managed to bring something good out of this godawful, shitty mess.*